**The Rose**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Super Mario &amp; Related Fandoms, Mario &amp; Luigi RPG (Video Games), Super Mario Bros. (Video Games)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Luigi/Prince Peasley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Luigi (Nintendo), Mario (Nintendo), Mamekku Ouji</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Love Triangles, Love Confessions, a lot of pining, Politics, Shady Agreements between Heads of State, Nature Allegories, a lot of flowers, Music, troubador realness, Songs, mangled italian, also mangled french (sorta)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-03-05 Chapters: 12/12 Words: 46053</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**The Rose**

by [LadyKeane](http://archiveofourown.org)

**Summary**

A romantic fairy tale centering on a green-thumbed minstrel, a prince who learns how to love, lose and reawaken, a brave and selfless princess, and a glowing golden rose.
Chapter 1

The cabbages had been divested of caterpillars. The formerly sagging tomato vines had been relieved of their ruby produce. The camellia bushes had been pruned of old growth, and the minature potted pirhana plants had been fed their daily luncheon of live grubs. Luigi checked his watch. Quarter to twelve, another successful morning's work. Before he returned inside to work on the laundry, however, there was one final task left to perform.

Equipping himself with his well-worn trowel, shears and watering can, he reverently approached an elevated, sunny patch of the flower bed.

In the centre of a well mulched and well weeded circle of soil grew a small rose bush, its undulating stems a pale young green, just on the verge of yielding its first buds. These delicate teardrop-shaped bulbs dotted the plant, standing out like stars in a milky evening sky. Even at this stage of life, they glowed an intense, luminescent yellow, completely unlike any other flower in Luigi's garden.

He brushed at the flushed leaflets and prickly stems tenderly, checking meticulously for any sign of pests or discolouration. After a lengthy inspection, satisfied that the precious plant was out of danger, he carefully loosened the rich soil surrounding the base, sprinkling a light shower of high-phosphorus fertiliser as he went. He had considered planting a ring of pansies around his treasure, but later decided against it, adamant that nothing should be permitted to leech nutrients away from its imminent blooms. Besides, once the flowers had opened, the prettiness of any mere pansy would shrivel beneath its splendour.

Finally, he took his battered watering can in hand and poured a gentle rain upon the tended bed. The forecast had insisted that the skies would remain blue for at least the next week, and keeping the thriving shrub from thirst was crucially important.

Having finally completed his regimen, Luigi wiped the sweat from his forehead and remained kneeling by the rose bush, his eyes roving over its burgeoning features. He had grown many plants from small cuttings - the tiny balcony of his childhood home in Brooklyn had always been teeming and green with the botanical accomplishments of he and his mother Mimi. However, this latest charge was truly a glorious accomplishment of his expertise.

He had only ever seen one other specimen of this jewel-like flower, a cutting that had been bestowed upon him as a gift. Instead of letting it wither indoors, condemned to sit in a chipped vase in a dim corner of his room, Luigi had propagated the little flower, planting it in his garden and taking every measure to ensure it would take root. The love and care he had dedicated to it seemed to be gradually paying off.

He removed his gardening gloves and lay back upon the dark, springy grass.

"HIYA!"

Trembling and flustered, Luigi shakily got to his feet. He grimaced at Daisy's ear-to-ear grin.

"You know, normal people don't use ambush as a form of greeting."

"Wanna come play some tennis this afternoon, Sweetie? Everyone's gonna be there, and we'll all go out for dinner afterwards!"

Luigi shook his head. "I have a lot to do around the house this afternoon."

"I'll help!" Daisy proclaimed, and began to haul the garden implements back to the shed. He moved to stop her in her task, but thought better of it, watching his friend lug everything away in a single
trip, her scruffy brown ponytail bouncing about in her wake.
"Princesses don't usually take kindly to labour."
After setting her load down in the shed, in a disorganised clump, she emerged and ruffled his hair.
"And great champions of the Kingdom don't normally spend their days cleaning and gardening." She began to skip off down the garden path. "Shall we start by putting out the laundry?"
Before he could object, Daisy had clambered into the laundry room and was hauling a sopping wet pile of the brothers' work clothes into a basket.
"I assume these are Mario's?" she giggled, holding up a pair of dungarees with a considerably wide seat.
"I haven't scrubbed all the grease stains out yet," Luigi insisted gently, removing the garment from her clutches. "It's OK Daisy, I got this. Go out and enjoy the match with the others."
A pang of guilt stung him as he saw the spark fade from her eyes. She gave him a brief, sad smile, before turning and making her way back down the garden path. "It'd be really great if you were there," she said simply, "We've seen so little of you for the past few weeks."
He followed her to the front gate, and she lingered for a moment, leaning against the wooden fence. "Last chance?" She offered. "I'll pay for your pizza afterwards."
Luigi sighed, simpered at her apologetically, and fetched the post from the nearby mailbox. Finally resigned, she snuck a kiss to his cheek in parting. "See ya 'round, nature boy."

***

"What's his excuse this time?" Mario grumbled, when he saw Daisy approaching without a lanky green-clad companion on her arm.
"He said he's got housework to do," the girl lamented. "Could we at least recruit Peach to make up the numbers?"
Toad shook his head. "She's holding a forum on the federal regulation of agriculture today."
His sister, Toadette, giggled. "At least she has an excuse."
Mario took his cap off and rubbed his forehead, trying not to chafe at his brother's continued reticence. "I had planned this day for HIM! To give him a change of scene and a chance to socialise! The first day in a month that I didn't have a monarch to protect, a violent bandit to squash or an autograph signing to attend, and he still can't be arsed to drag himself out of that blasted garden." He exhaled, resigned himself to the situation and looked to the cluster of his friends. "Come on then... let's play anyway."

The game wound down as the afternoon wore away, and the group agreed on a light meal at a fashionable new establishment in the Toad Town Arcade. They entered the brass-gilt doors, and savoured the respite of the air-conditioning and light jazz music emanating from a small stage at the back of the room. Toadette's eyes sparkled appreciatively.
"Oooh... the decor is so glamt!"
Daisy nodded. "Yeah, they say all the new 'Starbeans' franchises that have been opening internationally have developed waiting lists that are, like, three months long. I heard that the one on the Kong Archipelago even needs a team of bouncers."
"Good thing we have combined star power, then," Mario remarked cheerily, as a fawning maître d' showed them to a large table on the ornamented mezzanine level.
Menus were handed out, and Daisy hastily decided on her meal. Looking for something to wile away the time, she picked up a tabloid newspaper left on one of the nearby velvet lounges.
"This is a Beanbean Kingdom newspaper," she commented, "they must carry them in every Starbeans."
Mario's head snapped up. The front page of the publication declared: "Bumper Crop at Chuckle Bean Plantations - Prince Visits to Congratulate Farmers." The weathered, soil-caked hand of a beanish farmer was being shook by a dazzling, smiling, all-too-familiar figure. The plumber frowned. "Luigi's subscribed to that rag," he stated flatly. "He can't get enough of it.
There's stacks of 'em currently burying our coffee table at home."
Daisy looked up at him. "Now that you mention it, he was kinda eager to take the post in when I saw him today."
"Who could blame him?" Toadette interjected, wonder in her voice. "He's actually seen the place. The beautiful old buildings in Beanbean Castle Town, the sandy beaches at Gwarhar Lagoon, the vintages at Château de Chucklehuck... I'm soooo jealous!"

The visit that Mario, Peach and their entourage had made some time previously to the country had inspired a mini-boom in tourism to the place, and for a few months now, the Beanish way of life had become wildly popular with the youth of the Mushroom Kingdom. The opening of the new Starbeans had been a massive publicity event, to which Mario and Luigi had been welcomed as VIP guests. The Beanish celebrities who had been invited, however, all politely declined. Although the Beanbean Kingdom was a peaceable nation, there were less enthused people who were quick to point out the persistent low-level snobbishness that pervaded Beanish culture.

The energy of the conversation petered out as everyone noticed Mario's grim expression. He leant a fist against his cheek, staring down at the tabloid.
"He's been obsessed," he murmured. "He's been even quieter and more preoccupied than normal. The Beanish Prince gave him this shiny yellow rose. He kept the thing by his side constantly while we were there. The moment we got home he planted it in the garden, and he's fussed over it every day since. He keeps on inventing excuses not to go out... I'm really worried about him..."
Daisy's eyes widened.

Before anyone could say anything else, a flurry of noise and activity at the front door alerted the group. A mob of patrons were milling about excitedly, as the maître d' lead a tall, flamboyantly dressed Mushroom man up to a reserved table on the mezzanine. He casually waved off his fervent fans, leaving the Starbeans staff to manage the animated herd. His many gold rings glinted in the evening sunlight.
"Looks like they might need an army of bouncers here, too," Mario commented. "Who is that guy, anyway?"
The Mushroom man flicked back his purple cape. As his gaze flitted over to Mario's table, his face lit up with delighted recognition.
"Toadie!"
"Mannie!"
Toad got up from his place at the table, and the two embraced like brothers.
"Guys, this is Mannie Muscaria, one of the court musicians. He and I often work together at the castle."
"He's not just ANY court musician," Toadette added, "He's the greatest guitarist of his generation! Toadovsky, Master Poet, the Great Kondonini... he can shred them all!"
Mannie Muscaria chuckled bombastically. "Please, please. My art in itself is praise enough." He made a show of flourishing his expert fingers, his gold rings glinting all the brighter. His dark eyes settled upon Mario, and they narrowed.
"Would it be too much to ask if I joined your party, Mario? I have often seen you rushing about the castle, but have never had a chance to really meet you. It would be marvellous to pick the brain of such a monumentous national hero."
The plumber felt a little like a strain of bacteria being examined under a microscope. Nevertheless, he scrabbled up along the table, allowing the musician to sit down (it turned out that everyone had to move along a fair way - Mannie Muscaria's physique was as hefty as his reputation).
Eventually the food arrived, and the group all quite happily fell to eating.
"So," Mannie Muscaria slurred through a mouthful of fricassed goomba in hee bean consommé, "as you are all so close to the Princess, I imagine you would have some understanding of her personal musical predilections."
Mario looked up quizzically from his risotto. "Huh?"
"He's asking about Peach's taste in music," Daisy translated. Mario shrugged. "It's not really something that I have time to ask about when I'm trying to rescue her from the claws of crazed, villainous reptile kings."

"Apart from listening to the royal chamber orchestra at recitals," Toad mused, "I've sometimes known her to chill out to love ballads by Chanterelle..."

"Oh yeah!" Daisy piped up. "She loves that mushy stuff. You should have heard her do karaoke at my last birthday party. She and all the girls had one too many strawberry daiquiris - she leaned right into the microphone and hit a note so high it shattered the cocktail glass that Birdo was holding!"

Mannie Muscaria shrieked and snorted with laughter, his face growing a brilliant red. His fork clattered to the table. The maestro continued wheezing and spluttering, and Daisy was the first person to realise something was amiss.

"Mario..."

Diners at nearby tables gawked in horror as the Mushroom man flailed about wildly, choking on a munitious sliver of goomba meat. Mario leapt into action, lifting the massive bulk of Mannie Muscaria to his feet and giving him an almighty whallop on the back. The piece of meat was dislodged and rocketed across the room, landing with a spectacular splash in an elderly lady's glass of Chuckola Reserve.

Everyone cheered, excluding the elderly lady, who simply wiped a splatter of Chuckola reserve off her white lacy blouse.

