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MARTENETTES

Pipin blows onto a piece of wood and the dust rises into the air and flickers in a single ray of sunshine. Pip sighs and examines his handcraft. The beetle, which he sculpts, will probably be another toy for Tiny – his younger brother. The martenette raises his head to look for his twin sister. Pipina is sitting nearby with her friend Nita and the two of them are playing a game with pebbles. When she notices him looking at her, she smiles brightly. She points to the pebbles questioningly, but Pip shakes his head. He enjoys the sun, which gives his sister's bright ponytails a golden glow.

At first glance, they are not alike at all, as Pipi has light blonde hair and Pip has ginger hair. The personalities are also different. Pipina prefers to do something all the time, when he would rather choose to soak his fur in the sun than build a shelter. However, they have something about them that everyone immediately recognises as siblings. Maybe the fact that they are so different from other martenettes.

Late spring was already in full bloom with greenery and the glimmering beams of the sun. The tunnels of the cottage are showered with leaves, and the surrounding plum trees are buzzing with swarms of bees. Winter seems to be a distant memory, yet everything has begun then, Pip recalls thoughtfully.



“What are you doing, little brother?” Pipina asks. Her brother looks up at her through a thatch of red hair. The sister has just returned home. She is all muddy and out of breath. She has fluff attached to her ponytails and the blue ribbon on her tail has come undone.

“I am whittling a wooden toy for the Tiny,” Pipin shows his twin sister his handcraft. The wooden martenette had one longer leg than the other, it lacks whiskers and a tail, but Pipina thinks that it looks very good.

“You have a knack for doing this, Pip! I know, a piece of string will be just right for the tail,” Pipina praises her brother and rushes to rummage in mum's sewing basket. In a moment, they try to adjust the right length of the tail and pin up funny hairstyles on the head of the figurine.

“Come to dinner!” mum calls from above the table, where she puts seasoned groats balls with meat filling. This is her tribe's favourite dish. Mum comes from a tribe of martenettes with a long tradition and various customs. There are tapestries and rugs from her dowry all over the house. Pipin and Pinina are used to this kind of decoration. They don't often visit the houses of other martenettes, because they live far from any other villages.

Mum sits down carefully holding the stool with one hand and stroking her belly with the other. Twins are very curious about what the fifth member of their family will be like, and even more so when it will be possible to play with him.

“Mum, look what Pip has done this time!” his sister shows a wooden figurine from above the table.

“It is a very nice sculpture, you are getting better at it,” says mum, nibbling on a bite of a groats ball. Pipin grows proud on the inside, but on the outside you can only see him nodding his head in acknowledgement of the compliment. That's the way he is, but he takes his

mother's words to heart, because she never lies to them and always says what she really thinks. Pipina knows it too and smiles.

"Mum, when is the tiny martenette going to be here with us?"

"Soon. He's already grown a lot, hasn't he?" mum pats her belly gently.

Pipi and Pip uncertainly look at each other. Neither of them would fit in there, so the little martenette will actually be really 'Tiny'. They are used to talking about him like that. Mum assures them that they used to be like him. So it must be true, but it's hard to believe.

He and Pipina see their peers only by chance, during the annual summer fair or when a trail of wandering martenettes leads close to their home. Apparently, they also have some cousins from dad's side up in the mountains, but dad is reluctant to talk about his family, let alone visit them. Pip and Pipina only have each other and although they don't always get on well with each other (do any siblings?), their mutual presence is enough for them.

The door of the house slams and dad finally shows up. He takes in the smell of dinner with delight, and his whiskers twitch with satisfaction.

"Hi!" dad greets them, which is followed by a chorus of cheering.

"Sit down Sorel, I've put a pot of hot compote on the stove, it will warm you up a little."

It is chilly outside, because it is the middle of autumn. Dad gratefully accepts the cup of compote. This is yet another specialty of mum. Compote from dried fruit and herbs, with the addition of spicy roots. It is sweet and warm.

Pipina gulps her drink and is ready to get up from the table.

"Pipi, wait, I wanted to tell you something."

They perk up their ears.

"I met Nomsa with his family," dad starts. Nomsa with his wife, grandfather and two older sons live in the neighbourhood. This means that you need to spend a few hours walking to visit them. Nevertheless, they are the closest. They are all friends with Nomsa's family and they pay visits to each other whenever the opportunity arises.

"Nomsa said his sons want to go south to the Fortress."

Mum stops her spoon halfway to her mouth.

"Are they going to travel such a huge distance themselves? After all, they only have one old cartmouse, which is no longer suitable for riding."

Dad nods seriously.

"That's why they intend to go together with the Northern Caravan, all together."

Silence ensued. Everyone is processing this information in their own way. Eventually, dad continues.

"The Caravan will probably be in our area in a few days, because winter is coming and they are surely on their way. A trip together is safer, and you can always ride a cart."

"How did they convince Grandpa?" mum wonders.

"Apparently, the grandfather has come up with this idea," dad smiled, "he said that he would not send the grandchildren alone, knowing that he would not be able to hear from them."

"Well, they are adult martenettes," mum scowls and adds in a moment, "I don't like the Fortress."

Pip and Pipina glanced at each other in conspiracy. The Fortress, located far away, is the largest and nearest cluster of martenettes. They live there in a small space in clay buildings stacked on top of each other. Mum doesn't mind the crowd, just the crampedness and walls. Apparently, she was there once as a small martenette and then once again when she was a bit older.

"Anyway, Nomsa is afraid that Gugu will not be able to survive such a trip. They don't want to tire it, so it will stay with us."

Bad moods caused by the news of their neighbours' departure are suddenly replaced by joy. Gugu – their cartmouse is a friendly, peaceful animal that is always the centre of attention during the visits.

"Dad, we have to build a stable for Gugu," Pip notes, "I'll help you."

"I will collect the hay," the martenette offers. Pipina is glad that she has an excuse to go to a pond with dry reeds.

"Just take your jackets," mum warns them, struggling to get up from the table.

The preparation for Gugu's arrival is time consuming. Pipin and his dad have been building the stable for three days. Probably it would take less time if Pipi wanted to help, but after collecting the haystack, she disappeared for many hours, finding new interesting places in the Forest. Dad is preserving wooden bars by charring them with fire in order to make beams, while making unpleasant remarks.

"I can't believe she did it again. Have you noticed that whenever there is a job to do at home, my only daughter disappears faster than a tail flick? Of course, if we wanted to have more herbs at home, she would be the first on the list of volunteers. Can you tell me why Pipina collects all these weeds?"

Pipin ruffles his hair as usual when he is embarrassed. Pipina collects different plants because she likes them, and that seems like an enough of an explanation for him, but his dad doesn't seem to fully understand it.

A few more days pass and the Northern Caravan stops at a pond, which at this time of the year is dry. Nomsa and his sons are discussing the terms of joining the travellers. Mum exchanges a few jars with jams for hides and bone needles. The martenettes from the Caravan adore mum, because she always comes to them with her plucker and plays it by the fire. Now, however, mum is worried about the tiny one, which is why the travelling martenettes are visiting her at home. The whole family of Nomsa brings Gugu the mouse and says goodbye. Everyone is touched because they won't see each other for a long time, only when a need will force one family towards the other one. Dad tries to repay the precious gift of a cartmouse, but Nomsa's wife shakes her head.

"Gugu will probably spend more time on eating than helping you."

Pipin and Pipina are helping their mother prepare a farewell dinner. Everyone's invited, so Pipin and dad are making a temporary table that they set outside. There is no chance that such a bunch will fit under the roof, since four of them barely fit there. Mum, wrapped in a blanket, sips hot broth and sighs:

"It's a pity that we rarely have an occasion for such a grand celebration."

"It's hard to have great fun in this wilderness, Lir-min," Nomsa laughs, stroking his wet whiskers, "we've lived here for so many years that I tend to forget how fun it is to be in a larger group."

