

stop for long. He hastened to the southern end of the porch, which was open for storage.

The carving stock was mixed in with the firewood. He spent several minutes sorting it all out. He had lots of Tanningbark, but where was that half log of Syrup Tree? He knew he had it because he could remember . . . Ah, there it—

Something snuffled near his left ear. He felt hot, close breath, which stank. A lot. Something cold and wet touched his cheek.

Medford yelped and hurled himself back on all fours. He crab-walked backward until his head and shoulders banged up against a corner of the house.

There by the porch opening stood a shaggy white Herding Creature with black patches around its eyes. Medford knew what it was because the Shepherds brought such creatures—they called them dogs—into Town now and then. *What is a dog doing here?*

The creature sat down and grinned at him, its tongue hanging out the side of its mouth. Seaweed and grimy feathers were in chunks all over its back.

Something blocked the sun. Medford looked up and saw a figure standing there, impossible to make out distinctly with the sun blazing behind it. The smell assaulting his nose was so complicated he almost forgot to gag. He identified salt, something horribly decayed, several kinds of wet animal, wet wool socks, wet hay. Then his brain gave up, overwhelmed.

“Sorry to sta-a-artle you,” said a low, guttural voice, a cross between falling rocks in a quarry and the wind shushing through tall grass.

Medford struggled to his feet and steadied himself against the cabin wall. He blinked the sun out of his eyes, then got a good look at the figure before him.

The man’s face was long and thin, with a scraggly gray beard and bushy eyebrows. His head was bald on top, the rest covered in tangled gray hair. He was wearing a purple robe with a dirty white sash draped across his chest from right shoulder to left hip. His droopy horns were a dull white, with tarnished brass-colored knobs on the ends.

*His horns.* Medford wished the ground under his feet would stop moving around.

The man had a tall staff in one hand. Leaning on it, he stepped forward and put a hand out as if he might touch Medford, although he didn’t. The man’s gait was funny, but Medford couldn’t worry about that. He was having trouble catching his breath.

“So-o-orrry—,” the man began again.

“Don’t hurt me,” Medford said.

The wind picked up, cool and damp, right off the ocean. The man raised his hands in the air and tottered back a couple of steps.

Which was when Medford looked down and saw that the man had hooves.

Which was when Medford fainted.