"Another victory for the hero of the Mushroom Kingdom!" The maître d' announced. "Mario, you and your friends eat on the house tonight!" Upon hearing these words, Daisy and Toadette instantly reached for the dessert menu.

"I don't quite know what to say..." Mannie Muscaria said to Mario, "You have saved my life... but how on earth can I repay a man of your stature?"

Mario shook his head and sat back down. "It's fine."

"Really," Mannie Muscaria insisted. "would you like a gift? A favour? If you or any of your friends want free music lessons, you need only ask."

Mario's eyes drifted back to the newspaper that still lay upon the table, and the photo of the Beanish Prince that graced it.

"Actually, now that you mention it..."

***

Luigi opened up his musty smelling guitar case, starting slightly as Mannie Muscaria snatched the humble instrument and tutted, wasting no time in re-stringing it.

"You can't make music with an instrument you do not nurture," he muttered. "This guitar is crying out for someone to hold it."

He still wasn't entirely sure why he was there. Mario had rattled on at him about developing outside interests and focusing his mind on something productive, before he took off to help quell a reptillian pirate siege taking place in Rogueport.

It was true Luigi had always had a certain affinity for playing the guitar. As a teenager, he'd cherished various rock star idols, and his parents had paid for enough private lessons to enable him to bumble his way through many of the pop anthems of the day. However, as his plumbing apprenticeship began with his brother & father, and his displacement to the Mushroom Kingdom had led to a new life altogether, it had been a hobby that had simply fallen by the wayside.

And so, Mario had now arranged lessons with one of the Kingdom's finest court musicians. Instead of an exciting opportunity, Luigi approached this new endeavour with a sense of dread. A musical master like Mannie Muscaria would no doubt have high, exacting standards of his pupil - much higher than that of his old tutor, a burnout hippie rocker teaching pop tunes to kids for ten bucks a lesson.

"Your brother tells me you have had lessons before," the musician noted, one angular eyebrow rising slightly. "Show me what you can do."
Luigi gave a weak, apologetic smile, stated that he was rusty, and struggled his way through an old Freddie Mercury number. He tried to ignore the subtle wincing of his teacher at every sour note and staggered beat. It was decided a total overhaul was required, and the next hour was spent in a dogged combing of the fundamentals - tuning, fingering, and the most basic of major chords.

Rubbing his temples with pudgy beringed hands, Mannie Muscaria declared it was time for a break. "The Princess said she would attend to us in the gazebo with some tea and cakes," he said, a gleam coming to his eyes.

"Can I take this to practice?" Luigi asked, grabbing the neck of his guitar.

"Do as you please," the maestro responded dismissively, "just don't expect me to listen that closely." Student shuffled after teacher, and they made their way out to the castle gardens. In the centre of the flower garden sat a domed gazebo, its balustrade adorned with twisting filigrees of white iron. Upon a table in its centre sat a high tea service, complete with platters of delicate sandwiches and petits fours. There also sat a note written in rosy ink, upon parchment with the royal letterhead:

"Hello boys,
I would have loved to join you, but the parliamentary conference on surplus investment from the resources boom was moved to today. I am afraid I will be very busy, but please enjoy these pastries I baked for you. Luigi, I wish you much luck in your music lessons. Sir Amanito, I know you will look after him.
Much love,
Princess Peach <3"

"'Sir Amanito'?" Luigi enquired.

"'Mannie' is a nickname," Mannie Muscaria informed him. "My official title is 'Sir Amanito Muscaria of the Royal Chamber Orchestra, OMK, KRM'. I try to get her to call me 'Mannie'..." He sighed wistfully, and then plucked a delicate peach-flavoured confection off the platter, lightly inhaling its sweet aroma.

Luigi sipped at his unsweetened tea, then returned to remastering his chords. A major... C major... G major...

A few of his attempts at D major fell foul, and Luigi looked up at his tutor to make sure the man's ears weren't on the verge of bleeding. Instead, he was absentingly nibbling on a small cake, absorbed in staring at Peach's letter.

"She has a truly beautiful hand. Delicately curved, unhurried, feminine... it reflects her perfectly." He tucked the letter away in a fold of his cape, unashamed.

"She's a good woman," Luigi agreed, trying to sound disinterested. "I suppose she provides good conditions for the royal musicians."

"'Good conditions'? My boy, she is the kind of woman that madrigals and cansos were invented for! The amount of pieces I have composed about her has been compiled in two large volumes of their own!"

The relief of this ostentatious man's heart was suddenly on full display. They locked eyes for a few raw moments, until Luigi's face fell, focusing on his guitar strings and reddened fingertips. Mannie Muscaria turned away and stuffed himself with a few more pastries, pointedly staring out at the garden, while Luigi blankly fiddled with his instrument, at length settling upon a melancholy minor chord.

"Qui dove il mare luccica
e grida forte il vento
su una vecchia terrazza vicina al golfo di Surriento
un uomo abbraccia una ragazza
dopo che aveva pianto
poi si sciarisce la voce e ricomincia il canto:

Te voglio bene assai
ma tanto, tanto bene sai
Mannie Muscaria's hand had frozen over the platter, his attention arrested by the haunting verse. "What was that?"
"Something my Mama once sang to me," Luigi replied quietly.
"What language is it? I'm sure it cannot be any dialect of this country."
"Italiano."
"And your Mama was from this 'Italia'?"
Luigi nodded. "Papa too. She was just a simple country girl from Umbria, he was a sweet-talking charmer from Napoli. He would serenade her with old Caruso canzone when they were young. Sometimes they would still sing them together in Brooklyn. For Mario and me."
Mannie Muscaria gave up processing all the unfamiliar place names, and instead continued to marvel at the beautiful song. "There is a breath of genius in your performance. Here I thought you were a graceless clod, not beyond a mere hobbyist, but... well. The quality of your voice is nice enough, but the essence behind it is inspired. Almost celestial."
He then leant into his student. "You pine for someone."
Luigi's shoulders hunched, and he cringed.
"You must own the feeling!" The maestro exclaimed. The silverware and fine china rattled as his beringed hand struck the tabletop. "The pain, the passion, the astral highs and abysmal lows - THAT insanity is what stokes the fires of all artists' greatest works!" When you strum out your chords, grapple with your rhythm, when you sing with that sweet little lyric baritone of yours... do it in the name of your love!"
Luigi dared to look back up at his teacher, and felt heartened. Returning his hands to their position on the neck and belly of his guitar, he felt revived with a new energy.
Mannie Muscaria smiled widely, and watched his student fervently practice for a while, immensely pleased with himself. Eventually he spoke again: "I have heard you enjoy the company of that chubby little princess from Sarasaland..."
Luigi's concentration broke, and he laughed. "Oh, no. Daisy's a good friend, but it's not like that."
The maestro tented his hands. "Very well... then whom?"
Luigi ignored the question, focusing once again on the chords he was slowly extracting from his instrument.

Chapter End Notes

The song Luigi sings is 'Caruso', a popular Italian standard by Lucio Dalla about the famous opera singer Enrico Caruso. A lovely rendition by Lara Fabian can be found here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFyGOQnl1zA
Chapter 2

THE ROSE
A Fairy Tale
Chapter 2

Another swell of feminine squeals pealed through the flagstone streets, and the denizens of Beanbean Castle Town grimaced at the sound.

It had become something of a national sport: once any young beanish lass had spotted a vapour trail of golden sparkles, or the silhouette of a winged *Leguminos Sylphus*, wheeling through the skies, a mini-ruckus would inevitably flare up as she alerted all her gal-pals to the sighting. Nine times out of ten, the source of excitement turned out to be refracted sunlight, or a goonie-bird gliding on its expansive white wings, but it did little to deter these bloody-minded enthusiasts. The beanish tabloids had dubbed them 'Peasley Poachers', all of them besotted with the prince of their homeland.

On this particular day, the hunt had proved fruitful. Shoppers on the ritzy Vanilla Promenade gawked at the dense crowd of screeching, wailing girls that surrounded the celebrated prince, who had just swooped back into town on his well-known *Leguminos Sylphus* mount. He was graciously signing autographs, though he remained astride this flying beast as it hovered low upon the promenade, his feet not daring to alight upon the same ground as that of his devotees.

He had just returned to the castle town after his tour of the nation's vineyards. It had been a publicity stunt to enhance the nation's agricultural image and flaunt the bounty of their plentiful crops to the rest of the world. Lady Lima, the royal family's top advisor, was quite sure that it would give them a fair bit more clout with foreign ministers when wrangling trade agreements.

Prince Peasley persisted in granting his fans with his radiant smile, but in truth, he was desperate for a coffee.

At long last he managed to escape - two royal guards had been glowering over the commotion, and dispersed the girls once the hubbub began to wear thin. The other people in the vicinity breathed a sigh of relief.

A few minutes later, a lone paparazzo hurried into the promenade, angrily kicking an errant soft drink can as he realised he'd missed his chance.

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"With the personal compliments of Professor E. Gadd," announced a ruffle-clad house boy as he held out a steaming cup of Starbeans Teehee Blend on a gleaming silver platter.

The Prince lifted his blonde head from the deep cushions of his lounge, and weakly plucked the cup from its salver with shapely, uncalloused fingers. He uttered a heartfelt thanks to the servant, who proceeded to tuck the platter under his arm and march back to the kitchens, leaving the Prince alone in his private salon.

Mmmm, caffeine.

The south-facing palladian window before him afforded a familiar view of the castle town - the brightly coloured rooftops of the commercial buildings and gentrified townhouses and terraces, beyond which lay the airport. Its various squat terminals and warehouses were thankfully obscured from sight - only a few lofty control towers signified its position, as well as the periodical ascent and descent of planes sailing before the washed out strip of distant ocean that could be glimpsed. These
visions of society, industry and enterprise had overstayed their welcome upon the prince's senses, and once he had downed his last drop of coffee, he rose from the lounge and headed out to the tiled corridor.

His progress was arrested by the large portrait of his father that hung opposite the doors to the royal throne room.

King Favius I had almost single-handedly revived a tired, polluted dynasty and the morale of its people. The youngest son of King Berlottibotham VI and a dark horse for the throne, he had transformed the weakened monarchy, and its creaky economy bolstered only by slimy white-collar double-dealing and had spearheaded a return to the earth. The natural beauty and rich resources of the nation were made use of under his guidance, sustainably and respectfully. Agriculture blossomed, and in turn, so did the culinary and winemaking industries. International cultural mavens began flocking to the verdant green country, bringing with them tourist coins and the promise of valuable imports. And while Favius' older brothers wished to bulldoze the trees and meadows of the land to put up office blocks, the King fought to preserve them for the enjoyment and health of both the citizens and visitors to the kingdom.

Peasley remembered his big, booming laugh most of all. He was not a proud or haughty man, and loved to joke with both his family and the household staff. On one sunny afternoon, as a child, Peasley had insisted on helping his father as he tended to the royal rose garden. The little prince had pricked his unpracticed hand upon a thorn, tearfully running to his father, horrified at the dew-drop of blood that had bloomed on his tiny finger.

The king had gathered his son in his arms, tenderly swathing the injured hand in a much too large handkerchief. Peasley's tears were silenced by the slightly absurd sight of the enormous sheaf of silk being wrapped about the little appendage. His young mind roved to the images of desert mummies in one of his picture books.

"I'm a mummy, daddy!" the little boy had blurted.

