

Clouds Over the Grove

Sludger Slipfwysh

TedMayInquire

In this life, we are all creatures seeking comforts. Often, the comforts are of being with others. Often, others that we are comfortable with find us, often we find them instead. In this world of dark days and bright nights, noise and many moving parts, our comforts may be misplaced. There are, however, still places of quiet and stillness. There are still some places where the only thing in your world is the comfort of others. Often, these places are ephemeral and fleeting, but less than often, there are found places so rare and few, one might think they were dreamed. Our story comes from such a place, in such a time where love blossoms readily. In a land of foggy mountains and rivers, hidden but not hiding, beneath the twiggy pine and within a far-reaching bramble, a young poodle pup, so small in her stature, picked berries of black and red.

"Oh! Mama said she needed these ones, too..." the pup thought aloud to herself. This was the first forage she had been on alone, sent by her loving mother who was more than certain she was up for the task. With a soft little paw she reached into the thorns and picked from them their bounty. She looked down into her basket, the blackberries falling from her paw into the assortment. She looked a while longer, thinking about how she wanted to taste the berries, but also that Mama told her not to until it was sure that they were safe.

"Pidge? Oh Pidge? Where are you, Little One?" a voice rang out.

"Coming, Mama!" the pup exclaimed. She shot up and some berries leapt from the basket, into the dry pine needles. She grabbed for most of them and stumbled toward Mama's cottage, finding her pace as she flowed into a brisk skip. "Look at all the berries I got!" she cheered, "Can we have pies now?"

"You know it, kid," Mama said with a warm smile on her face, hoisting her pup off the ground and pushing her snout into the wee child's cheek.

Mama was a badger not too much bigger than Pidge, she was short and stocky, and was known to walk upright with a wide gait. Her attire was only a quilted apron, dusted with flour. Her buffy pelt smelled softly of oak logs and warm fur, and strongly of the dough that she had just been working with. Nevertheless, she hoisted Pidge up in a single arm with the basket in the other and carried her pup to the cottage, bowing through the low door frame. Mama sat Pidge down at the stool in the entryway, unbuttoned Pidge's cowl, helped her out of her clothes, and took off her shoes. She brushed the grass seeds and burrs out of her pup's fur, trying to hold back a chuckle as she remembered how dirty kids can get. A wet cloth daubed over Pidge's paws and face, tending to the dust and scuffs from her forage.

"Did you have fun out there, Little One?" Mama said.

"Yes Mama," Pidge replied through the terrycloth scouring her snout.

"The bramble didn't get you too bad, I hope?"

"No Mama."

"I'm glad," she finished, pulling away to look over her child. "There, I think you're all done..."

With that, Pidge bounded over to the bed, landing on a robust mattress dressed in warm linens; dust and fur shot into the air as she plunged into its soft embrace.

"Less of that, dearie." Mama grumbled, already sorting through the berries and working the floured kitchen counter not fifteen paces away. Pidge only beamed with the pursed smile of a mischief-maker as her mother assembled the pie filling and left it out to macerate, turning her attention to the burbling pot on the stove adjacent to her.

"Supper appears to be done, dear, you hungry?" asked Mama.

"Yeah!" Pidge replied as she wagged.

Mama pulled up a table and chair to the bed, then brought over a large bowl of stew from the counter. As she sat across from a patient Pidge and lifted the spoon to her child's beaming face, she thought about how beautiful her child was, how content she seemed to be with her mother, and lastly she remembered what her life was like before Pidge was in it. She didn't even hear the praise from her kid as her eyes grew misty; what a confusing time that was, as a mother without a child... it was all so empty, with a feeling of endless, aimless wandering. Then there was Pidge: at first so quiet and fearful, reluctant to say anything, but could never take her eyes off Mama. From the first time Mama carried her home, to all the flavorful meals prepared and nights spent cozy together in bed thereafter, the kid would quickly warm up to her mother, playing and talking together as they went about their daily lives until eventually Pidge could barely stand to be apart from her mother.

"Mama? Why are you crying? Are you sad?"

Mama's eyes focused, noticing only then the wet fur on her face- tears still welling up. She was unprepared to explain herself to her child, "Oh, I... I'm not sad. I was just thinking nice thoughts about you. I'm really happy."

"And you cry because you're happy?" Pidge asked quizzically.

"Mhm, and I'm happy because of *you*. I love you. A *lot*."

"I love you too, Mama." She replied with a wag of her tail.

Afterwards, Mama listened to Pidge about her first forage out alone as she ate her fill, just so glad to have the company. She left the table as she finished, returning briefly with Pidge's sketchbook and a light for the bedside lantern, as it had begun to grow dark, departing with a scritch and a pet before she sashayed towards her kitchen. Rolling and cutting her dough, filling and crimping the edges of her hand pies and brushing on the egg wash, but all the while she wished she should watch her wonderful child, if not for having to face away to continue her work. She put the tray of pies into the stove's oven and clapped the flour out of her paws. It had not been so long, but it was clear to her as she studied her child that Pidge was starting to fade.

"Alright, Little One. It's getting to be bedtime for you," she said.

"Wha? But what about the pies...?" Pidge replied weakly.

"They're still baking, and I want you well-rested when we head out to the market tomorrow. You'll have them for breakfast."

Pidge merely blinked with heavy eyelids, "Will Mama come to bed?"

"Oh my dear, I still have work to do, but I'll tuck you in," said Mama with a sweet sorrow in her voice.

In a swift motion, Pidge was covered and tucked away, the lantern was dimmed, and a cup of water left at her bedside. She would wordlessly watch her mother clean the kitchen as the static of scrubbing and wiping eventually numbed and she fell into her slumber. Mama would join her not too long after, throwing her apron over the chair, the cooling pies behind her, and finally settling beside the child with her arms around her. Pidge stirred but did not wake, and Mama kissed her cheek with the lightest touch.

"You are my *Everything*, Little One. Rest well."

the trees in mountain alpenes weep

to nourish understory rodents keep

as clouds pass through the grove

the love of hearts, the milk of breasts

the weathering of times with tests

is care with worth beyond a trove