

Martha, My Dear
by Vasya

Mary loved animals for as long as she could remember. She lived in a rural community, away from the loud hustle and bustle of the big cities. Even as a kid, growing up in the lush farmlands, surrounded by nature and animals, was absolute heaven for the young woman. Her favorite place of all, however, was old farmer Paul's sheep farm. Almost every day, she'd come to the farm to see and pet the soft, fluffy sheep, and help the old farmer tend to the animals. Her big hero, however, was the farmer's sheepdog.

Farmer Paul had an old Albion sheepdog, the breed famous for both their sheep herding skills, as well as their instantly recognizable fuzzy, shaggy fur. Mary always watched with amazement how he effortlessly herded all the sheep and kept everything under control. The treats he'd receive from the farmer after every hard day of work were always well deserved and Mary wanted to be as skillful and hardworking as the dog one day. When little Mary used to enthusiastically say: "When I grow up, I'm going to be a sheepdog," people laughed and thought her cute, never knowing just how true this statement would be one day.

As years went by, Mary's father was trying to convince her to go to college one day, not wanting her to waste her life in their rural community. While well-meaning, it was not what Mary wanted and there would often be arguments. Her father even suggested veterinary school, because that way she would still work with animals, but Mary was always more of a hands-on girl and vastly preferred physical labor to reading books and studying all day.

All throughout her teen years, she kept working at farmer Paul's farm and helping him. She was always built a bit heavier, but the farm work, apart from giving her purpose, also gave her physical strength. She was both muscular and plump at the same time, and while visually, her body remained rather soft and plump looking, underneath that softness were powerful muscles. She was just as capable as any man, if not more. She also developed a lovely sun-kissed tan which blended well with her bright ginger hair. She was well aware of the genetics lottery she won to be able to be a ginger and not burn in the sun, but tan instead.

By the time Mary was 20, she was finishing up high school. Her studies suffered a bit due to the amount of work she had been doing at the farm, which was the reason school took her a bit longer to finish. Despite her father's wishes for her to go to college, she made no such attempts. She kept working at Paul's farm, planning to finally get employed there full-time, together with Paul's son, who was now slowly taking over from the old man as age had taken its toll on Paul.

Things, however, were not looking good as the farm had fallen on tough times. The old sheepdog had died of old age, proudly having served the farm for 15

years. Financially, trouble was brewing, too, due to the increasing demand for sheepgirl wool instead of traditional wool from regular sheep. All the new and modern sheepgirl farms popping up in the rural area did not help, either, and old farmer Paul was distraught and unsure of what to do.

Seeing how things were going downhill, Mary and Paul's son had a long talk about how to try and save the farm, and after some digging online, they came to a solution. While Mary managed to dodge the compulsory pettification service of the government, she found out that due to the increasing demands for sheepgirl wool, the government was giving out subsidies to farms with volunteers. Together with the subsidies and the leftover finances, they could turn the old farm into a sheepgirl farm and turn their bad fortune around. All they needed now was volunteers.

After a fruitless search for girls who would willingly become sheepgirls, Mary was at the point where she almost gave up in defeat, but as luck would have it, the demand for wool was only ever increasing, to the point that the government itself contacted the farm. This was fantastic news for everyone involved, as the government offered to not only subsidize the farm, but to also provide sheepgirls. However, this was to be done under one condition. They would need to provide a volunteer sheepdog to keep the girls in check, as well as help the government research program in seeing how well sheepgirls and canine-type petgirls mesh together in an enclosed farm environment.

This was almost a dream come true and the big break the farm needed, so Mary did the only thing she could. She took one for the team and volunteered herself as the farm's sheepdog girl. She would go through the standard procedure of pettification, with an added emphasis on sheep herding, and then be released to the farm for a regular two year period, a task that Mary gladly took upon herself if it meant saving the farm.

Both farmer Paul and his son were overcome with joy, while Mary's father gave it his all to try and talk her out of it. Mary, however, was adamant. She had to save the farm. Since volunteers had a bit of leeway when it came to certain things, they let the old farmer pick a name for the new dog, as he was now to be her legal owner. Paul named her Martha, a name he very much liked and thought fitting, and Mary happily agreed to it. And thus, the deal was done and the farm, once again, started to prosper.

Mary, now Martha, passed her pettification training with flying colors. Once her two year contract period started, she was overjoyed to once again be able to roam freely around the farm and help out, albeit on all fours and in a different way than before. She remembered the old sheepdog that used to herd the sheep at the farm, and she felt proud to be able to continue his legacy.

Throughout the following two years, Martha got even healthier than she was

before, all that running around the farm doing wonders for her cardio, even though she never completely lost her natural softness and plush looks, which made her look even cuter in the form of a sheepdog girl. The sheepgirls quickly formed a bond with her, and one might even consider them friends, in a way, though they always obeyed their herding dog, no matter what. Martha's relationship with old farmer Paul also improved more than ever before and the two grew incredibly close. The old man knew the sacrifice the girl had done for the farm and, not only knowing her since she was a kid, but seeing her so happy and hardworking, truly made him feel the kind of pride he last felt when his own son was born. Life was good.