The King bellowed his enormous laugh. As it rang through the rose garden, Peasley could remember how the sound had reverberated through his body like electricity, its energy and music drying up his melancholy. They had spent the rest of the afternoon chasing each other around the garden, pretending to be cursed, lumbering desert mummies.

He had also died like a true King, taking a Kremling musket ball to his chest during a pirate invasion at Oho Oasis. He and an unsure, adolescent Peasley had stood at the front line with the royal navy, ready to fend off the invaders in the name of their people. After the death of their King, the rage of the Beanbean soldiers had been more than enough to fend off the crude fleet of invaders.

While the kingdom had been plunged into mourning, Queen Bean had insisted that its laughter should not be silenced. The current royal insignia, a highly stylised depiction of the King's laughing face, complete with his radiant smile and perfectly bald head, had been branded upon every possible inch of the government's architecture and documentation. Even the heraldry had been updated to include the symbol, a green jewel newly adorning the stately old emblems.

He was smiling in the portrait too, his eyes sparkling. In his hand he clutched the beautiful strain of rose that he had cultivated, its petals a luminescent yellow. It had been a project undertaken at the birth of his son, to pay tribute to the silky gold ringlets that crowned the newborn's head. The real king was currently lying far below, in the lightless castle tomb, a few roses of the same kind withering in his cold hands.

Determined to make the most of the remaining afternoon sunlight, Peasley headed out into the gardens.
The rustle of trees and the gushing of the fountain greeted him, and he imbibed the rich, clean air as if it were fine wine. After his protracted absence, it was good to be among the living things which he knew best.
The tall, skinny cypress trees bowed, the dainty jasmine blossoms opened, and a flourish of dandelion seed-heads whizzed cheerfully about. As he meandered through the gardens, Peasley plucked a rich purple plum from an obliging branch, savouring the nectarous flesh.
One of the head gardeners had approached him upon his return to the castle, advising him that the roses were still fairing well. He had to see them for himself.
He came upon the graceful trellis gateway marking the entrance to an exclusive part of the castle gardens. As he approached, his pace quickened. The perfume of hundreds of roses spiced the air, the dark green bushes filled with a mosaic of different coloured blooms. In the centre of the space, surrounded by lawn, his roses glowed ever brighter in the failing daylight.
They leant into his touch, enlivened by the presence of their prince. As he caressed the silken petals, Peasley imagined his father doing the same thing with the present blossoms' ancestors, many years ago. The superstitious members of staff had whispered that a magic beyond all knowledge inhabited the plantation.

None of the castle gardeners had ever touched them. The late king and the young prince were the sole cultivators of these exquisite flowers. They were the envy of the horticultural world, many other gardeners trying to replicate them unsuccessfully. A few of the flowers had been given as gifts to heroes who had performed great services to the Beanbean Kingdom, a coveted honour. Many young Beanbean girls had given their sweethearts normal yellow roses in an attempt to imitate this.
Peasley noticed a small bud hiding deep in the foliage, obscured by an interloping weed. Removing his gloves, the young man ripped the weed out by its roots, and a ray of waning sunshine was cast upon the delicate floret. It bashfully pushed its face into the warm, soft light, and its petals opened just a little.

"Peasley!"
Lady Lima was striding up the pathway to the sacred plot, two retainers tailing in her wake. Peasley rolled his eyes. Had he forgotten some engagement or another? Greeting some stodgy old ambassador? Giving a speech at parliament? An interview and photo shoot with Teen Bean magazine?
The moment she was upon the prince, her old hands dusted off the front of his breeches.  
"Darling, if you're going to kneel in the soil, you must change out of your best red satin breeches."
"Nana Lima, I have at least a dozen pairs of red satin breeches, these aren't even my favourite ones!"
He whined.  
"I know which ones are your favourite, young man, and they're far too garish. Now come along, it's getting dark."
They headed back down the path towards the castle, the two retainers following loyally.  
"You and I have another visit to make. Today, Princess Toadstool of the Mushroom Kingdom announced she is planning to hold a Springtime Soiree."
Peasley laughed. "Dear old Peach. She throws soirees, feasts, festivals, parties and jamborees at the drop of a hat. What's her excuse this time?"
"Given the lack of major international conflict over the past year... which I take to mean the good relations maintained between most countries, and relative silence upon Bowser's part... she is holding this ball as a gesture of goodwill between nations. She's inviting cultural delegates from all over the place. Even some of the younger members of the Koopa royal family will be attending."
Peasley's eyebrows leapt to the top of his forehead. "Has she lost her mind!?"
Lady Lima shook her head. "No, she's just desperately naive. She's convinced that if she extends the hand of friendship to Bowser's heirs while they are young, it will instill in them a desire to make
peace instead of war."
"All the more reason, I suppose, that I should be in attendance," Peasley said gravely, making a mental note to sharpen his already formidable swordplay before leaving. "Just in case they decide to try anything."
Lady Lima nodded in concurrence. "Toadsworth suggested the same thing."
A grin crept up Peasley's lips. "Toadsworth? Wasn't he that mustachioed beauracrat chap that you..."
"Toadsworth is an able Mushroom politician with whom I have have had... dealings... in the past."
"I'll bet," Peasley giggled, and was met with a sound clip to his ear.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

THE ROSE
A Fairy Tale
Chapter 3

The stars shone brighter and brighter in the fading sky, and the torches were lit. The Ballroom of the Mushroom Castle was abuzz with cooks and waiters arranging immense tables crowded with food: plates of exotic fruits for the Yoshi guests, all manner of meats twirled slowly upon spits for the Koopas, and cumbersome piles of bananas stood out as great clumps of yellow amongst the spread, ready for the delectations of the the Kongs. Chefs were still fretting over the final touches of the haute cuisine dishes, the finest gastronomical accomplishments that the Mushroom Kingdom, Sarasaland and the Beanish had to offer.

There would be no string quartet tonight. The royal orchestra had devised entertainment similar to days of yore: a small band of 'minstrels' was setting up with period instruments, and amongst the milling crowd would be jugglers, acrobats and all manner of prestidigitators.

Peach fiddled with the last adornments to her ballgown, and sauntered out onto her private balcony, savouring the escalating energy in the evening air. She knew she assumed this every time she played hostess, but this was going to be the best party ever.

"Presenting His Majesty Prince Peasley of the Beanbean Kingdom, Guardian of the Beanish People and Protector of the Beanstar, and the Right Honourable Lady Lima, Grand Vizier and Matron of the Royal Beanbean Court, and Protector-"
"Oh, Toadsworth, I know who they are," Peach giggled.

"Yeah, wasn't the formal procession at the start of the night boring enough?" Daisy interjected, and most of the younger members of the group laughed.

Mario and Luigi stood abreast behind Peach, stalwart, silent, adamant bodyguards. Mario had not laughed. His eye was currently trained on the heinous forms of Ludwig and Wendy O. Koopa, currently skulking about in the midst of the crowd. The revered royals were currently mingling on a high elevated dais at the rear of the room, while the masses partied on the main ballroom floor below. Nevertheless, constant vigilance was to be Mario's byword that night.

Luigi's gaze, however, was captivated by another guest altogether.

"Peach, darling," Peasley kissed her cheeks. "So heartening to see you in such good spirits."

"You too!" Peach responded. "I trust the Beanstar is well protected?"

"Under lock and key," the prince affirmed.

"I still say you should make a few fakes," Daisy suggested. "With built in flame throwers. Or make up some kinda urban legend saying that any thief who touches it will turn to dust or something." She looked immensely pleased with her suggestions.

"Tell me, dear Daisy, have the King and Queen of Sarasaland decided to put you in charge of homeland security?" Peasley chuckled.

"With any luck!" Daisy riposted. "How I'd love to be at the front line of the action. Just like you and Mario and Luigi. The stuff you guys have done is amazing. I still can't believe the three of you managed to excorise the spirit of a wicked witch out of Bowser's body. It must have taken some amazing spunk. Not to mention teamwork..." She smiled brightly at the brothers, still standing by the Mushroom Princess' shoulders.
"It certainly did," Mario answered blankly, still obsessively staring down at the Koopa heirs.
Luigi had been burning for permission to speak. Looking hopefully at Prince Peasley, he declared
unsteadily:
"It was an honour to assist you in your mission, Your Majesty."
Peasley's attention was caught by the crudely-attired bodyguard standing by Peach and Mario. Oh
yes, Mario's brother. He had been one of the party in the quest to liberate the Beanbean Kingdom
from Cackletta and Fawful, the terrorists responsible for stealing the Beanstar and possessing
Bowser. At the time, the prince couldn't figure out what the boy was doing there in the first place.
Perhaps Mario required a P. A. on his adventures, and had graciously given the post to his little
brother. He certainly was cute, in an unkempt, stable-boy sort of way, and Peasley now remembered
what fun it had been to tease and flirt with the great oaf. However, given the glazed, slightly fevered
look in his eyes now, it was clear that he was just another infernally infatuated fan.
Peasley flickered a brief, empty, altogether uncomfortable smile at the moustached attendant, and
quickly turned his face away.
Luigi strived to keep a blank face, but Daisy was wise to his torment.
"Oh, Luigi," she lamented, clutching his hand.
Mario's eagle-like vigil was interrupted. "You okay, lil' bro?"
Luigi's head was bowed as Daisy stroked his shoulder, he remained silent. Finally Mario caught onto
what had happened.
"He's not worth it, 'Weeg."
"Maybe you and Peasley are just too different."
A stir in the crowd drew the three of them over to the balustrade. Below on the ballroom floor was
an unwelcome sight. Harassing the waiters and taunting the entertainers were Wario and Waluigi, the
two infamous Diamond City rogues who had obviously stopped by to gate-crash.
"Luigi, you stay with Peach," Mario instructed, "I'll be back soon."
"I'm coming with you!" Daisy declared, kicking off her heeled shoes and raring to join the fray.
Luigi did not look up from the tiled floor. From his left, he heard the echoed clamour of Mario and
Daisy descending upon the rascals, both swiftly and fiercely expunging them from the castle, and the
inevitable mobbish cheers that came from the invited guests. To his right were the genteel, tinkling
tones of Prince Peasley and Princess Peach comparing notes on their various royal duties.
Feeling utterly out of place, he desperately wished he could just vanish into the stone architraves.
"Psst!"
He remained a morose statue.
"Psst! Over here!"
Mannie Muscaria was peering out from behind a velvet curtain, dressed in semi-archaic attire of the
Old Mushroom court, including a ridiculous powdered wig. He held a beautiful scrolling mandolin in
his hands.
"I have a boon to crave of you tonight."
He dragged Luigi down the staircase leading to the main ballroom floor, and they weaved and
ducked through the hordes of laughing, jabbering, eating and drinking.
"I've been practising one of those 'Italia' songs you relayed to me."
"The Caruso one?"
"No, the one that opens with all those grouped sixteenth notes, in F minor."
"Uh...?"
"Oh, I'll show you which one!" Mannie Muscaria blurted curtly. "Anyway. My mastery of this aria
on the strings is superb, but..."
"But...?"
"Well... my... my voice leaves something to be desired."
Mannie Muscaria wasn't kidding. During one of their lessons, he had tried to croon an old
Mushroom folk ballad as he played it, and the servants in the hall nearby had rushed in, thinking some terrible, agonising torture was taking place in the room. (In a way, their instincts had been spot on.)
"I have instructed young Toad to lead Peach out onto the master balcony above the moat bridge later tonight. I want you..."
"You want me to sing?"
"Naturally. My fingers are as enchanted as your dulcet voice."