The fun lasts so long that the youngest martenettes fall asleep cuddled together on the carts. Pipina falls asleep with her head on the table, listening to the stories told by martenettes from the Northern Caravan, while Pipin lasts a little longer. He is awakened by the rattle of the departing carts.

“Is it over?” he asks sleepily, as mum eats some peanut butter from his plate.

“Yes, everyone is going tomorrow. Winter is coming, they have to hurry up so as not to get stuck in the snowdrifts.”

Winter is approaching really fast.

The short days make Pip wake up later than usual. He always sleeps too long, according to his sister, but in winter he turns into a real sleepyhead. Pipina, on the other hand, likes rummaging in snowdrifts and is tireless when it comes to making snow towers.

Their house is completely covered in snow, so Pipi glides from the roof as if it was a slide. Gugu also sleeps for a long time, then it's hungry, so Pipina brings it treats that she found under the snow and hay. Dad is worried that they don't have enough supplies for the winter, so he decides to look for something else to eat in the Forest. Pipina desperately wants to go with him, because dad will be gone for a few days and the little martenette would love to take part in such an expedition. The parents, however, disagree. Dad explains:

“I'm taking Gugu with me, it will help me pull the sled. You and your brother must take care of your mum. What if she's too weak to cope on her own? Tiny may be here soon.”

The siblings promise to keep an eye on their mother and help at home. Finally dad disappears behind the hill, completely unaware that his words have hit the nail on the head.

The next day, mum feels particularly bad. She does not get out of bed at all and although she is very brave, you can see that Tiny does not fit in her stomach anymore.

Pipina worries.

“Is it normal? Maybe mum is ill? Maybe I should follow dad and bring him back?”

Mum shakes her head and grabs her daughter's hand.

“I'll be fine, sweetie. It's dangerous for you to go somewhere alone, especially when it's so cold outside.”

“Drink it,” Pipin advises, offering his mum some herbal tea.

Those two days were terrible. Mum twists in pain and the siblings do everything they can to somehow ease her pain. They have to bring some wood to the furnace, hang the washing out to dry, knead the sourdough, clean the mouse stable, wash the shirts, or even prop the roof that is sagging with snow. On the third day, mum is feeling better and is fed up with lying down. She cooks a delicious dried vegetable soup, which greatly improves everyone's mood, because Pip only cooks oatmeal and always burns it a little, which makes it bitter. On the fourth day, dad finally comes back. Gugu pulls a loaded sled full of various forest delicacies. Hunted lizard reigns supreme in size among other delicacies. Dad carries it to the smokehouse. He arrived just in time, because heavy clouds are going to bring more snowfall. The blizzard is coming and mum is about to give birth.

Tiny is being born in the middle of the darkest winter night, amid the howling of the wind and the rustling of powdery snow. His eyes are still closed, he has a large head and the smallest paws you can imagine on a martenette.

Winter is long enough for everyone to notice two things. First of all, the house is terribly cramped. Tiny's cradle takes up a large part of the kitchen. Pipi takes every opportunity to go outside because of it. Second of all, that you can love your family very much and at the same time be fed up with it. Pipina also loves space and snow. She likes to slide on ice and throw snowballs at the target. However, she cannot stay outside for too long, because it is very frosty and after some time her feet are frozen. Martenettes do not wear shoes, because even in winter they are great at walking barefoot, but in the long run they still get cold.

Pip hides in the corner and whittles the pieces of wood. Mum looks at him with care, blowing his ginger fringe. Her hands are always full, because she is either holding Tiny, darning, or grinding something in the mortar. Pip has already made twenty wooden forks, each decorated differently, sixteen spoons, four bowls, two pipes for dad, and a whole bunch of tiny wooden toys, from blocks to figurines. He's actually getting better at carving. The sixteenth spoon is resembling a proper spoon, one of the pipes was used twice by dad before it broke. Lir-min is proud of her son, but she's also worried because Pipin talks even less than usual, does not want to go outside with Pipina, and seems a bit sad.

Dad is scribbling some designs with charcoal. Mum supposes that it's furniture, but dad doesn't have a talent for drawing or woodwork. If the kitchen table is upright, it's because Pip was helping with it. The table has very short legs anyway, so when they are dining they sit on very low stools or even cushions.

On days when it gets light outside, dad cleans Gugu's fur, looks into the smokehouse and picks up a whole lot of brushwood, so that it'll soon reach the chimney.

"Sorel," mum says once, when dad is hanging hand-made decorative rugs on the wall. A moment ago, in a burst of inspiration, he had shaken the dust off from all of them and he aired them out in the frost.

"Don't you think we all are crawling up the walls? If Nomsa's family were still around, we would at least visit them."

Dad sighs and looks sadly at mum.

"You know Lir-min, I miss them. Maybe we didn't see each other very often, but at least we knew that we had friendly martenettes nearby."

Mum nods, and she already knows they're thinking about the same thing.

"Tiny will grow up quickly," she adds, stroking her son's head.

Dad didn't say anything anymore, but looked around the house thoughtfully.

The house has two rooms: a bedroom, where everyone fits, and a kitchen, which is also the living room. Over the years, a lot of trinkets have been accumulated here. The walls are mostly covered with rugs. Pots and dishes stand in cabinets and on cupboards. The saucepans, ladles and pans hang on a pole, and some are hidden in the shed. The family doesn't use normal beds. Every evening they take rolled-up beds out of the wardrobe. This way, there is a place to sit during the day. A lot of space is taken up by the stove, chimney and the kitchen table. At the same time, the trunks, boxes and hidden compartments in the floor are filled with personal things. There are herbs or even dried and smoked meat hanging from the ceiling.

The shed is also littered with tools and everything that didn't fit in the house. There is also a large basement used as a pantry. There are mountains of jams sealed in clay pots, sacks of

grain, flour, groats, barrels with pickled mushrooms, roots and wild garlic. Only one martenette can fit through the aisle there.

When dad and mum were building this house, they thought that this was enough space for them. Neither of them knew anything about construction work. Dad came from the mountains and is the eldest of eight brothers, in his neck of the woods martenettes often live in caves. Mum grew up as an only child in a nomadic tribe from the north, where they live in tents. Nevertheless, building a house in the woods was a great achievement for them.

One winter evening, when the family gathered at the table, dad solemnly announces:

“Let’s move out.”

Everyone froze. Pipin turned his head at his sister, Pipina at mum, mum looked at Tiny, to which he cheered up and started squeaking, yet he didn’t seem to understand much of it.

“Sorel, where do you think we would live?” mum tilts her head with a smile and folds her paws in a very typical way. It is obvious that she was thinking the same but pretended to be surprised.

Dad ruffled his fair hair in a way that made his face look even more enthusiastic.

“We have to think it over,” dad says finally, clearly waiting for his family to do the thinking for him. Although he sometimes has some very interesting ideas, he doesn’t like to decide about their execution.

“We could have our own room,” Pipin begins carefully, looking at his twin sister as she moves her ear sensing the conspiracy.

“We could,” Pipina agreed, “and a room for Tiny when he is no longer tiny.”

“We could have enough space to invite guests!” mum claps her paws.

“What kind of guests?” everyone is interested, as Tiny is pulling his mum by the skirt.

“Interesting ones of course. We will force the boring ones to wash the dishes and weed in the garden.” Everyone laughs at it, although you never really know if mum is being serious.

The thought of moving out spreaded out throughout the house like the first ray of spring sunshine. Stealthily... Yet everybody is thinking only about it and everyone does it in their own way.

“I know what we’re going to do,” dad said finally, “we will visit my cousin. Maybe it will be worth moving to the settlement.”

Mum is processing this idea. They live away from any other martenettes, because the house was roughly half the way between their homelands. They built this little cottage themselves and the twins grew up here. The house also holds many memories although it’s so tiny.

“This may really be something! Good luck my love, I’ll pack you some provisions for the road.”

Dad’s whiskers dropped when he realised that he had to do this exploration alone, which would be quicker and more convenient. The rest committed to packing up all the necessary things. Once again Pipina really wants to go along with dad and see other parts of the Forest, but her mum and brother need help.

