

MARTY

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AND SO IT CONTINUES . . .

Marty's new best friend had almost died twice already, and she fully intended to make sure the third time was the charm. The third time, of course, would be the next time she saw him. Marty had only known Ruzo for a short time, but she had grown quite fond of him through their adventure. She thought he felt the same. But then again, maybe not. She wondered, *Why would he just take off without saying anything . . . again? Ruzo seems like he's a caring and decent cat.* "This, however," she shouted into the night, "is just plain rude!"

As the dark clouds dispersed, Marty looked up and asked the Man in the Moon, "Mr. Moon, sir, have you seen Ruzo? Do you know where he went? I can't find him . . . Mr. Moon? Are you awake?" Much to her dismay, the moon was silent. Just a bright, barren rock many miles away with nothing to offer. Looking around one last time, she found nothing but torchlit darkness. So, Marty flew down

from the peak of the roof, soared around the castle, and darted through an open window.

She landed next to the king with a stumble, and he could immediately see something was wrong.

"What troubles you, little bird?" asked the king.

"I can't find Ruzo, Your Majesty," she replied. "He went off without saying anything, again."

"Surely not," said the king while he surveyed the bustling crowd, cheerfully celebrating the victory over the rogue Blue Witch and her Lutabeast army. "He must be around here somewhere." Looking through the crowds of lively participants, it was hard to see everyone. "Where did you see him last time?"

"Over by that far window," Marty answered as she pointed her wing. She then motioned toward the elders standing nearby. "He was arguing with someone in a robe, just like them."

"Arguing, you say?"

"It sure looked like it."

Turning to the elder nearest him, the king asked, "Who else would have one of your robes?"

"No one," answered the elder. "We have only these that we wear. When a new robe is made, the old one is destroyed. It's not possible for anyone besides an elder to have a robe. Either she's mistaken, or it was a counterfeit."

The King knelt closer to Marty. "Are you certain it was a robe like theirs?" he asked.

"Exactly the same," she answered intently. "The same blue-and-purple silk, with the same gold trim. I'm sure of it."

"Something sinister could be afoot," the king said as he stood and signaled across the room at a knight. Upon the knight's arrival, the king instructed him, "Roger Ruzo is missing. Search the castle and grounds at once. Enlist everyone you can find."

"It will be done, Your Majesty."

As the knight spun to action, the king stopped him and added, "See if you can locate the remains of the rogue witch as well. She fell from the roof on the north side."

Within minutes, dozens of knights and soldiers were scouring the castle, the grounds, and the surrounding town.

Marty and her parents also joined in the search, flying high above the trees, scanning every inch of the grounds and surrounding town under the moonlight.

Back inside, the king said to the queen, "I need you to remain here with the celebration. In about ten minutes, send our daughter to join me in the dungeon."

"As you wish, my dear," she replied. "I'll also send for the royal detective."

Nodding in approval, the king hastily walked out and toward the stairs leading to the dungeon.

When he reached the cell holding the Lutabeast general, the king commanded the guard, "Leave us."

The guard immediately obeyed and took up a post outside the door.

General Tusk, seated on the bed, raised his head. "Release me!" he screamed, his grim, monstrous eyes locked on the king.

"I will do no such thing," answered the king. "Why did you break our treaty?"

"The witch promised us all of the lands. Why would we stay confined to our territory when we can have it all?"

The king shook his head. "Never have you been confined, except by your own destructiveness. Lutabeasts are free to roam wherever they wish, so long as they obey the rules of law, order, and decency."

Standing, the general replied, "We follow no law but our own!"

"Which is fine—within your own territory," the king said. "But when you venture into other territories, you are expected to abide by their rules. You must be respectful to others and their property. Since you've proved incapable of that, it's best to stay home."

"Confinement!" shouted the general.

"Containment," countered the king. "For your good and the good of others. Trust me, if you would behave, you would be welcome in our lands. But I am not here to argue with you. Someone's missing—possibly taken against their will. Tell me what you know."

"I know nothing," insisted the general.

Turning to leave, the king said, "Then you are of no use to me."

"What's in it for me?" asked the general as he stalked toward the cell door, wrapping his large, clawed hands around the bars.

Turning back toward him, the king said, "Help me locate my missing friend, and I will keep it in mind when I decide your punishment."

"Punishment? My troops will break me free soon enough."

The king took a step closer but remained just out of reach of the deadly claws. "We will be ready this time. Your soldiers will not get near you—that is, if they even try. You saw how they ran when you were jailed."

"Cowards," spat the general. "I'll end them myself when I'm free of this place."

"On the other hand," the king thought aloud as he rubbed his chin, "if you were to help me retrieve my friend . . . and swear an oath of peace. Hmm. Perhaps then a new treaty could be signed. One that would see you returned to your territory."