Mannie Muscaria then led him into an empty room to rehearse the big moment. Before they commenced practice, Luigi spoke up.
"You know, Mannie... the Princess' heart solely belongs to-"
"Your brother, I know," Mannie Muscaria muttered bitterly. "He is braver than I, and worthier of her. Even so... I simply must do this. Even if she feels it is no more than light entertainment for her fleeting amusement... at least I shall have the chance to declare myself. In the greatest way I know how."
Luigi smiled at the maestro, his battered emotions suddenly invigorated by an overflowing of sympathy. He removed his cap, extracting from it an exquisite golden-yellow rose at the height of its bloom, its splendour undiminished by its slightly cramped hiding place.
"I was going to give this to someone tonight," he said to himself. "But instead I'll wear it as something that is entirely my own."
With this, he threaded the stem of the rose through a frayed denim buttonhole on his breast.

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"Mario, calm down. I'm sure he can't have gone far."
"I specifically asked him to stay here with you! What if those Koopa brats had leapt at the chance to steal you away!?"
"But they didn't. I'm fine! You and Daisy have done a splendid job. Maybe he's gone outside. You know how he loves the gardens."
"When I find that absent-minded pedrolino..."
Scuttling up the staircase came Toad, saluting them.
"Your Royal Highness! I have been asked to escort you onto the master balcony. There is a surprise awaiting you for your royal amusement."
Peach clasped her hands. "Oh, how lovely."
"I knew it," Mario groaned. "Bowser's got his airship pointed right at the castle, ready to attack, am I right?"
The princess flicked the back of her protector's head.
"Can we come?" Daisy asked, indicating herself and the Beanish prince.
"We'll need all the backup we can muster!" Mario declared.

The grand glass doors leading to the balcony were ceremoniously opened. However, instead of being met with the ferocious scream and grind of a monster airship and its bloodthirsty captain, the night sky was clear. Far beneath, from the moat bridge, came the honeyed, resounding strings of an old-fashioned mandolin. The Maestro Sir Amanito Muscaria of the Royal Chamber Orchestra, OMK, KRM, was playing a haunting piece in a minor key, sad yet flourishing. It had never been heard by the people of the Mushroom Kingdom before, and all those who had gathered at the doors and windows to watch assumed it was a new composition, in dedication of his fair Princess. His fingers sailed over the gossamer strings, waves of arresting, pathos-laden notes rendering the crowd enraptured.
The only jarring element to the scene was the denim-clad labourer standing by his side, shuffling his
feet nervously, akin to an ugly earthenware pot amongst a porcelain tea-set. However, a few of the
sharper party-goers recognised the golden flower that sat on his chest.

"O del mio dolce ardor
Bramato oggetto,
Bramato oggetto.
L’aura che tu respiri,
Alfin respiro,
Alfin respiro.

O vunque il guardo io giro,
Le tue vaghe sembianze
Amore in me dipinge:
Il mio pensier si finge
Le più liete speranze;
E nel desio che così
M’empie il petto
Cerco te, chiamo te, spero e sospiro.

O del mio dolce ardor
Bramato oggetto,
Bramato oggetto.
L’aura che tu respiri,
Alfin respiro,
Alfin respiro."

The resonant song’s final note died in the cool night air. A few moments’ silence preceded passionate
applause. The lyrics were completely indecipherable, but the sweet, slightly anxious vocalist that
carried them had bewitched the listeners. Mannie Muscaria's agile artistry had melded with this
unknown voice to create something almost spiritual.
"WOO! Luigi! Yeah!" Daisy bellowed, as Mario tussled with a mixture of fraternal pride and
fraternal outrage, applauding mechanically. Peach clapped her small gloved hands with delight.

The moment Peasley had peered down over the balcony and sighted that rose, his rose, resting upon
the heart of the humble boy, time had stopped. He remembered bestowing one of the sacred flowers
upon him. His white silk mousquetaire gloves momentarily brushed the boy's dirty worker's gloves
of yellowed cotton and leather, as the talisman was passed between them. He had said nothing, but
his clear blue eyes had met the prince in the pale morning sun, and the briefest glimmer of
undisguised desire pierced him, petrifying the prince all too swiftly, and the incident had then been
promptly forgotten.
The song had snaked its way into the prince's core, and he silently, helplessly begged the boy to look
his way.

The enchantment subsided, and Luigi was suddenly sensible to the clamour from the audience he
had magnetised. A dreadful chill went through him.
"Nice work, lad," Mannie Muscaria asided, "You could become a court musician after this. Just let
me talk to the royal director."
The horrific vision of audiences of thousands discriminating music fans bore down on the young
plumber, and he cringed.

Just before the bystanders shook off the last strains of magic themselves and went back to their mire of small talk and banqueting, Luigi’s eyes rose to the balcony above, wondering if Peach had been successfully charmed. Instead she was chatting cheerily with Daisy. But next to them, with his long slender fingers still prizing the marble railing of the balcony, and his golden ringlets dancing very slightly in the night-time breeze, the beautiful prince stared down at the humble singer, utterly transfixed. Once Luigi’s eyes had locked onto his, he found it impossible to tear them away. Gilt by the lamplight from within the castle, he was unreal, just as a seraph gazing down at the troubled and turbulent earth for the very first time.

"HEY! C'mere! C'mere!" Daisy grabbed both Luigi and Mannie Muscaria by their shirt fronts and hauled them inside. "Come and play another song for us!"

For the next lingering hour or so, the two musicians were compelled to sing more canzone and romanze Italiano. Luigi had only shared a handful with Mannie Muscaria, and once they had depleted their repertoire, Daisy further nudged them to perform some old favourites - Mushroom music hall numbers that were more upbeat, far less poignant, and that could be clapped and stomped along to by the crowd. In between each number, Luigi and Mannie Muscaria shared pained expressions. Luigi took every opportunity to crane his neck, craving even a brief sighting of the prince. He could not be seen anywhere within the great crush.

Finally, after a drawn out, excruciating age, the crowd had become too tipsy to concentrate on the music anymore, and the duo were able to make a break for it. It was growing very late, and Peach finally conceded to her retainers' requests to retire the live entertainment. They then put a pre-recorded party mix onto the loudspeaker system they had wired up earlier in the day. The older guests began to leave, while all the bright young things were determined to remain and dance.

As Luigi pushed his way through the shimmying and boogieing throng (divested of the elderly, but augmented by a few of the royal servants now loosening up), he stumbled upon at least a dozen girls demanding a dance with him. The same thing had happened to him in high school. Even though Mario had undoubtedly been the more popular sibling, an awkward rendition of any ditty by Queen or Elvis on his guitar was enough to have formerly dismissive bimbettes drape themselves over him. The experience was always claustrophobic, nerve-wracking, and mercifully, short-lived.

After a few hazardously close encounters, he escaped with a sizeable chunk of his equilibrium intact. He slipped through a heavy door leading to the rear of the castle.

All that could be heard in this murky corridor was the dull thumpa-thumpa of the commotion in the ballroom, and the metal-on-metal clangs of the castle kitchens. He padded through the dim, his eyes guided by a peaceful strip of night sky. With some caution and much relief, he found a doorway out into the gardens.

It was much lighter out here. The mild, silvery starlight was unobscured by cloud, and the winding pathways were illuminated by the warm orbs of light emanating from the grand, curling garden lamp-posts. The pounding dance music, though still audible, came as a benign rumble, like thunder upon a distant mountain. Much more noticeable was the aroma of the night-blooming flowers, the rhythmic chirp of the crickets, and the soft splashes and gurgling of the great star fountain from its courtyard. Lured by the luscious liquid symphony, Luigi drifted by the hawthorne hedges and the potted bay trees towards the courtyard, bedecked with primrose, gladioli and moonflowers. Clematis vines coiled their way up lone marble columns, standing regimentally against the inky heavens.

He perched upon the edge of the fountain, the sound of the water slowly pacifying each of his
faculties. His vision strayed about the cool hues of the courtyard, his mind beginning to empty of the searing simulations of the evening. A lugubrious lone cloud obscured the starlight.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?"

Whirling round, his heart suddenly accelerating in tempo, he beheld the prince, gracefully descending the stairs of Peach's favoured gazebo.

His breath grew shaky. "Sure is," he murmured, staring at the ground.

The prince noiselessly shimmered into the courtyard, seating himself beside the plumber.

"I didn't realise you had such a charming singing voice." There was something slightly playful about the way he said this.

"Yeah, well..." Luigi's painful self-consciousness was currently burning behind his eyes, and he resisted looking up.

Abruptly, he felt a gloved hand collide with his chest, curling around the rose.

"Where did you get this?" The prince was still calm, but a certain edge came into his voice that dispersed any remaining traces of Luigi's composure. He could feel the imperious eyes upon him, and slowly, reluctantly looked up.

"Well, er... when we met... you gave me a rose like this. A-and, it was so pretty that I didn't just want to stick in some vase indoors. When I got home, I planted it in my garden. So I grew a whole bush of roses just like it.

Peasley searched his fearful eyes. "Only my father and I have ever been able to grow these roses..."

Luigi flinched, drawing himself away from his inquisitor. "I didn't mean to offend you!... I hope I haven't broken any rules or anything... I just wanted to give this to you tonight, you know, a-as a gift...!"

His fingers instinctively went to his buttonhole, intending to clutch at his golden treasure. They instead intertwined with the prince's own slender hands.

Inside, the music changed.

Peach's staple favourites of maudlin Chanterelle lovesongs took over from the frenetic pop music, and Luigi and Prince Peasley remained as a living sculpture upon the rim of the star fountain.

After an unmeasured spell of time, Peasley regained his usual aplomb. As the echo of saturated strings exuded from the castle, he smiled at his companion, stood, and offered his hand.

"Would you care to dance?"

They circled the fountain slowly, as the pair of scuffed work boots took extra care to match the nimble steps of the gold-embroidered court shoes.

Once he had fallen into something of a rhythm, Luigi affected a casual mood. "What a sappy old song," he chuckled.

"It's based upon an old Mushroom folk tale," Peasley informed him.

"Oh yes?"

"A piffling little anecdote. The prince of heaven, responsible for all the sparkling stars in the sky, fell in love with a commoner. When they met upon the earth, there was no-one to light the stars each evening, and so the king of heaven had them separated forever. The prince's tears moved the stars so, that they aligned once every year to allow his common lover to reach him in the sky."

Luigi was silent, and fell to staring at his conscientious feet.

"Something the matter?"

"Um. Well... that's actually pretty sad."

Peasley chimed out a pleasing laugh. "It's only make-believe, dear boy. Besides, this song describes how they dance happily together in the heavens..."

The lonely cloud gave way to the glimmering stars once more, and the music inside swelled to a climax.

"I am here, my love, I'm here, I'm here in the infinite
As we dance, my love, we trace the the endless sky"
Don't let time assail us, love, don't ever let this night end
Just watch the dream go on and on...

The conversation had faded, as both followed the natural motion of each other's bodies in their gentle, harmonious dance.
There was a lull in the ballad, and Peasley drew Luigi into him, their cheeks almost touching. The plumber was suddenly wallowing in the beguiling, lightly musky perfume of the prince's blonde ringlets. His arms came out in gooseflesh.
"I should go. It's getting late, and..."
As he tried to pull away, the swordplay-honed sinew of the prince's arms reeled him back in, and the rose in his buttonhole was pressed firmly against his beloved's chest as they kissed.
The moment expanded like a surge of warm air, encompassing the both of them and the black sky and its diamond beacons. His hand traced up Peasley's neck and tangled itself in his hair, and every frantic meeting of their lips roused another tremulous thrill. Luigi ardently entreated the stars to not let time trudge along, to suspend this moment and let it go on and on...