Dad leaves both Gugu and sled this time. Pipina is curiously watching as dad attaches two long boards to his feet.

“What is that, dad? Are you going to walk with those? It’s probably not very comfortable?” the martenette keeps asking.

“Those are skis, honey. I’ll show you in a mument how to use them.”

Dad fastens the last straps and, supporting himself with two poles, climbs a little clumsily onto the roof of the house. With two boards strapped to his feet he looks so silly that Pipi starts smiling. Dad is not very agile, he always manages to hurt himself or drop something on his paw or head, because he’s clumsy and always distracted.

Once he’s finally at the top adjusts himself and, pushing off slightly, slides down.

Pipina rubs her eyes in disbelief. With a graceful slalom avoiding the stable and a heap of wood, dad stops right by his daughter and with a sharp turn of his skis the snow bursts into a cloud of white dust. Pipina closes her gaping mouth with her paw.

“This... this is... Dad, you... You were amazing!”

Dad looks at her with amusement and resentment at the same time.

“You know, it’s sad that you’re so surprised by this.”

Mum leaves the house with Tiny wrapped in a blanket like a cocoon.

“Be careful,” and nudges him with her nose to say goodbye.

Dad has only a light backpack with some food and a blanket. He waves goodbye to the children and, pushing himself off with his poles, disappears from their sight quicker than if he had been running.

“Will dad get there today? He’s so fast,” Pipi asks in awe.

“Oh no, honey, I don’t think that’s possible. The village where dad went is closer to the mountains. It will take some time.”

While dad is away, they try to sort out the possessions. They go through all of the things gathered in the house and make an unbelievable discovery. Pipina writes down what they need and don’t need. It looked like this:

things needed - almost everything,

unnecessary - none.

“We can’t take everything. No sled can pull it all,” mum is getting upset and bites the tip of her thumb.

“We can each pull a sleigh,” Pip suggests.

“Make me one safe enough for Tiny to sit in it,” asks mum over the pile of sewing supplies she’s trying to fit into a small box.

Within a few days, they manage to sort their things so that the most beloved and necessary ones can fit on sleighs. Pipin and Pipi are very excited. Finally, one afternoon, dad returns. And he is not alone.

The tall martenette who arrives with dad has dark hair and mounts a young cartmouse. Mum apparently recognises the stranger and is very happy to see him.

“It’s cousin Arel! Hello Arel, it’s been a long time.”

“Good to see you, Lir-min,” replies cousin Arel, already from afar waving his paw, “I see you already have a nice little brood.”

“Yes, they’re our little ones,” dad says, bursting with pride, “kids, this is my cousin and your distant uncle.”

Cousin Arel doesn’t look like dad at all, but he makes a very nice impression. He treats everyone to some candied fruit and introduces a helper for the move. The other cartmouse is a little smaller than Gugu, but seems just as well-behaved yet curious. It sniffs the siblings, who approach to pet it.

“We figured Gugu shouldn’t haul too big of a load by itself. They have a mouse farm in the village, and they agreed to lend us this one,” dad explains.

The twins are intimidated. Tiny, on the other hand, is so interested in his uncle that he reaches out towards him and squeals contentedly. Tiny’s eyes opened some time ago and the martenette is looking excited and curious at the world from mum’s shoulders.

Cousin Arel has never been to this neck of the woods. The last time he saw dad was not long after dad and mum met.

The next day is taken up with final preparations for the trip. Dad and cousin Arel need to recover from their long journey. They talk about the village and the martenettes who live there.

“It’s not a big settlement, but we have quite a lot of land around it. Some of us work, as you can guess, at a mouse farm, some work in the fields, there’s a group of hunters, there’s quite a few of us overall. It really is the back of beyond where you live,” says cousin Arel.

“The village is a bit cramped, but we found a place on the edge of it that you should like,” dad is very enthusiastic, but he won’t say anything more, he says it’s a surprise.

Pip and Pipina listen to everything with their mouths wide open. The village supposedly lies on a hill surrounded by a birch and pine forest. There’s a stream nearby, and a busy road a bit down south. Then, however, the twins realise something. When they move they are going to meet so many martenettes as they have never seen before and they are a little afraid of it. Later in the evening when they should be asleep Pip shakes his sister by the shoulder.

“Are you scared?” he whispers. Pipina denies it with a quiet grunt, but her ear twitches. This is the best sign that she is lying. She grabs her brother’s hand for reassurance and so they fall asleep.

The morning of their journey was frosty and sunny. Single clouds only sometimes overshadowed the sun. They were already packed but the whole family decided to do some more cleaning. It is impossible to take everything. The whole house gets swept and dusted. Old equipment stays in the shed. The furniture, including the good old dining table, the stove where the twins slept as little martenettes, even the barrels in the basement – all that is left behind. Mum thinks that if any stray martenette are in the area, they can always use this cottage. That way it still can be useful. If Nomsa and his family visit the old place, they will be disappointed to find the house empty, so dad leaves a map with the settlement marked. That way it will be clear where the previous owners of the house are.

The last glimpse at the cottage is exceptionally long. Pipina sniffles, looking at the familiar paths she used to run through the Forest. Everything is covered in snow now, but soon it will all melt, and new sprouts will emerge from the ground. It is hard to part with home.

But cousin Arel rushes them. The road is still long, and after all, the six of them will move more slowly. Gugu and Riz – the mouse from the village – pull the sled along jauntily. Tiny rattles loudly from the top of the packed sled. Powdery snow escapes from under the skids. Tiny stretches out his paws to the frosty sparks swirling in the air. Pip stares at the footprints

left by his dad and uncle. The fur on his back bristles, not from the cold, but from the excitement. As long as they were making plans within the walls of their cosy home, everything seemed simple. Now that they are going to a completely strange place, Pip is afraid. He knows that his sister feels the same way. They are to make friends with other martenettes. But how?

The journey is not easy, but it goes without incident. Cousin Arel reads animal tracks well. There is no fear that they will come across a fox or a bobcat by accident. The stops are short and the siblings soon feel tired. It is good that at least the days are short and they can sleep all the fatigue away. In order to spend a peaceful night, dad and uncle dig a small burrow in the snow. There, covered with blankets, they fall asleep faster than you might think. The morning wakes them up for the journey. On the third day a strong wind is blowing so they move with even more difficulty. Even Tiny started to whine. It is hard for him to sit on the sleigh all the time without moving. Pip and Pipina, on the other hand, do not want to move anymore. Their paws hurt from exertion, the cold makes their furs stiff, and sleighs which were light at first, now seem to be twice as heavy, as if someone sneakily added more luggage.

They reach the village on the morning of the fourth day. Before they can see the village, they have to climb a small hill. Pip and Pipina are stuck at the very end and are heartily fed up with the whole journey. Even Pipi, who was the most eager for it, now dreams of a cup of hot compote and a warm, quiet, dry corner to sleep in. They are last to climb the hill and pant heavily, letting puffs of steam out of their mouths.

“L-look!” Pipina points down the hill, so Pip lifts his head up to see what she was talking about.

Below the hill lies a snow-covered settlement. A whole bunch of little houses must be hidden beneath the snow, because there are plenty of chimneys sticking out from underneath. The village is in the shape of a big circle. From where they’re standing, the twins can see with ease a swarm of martenettes bustling about between houses. Martenettes are climbing on the roofs, running through tunnels in the snow and emerging again and again on the large square right in the middle of the village. Martenettes are shouting, laughing, talking. Dad, mum and uncle are almost at the village. Dad waves his paw and calls the siblings.

“You know what, why don’t we just sleigh down there. I swear, I can’t take any more steps,” Pipina says while sitting down on her sleigh. Pip hesitates but only for a moment. A few seconds later they both are hurtling down.