"So," answered the general, "when your nobility and honor fails you, when your goodness and compassion leaves you dry, you turn to extortion and bribery? You are weak. I will not betray the witch, not even for your bribe."

There were soft footsteps, then the creaking of the door to the dungeon. The general looked toward the door as the king turned to see the princess peeking in.

She said quietly, "Mother said you had called for me."

"Indeed I did," acknowledged the king. "Come in and tell General Tusk the plan. The one the witch told you on the rooftop."

Frightened by the general, the princess cautiously stepped into the room. She stood plenty far back and spoke shyly. "The witch was going to use her magic to switch us so I would look like her and she would look like me." The general snarled impatiently, as she continued.

"She was going to leave me chained to the rooftop, looking like her. She, pretending to be me, was going to release my father so he would defeat you and your soldiers, and then run up to defeat the witch—which would have actually been me. Then she was going to get rid of my parents through some sort of accident and take over as ruler."

"Clever plan," mused the general. "Too bad it included betraying my troops and me. So, we were the fall guys . . . She used us." He bristled with anger as his claws tightened around the bars. He looked at the king. "I ask that you do me this one favor. Place the witch in my cell."

"She fell from the rooftop and to her doom," replied the king. "The witch is no more." Then turning to his daughter, he said, "Thank you. You can go back to the celebration now. Tell your mother I will be there shortly."

"Yes, Father." She smiled, and then with a quick stern look at the general, left the room.



Meanwhile, Marty and her parents had scoured the entire area and returned to the castle.

"Did you see anything?" asked the queen.

"No ma'am, nothing," answered Marty.

"It's so dark," added Marty's dad as he stood firmly at attention. "Even with the moonlight, it's hard to see much, Your Highness."

Kneeling, the queen asked Marty's dad, "Harold, is it?"

"Yes ma'am. Harold Martin," he said with a bow.

Benevolently, she continued, "The king and I are neither higher nor better than anyone else. We simply have a different job. That's all. So relax. I do appreciate your respect, but there is no need to stand on ceremony."

"Got it," he said as he relaxed, but he still maintained a respectful tone. "I think we should start a search of the woods, ma'am."

"I believe you're correct, but we should wait for the king and the royal detective," answered the queen.

As they continued to discuss the situation, Marty noticed an astute squirrel enter the room. She was surprised that he wore clothing—she'd never seen an animal in clothing before.

He had a small black hat made of felt, tilted to the right a little. He wore a white shirt with a cravat and a gray vest buttoned over it, topped with a black trench

coat that hung almost to the floor. Walking upright, and carrying a fine walking cane, he approached them in earnest. Going directly to the queen, he bowed and then said, "You sent for me?"

"Yes," the queen answered, "Roger Ruzo has gone missing. We need your services. He was last seen at that open window just over there."

"Well then," said the squirrel, "let's have a look-see."

As he made his way to the window, Marty followed along and asked, "So, you're a detective?"

"Quite so," answered the squirrel. "Sherwin is my name. And yours?"

"Martina Martin, but my friends call me Marty," she replied as they reached the window. "Ruzo was right here last time I saw him. Do you think you'll be able to find him?"

"Perhaps," said the detective, "if he wants to be found."

The squirrel surveyed the area, looking closely for any clues. He then jumped onto the window ledge and finally onto the ground outside.

Looking around again, he smelled at the air, tasted the grass, and began to stare up at what appeared to be nothing.

"What is it?" asked Marty.

"Please quiet yourself," Sherwin responded. "I'm thinking, and the clinking of glasses and laughter inside the castle is making it difficult enough as it is."

So Marty stood quietly and watched him curiously. After a few moments, the squirrel turned and charged back into the castle. He made straight for the queen, with Marty trailing right behind him.



Below, in the dungeon, the king and the general had been talking—well, arguing really. But they were making progress all the same.

“You’re a fool!” shouted the general. “I should have cut you down when I had the chance.”

“You are the fool, my old friend,” replied the king. “You left the sanctity of your territory and abandoned a treaty of peace and protection to attack the Castle of Light. You were led by a Blue Witch to your own slaughter. Now you sit in detention. Pure madness.”

Reaching through the bars, the general tried to grab the king, but could not reach him. “I’m not going to help you,” the Lutabeast grumbled. “But if you let me go, I will leave your precious castle and never return.”

“So you do think me the fool,” the king answered in frustration. “We’re finished here. For your crimes against the kingdom, our town, and its people, I shall schedule your execution.” Turning to walk away, the king paused at the door as the general burst out in anger.

“Threats? Where is your nobility now?”

“It is not a threat, Tusk. It’s an ultimatum,” replied the