A pause between songs alerted the two to an ominous ruffling in the bushes. Falling back upon his chivalrous instincts, Peasley shielded Luigi from the direction in which the noise was coming, his stance aggressive and his nerve unshakable.
"Ooh, Toadsworth!"
Rolling gracelessly out onto the courtyard's paved floor came a tousled Toadsworth and Lady Lima, arms splayed, clothes rumpled and hair mussed. All four parties froze as they took notice of each other in an instant of unparalleled agony. No-one wanted to be the first one to speak.

"LUIGI!"
Without warning, Mario came storming upon the courtyard, followed by Toad. Somehow the older couple had straightened themselves up into respectability by the time Mario had stomped his way up to the star fountain. He took one look at his younger sibling, still ensconced in Peasley's arms, and fiercely yanked him away into the night. All Luigi could do was stare longingly back at his prince as he disappeared between the trees.

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He was made to wait by the front gate of the castle. Arms folded, Luigi peered sulkily over his shoulder as Mario gallantly kissed Peach's hand, wishing her buona notte.
The walk home was stewing and silent. As Mario slammed the front door, he began the inevitable tirade.
"Idiota! What! Were! You! Thinking!?"
Luigi settled on passive aggression, ignoring his brother by heading to the kitchen for a late night snack.
"If you hadn't noticed, fratello mio, I'm a grown man and can do as I please." He extracted a roll of bread from the breadbox, but it was snatched away by Mario, who fell to cutting it with a kitchen knife, brandishing it with a little too much enthusiasm.
"So you wanna be free to have your heart smashed into frammenti by some spoiled brat pretty boy!?"
"It's not like that!" Luigi asserted, the cucumber, tomato and lettuce in his arms tumbling to the slate floor.
"Oh no? I s'pose the Brooklyn girls who suddenly showed interest in you after you sang for them stuck around too?" Mario reached for meat, cheese and mustard from the open fridge door. "That primping peacock is no different. Remember how he cast you off the first time you gave your heart
Mark my words, Luigi, if he can blow you off once, he'll do it again!” He shook a cumbersome stick of salami at his brother as he made this declaration.

"You're so cynical!” Luigi exclaimed, picking up his vegetables and depositing them on the bench.

"You do know that I'm the only person who's ever managed to grow the gold roses apart from Peasley and his father."

Mario sneered. "Really. I'll bet he says that to all the boys." The cucumber and tomato rolled off the bench and onto the floor, and Luigi once again retrieved them. A dreadful thought struck the younger brother, and he paused in his enfeebled culinary endeavour.

"Mario... it's not... it's not because he's, you know, a guy?"

The older brother almost looked hurt. He rested his knife on the chopping block and placed an affirming hand on his sibling's shoulder.

"Luigi. You know that's never been a problem with me." He allowed himself to bark out a short laugh "Not that that seems to be an issue here, given that mushroom men are free to marry human girls and beanish bellas... It's just... I don't want to see you hang all your hopes on this prancing prince, only to have him ditch you because you're a..."

Luigi's blood rose again. "I'm what, Mario?..."

"Well... in his eyes, you'd be seen as little more than a foreign commoner..."

"Oh, right. Because your relationship to Peach is so different."

Mario sighed, tired of arguing. "If you got hurt again, lil' bro, I don't think I could forgive myself."

"But my welfare is not your responsibility!"

After a steely moment of silence, Mario slammed a plate of salami and mortadella sandwiches before his baby brother, and turned away.

"Buona notte, Luigi."

Mario retired for the night, and Luigi huffed at the dense layers of protein sitting before him. How he hated salami.

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Chapter End Notes

The song Luigi and Manny perform is a very famous Italian aria called 'O Del Mio Dolce Ardor' ('O of my sweet love'), from Gluck's opera 'Paride ed Elena'. Originally it is a love declaration by Paris to Helen of Troy, which I think makes it hugely appropriate for this story. It's also a well known piece among classical singing students, being a part of Schirmer's 24 Italian Songs.

A gorgeous tenor version by Juan Diego Florez (swoon):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoECdxIUGfQ

A duet rendition with guitar accompaniment which probably helps to imagine what it would sound like performed by Manny: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bNKDkB69Kg
Chapter 4

Peach's brow furrowed, she looked from one consultant to the other. "Renegotiate our trade agreements?"
Toadsworth nodded vigourously. "I am convinced that if we open discussion for a few more weeks, we can come up with a pact that will benefit both our nations even further."
Lady Lima chimed in serenely. "There are various tariffs and quotas I wish to go over with Toadsworth and the cabinet, your Majesty. In a period of international peace such as this, it is worth taking the time to strengthen our economic and political bonds. Of course, this means I will have to impose upon your hospitality for the time being. I trust that is acceptable to you?...
Peach caught the slightest pink tingeing Toadsworth's cheeks. She had known the dear old codger for too long not to be wise to him.
She smiled, resting one gloved hand upon the other. "But of course, Lady Lima. You know you are always welcome here. We can open the first meeting on Tuesday morning - take all the time you need."
"Excellent," Lima responded, rising from her chair. "In the mean time, perhaps I shall partake in this delightful weather with a turn through your castle gardens. Mister Toadsworth, would you care to join me?"
Toadsworth took the Lady's frail, silk-enrobed arm, and together they exited the state room.
Laughing lightly to herself, Peach returned to addressing her daily correspondence.

Later in the day she took tea with Prince Peasley in her drawing room. Sir Amanito Muscaria serenaded the diners softly from a velvet-draped corner.
After taking two joyless sips of his berry infusion, Peasley forsook his place at the table, drifting over to one of the high windows and gazing out over Toad Town.
"Is anything the matter?" the Princess asked, fixing a concerned eye upon him.
Peasley sighed. "I suppose I'm not looking forward to returning home. The same old insipid duties await. Sitting in on legislative meetings might be engaging to those who actually have a say in matters... but I usually end up counting the tiles on the floor while my mother and Nana Lima argue amongst themselves."
Peach smiled. "Actually, Lady Lima will be staying here for the next few weeks."
The Prince turned to look at his friend. "Whatever for?"
Peach held a delicate hand to her lips, trying to stifle a giggle. "Oh, she claimed it was for the purpose of renegotiating trade agreements, but she and Toadsworth are simply smitten with each other. I've allowed them their subterfuge so they can spend more time together. Who am I to stand in the way of romance?"
The Angélique Lute in the corner emitted a sad arpeggio.
She rested a hand on Peasley's shoulder. "How would you feel about taking a tour of the Kingdom? The young people of Toad Town were so saddened by your absence at the opening of our new Starbeans franchise. You've plenty of adoring fans here that would love to see you."
Some energy returned to the Prince's bearing. "That would be superb!" He turned to the window again, his gaze drawn across the bright domed rooftops of the town. "I've always wanted to see the variety of plants in the meadows of Petalburg, and partake in the nightlife of Glitzville..."
The music in the corner ceased, and was succeeded by a theatrical throat clearing.

"If I might, your majesty..." Sir Amanito Muscaria entreated softly, "His Highness Prince Peasley is a very exceptional guest of our Kingdom, being the sole heir to the Beanish throne. It would be unforgivable for him to take this journey with but a few lonely retainers for guidance and protection. Although I am sure he is more than capable of taking care of himself, it may be wise for him to be equipped with an escort... Someone familiar with the Kingdom who can act as an aide of sorts?"

Peach frowned. "But Mario is away at Boggly Woods at the moment, serving as the spokesman for the 'Save the Punies' campaign."

A dissonant cluster of strings was twanged at the sound of Mario's name.

"Actually, your Majesty, I was thinking more of his younger brother..."

Peasley inhaled faintly, and a jolt of realisation shot right around the room. The princess couldn't stop herself from then grasping Peasley's hands and beaming at him.

"I'll summon him to the castle right away. And I'll ensure that you two are installed in all the finest hotels and castles and manor houses of the kingdom! You leave first thing tomorrow!"

She kissed his cheek, and another plaintive chord rippled out from the velvet-draped corner. The two royals giddily rushed out of the room to begin planning the tour, and a lonely ballad echoed out into the cavernous corridor behind them.

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Luigi stood with his hands to his sides, flanked by two grim Mushroom security operatives. He fancied they all made quite a funny picture - just as leaden and austere as the dance floor before them was spirited and bright.

Peasley was luminous, writhing elegantly in the middle of a crowd of privileged it-boys and it-girls, all of these spangled darlings trying to wriggle up as close as possible to the prince. Luigi marvelled at the seeming ease with which Peasley managed to maintain his grace and composure. Even on the sidelines, this nightclub was utterly suffocating.

A few vague strokes of jealousy fluttered through Luigi, and he started as one of the security operatives barked a command into his microphone headset. A few minutes later, a drunken Pianta raver was being dragged into the streets of Glitzville, his green glowsticks rolling ruefully across the floor.

The hours passed. Deep in the night, the security operatives clomped heavily along behind a tired Luigi and a somewhat tipsy Prince, through the deserted marble lobby of the Glitzville Palace Hotel. Peasley giggled, jumped at the sonorous echo of his own voice, and giggled again.

The door to the royal suite thumped closed. Peasley kicked off his white leather club shoes and flopped onto the enormous canopied bed in the master bedroom. Luigi busied himself at the generous bar, preparing some iced water and opening a packet of aspirin.

"Oh... open the curtains, Luigi, I do so want to see the stars."

Luigi obeyed, and returned to the bar. He carefully placed a tumbler of the iced water on a platter with the aspirin, carrying it it over to the nightstand.

"I'd recommend having some of this, given your-"

A hand hauled Luigi onto the bed, and he found himself lying on top of Peasley. The same hand caressed the back of his head, willing him into a kiss. Luigi was suddenly all too conscious of the extent to which their bodies were enmeshed. Peasley's chest rose and fell.

"Why didn't you come and dance with me tonight?"

It took a few moments to reclaim the power of speech. "I... um, the Princess asked me to... well, I'm s'posed to be your aide on this tour, and..."

He shuddered reflexively as Peasley's fingers found the nape of his neck. The prince laughed. "Ever the dutiful squire. You're adorable." He kissed him again.

Luigi's hands found the warm skin of Peasley's bare arms. Trailing from his shoulders to his elbows.
With a great spur of strength, Luigi broke the kiss, rising and reaching for the iced water on the nightstand. "Please," he urged the prince. Peasley shifted, leaning back against one of the cushions with a magnificent pout. He nevertheless took the proffered tumbler and sipped from it.

"Sing to me," he demanded. Luigi looked away. "Sing me one of your songs. Like the ones you sang at Peach's soiree." He made a point of clearing the bar first. "I'm waiting." He sat back down on the bed, staring out at the sky. He cleared his throat.

"Si por pobre me desprecias
Yo te concedo razon
Yo te concedo razon
Si por pobre me desprecias...

Yo no te ofrezco riquezas
Te ofrezco mi corazon
Te ofrezco mi corazon
A cambio de mi pobreza."

"What does it mean?" Peasley interrupted. "Um..." The song was Spanish, a ballad Luigi had heard over the radio as a child, and it took a few moments for him to summon the translation.