“Woohoo! Heeeey!” they shout in excitement at first, but now they are frightened. *How do we stop?!*, wonders Pip. They pass the parents and jet on forward straight at a heap of snow that’s covering the village. Pipina jumps off the sleigh and keeps rolling on the snow. Pip, on the other hand, is clinging as hard as he can to the luggage and crashes into the snowdrift. Mum, dad and uncle all rush to help. Luckily everything is fine. The snow cushioned the fall but the sleigh missed a wall of a house hidden under the snow by a whisker. It was a close call! And could have been very dangerous. Pip is scrambling from under the snow. He is coughing, snorting, and shaking the snow from underneath his shirt. The sleigh is stuck, and they need dad to get it out. Pipina’s sleigh is right next to it. All the rumble caused the concerned homeowner to go outside. A tall martenette runs out of the cottage.

“Hello Mork!” Arel lifts his paw to calm him down, but the stranger is already calling for his family and neighbours. The news about a new family from deep depths of the Forest has zapped through the village as fast as a bird can fly. Before the twins manage to pick up the scattered packages, at least half the villagers appear. Martenettes greet cousin Arel and

welcome mum and dad. Tiny attracts the attention of girl martenette because he's so cute and fluffy, and he squeaks happily and lets everyone be stroked and talked to. Pip and Pipina are intimidated. They feel silly because even though the accident didn't cause any damage, everyone is talking about the hole caused by the crash. Pip wants to hide under the snow and wait until everyone goes away. Nothing of the sort. The martenettes from the settlement are outgoing and friendly. They lead the whole family through the paths and tunnels in the village. In summer, grass is braided over the paths to form a canopy that protects from the sun and rain. Now the sun breaks through a layer of snow covering the entire structure. They are led into the middle of the village to the large square where everyone is gathering. The square is uncovered and a bright sky can be seen above it. From one of the huts, right next to the square comes a martenette. She has grey hair tied up in a ponytail and wears a toolbelt.

"This is our mayor," explains cousin Arel.

"Welcome, I'm Linue," the mayor introduced herself in a low, confident voice.

The parents bow their heads in greeting, then shake paws with the governor.

"You must be tired from your journey, please rest and if you need anything this is my house," the mayor seems to be busy so she leaves. But the crowd does not get smaller. Everyone talks to the parents, they exchange pawshakes, everyone introduces themselves and adds something of their own.

"My mother is a great embroiderer," says the young martenette.

"Come and get some smoked fish," the short-haired martenette pats the dad on the shoulder.

"We'd love to show you around," the others say.

Mum is clearly happy. In her tribe she grew up among many martenettes and she must have missed such a friendly bunch.

"Here in this square we meet on various occasions. In that hut is the baker, over there is the tailor, the next workshop belongs to the blacksmith, and that tall house over there is the library."

"What is a library?" Pip asks timidly.

"It's a place where martenettes gather knowledge written down over generations," cousin Arel explains, "come with us now and have something warm to eat."

The mice are led to the stables and the carts remain in the square, the family can go back for them later. The Arels' house is located down the road. On the doorstep, they find an adult martenette in a scarf and oven mitts.

"This is Sappi, my wife," cousin Arel says.

"Welcome, I've already made oatmeal and boiled the water for tea. Make yourselves at home."

Aunt Sappi is very kind and caring. First she serves tea to everyone. It is different from the herbal drink that mum always makes. Pipina asks what it is made of.

"This is real tea my dear. I had some seedlings last summer, and I bought a bag of tea at the fair, look honey," auntie shows the bag full of aromatic dried leaves.

"Tea is expensive," mum remarked, "we didn't drink it, because the martenettes from the Caravan didn't have much of it."

"Here, closer to the main trail, we often meet travellers. The tea plantations are not that far away," auntie answers with a smile. Then she serves steaming oatmeal – spicy, but tasty. The

tea and spices are warming up the twins and their moods. They take a look at the hut. There is plenty of room, even though uncle Arel and aunt Sappi live here by themselves. There are macrame decorations hanging on the walls, and the hut smells a bit of mouse fur. When asked about it, the uncle replies:

“Sappi works on a mouse farm. She chose Riz to pull the cart. She takes care of it. I also help out a little, but mostly I assemble furniture and repair houses in the village.”

Pip and Pipina then find out that almost everyone in the settlement is busy with some kind of chores. The hunters provide meat and pelts, and defend the village from predators. Fishermen work on the river, farmers take care of mice and other creatures tamed by martenettes. Others look after the fields and plantations, which are a bit behind the village. You can order clothes from the tailor, get warm baked goods from the bakery in the morning, the blacksmith melts down iron into necessary tools, the furrier makes various useful things from leather, in short, everyone helps each other. You can exchange various items just like the martenettes from the Northern Caravan do, or buy something for metal nuggets, because metal is extremely valuable.

Full and rested martenettes are impatient to see their new home. Dad and cousin Arel wink at each other in agreement, which looks very funny. Pip and Pipi also keep winking at each other the whole way through, giggling and joking at the same time.

To everyone’s amazement, dad and cousin Arel take their steps outside the village. They climb halfway up the hill and walk towards a thick, sprawling oak tree. In this area, this tree definitely stands out, although it is by no means the tallest. It is stocky, old and has thick roots sticking out of the ground. Previously, the twins had not even looked in its direction while sleighing, but now they wonder how they could have missed it.

“Look, here is the entrance,” dad can’t be seen from behind the roots, but following his voice they find a hole created in the roots. They look inside. The trunk inside is hollow, littered with a lot of punk and leaves, but if they clean it up, there will undoubtedly be plenty of room.

“How do you like it?” cousin Arel leans back against the trunk, “there’s a nice view of the countryside from here.”

“It’s...”

“It’s amazing!” mum finishes in awe. If there’s anyone more excited than the twins, it’s her, “there’s so much space! You could even drill up and make another floor!”

Pipina’s eyes light up and immediately getting what she’s thinking about Pip nods his head. They both enter the shady interior. High up, a ray of sunlight breaks through the cracked bark. Dust flickers in the air. The dry wood smells beautiful. Pip tears off a piece of it and tries it in his paws.

“This will do great for carving,” he says in an expert tone. Pipi listens with one ear as she climbs higher through the cracked wood.

“Spring is not far away. If we clean this place up, we can move in soon,” says dad, taking mum’s paw and then starts explaining where they need to make the stove, where they need to make the chimney, where they can put real beds and the big family table.

Cousin Arel has already offered his help to assemble the furniture.

A few days later the snow melted. By then the trunk had been hollowed out, the walls scraped, and the gaps taped. The floor had been swept and everything was waiting for the

frost to ease. When it did, freshly planed boards were put on top of the floor which was levelled with a special mixture of clay. The martenettes from the village also helped to build a decent furnace, which was covered with white and green patterned tiles. Some of the tiles had forest animals painted on them, which Pipin liked very much. It was a gift from the martenettes working in ceramics. The first floor with its wonderful wide staircase served as an attic and storage room. Dad and cousin Arel carried mum's big trunk up there, not without difficulty. Pip and Pipina found a great place for their room. While hollowing out the trunk, a passage to a second, smaller chamber in the tree was revealed. There, the entire tree pulp was not removed, but various wide steps and stairs were left. Pipina really wanted to sleep high up on a shelf created against the back wall, where a ladder had to be nailed for her to climb up. Pip stretched himself a hammock made of a wide strong striped sheet. The room was roughly divided in half. Holes for shelves and drawers were carved out of the remaining wood, while Pip decided to carve various patterns on one of the many walls of this room over time.

All of these things have now been done and mum is chasing the twins out of the oak.

"The floor has to dry now and you can't walk on it. You have to wait before we'll start making furniture and putting in all the stuff," Lir-min says as she opens the new door wide so that the air helps the clay dry, "the furnace and floor are still too fresh. It's such nice weather, you can go out. You should make some friends with the village martenettes."

Pip and Pipina look at each other with sour faces. It's not at all easy to 'make some friends with the village martenettes'. In fact, they don't know how to go about it at all.

"What is it? Is something bothering you?" mum asks anxiously. Tiny reaches out to her from the pushchair.

"I'd rather help you," says Pipina cautiously.