After the two year period passed, the government contract was over and the farm was now once again able to function independently. It would, however, remain under government observation. Martha did not have to be a sheepdog anymore and was expected to try and integrate back into human society as Mary. A problem arose, however, as this not only saddened her, but it proved increasingly difficult to return to her old life. She missed the farm, she missed the freedom of running around, herding the sheepgirls, and she missed lazily napping in the afternoon sun next to old farmer Paul's feet. The sheepgirls grew distressed, too, as they missed the sheepdog girl they were used to and did not take too well to the farmer's attempts to herd them themselves. And then there were old farmer Paul and his son themselves, who felt that the farm lost its soul with Martha gone.

This dilemma didn't last long, however, as Mary didn't even manage to endure a full month living as a human again. She contacted the ComPet agency and offered a proposition. Lifetime subsidies for the farm in return for her volunteering to permanently become a working sheepdog girl for said farm. Never letting a good opportunity go to waste, the government agency gleefully agreed and the farmers were soon told the good news. At this point, Mary's father realized that the wishes for a higher education and standard of living were his wishes, and not the ones of his beloved daughter. After years of struggling, he finally made peace with her decisions and decided that, if she is truly happy as a dog on the farm, then he will support her in her choice and love her unconditionally.

Mary was taken to be pettified once again. She was given a petsitter resembling her old one, but with updated software and mobility enhancements. Her old tag, however, remained the same, and she would soon return to being Martha again, and this time for good. Her old training sufficed and she was only given a few updates and a short test run, which she naturally passed. The final change she would have to endure this time, however, was her mark of permanency. As a dog, this meant that she would have her nose tattooed black to both resemble a canine and serve as a mark that she was a permanent pet. The procedure was

quite painful as the nose is one of the most sensitive parts of the human body, but she grit her teeth and endured as she knew it was for the good of the farm, and ultimately, her own. She wanted this. She needed this. This was her destiny all along.

As work resumed on the farm, everything seemed perfect. She was back in her old place, the farm was running well, money was coming in and everyone was happy. Until disaster struck...

Old farmer Paul, who was already an old man when Martha was a child, had been having an increasingly harder time running the farm due to his deteriorating health, having to rely more and more on his son to take over. He tried to hide his health problems from Martha, but she noticed over time that something was wrong. And sadly, the fated day finally came, as the old farmer was found in his bed, having peacefully passed away in his sleep.

Due to pets often succumbing to psychological pains and "breaking character" during such emotionally loaded events, such as funerals, they were not often allowed to attend, but Martha was given an exception. Led on a leash by farmer Paul's son, her new owner and master, she sat next to him and whined. Even though she was heartbroken, she never once broke character, as was expected from a permanent pet, and as tears flowed down her cheeks, she leaned on the leg of her new master and whined like a lost puppy. It was a sad day, indeed, for everyone.

After some time passed, life returned to normal on the farm. The old farmer Paul was dearly missed by all, but work could not stop, nor would he want it to, either. He would have wanted all of them to continue his legacy, which they happily did. Martha quickly developed a renewed master-pet bond with the farmer's son, and even had the occasional visit by her own father, which was uncommon, but tolerated by the agency, since he supported his daughter's choice and did not cause any trouble. Plenty of head scratches, pets and the occasional sneaky treat were a given, however, as he still loved his daughter deeply, even if she was a just a dog now.

One day, rummaging through his father's old belongings, farmer Paul's son found an envelope with a letter, simply addressed: "To Martha". He called the girl to his side and showed her the letter, which she sniffed, still smelling old farmer Paul's scent on it, and she got excited. "He left you a letter," the son said. "Let me read it for you."

The son opened the letter, which simply read:

"Martha, my dear...

Please, remember me.

Paul"

Next to the letter, there was a photo of a typical lazy afternoon on the front porch, with Paul in his rocking chair, and Martha napping next to him, a very fond memory. Martha whined softly and remembered all the good times they had together, which gave her an even bigger motivation and drive to help his son continue Paul's legacy and make the farm as successful as it once had been.

As she ran outside, a look of determination on her face, and went to herd the sheep, she felt true happiness in her heart. This was the best life she could have ever imagined, and thinking back to her childhood, how everyone laughed when she said she would one day grow up to become a sheepdog, Martha softly smiled to herself. Oh, how little everyone knew that she had been right all along.

THE END

Author's note: Since pretty much nobody got the references while the image was still in a sketch phase, instead of asking the audience to guess, I will provide the context. The story, image and title are all heavily inspired by the Beatles song, "Martha My Dear", which Paul McCartney wrote for his old English sheepdog, Martha. I think, having said that, the reader can now see all the references in the story and elsewhere. I highly recommend the reader to look up the aforementioned song, and they will see how well it fits the story, the message and the image itself. Thank you for reading and a big thank you to artist NimbleTail for illustrating Martha and giving me permission to color the artwork.

P.S. The dog breed in the story is deliberately called "old Albion sheepdog" instead of "English", as this story takes part in the fictional ComPet universe where the country does not exist, at least in the way it does in our world.