"If in poverty you despise me,
I give you truth.
I give you truth,
If in poverty you despise me.

I do not offer you riches
I offer you my heart.
I offer you my heart
In exchange for my poverty."

He broke into song once more.

"Malagueña salerosa
Besar tus labios quisiera
Besar tus labios quisiera
Malagueña salerosa
Y decirte niño hermoso

Que eres lindo y hechicero,
Que eres lindo y hechicero
Como el candor de una rosa."
He turned. Peasley had rolled onto his side, and was lost in sleep. His lips were parted slightly with soft, full breaths. A spell of serenity seeped through the muggy air. Eventually, Luigi got up, left the glorious surrounds of the master bedroom, and crossed the suite to his own cramped lodgings.

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"The Petalburg Post Office is a heritage listed building, going right back to the town's origins, some five hundred-odd years ago. See, the Koopa Baron what lived over in Schwonk Fortress was mighty fond of sending away for trinkets advertised for sale in the Portobello Post. Yep, he collected him all kinds of mail-order junk, from steak-knives to novelty chess sets. In those days, mind you, chess was called 'tiddlywinks'..."
The flashbulbs of the press periodically snapped away, and Peasley held back the need to yawn. The tour had moved onto Petalburg, and with it the team of eager tabloid journalists who had tracked Peasley from the beginning of his journey. A village fête was in full swing, to commemorate the Prince's visit.

Peasley looked from the rickety old Mayor of the town, droning on from behind a folksy, woodwork podium, to the newsies trying desperately to look interested in the diatribe on civic history. Intermittent squeals came from the girls in the cluster of townsolk. From behind him, Peasley heard Luigi mutter: "This poor old-timer's more full of wind than Mario after a huge bowl of *pasta e fagioli.*"
The prince snorted as he tried to contain his laughter, and everyone was startled at his momentary lack of poise.
The Mayor's winding speech pushed on unabated. Then, out of the clear sky, a butterfly with large, fragile wings descended, drifting just above the heads of the crowd. One of the prince's security operatives stared at it suspiciously.
Lightly, sweetly, it perched upon Luigi's head. Attention was now decidedly diverted from the Mayor, and Peasley gasped in astonishment. "Luigi! That's a Polished Amber-wing!"
He raised his hand, removing his glove. With the slightest of coaxing, the creature scuttled onto his finger.
"It's beautiful."
"Not to mention almost impossible to spot in the wild," the prince remarked. "They're meant to be extremely shy." Their eyes met. "I would dare to suggest it just sought out a kindred spirit."
The photos of the butterfly and the plumber were destined to hit the society pages of every newspaper the following morning. "...See, old Lord Bub-ulbington IX went out to that hill yonder to discover the cure for rickets, but instead came up with a new recipe for Shroom pudding..."

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Luigi and Peasley took the Polished Amber-wing out to the neighbouring wilderness of the Petal Meadows, and induced it to flutter onto a bed of buttercups. It flapped its wings at the two crossly. Back in town, the fête continued, and all the journalists had scrabbled away to the inn to work on their copy and knock back a few drinks. And a few yards away from the prince, the security operatives paced about, scanning the area for any sign of trouble.

Luigi wandered over to the riverbank and sat down. Peasley joined him. Together they gazed into the rippling water, flecked with sunshine.
Luigi felt the Prince lean against him, soft curls tickling his cheek.
"Look at the groups of forget-me-nots on the far bank. You couldn't find such vibrant specimens in captivity."
"Nope," Luigi conceded. "I tried to grow them once as a child. I got so enthusiastic with my weeding, I ended up uprooting the whole plant. I cried and cried. My father ended up getting me a potted peony bush just to cheer me up."

"I suppose those forget me nots have lived up to their name, then," Luigi quipped. Peasley chuckled, playfully smacking the back of Luigi's head. He tackled the prince to the earth, but was bested as Peasley nimbly flitted up and fell upon the boy, getting the upper hand and pinning him.

Luigi found himself being kissed again. At length, Peasley pulled back when he did not return the kiss in kind, giving him a puzzled, slightly injured look. The plumber sighed, sitting up and drawing away.

"Luigi... I wish I could know what's going through your head."

He raised an eyebrow. "I could say the same about you, your Highness."

That diffident honorific hurt far more than any of his previous brushoffs.

Luigi stared down at his rippled reflection in the lazily babbling river. "You've run hot and cold since we met," he said dolefully. "You've repeatedly built up hope in my heart only to dash it down again. I can't help but wonder how much or how little you regard my feelings."

"Luigi-"

"My brother was the first to suggest you might just regard me as some commoner plaything that you can cast off whenever you fancy. I defended you against him with every scrap of my convictions... but..."

He grunted, grudgingly tearing at the grass. A million things began to gallop about in Peasley's mind. He scrabbled for some grand, chivalrous gesture. Promising his kingdom to him? Giving him lifelong servitude? Scooping up every single wildflower in this blessed meadow for him? Peasley had never been so possessed by desperation before. No sweet flattery or amorous caress could win him. In vain, the prince prayed for some magic enchantment that would prove himself to...

"...I love you."

For that moment, Luigi calcified.

"I love your humility, your gentleness, your ineffable gift to commune with nature. I love your beautiful voice. I even love your bashfulness, frustrating as it is. Luigi, I've been possessed by you since I saw who you really are. I love you."

Wasting no more time, Luigi seized his beau and lay him amongst the buttercups, kissing him and worshipping him without restraint.

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Hushed, drowsy and dark, the now inert town took no heed of them. The goons charged with guarding them remained inside the inn, outside the prince's door. They had stolen again to the riverside, to the flowers, under the stars. Crickets sang out feverishly. His trembling was mad, he latched on to the beautiful expanses of his prince's body all the tighter. Their hurried breaths were caught in unmeasured kisses, upon his lips, his neck, his shoulder, his chest. Those lovely royal fingers clawed furiously into his own coarse flesh as both were stupefied by shocks of pure bliss.

At the backs of their minds, beneath this muddle of indelicate rapture, the understanding that they would have to return to the inn well before dawn still made itself known.
The song Luigi sings is 'Malagueña Salerosa', a popular mariachi song about a commoner expressing his love for a posh girl from Malaga (he changed a few pronouns...). There was a kick ass rock version of this done for 'Kill Bill 2' that most people have heard, but there are so many more versions of this out there, some hauntingly gorgeous, some truly awful. This is one that I quite like, one of the more well known renditions by Miguel Aceves Mejía: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31OWzqItCIw
Chapter 5

THE ROSE
A Fairy Tale
Chapter 5

Both the Mushroom and Beanish press took great relish in criticising the dubious success of the trade talks. Three weeks of meetings had resulted in very little improvement - many columnists vehemently questioned the idea of the Princess' cabinet sitting in on less than half of these meetings. It had mostly been private discussions between Toadsworth and Lady Lima. The long lunches were a matter of concern as well. Just what were the two officials doing on the taxpayer's coin?

Meanwhile, the Beanbean Kingdom was beginning to experience a serious surplus problem. The nation's staple crops had been yielding their highest harvests in years, certainly much more than the relatively small population required for themselves. The minister for trade & agriculture (who had bafflingly not been invited to the trade talks) had been trying to export all of this foodstuff to any nation that would take it - normally Beanish imports were a prized commodity, but now some nations were turning their noses up at the sheer volumes of the stuff, citing their quotas. Most concerning of all was the crops' imminent devaluation. The Beanbean Kingdom's prosperity was primarily owed to agriculture - they could not afford to let this precious commodity become a common, unwanted cast-off on the economic world stage.

Nevertheless, efforts were made to gather and manage the yield, primarily with a volunteer harvest drive. The citizens were encouraged to help the farming communities by participating in their massive workload.

Prince Peasley's royal tour, however, had gone over extremely well. The crowds of fans at each regional centre of the Mushroom Kingdom had lapped up his Highness' well-wishing. He had signed autographs, kissed babies, and partaken in cultural activities ranging from sampling local delicacies to visiting temples and issuing a prayer for the continued prosperity of the two allied nations.

Upon returning to the Princess' castle, his farewell speech on his final day had been particularly well-received:

"...Of the many nations that I have visited before, I have never been made to feel so welcome as I have in this wonderful Kingdom. The diverse colours of its vast and beautiful landscape are a perfect reflection of its people: Charming, surprising, warm and beauteous and unspoiled. You have made a singular impression upon my heart. To know I must leave you behind afflicts me with great melancholy... please believe me when I say it is keen and deeply felt. I return to my homeland to assist in the harvest drive - I shall have to be content, for now, with the memories of your amity and your unaffected charms. With all my dearest affection, I regrettably say farewell."

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Daisy huffed. "Can you believe his nerve? Demanding a rematch twice? And I thrashed him soundly every single time!"
"I s'pose he's just a glutton for punishment."
"I'll say! I mean, you just gotta take a look at the guy to see that he's got issues. Him and his big brother, actually. I mean, 'Wario and Waluigi'? Who do they think they are, knocking you and Mario off so blatantly? Is that their idea of attracting publicity?"

Luigi shrugged. "Mario just says that imitation is the highest form of flattery. Well, he also reckons
that they probably invented those identities as safe aliases. They might have a dodgy history back in Diamond City that they needed to leave safely behind."

Daisy snorted, twirling her racquet playfully.

The Sarasaland Princess was in particularly high spirits today, as she had finally cajoled Luigi out for a round of tennis at Peach Dome. They had run into the bandits Wario and Waluigi, who were both raring to challenge them to mixed doubles. In particular, Waluigi had been extremely eager to show off his expertise, pitting himself zealously against Daisy. They now headed to Starbeans for some icy frappucinos, and the princess insisted on a long leisurely stroll through the arcade. Slinging her racquet into its carry case, she snatched Luigi's large hand in hers.

Luigi made an attempt at small talk.
"How're things back at home?"
"Still as dull as ditchwater," Daisy mumbled. "I swear, Sarasaland is a beautiful Kingdom, but I'm never allowed to do anything. All my parents care about is primping my big brother for the throne. And no-one at court ever acknowledges me - except for when there's some stupid royal ceremony happening. Most of the time I just feel invisible."
"Tell me about it," Luigi replied. The two shared a laugh.

The monstrous roar of a souped-up engine threatened to split their eardrums. From behind the wheel of his oversized muscle car, Wario honked his customised car horn at his rivals. It played a grotesque minor key 'melody'.
"Hey, sweetie!" Waluigi hollered from the passenger side, his sweaty tennis togs now replaced by a screamingly purple fedora and a velvet bolero. "How about ditching Loser-igi and comin' out for a night with us? Plenty o' room in the backseat, if ya know what I mean!" He leered at the girl, leaving no doubt in anyone's mind as to his intentions.
The screamingly purple fedora and bolero were suddenly splattered with a chocolate-chuckola frapuccino.