"Mum, we've already seen the martenettes from the village," Pip remarks.

"But I don't suppose you've made friends with anyone yet?" mum tilts her head with 'This-Special' look on her muzzle. Pip dislikes it very much. It usually means that he will have to do something he doesn't feel like doing. Mum smiles very nicely and very firmly. It is a smile that says 'I don't see a problem.'

"Is it necessary?" reassures Pip while trying not to wince.

"Hm... After some thinking... It definitely is, march off!" mum smiles even more and apparently is very pleased with herself.

Pipina sighs deeply. As they walk away from mum Pip whispers to his sister.

"Okay, fine. Let's go together, we'll meet someone, walk around the neighbourhood and come back for dinner. After all, mum didn't say how many martenettes we should meet, or how well we have to get to know them. Maybe just saying 'hello' will be enough."

Pipina doesn't like the fact that her brother wants to lie to their mum. At the same time, she is too scared to just walk up to someone and start a conversation.

"Maybe we should visit the mayor?" she proposes, "ask her whether she needs any help, or maybe she would like to host us..."

"But she already said 'hello' to us. Are you afraid of talking to strangers?" Pipin looked at his sister.

"I'm not afraid, it's just that, since she is the mayor, maybe it's her we should get to know best?" Pipina's ear is twitching, so it is clear that she is lying.

“Don’t be afraid, I can do the talking if you want.”

It’s very nice of him to say that because Pip is not much of a talker, but his sister is angry because he just hit a nerve.

“This isn’t true. I didn’t say I was afraid. Why are you so stubborn?” she is so angry that she stops and clenches her paws into fists.

“I can see that your ears are twitching, don’t be like that...”

Pipina holds her ears with her paws and gives a frown. There is only one thing that she hates more than talking to strangers and it’s being accused of being scared.

“I am not afraid! Let’s bet! I will find a friend first, and without any help!” Pip is angry at this point too. His sister can be terribly difficult, even if she has a charming appearance and a quiet voice.

“Great. You’re on your own, then. I’ll see you at dinner, bye,” as he says that he spins around with his tail and he heads briskly towards the village.

Pipina already regrets getting in a fight with her brother, but her pride was too injured. The martenette fixes her ponytails, a ribbon on her tail, and heads towards the houses, but goes in a slightly different direction than her brother.

Pip tucks his paws into his pockets and walks displeased. Unlike his sister he is not afraid of talking to strangers, he just doesn’t feel like doing it. He doesn’t feel the need to make friends. Why does mum think this is so important? Although they are twins, they are very different. Pipina likes to wander about the forests, get to know new things, she tends to be very talkative and active. Pip on the other hand liked the most to sit by the window in their old house with a piece of wood, surrounded by the silence of falling snow and fire crackling in the furnace. Sometimes with an accompaniment of mum’s pans and pots and a silent melody of her tribe hummed under her breath. Pip does not like to talk much. Anyway, before he even decided what to say out loud, new thoughts were coming into his mind.

Now he just wanders forward, wherever his paws will carry him. He is kicking a stone and does not even look around much. He doesn’t care about martenettes passing by. He doesn’t care if they think he’s a clam. He just wants to find some secluded place and stay there. He didn’t even realise that he walked through the whole village and was at the very end of it. Here, by the streams of water from the melted snow sits a black-haired martenette, making some weird construction of sticks and leaves.

“Hold this stick, would you, I need an extra paw,” he says suddenly without even turning his head.

Pip looks around as if he was hoping that the words were not spoken to him. But it is just the two of them. Liking it or not, he walks closer and holds the stick as asked.

“Hold it, just like that, wait, I need to tie this.”

They work in silence for a while and then the black-haired martenette rubs his forehead and looks at the incomer for the first time.

“Thanks. Who are you, by the way?” he asks impolitely. He has a shag of dark hair, sticking in all directions as well as paws dirty from mud and mowed fur on his knees and elbows. His brown eyes are glowing with some weird enthusiasm from under the dark shag.

Pip shrugs.

“I’m Pip. Who are you?”

“Ah, you must be one of the new ones. What are you doing? Shouldn’t you be sitting with your mummy?”

This martenette is very impolite, thinks Pip and stands up flicking his paws.

“Why is your hair so funny? Where are you from?” asks the martenette while getting up. Pip fixes his ginger shag nervously.

“Why do you care? Leave me alone,” Pip turns around and wants to leave, but the stranger keeps pace with him. Pip is annoyed. He certainly doesn’t want to have anything to do with such an impolite and intrusive little creature. *I have no intention of being friends with him*, thinks Pip while glancing out of the corner of his eye at the boy walking next to him.

“Where are you going? There are only fields in that direction, and nothing grows there now anyway. You are very rugged, you know?”

“No way,” says irritated Pip, “then maybe you can go back to your business and leave me alone?”

“I’m bored,” says the black-haired completely unaffected, “hey, let’s play ball.” Martenette proposes and then starts to pull Pip by his sleeve in some unknown direction, “the ball must be somewhere in the garden, we have to go get it. You are as cranky as an old lady, but you are not old. I think we are the same age, aren’t we?”

Pip rolls his eyes, surprised by the fact that he allows to be dragged somewhere. Maybe, if he doesn’t resist, the boy will grow bored of him and leave him alone. He wonders how Pipina is doing.

Meanwhile his sister can’t even make herself enter the village. The closer she gets, the more she panics. She imagines all the martenettes are looking at her, which makes her really embarrassed. And when she tries to think of something to talk about, her mind gets completely empty. A few adult martenettes are working at fixing the grass canopies thrown over the paths and in the gardens. They are busy with work and although some of them waved their paws at Pipina she is too scared to open her mouth. Finally she walks by the village edge until she reaches a broad paddle, which is still covered with a thin layer of ice. There she meets a young martenette breaking ice with a stick at the shore. The martenette has very short red hair and wears wide brown trousers. Martenettes don’t usually have red hair so Pipina guesses it must be dyed.

“Hm, hi,” Pipina tries to talk, but it comes out very quiet and high. She is not quite sure if she is talking to a boy or a girl. ‘He’ or ‘she’ turns their head confusedly.

“What do you want?” the stranger snaps back.

Pipina stuttered and she couldn’t get any answer out of her mouth. She steps from one foot to another and twiddles her thumbs. The stranger martenette looks at Pipina expectantly, so she heroically brings out an even quieter and more squeaky answer:

“Are you a boy or a girl?”

The stick lands in the water with a splash and the stranger martenette looks surprised at first, but angry later.

“Just because I don’t wear ponytails and ribbons doesn’t mean I’m a boy!”

“I didn’t say anything like that,” Pipina gets even more embarrassed and hides her tail behind her back.

“Why are you here? Who sent you? Did aunt Anad tell you to come here?”

“Who is aunt Anad?” Pipina asks.

“She’s one of my aunts. I have five of them and every single one has at least two children. Of course, each one of them is too small to play alone and I have to take care of them.”

“I have a younger brother, he’s really tiny. He was born this winter,” Pipina informs politely.

“One brother?”

“Two. Pip is my age.”

“You should be happy, then. One little brother is not a problem. I have to take care of at least four such babies. That’s why I’m sitting here.”

“Niiiiitaaa!” there is a sudden call.

“Oh no!” the martenette jumps to her feet, “they are coming for me. I think it’s aunt Tula. She’s cool, but I’d rather she didn’t find me.”

“Why won’t you hide in the forest?” Pipina proposes.

“I am not allowed to go to the forest, because I always get lost,” Nita’s fur bristles with fear, “once after I got lost they were looking for me all night.”

“I can come with you. I never get lost.”

Nita wastes no time. She grabs her new friend’s paw and they both run towards the forest. Just in time, because the moment they hide behind a thick branch, aunt Tula appears by the pond. They wait for her to go away.

“Uff, that was close,” Nita peers cautiously from behind the branch. Pipina points at the thicket behind her.

“Let’s go deeper, no one will see us there.”

Nearby they find a wide stump, the roots of which create a tangle that encourages climbing on it. Without thinking much Pipi gets to the top of the stump.

