

Penelope the Porcupine Goes Looking For Spring

By Landere Naisbitt

ONE MORNING young Penelope the Porcupine decided to pay her friend Punk the Skunk a visit. She was feeling blue from the long cold winter and was sad that all the trees still looked so dead. She really should have stayed home to clean her house, but she decided to put it off for another day. Did you know that porcupines poop a lot? They poop so much that sometimes they have to find a new home! Penelope had reached the stage where she either needed to clean or move out.

It had snowed the night before so it took her sometime to waddle through the drifts to Punk's house.

"Good morning, Punk! " She called, rattling her quills and swishing her tail. Punk emerged still sleepy. "Do you want to go on an adventure today?" Penelope asked, "I am tired of winter. I want to go and look for spring."

"Of course! he replied, "let me pack some winter seeds for a snack. Do you want some?"

"I have bark sheds to chew on," said Penelope. The sap in my tree is just beginning to run! Last night when I was chewing bark off the trunk I got some drips on my tongue. A sure sign that spring is coming."

Penelope and Punk started out, leaving their little patch of forest behind them in search of spring. Punk trotted and Penelope waddled. Together they crossed a field and a stream. Finally they came to a snowy balsam fir wood where they saw tracks that looked like arrows crisscrossing the trail.

"Who is that?" they wondered and bent closer to look at the tracks. Just then something whizzed across the path ahead of them - a small dark gray shadow!

"Did you see that?" whispered Punk lifting his tail high in the air. "Don't spray!" shouted Penelope and jumped into the woods. As she did so she brushed into a balsam branch and they heard a flapping of wings and an annoyed crackly voice shouting from above.

"What do you want? I am trying to forage for breakfast and fill my crop for the day ahead! Oh dear, what an interruption!!!" it wailed.

Penelope and Punk found out that the gray shadow was actually a Grouse named Greta who was grumpy because she hadn't eaten enough for breakfast. They bowed and apologized.

"What is your crop?" asked Penelope hesitantly, worried that their new acquaintance might get mad again, but was too curious to pass up the opportunity.

"It is a pouch in my upper chest where I store food. I eat lots and lots of tree buds, birch are my favorite, and then I snack on them all day long."

"Buds!" said Penelope, "we have found another sign that we are getting closer to finding spring!" She shook her quills like she always did when she was excited.

"If we help you find more buds to fill your pouch you could come with us on our adventure!" suggested Punk. "we are going in search of Spring."

Greta thought this sounded like a great idea and she agreed.

Finally the new friends were off once more and soon found themselves near a wide wide river. It was mostly covered in ice. They stopped to stare out over the icebergs and snow. "Any sign of spring?" Penelope asked.

"No... but look!" said Greta. Near the edge of the water was a very large shape. It was covered in snow, but it looked suspiciously like a giant bear all curled up.

Greta motioned for Penelope and Punk to hide with her behind a tree. The shape was awfully big, so BIG that they all grew afraid. What if it wakes up? What if it is hungry? Maybe it's a monster? As they talked they tip-toed closer and closer to get a better view of this strange shape. They turned the corner and came face to face with a giant mouth with huge clear teeth! "AHHHH!" they all screamed and dove into a drift. When they reappeared it was just their little heads looking out from under the top of the snow.

"It's definitely a snow monster," said Penelope.

"No, it's a polar bear," said Punk.

"We don't have polar bears in Maine," said Greta.

"Well, we don't have snow monsters either, do we?" said Punk

"I think somebody is trying to play a trick on us," concluded Greta. "Let's go check it out." The three animals shook the snow off and tip-toed slowly to what looked like the mouth of a giant creature.

When they got closer they realized that it was not a mouth at all but a giant boulder covered in snow next to the opening of a cave. Large drooping icicles hung down in front of the cave, and they looked like giant teeth! Penelope, Punk, and Greta laughed and laughed at how scared they had been by a rock and some icicles! Penelope's smile changed to tears when she realized they were no closer to finding spring. Not only had they not found spring but what they had found was covered in snow and icicles.

"We have come so far and not found spring," Penelope said sadly, wiping a tear from her face, "just more ice and snow."

Just then a low voice spoke from within the cave. It was the voice of the Wise Mother Bat of the forest. When the three friends looked inside there she was hanging from the ceiling of the cave. Her wings were folded on the brown velvet fur of her body, and her eyes were closed, but she must have sensed that the three animals were near.

"Break a branch from the bush outside the cave and you will find spring," she said. Penelope wasn't convinced but she did as she was told, and when she held the broken branch in her paw and looked very closely she saw bright green hiding under the bark. When she opened the hard brown bud she found tiny folded green leaves!

"Spring is always with us if we know where to look. It is never fully gone even in the depths of the coldest winter. Just know that each plant in the forest, however dead it may look now, holds new life that will come forth when the sun shines high in the sky."

Penelope smiled and held the branch close. Then she decided to collect some of the branches with the secret green inside of them and bring them home with her to be a reminder that spring is never far away.