Daisy followed Luigi home, chattering all the way.
"I need to tend to the garden before it gets dark," he insisted.
"Sure, want some help?"
Upon his instruction, she fetched pinking shears, gardening gloves and a watering can from the garden shed, not flinching when she discovered a large spider hanging out on the spout of the battered old can. Dropping the leggy beast onto the closest obliging leaf, she approached Luigi with the armful of equipment. He knelt in the flower bed, absorbed in shooing a rogue caterpillar off the stem of his favourite rose bush.
"Ooooh..." Daisy marvelled at the radiant golden flowers. "They're so beautiful! They've really come along!"
Luigi donned the gardening gloves and started snipping away some of the older growths. He couldn't help a wide grin from brightening his face.
"This is the only plant like it in the whole country. Prince Peasley's dad bred this rose, so the only other ones are in the Beanbean Castle Gardens."
Daisy saw the smile on her friend's face, and fancied it tragic. "Luigi... oh, can't you..."
She almost sounded on the verge of tears. He rested his shears on the soil and faced her.
"What's wrong?"
"I still don't know why Peach made you go on that royal tour with him... it was just so cruel."
Luigi strained to make sense of these words, and she clamped both her hands on his shoulders.
"Look," Daisy said firmly, "he made his feelings very clear on the night of the Springtime Soiree... you can't keep doing this to yourself! You're worth so much more than what you think! If you can just... stop wasting your sweet self on a futile hope... you're already surrounded by people who love you! Really!"
Luigi examined her honest face, brimming with sympathy. He picked her hands off his shoulders and returned to caring for his roses. "Daisy, I'm fine. I promise."
Daisy could do nothing but watch him silently as he continued in his habitual pruning, weeding and watering.

Once the rose bush had been seen to, the sun had dipped below the treetops. Daisy returned to the shed to stash the gardening tools. As she tossed Luigi's shears upon their hanger, a great burst of noise came from outside, a magnificent whoosh followed by a dense, bodily thud.
Daisy dashed out to the garden, only to be startled by a resplendent, streamlined *Leguminos Sylphus* flapping its large white wings in her face. Her heart leapt into her throat before plummeting to the pit of her stomach.
Upon the grass, Luigi had collapsed into the arms of Prince Peasley. The two were clasped together in a passionate kiss.

"I couldn't stand being away from you," Peasley cradled Luigi's face in his hands. "But... what about the harvest drive? Weren't you s'posed to...
"
He tinkled out a laugh. "Do you know what they wanted my great contribution to be? Posing for photos on the volunteer recruitment pamphlets! I went to the plantations to help harvest the crops myself, and some surly foreman stayed my hand. He said it wasn't the proper role for a prince! I found myself simply sitting around in the castle, as my mother and Nana Lima listened to daily reports of the yield levels and utility management. After three days of this I finally left, acknowledging where I truly wanted to be."
Luigi kissed his forehead, stroking a golden ringlet.
A sheen of soft light from the flowerbed caught Peasley's eye. "Oh!... is this your rosebush?"
The two knelt before it. "Yep, I grew this whole bush from the cutting that you gave me. It's grown so many blossoms... I've ended up putting some of them in vases indoors. The perfume has scented the whole house."
Peasley touched one of the petals, enjoying familiarity of its soft, bright splendour. "It's extraordinary. It's just like the ones back at home."

"He's put hundreds of hours into looking after that plant," came a small voice from by the shed. Peasley finally noticed the other person in the garden. "Daisy!? My darling!" He swept over and kissed her cheek soundly. "What a pleasure to see you! You should have told me before how close you are with Luigi. He simply raved about you while we were on tour - I was treated to a full report of your sporting achievements, and the sound verbal lambasting you've heaped on many a deserving ruffian. He spoke of you as if you were a beloved little sister... I daresay that's not far from the truth!"
Daisy managed to conjure a smile.
"She comes over here all the time," Luigi stated, looking at the girl with callow affection. "Then we must have a good and proper catch-up while I'm here," Peasley commanded.
"Sure," Daisy conceded breathily, "but it's getting kinda late... Peach will start to worry if I stay out any longer."
The couple waved goodbye to the girl as she ran back down the street in the rising twilight. From a corner of the garden, Peasley's *Leguminos Sylphus* pounced upon and devoured an unfortunate spider.
Mario was lost in his thoughts, swirling the scant remnants of his *ciriole alla ternana* around on his plate.

It had been Mama's signature dish, a swirl of fragrant fresh pasta dotted with luscious black truffles. It was the prime Umbrian specialty she proudly retained amidst her repertoire of Neapolitan dishes, which were acquired to please her husband. Luigi had prepared it with immense enthusiasm, as Peasley had perched upon a kitchen stool, watching with curious amusement. He had placed little strings of the serpentine pasta between the prince's awaiting lips, the couple making an overt display of the same flirtatious game that countless lovers before them had played, their mouths drawing together for a kiss at each end of each pale yellow string.

Mario recalled the first time he himself had fallen in love, back in Brooklyn. There had been countless girlfriends in high school, short-term infatuations which fizzled out as quickly as they had begun - these had left his heart unscathed. One afternoon when he had been a young apprentice plumber, a bizarre scenario had imposed itself upon him. A large ape, presumably on the lam from Central Park Zoo, had scrambled up the scaffolding of a construction site that the Marios had been doing contract work on. The monster had abducted a young woman from the sidewalk below, and was chucking construction equipment at the firemen and police who were attempting to coax it down. In what he would later regard as an insane feat of chivalry, Mario had scaled the precarious platforms in a few fortuitous leaps, rescuing the girl and bringing her back down to safety. He had cut out the newspaper headlines and kept them in a little scrapbook. (At the time, he had assumed this daring adventure would be his single moment of fame and glory in an otherwise common and unremarkable existence.)

The girl's name was Pauline, and she was gorgeous. She was a student at a local beauty school. He had taken her out to dinner and worked his charm on her. After a few heavenly months, he found himself dragging Luigi along to jewellery stores, trying to find an engagement ring that truly befit her loveliness.

The proposal was turned down, compounded with the news that Pauline had tired of him and had developed an interest in a strapping blonde litigation lawyer she had met at her local gym. For a long time afterwards, Mario had found it an immense struggle to get out of bed in the morning.

Peasley was currently scrubbing the dishes, vigorously inducing each piece of dinnerware to squeak before stowing it gingerly on the rack to dry. He hummed to himself cheerfully. After exhausting the stack of dirty plates, he grabbed the one that Mario had been lingering over.

"You're keen," the plumber remarked.

"I can't stand dirty surroundings," Peasley tutted.

Mario got up and grabbed a tea towel, beginning to dry the now immaculate dishes. The sink was overflowing with sparkling white suds.

"I have to know," he began, "and please don't think I'm rude for asking... is this just your way of slumming it?"

Peasley raised an eyebrow at him. Mario persevered. "You know, poor little rich boy is sick of his hoity-toity lifestyle, and he goes out in search of common squalour? So he can get it out of his system, so to speak, before returning to his royal duties? I mean, washing dishes and cooking your own meals may be a novelty to you now... just try doing it every day for a couple'a weeks and see how you like it then. A lotta rich people see a kind of humble romance in it... but trust me, there ain't nothin' romantic about scrubbing toilets and hunting down cockroaches with an expired can of repellant."

A smile spread onto Peasley's face, which soon evolved to laughter. He suddenly hugged Mario, the
sopping wet washing-up gloves seeping dishwater into his dungarees. "You uncouth little twerp... you are such a good brother!"
Mario wriggled his way out of the hug.
"I hate washing up!" Peasley declared. "But Luigi looked so pleased when I offered to do it. I'm not here to immerse myself in household chores and common squalour. I'm here in spite of the household chores and common squalour. I'm here for him."
Mario's expression finally softened.
"Well," Peasley added, "except for the gardening chores, I like them."
The plumber allowed himself to grin, casting his eyes over at the vase of roses sitting on the kitchen table. "So does Luigi."

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The *Leguminos Sylphus* hovered a few inches above the earth. Luigi caught the briefest glimpse of carnivorous-looking teeth between its almost indistinguishable jaw.
"Step lively, she's not going to bite you!"
Slowly, carefully, he experimented with putting one foot on the creature's back. Without warning, the winged mount bucked playfully, nuzzling into Luigi's reluctant sole. Peasley clapped his hands in delight. "She likes you!"
Luigi smiled uneasily, endeavouring to place a second foot upon her back. He sent a silent prayer up to heaven.
It dawned on him that he had now entirely lost contact with the ground, and at the same moment the *Leguminos Sylphus* fluttered its wings and gave a frisky aerial prance. This was too much for Luigi's dubious balance - it gave out, and his long limbs flailed clumsily as he fell off the mount. Peasley sprang forward and caught him in his arms, without a single blonde hair falling out of place.

It was agreed they should ride together, and Luigi clutched himself fast to his Prince. A vigourous breeze whipped itself abut them. The rooftops fell away, then the treetops. Peasley dared not go any higher, and after a few minutes (during which Luigi did not open his eyes) they set down upon a hilltop just outside the town, safely out of the way of any rubbernecking townspeople.
They reclined on the long grass. The prince soothed away his lover's jittery dismay, drawing his fingertips tenderly across his face.
"Once you've gotten a hang of the basics, it's incredible. It's just you and your flying steed and the stretches of endless sky... you become like a goonie bird gliding on the highest currents, the sun warming you and the clouds cooling you. The world below shrinks, and you can almost convince yourself that you could just reach out and gather the stars themselves."
Luigi sighed in spite of himself. "It sounds wonderful."
"I'll teach you yet, my lad." He smiled into Luigi's dark hair. "It's a bit like surfing."
"I hate surfing," Luigi whimpered.
As the light failed that afternoon, an elusive shadow swooped before the sun. A great winged monster bore two men on her back: one upright and sure-footed, and the other curling his rangy frame around his partner firmly.

***

The garden was glistening in the sunlight, each plant beaded with a million rain drops, diamond residue of the Summer downpour that had happened during the night. Luigi had just finished gathering the errant foliage and bruised fruits, and deposited them into the compost bin.
"Peasley, would you like to feed the pirhana plants?"
A hooded figure currently loomed over the ground cover of hellebore. His eyes, obscured by fat wraparound sunglasses, roved over to the rectangular terracotta pot that held the snakelike entities.
Their thick stems wiggled about and their slimy puce-coloured tongues wagged flaccidly from their mouths.
"It's okay, they're only miniature ones. They've been specifically bred down to that size. They're quite harmless."
"They still look as if they'd be happy to take your finger off," Peasley cringed.
Luigi grabbed the container of live grubs that had been delivered earlier that morning, and beckoned Peasley to come over to observe the feeding.
"See? Perfectly tame." He dangled the juicy grubs above the heads of the pirhana plants, and like trained lapdogs they reached up and slurped the ill-fated insects into their hungry little gobs.
Peasley shrunk behind Luigi, holding onto him like a child's security blanket. He tried to block out the repulsive slurping and gobbling sounds.
Once the odious little creatures had finished gorging on the grubs, Luigi dusted the soil from his jeans and began to pack away the gardening tools.
"Shame we can't go out for that picnic," he murmured. The previous evening, it had been suggested as a way to escape the confines of the house, mostly to give Mario some quiet time to answer his fan mail.
Peasley jerked the hood of his jacket as far over his head as humanly possible.
"I told you, dearest, I can't afford to let anyone in town see me."
Luigi smirked. "I've never figured you as someone who would hide from attention," he teased.
"Oh, but you don't know what they can be like!..."

The sound of clomping, spirited footfalls came gradually from the road. A pair of pixies bounded through the front gate and into the garden.
"Hey, what are you girls doing here?" Luigi queried.
Toadette and one of her cohorts, a kitchenmaid from the castle, giggled madly, still breathless from sprinting.
"Is Prince Peasley here?"
Luigi blinked. He risked a glance over his shoulder. It seemed that the hooded figure had flown from the garden to a safe hiding place, away from the two pairs of wide admiring eyes currently gleaming at the plumber.
"Who told you he was here?"
"Princess Daisy did!" Toadette blurted. At this, her friend gave her a scandalised look. "Um..." she added sheepishly, "...sort of."