“How did you get there?” says surprised Nita.

“Well... just like that. You have never climbed trees?”

The martenette denies with a shake of her head.

“Don’t you remember that I am not allowed to go into the forest alone? I can go only in the company of adults. For example, for the berry festival.”

“What is the berry festival?”

“Don’t you know? It is the coolest, the most important, the most martenette festival of the year! We make a lot of juice then and we party until late night. I really like the berry festival,” Nita explains while trying to climb just like Pipina did. Pipi offers her paw to help her climb up.

“What’s your name, anyway?”

“Pipina. Pipi.”

“Thanks for saving me back there,” Nita looks much nicer now. She’s not angry and doesn’t frown, now she looks a lot more like a girl.

“I’m sorry about earlier. Your hair is really short,” Pipina explains.

“I cut it myself. One of my cousins had some tar on their paws and grabbed my hair. I couldn’t get rid of that awful smell so I cut it. It’s more comfortable that way. Do you think it looks bad?”

Pipi shakes her head in denial.

“It suits you. The colour is nice.”

Nita’s hair shines bright red in the sunrays. Any other martenette would probably look funny with hair like this, but Nita looks interesting. Pipina is silent for a moment and realises that her fear is gone.

“Do you want to play with me in the forest?” Pipina asks Nita, “we won’t get far away,” she assures seeing the hesitation of her friend.

Soon they chase each other around the trunk, pretending that it’s a fortress in which they have to hide from the falcon. One time Nita is a falcon, another Pipina is, and later they both are falcons. They look at other martenettes from above and then make a comfortable nest at the top of the trunk. The fun is in full swing, because it turns out that playing together is much more interesting and fun than on your own. Nita is not as sluggish as Pipin, who only likes to build things with bricks and hates running and getting tired.

I wonder how he’s doing, Pipina thinks, but after a short while she forgets everything because Nita tells her about her aunts and gestures so vigorously that Pipi can’t help but laugh.

Pip looks anxiously at the tiny house on the western edge of the village. The black-haired stranger brought him here and now he is sneaking up to the window where the old, worn-out ball lies. Everything here is old and ruined. The moss-covered roof of the house bends under its weight. The supports and beams of the house look very decayed. Around there are many more weeds than in the village’s centre.’

“Grandma is probably asleep,” the other martenette whispers, while running away from the window with the ball in his paws, “we can’t wake her up, let’s go somewhere else,” he says to Pipin and drags him somewhere again.

“Hey, if you think that...” Pipin starts annoyed with himself that he allows to be bossed around like that, but the other martenette interrupts him.

“Shhh! Not here,” he ends categorically, ignoring Pipin’s protests.

They walk a bit outside the village to the square of packed ground. New grass has not grown yet, since the snow has just melted, so there are only some dry clumps of grass left from last year.

“This is the best place to play, catch!” the martenette kicks the ball towards Pipin, who will not even budge. The ball flies by and rolls on the grass, “what’s wrong? Don’t you know how to play?” the latter one seems to be genuinely surprised.

“I’m not interested in playing ball. I’d like to go home now,” Pip replies, squinting and wrinkling his nose.

“I’ll teach you. It is not difficult but requires some practice. Usually, you play with three teams of at least two. But it is also possible to play one on one. You cannot touch the ball with your paws or tail, only with your head and legs. You can only stand in your field and you have to toss the ball over your opponent’s head to your partner. Usually, bars are hung above players’ heads. There is also a version of more teams and then you can make an alliance with...”

“Give me a break,” Pip is getting more and more annoyed, but somehow he can’t walk away as if something is holding him back. He should have turned back a long time ago, away from that annoying martenette, but his legs seem to want something different than his tail, as if they are stuck to the ground.

“We will play very simply. I will aim over your head and try to kick the ball out of your zone, and then you do the same,” Pip doesn’t understand how this martenette can ignore his words. The latter one deftly kicks the ball several times with both his feet alternately and then, unexpectedly, over Pipin’s head. Pip refuses to move, but his legs bounce by themselves. The ball, however, flies over him and continues to tumble across the grass.

“I scored a point. Your turn,” says his opponent, jumping to warm up.

Pip feels a strange sting. The sensation is unpleasant, but somehow exciting. He doesn’t want to lose to this weird, talkative, black-haired rude. He tries to toss the ball in the same way as the other martenette. He does it so clumsily that he stumbles on the ball and falls, bruising his tail area painfully.

“You’re not doing well. It’s obvious that you’ve never played it,” says the other bluntly, “try to kick it with one foot.”

Pip is boiling inside because he thinks the other one is making fun of him. He takes a swing and kicks the ball as hard as he can. The ball flies sideways, but the latter one spins slightly and sends the ball back towards him with a graceful jump. The ball flies by a whisker from Pipin.

“Now I don’t score a point because the ball didn’t go over your head,” explains the other one, “as it flies towards you, you have to take it. But remember not to touch it with either your paw or tail,” he says in such a tone as if he was talking to a small martenette. It’s very annoying.

Pip tries again. After one attempt, he manages to bounce the ball so that it doesn’t bounce on the ground, but higher. Unfortunately, his opponent kicks it back without any problems and the ball flies over Pipin’s nose once again.

“I’ve had enough,” Pip finally gives up, “It’s a stupid game and I don’t feel like playing it. Bye, have fun alone,” finally he decides to leave, surprised that he managed to last so long. His legs move as if they were in tar.

“Don’t go yet. Then I’ll tell you my name,” black-haired martenette runs in his way.

“I don’t care about it anymore, go away.”

“I’m going to tell you my name and then you will have to play with me,” he says relentlessly, “I’m Wink!” he shouts to him.

Pip doesn’t react this time. He drags himself home without looking back. Pipina is not home yet, even though the dinner is almost ready. But mum believes that if Pipina cared about the dinner, she would have been home by now. So, apparently, she’s not hungry. Pip eats in silence, then climbs a small hill under an oak tree. He perches on one of the roots and stares at the sky above the forest. It will be getting dark soon. Bushes with fleshy white fruit grow nearby – snowberry. Pip remembers the name Pipina used to describe the shrub. This plant only bears fruit at the turn of winter and spring. Not thinking much, he approaches the snowberry bush and picks up one of the fruits. He kicks it lightly and the white ball rolls towards the oak. Pip steps closer and kicks the berry so that it bounces off the trunk. And then again and again. The ball bounces sideways and doesn’t go where Pip wants it to, but

martenette doesn't get discouraged. He kicks again and again, and before he even realised, it was twilight already.

Pipina is the first to return this time. Her eyes are glittering and the tail is swinging left and right in excitement. She enthusiastically tells her mother and aunt about her new friend. Pip is listening silently and feels a bit jealous.

"Have you met someone?" the sister asks proudly, "if not, I win and you have to do me a favour."

Pip and Pipi always bet for favours. One may wish for something from the other, and the latter must always comply. Sometimes tasks remain for longer. To remember them, each of the siblings has a purse with unnecessary small things and each of those mean one task. In her purse Pipina has a button, a seed, a white pebble and another shiny green one. Pip has a pine cone, beetle wing and a tiny feather. If the sister won the bet now, she would be in the lead and would have much more favours than Pip.

"Yes, I met one interesting martenette. His name is Wink and he has a grandmother who lives on the edge of the village," Pip replies, turning his eyes away.

Pipina makes a strange face, which to her brother seemed as if she wasn't expecting that answer: 'It's hard to believe, but...'

"Hmm... we will play with Nita tomorrow, do you want to meet her?" Pipi doesn't know what to say, she is so surprised. I guess they both did better than they thought they would.

"No, I don't think so. Tomorrow... Tomorrow we will play with Wink."

Apparently, Pipina could be even more surprised. *Pip and sports?? The birch trees in front of the house have never witnessed things like this before*, Pipi thinks as lots of confusing thoughts are visible on her face.

Pip doesn't want to play ball at all, but he also doesn't want to get to know new martenettes or play Pipina's games. And he definitely doesn't want to admit to his sister that Pipina, as shy as she is, apparently won this bet. So what if he met a martenette of the same age, it doesn't matter because they didn't become friends. Pipi, however, looks delighted with the new friendship.

Pip is in a very bad mood and goes to bed extremely early. The next morning, there is an even bigger surprise waiting for Pipina. When she opens her eyes at dawn, she realises that her brother is no longer in bed.

"Pip was up before dawn. He grabbed a piece of bread with jam and left. He was in a rush, but he said he would be nearby," says mum, bustling in front of aunt and uncle's house.

Pipi is in a hurry too. They made an appointment with Nita to meet by the puddle early in the morning. But she couldn't find her by the puddle. Pipi waits for the sun to rise a little higher. Finally, she decides to look for her friend in the village. Nita said that she lives near the square, so the martenette goes in this direction. As she walks, she bumps into her friend right in front of the village. Nita has a dull face, though her mood clearly improves when she sees Pipina.

"Yesterday my aunties were angry with me for coming back late and that they couldn't find me all day. I promised to be back this afternoon and look after my cousins."

"I'll help you if you want," Pipina suggests.

Nita is overjoyed.

“Let’s go to the stump,” Pipina encourages her, and in a moment they both disappear behind the trees. That day they intend to improve the stump and make it into a base. It’s partially rotten, but the roots are still firmly in the ground. The girls decide to make a burrow in the roots and a watchtower at the top. At noon their clothes are all stained with mud and clay, and their stomachs empty.

They go to Nita’s house together. Pipina stiffens before the threshold, nervous and a little bit shy. She already knows Nita a bit and is not afraid of her, but Nita’s family is a different story.

“By my tail! What dirty martenettes you are! If you’re planning to eat with such dirty paws, forget about it!”

“This is auntie Anad,” says Nita over the water basin as she and Pipina wash their paws and mouths – she is a bit scary and everyone listens to her, but she is very good at cooking and sometimes she tells great stories.

Auntie Anad is round and tall. Her blonde hair sticks out a little bit from a bandana on her head. Next to her, there is a tiny, older martenette, which skillfully chops herbs into the soup.

“This is auntie Anesha,” Nita continues in a whisper, “she is the oldest of all aunts, but she doesn’t have any grandchildren nor even children. Aunt Tula seems to be in the other room with the kids now. There are also aunts Vehna and Avena, but they are probably still working in the fields.”

Pipina gets lost in all these names and instantly forgets who’s who. She is a bit scared and upset. *Maybe I should just go home?*, she wondered.

But aunt Anad scoops both girls to the table. After one minute, a group of younger martenettes rushes into the room. Pipina opens her eyes wide as she tries to count them all but the martenettes run around and under the table. They are doubling and tripling in her eyes. Two smallest aunties take them in their arms, but one little martenette is hiding behind the skirt of one of them.

“Tilta, don’t hide, look, it’s just Nita’s friend.”

Pipina watches little Tilta. Is the little martenette scared of her?

Tilta hides her face in the folds of the skirt, but after a moment she dares to peep curiously with one eye. Pipina regrets not having one of the toys carved by her brother at the moment. She’s waving at Tilta. The little one just stares at her.

Meanwhile, aunt Anad firmly takes the whole pack to the table, and aunt Tula puts the steaming stew in the centre.

After a while, Pipina eats so fast her ears are shaking. The aunts are talking to the martenette and asking about her former home, her parents and brothers. Pipina, shy at first, cheers up seeing that the aunties are kind and sympathetic.

“When Nita was as young as Tilta,” says Aunt Tula, “she didn’t want to eat some vegetables at all. Then Aunt Anesha said that if she didn’t eat them, her tail would not grow. Nita was so scared that she ate everything from then on.”

“That’s not true,” Nita’s nose turns red with embarrassment, and a wave of shivers runs through her fur, “Aunt Anesha simply started spreading jam on the radish and cucumbers, so I began to like it.”

Pipina chuckles as she sees her friend's angry face. Nita looks unbelievably funny right now. Then she senses that someone is watching her. She turns and sees little Tilta behind her. Tilta, however, is not looking at Pipina, but at her tail, which is always tied with a blue ribbon.

Pipi thinks for a moment, then takes the ribbon off and ties it around Tilta's tail. The little one is overjoyed. Immediately she runs to one of the aunts to brag about the gift.

"Won't you miss it?" Nita asks softly.

Pipina just smiles playfully.

"I have a bunch of these at home."

When everyone is full, Nita suggests playing hide and seek. All the kids have fun, but the rules are you can only hide at home and in the garden. Unfortunately, there's too many martenettes for everyone to find a good spot, so aunties let them go out to the big square and play tag. A few of the martenettes from the neighbourhood join the fun, so they decide to play fisherman, as there are so many paws ready to play. Pipina has never played a game like this before, so she is extremely excited. One martenette stands in the middle of the square as a Fisherman, and the rest put colourful bandanas or hats around them. Then everyone walks around the Fisherman and sings a rhyme: 'oh Fisherman, oh Fisherman, what did you catch in your fishing net / fish, fish, fish, creatures from the waters deep / hungry, hungry martenettes, give one fish for each!' and then you have to run up to the Fisherman and try to take his trophy, that is a fish of course. And the Fisherman doesn't let anyone get close to the trophies and shouts: 'you want some fish? Forget! Get your paws off my net!' Then the players have to stop and everyone counts how many fish they have managed to catch. Whoever has the least becomes a Fisherman in the next round.

Pipina once became a Fisherman and defended her gifts like a bird guarding its nest. And then she won once and had the most fish. For afternoon tea, a baker - a cheerful martenette in a white apron with a face and paws covered in flour, offered warm blueberry muffins to everyone, and the winners got buns with the most filling. In the end, all of Nita's cousins, including Pipina, came home and they played one more game – the button.

The button, threaded on a long loop, which everyone is holding, moves from paw to paw so that the Sewer standing in the middle cannot see where it is. Everyone in the circle pretends that the button is being moved on the string, so it's hard to guess if someone has already passed it from their hand to another player's, or if they are still holding it in their own paw. Pipina was the first one to be the Sewer and she stared for a long time at the agile paws of the merry crowd. Everyone sings another song: 'a button, a button, is missing! Oh no! Look for the button, where did it go?, under the table, into the hole, down on the floor, it rolled and rolled, the button is being passed briefly, the time is running out quickly, the Sewer is guessing, and the button is messing with her, it doesn't obey and jumps to the hole, hey!' On 'hey', everyone freezes, and Pipina-Sewer tries to guess in which hand the button is hidden. The game is very addictive and fun. The younger martenettes chuckle in amusement as Pipina makes funny faces, trying to guess where the kids hid the button. Finally, it is getting late and Pipina decides to go home, even though it was morning, only like a minute ago!

Mum greets her with a smile. Today she is preparing dinner because Aunt Sappi had to stay longer in the dairy mice pen. Soon one of the mice will give birth. Pipina is excited to hear about it and mum, catching her thought, sighs aloud:

“I would like to see such little mice,” Tiny is babbling under his breath and nodding his head amusingly from side to side, “you want to see them too, Tiny?” says his mother, “it’s settled then. We just need to ask Sappi when.”

Pipina helps uncle Arel to season the dinner. Her uncle shows her which spices are used for what dishes and what smells go together well. Mum prepared one of her tribe’s dishes. Heavily seasoned baked balls of dough with vegetable and meat stuffing. On top of that, Uncle Arel spreads mouse cheese and pumpkin jam. Pipina tells them how she spent the day.

Soon dad returns, and when the steaming buns are on the table, Pip appears. He’s sweaty and looks very tired.

“Welcome back,” mum smiles gently, but Pip can only mumble something inarticulate in response.

“Hey, little brother. Why so tired?” Pipina is in a very good mood. Usually, she smells like wind and grass after going to the forest. But today she is extremely talkative. She definitely wants to share new experiences, “...and when I gave Tiltia my ribbon, she wore it all day later, and when we played fisherman, she never let anyone take that ribbon from the pile of treasures. Later, Aunt Anad told Tiltia to return the ribbon as it was too big for her tail anyway. And the baker gave us blueberry muffins with jam from the last berry festival. I would love to see the berry festival.”

“It won’t be until autumn. Before that, however, we will have a few other holidays, so don’t worry, each is unique in its own way, although I also probably love the berry festival the most.” Aunt Sappi says, “Pipin, don’t you like the cook’s beads?”

This is what mum called this dish when she was still a little martenette.

Pipin chews the warm bun unwillingly, staring dimly at the crack on the table.

“They are very tasty, but I don’t think I’m hungry. Thanks for the compote in advance,” Pip replies and jumps off the stool. Heading towards the exit, he speaks, “I’m going for a walk, nowhere far. I will be back soon.”

Pipina looks at her brother, then shifts her questioning gaze to her mother.

“Pip has been training all day at the oak today. At noon I brought him a compote because, as I rightly thought, he was very thirsty,” says mum.

“I thought he was with his friend...” Pipina’s words hung in the air, “I’ll be right back,” martenette grabs two more buns quickly and runs after her brother. She catches up to him and walks with him shoulder to shoulder. They walk in silence for a while.

“You don’t have to follow me, I’ll be right back.”

“What happened? You look... I don’t know. Different.”

Pip usually sat down after dinner with a piece of wood and carved it. His face was focused then, but he wasn’t sad, just silent. Sometimes he smiled to himself, and when he looked up, he would smile at his mother or wave to Tiny. Now Pip seems annoyed and depressed at the same time.

“Don’t worry. I just need to practise a little more. You want to see?” he says unexpectedly, and when Pipina nods her head hesitantly, he leads her under the oak tree and picks the snowberry from the grass. Pipina notices a pile of smashed fruit in the grass nearby. Pip stares intently at the stump and then kicks, aiming high at the height of the adult martenette’s head. The ball bounces back and Pip kicks it again and again. He manages to repeat this manoeuvre

three more times, and the berry does not touch the ground even once. Pipi tilts her head in admiration.

“You’re pretty good at this. I didn’t know you liked playing ball.”

“Me neither,” admits ginger martenette, “if it wasn’t for... But it’s still not enough. I must be better to win.”

“Are you also going to exercise tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Pip replies with determination in his voice.

He knows his sister is watching him with concern. Pip is not in a good shape. He would probably lose to his sister in running, whether it was speed or distance. His muscles hurt. Even the journey from the old burrow to the village was not so tiring.

He spent the whole day bouncing snowberries on the stump. At first, he struggled even with that. He smashed his toes painfully a few times, and two or more times he lost his balance and fell.

So what if he doesn’t play ball? He never liked sports or long trips to the forest. He also never felt hmm... worse before? He didn’t care about the opinion of other martenettes, except his family. On the other hand, he also never spent too much time with other martenettes, especially his age. The Northern Caravan visited them only once or twice a year. Nomsa’s sons were much older. Pip had no idea he might get so anxious that the other martenette thought of him well. He wanted to wipe the satisfied smile off the boy’s face. He will show him that a little practice is enough to win.

What was his name? Wink! I think so. I’ll challenge him to a duel and beat him in this stupid game, this thought runs through his mind even when he and Pipina return to uncle Arel and aunt Sappi’s house.

It gets colder again over the next few days. The earth and weeds are becoming white, but dad says that it will only get warmer after these frosts. Pipina visits Nita regularly in that time, even Nita visited Pipina once. The aunts agreed to let the two martenettes play by their stump-base, since they always go there together. Mum also visits Nita’s aunts and immediately befriends aunt Tula, because they are similar age and because aunt Tula is almost as nice as Mum.

Pip trains on the oak every day. The first three days are the hardest. Pip is irritated because nothing is going the way he wants and his muscles are sore. On the fourth day, however, he clearly improves. On the fifth, Pipin can hit a snowberry several times in a row. Finally, he decides to find black-haired Wink. He goes there late in the morning, this time allowing himself a good night’s sleep, and eats all of his breakfast, even the bouquet of parsley with which the mother decorated his plate.

Lir-min doesn’t recognise her son’s behaviour, but she also doesn’t seem to mind. Sometimes she just whispers in the ear of Tiny:

“Did you see, he ate an egg and a carrot. Unbelievable. What is this older brother of yours up to? Ask him one day, okay? Maybe he’ll whisper something about it in your ear,” of course, mother is joking, because Tiny does not know how to say a word yet. Although who knows what she means.

Pip heads to the moss-roofed house where Wink recently took the ball. There is no one around. Pip looks through the little window without thinking too much.

The interior of the cottage is not very decorative. There is a table here with a bench and two chairs. A small stove and a ladder to the upper floor or attic. In the second room you can see the corner of the bed. There, Pip notices some movement.

“Be careful, grandma,” Pip hears Wink’s voice, and soon he also sees him next to the bed, carefully guiding a very thin, stooped martenette. The old martenette is walking slowly, supporting herself on the grandson’s arm. Wink helps her to sit down on a chair and sets a kettle of water on the stove.

Pip hides his head, embarrassed.

“You know Wink, darling, the weather is so nice today I will sit on the bench in front of the house,” the old woman says in a pleasant, quiet voice.

“Okay, Grandma, but I’ll bring you a blanket. It’s still pretty cold,” replies Wink and you can hear him walking from room to room. The whistle in the kettle announces that the tea can now be made, so Pip carefully steps back to the path. He doesn’t want to be caught eavesdropping. Pip pretends he just hit the path. At that moment, the door to the cabin opens and Wink appears leading Grandma.

Pip walks over to them slowly.

“Good morning,” first greets the old woman, who nods her head smiling kindly. Wink seems surprised.

“Oh, hi! I already thought you won’t come. Grandma, this is Pip. He has recently moved in.

We’re going to play ball on the field, okay?”

“Have fun,” elderly martenette agrees, carefully sitting down on the bench.

Wink wraps her in a blanket, brings her hot herbal tea, and a pillow.

“Thank you, a blanket was already enough, Winkie. Go play, kids, come over for the cake later. I think there’s an apple pie in the pantry.”

Wink takes the ball and they go to the field together. They start the game as before. Wink starts by aiming over his opponent’s head. Pipin misses the first two balls, but then corrects himself and manages to pick up some really difficult throws.

“Don’t you have a twin brother?” Wink asks admiringly, “maybe you changed and the real Pip stayed at home?”

“I have a twin sister, but she doesn’t look like me at all,” Pip replies, sending the ball high above Wink’s head, who bounces it with his head.

Ultimately, Wink wins because he’s really good, but Pipin isn’t sorry at all. The game was very enjoyable, especially since kicking the ball with the second martenette is much nicer than being alone against the wall.

Later, they sit down in the grass, tired, watching the wind chase away the clouds.

Wink’s parents died in the flood, so he lives with his grandmother. Grandma has mobility problems, especially in the early spring. Wink helps her as much as he can. In the spring, the mayor promised that a new house would be built for them, because this one is too old and is in danger of collapsing.

“Your grandmother is very nice,” Pip says.

“She’s fine. But I was bored alone. I didn’t have any nice friends in the village,” sighs black-haired Wink.

“How is that?” Pipin is surprised, “I see a lot of martenettes everywhere.”

Wink shrugs, squinting in the sunshine.

Then they play another round and Pip is close to winning, although he is not sure if his friend hasn't missed a few points on purpose. When they are out of breath and tired, they run to the house for the apple pie. And then Pipin has to hurry for dinner because it's suddenly getting late.

Pipi runs to the doorstep at the same time as her brother.

“Today we eat dumplings,” Pipina rejoices.

During dinner, Mum whispers in the ear of Tiny:

“Look how happy your brother got. He doesn't seem to say anything, but his eyes are shining.

Something good must have happened.”

Pipin pretends not to hear it, but smiles slightly.

It might be good to have a friend after all.