Luigi crossed his arms, fixing the girls with a Look.
The little kitchenmaid scratched the back of her neck. "Well, see, I was in Princess Peach's drawing room, getting the dirty plates from morning tea, and I might have overheard them talking about how Prince Peasley was staying here at the moment."
Toadette piped up again. "She was listening at the door. Daisy said she didn't want anyone to find out because the Prince wants some privacy."
The kitchenmaid kicked at Toadette's glittery fuchsia sandals.
"So, if you know the Prince needs privacy, why on earth did you come here?" Luigi demanded.
"Oh," the kitchenmaid whined, "but if it's just the two of us getting to hang out with him, then he's still got heaps of privacy!"

Luigi rolled his eyes. "I'm afraid it's out of the question, girls."
Their wee faces simultaneously fell.
"Besides, you're too late. The Prince was only here for one night, he took off to visit Diamond City yesterday."
"I put on my best slip dress for nothing!"
Luigi's expression softened. "Sorry. You'll just have to wait until he visits Toad Town again."
The two girls linked arms and shuffled away once more, heading to Starbeans for a consolatory
Peasley re-emerged from behind the garden shed, the grey hood falling off his head and exposing his blonde ringlets to the sunlight. "My hero!" he gushed, scooping Luigi into his arms. "Rescuing me from the onslaught of hyperactive would-be groupies!"
"More than that," Luigi responded, "by hell or high water, I'm taking you out on a picnic."

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"Camembert, my love?"
Luigi recoiled at the wheel of gooey yellow cheese being presented under his nose. He valiantly fought off the need to vomit, and persevered to take another sip of his weak ginger-root tea.
"M-my stomach is still a little unsettled. You go ahead," he told Peasley.
The journey would have been tolerable, had it not been for the dramatic, sweeping ascents bringing them into the stratosphere. They had gone leagues higher than necessary. The *Leguminos Sylphus* was flumped down nearby, sleeping off her athletic maneuvers.

They had brought their picnic basket to the roof of Peach's castle, Luigi braving the trip for the seclusion that the couple were now afforded. To escape the fiercely sultry sunlight, they sat beneath the shade of one of the towering turrets. The rush of the waterfall just West of the castle moat rumbled away, and they enjoyed a fabulously expansive view of the town and the countryside beyond.
As Luigi's appetite slowly returned, he started nibbling delicately at a water cracker.
"This is terribly naughty," Peasley remarked, piling another cracker with smoked salmon and creme fraiche. "There are scads of people going about in the castle, who have no idea that our blessed little bums are perched right above their heads! Those two little mushroom girls, for instance, and your Sir Amanito. He's probably directly below us right now, strumming out some dreadfully ponderous melody..."
"Back in Brooklyn I used to sneak up to the roof of our apartment block a lot. No-one ever knew where I was - I had the whole city to look upon in perfect solitude."
Peasley chewed on his cracker thoughtfully. "This 'Brooklyn' place you came from... what was it like?"
"Hard to say. It was similar to this world, only... really different. For one thing, it was only home to humans."
"Hm. Strange. No plants or animals?"
"Well, yeah, we had that stuff... but no other people. Like, no Mushroom men or Koopas or nothing. And no magic, apart from in stories."
The prince smiled. "Do you think you could take me to see this place?"
Luigi simply tossed his hands up in helpless abashment. "Even after all these years, I'm still not sure how we got here. We've asked all the top minds of the Kingdom, they're stumped too. As far as I know it was a one-way trip... anyway, Mario and I like it here, we've made this place our home."
"But what about your family?"
"Mama and Papa both died long ago. We had no-one left who really cared about us."
Sympathy glowed in Peasley's face. "That must have been hard."
Luigi flicked his half-eaten cracker into the rubbish bag he had brought. "Mm. I suppose we managed in the end."
"I lost my father when I was sixteen. He was my best friend. Mother does love me, but she was never that affectionate. Mostly she was busy at court... I learnt to make do as well."
He took Luigi's hand in his, trying to allay the glum air that had fallen upon the two of them.
"You know, I think my tummy's settled... I could go for a celery stick or two now," Luigi declared.
Peasley stretched out his legs, and noticed a lissom bunch of dandelions growing out of a crack in the roof's tiling. "Oh, look at this..." He plucked the dandelions and held them like a bouquet. "Pretty amazing to see where things can grow, even up here on this desperately bare stretch of baked clay." Playfully, Luigi laid his fingers over Peasley's, brought the flowers up to his lips and blew the gossamer seed-heads into the air. They found an updraught and were whisked away into the blue.

***

The staggered strumming of a not-quite-perfectly-tuned guitar filled Luigi's messy bedroom.

"O del mio dolce ardor
Bramato oggetto,
Bramato oggetto.
L'aura che tu respiri,
Alfin respiro,
Alfin respiro."

There was a pause in the music as the novice musician struggled to place his fingers on the strings, endeavouuring to find the next position. Peasley leant his face gently in his hand, staring at him adoringly. Luigi eventually persevered his way to the end of the song, after a bit of stumbling over the more complicated chord progressions. "I see the lessons with Sir Amanito are going well."

"Kinda." Luigi replaced the guitar on its stand. "I think Mannie puts up with my crummy playing so he can keep on asking me to join the royal music ensemble as a singer."

"Perhaps he just can't get enough of your voice..."

Peasley pulled him back onto the bed, and they kissed deeply. The prince gladly allowed his lover's rough and lively fingers to loosen the clasps of his light summer waistcoat, as he toyed with the theadbare buttons of his green flannel shirt. He tasted faintly of almonds and dessert-wine. The air was heavy with warmth and the duvet beneath them was deliciously soft. Jagged breaths rolled across the prince's now uncovered skin, electrifying his nerve endings almost painfully. Peasley tenderly directed Luigi's touch, patient enough to refine the impetuous ravishment that had been their previous rendezvous. Each admonition of the prince was fulfilled with slow, spellbound devotion. Through this loving indulgence, the common boy's shaky inexperience soon dissolved as they found their rhythm, the natural cadence to their lovemaking that had seemed to always lie beneath even their first coy flirtations. The brilliant crimson tingeing the boy's olive complexion was glorious. Their clammy, heated arms fused about each other as they rode out the aftershocks, with dozy kisses and obscenely sentimental words being exchanged breathlessly. The division between sleep and wakeful elation was blurred and unheeded.

***

It was getting close to noon as Mario shuffled down the garden path to collect the mail. He rifled through the piles of bills and glossy junk-mail grouchily, when a feral sound above caused him to topple against the garden fence.

He craned his eyes skyward to observe Peasley and Luigi zooming about on that freaky winged bean-thing, his brother whooping joyously. The creature had gobbled up Mario's toast one morning while his back was turned, and so the plumber was not particularly eager to befriend it. All the same, it seemed Luigi had finally achieved a passable equilibrium astride it. Peasley still held onto him, but it was clear that his confidence had grown in the past month, so much so that they were
now rocketing upward, even skirting some of the low-hanging clouds.
It was not often Mario had seen his baby brother forsake his usual anxieties, especially when it came
to physical feats involving gravity and strange animals. An ill-fated childhood trip to a skate park in
the Bronx arose in Mario's memory, one that ended in tears for the younger sibling and painstaking
embarrassment for the elder.

Above, Luigi's skinny arm playfully reached out to bat the topmost leaves of a towering Mushroom
Kingdom sycamore, and Peasley's consequent laughter could be heard even down on the ground.
Some warm variety of pride blossomed in Mario's chest, and he took the mail indoors. He found a
pink perfumed letter from the Princess hidden amongst the garish brochures, and he later read it over
a glass of Chuckola reserve. She had the evening free and had baked a cake - her instructions were
specifically for Mario to come to her, leaving his brother and the Prince alone together. Mario
couldn't stop from beaming.
Peasley purposefully set his wine glass down on the half-folded letter, haloing its royal seal with a
pale burgundy watermark.
"What has she asked you to do?" Luigi asked carefully.
"She didn't specify. All she disclosed was that there is an important duty she wants me to undertake.
In fact, she spent most of the letter scolding me for not attending the castle's Summer Cotillion. As if
this year's Beanish social season hasn't been a total write-off." He snorted, grabbing the bottle of
Shroom Shiraz and sloshing another helping into his glass.

It had been a lovely day, for the most part. In the sizzling heat, Peasley and Luigi had flown to a
secluded shore, far away from Toad Town. After skylarking about in the gently undulating surf, they
had escaped to the shade of the trees and the grass. The pair feasted madly on each others' bodies,
dusted with salt and sand.
Upon returning to the brothers' house, sated and exhausted, they found a letter graced by the
Beanbean royal seal sitting on the kitchen table.
"A messenger from the castle came on another one of those winged bean things," Mario had
explained. "He spared no effort in telling me how urgent it is."
Queen Bean had instructed, in terse and insistent language, that her son must return home at once.

Peasley could remember a time when such a summons would have had him zooming to his
destination, raring to do right by his family and his nation. However, as he had taken on more and
more royal duties, he had come to find most of them not only insipidly dull, but also entirely without
value. The tasks were usually little more than publicity stunts - facile words tumbling from his lips, a
cheesy grin adhered to his handsome face. The only skills of his put to the test were his rhetoric and
his patience. The memories of his late father's grand deeds teased at him: the heated debates as he
turned the onus of the whole government on its head, his decisive trips around the world to make
pacts and treaties with foreign rulers, his unfailing position on the front line of battle with the nation's
troops.
But here, in a small family home on the outskirts of Toad Town, Prince Peasley was truly needed.
He adamantly deferred his journey back to the castle until the next morning.
"Tonight," he insisted, reclining his golden head in his lover's lap, "All my attentions are yours."

The morning did regretfully approach. The Prince diffidently went through the motions of preparing
to set off. When the daylight had become too bright and established for him to put it off any further,
he beckoned to his Leguminos Sylphus and headed out to the garden gate.
"I'll find out when we can meet again as soon as I can," he told Luigi. "Perhaps next time, it will be
you visting my home! I'll show you all the hidden groves and flower beds of the castle gardens."
Luigi had collapsed into Peasley's arms, forehead resting upon forehead. A muted sob escaped from
under his moustache.
"Come now, my darling," the prince cooed. "It's only goodbye for a short while. You'll be
serenading me and fattening me up on pasta again before you know it."
This lovely notion would have to sustain Luigi for the time being.
"Expect a letter from me within the next day or so." A firm kiss, a flash of a smile, and then he was gone, a receding shadow in the parched blue sky.

***

After an unhurried trip, including a pit stop at the far flung hamlet of Hoohoo Village, Peasley did not reach the castle until sunset. As its familiar monolithic outline grew larger on the darkening horizon, the Prince caught sight of an additional shape: a massive hulking aircraft, a veritable juggernaut of a ship, shrouded the rooftops of the castle town. As Peasley came closer, he recognised the ornamented cannons and brutally styled metallic hull. Bowser's combat cruiser.

"Oh no..."

He swooped down to the castle gates, and the two royal guards on duty ran to greet him eagerly.

"Your Highness!"

"What the devil is going on?" Peasley exclaimed, gesturing to the warship hanging above their heads.

"It is most important that you see the Queen straight away. King Bowser has been waiting for almost two days."

"Waiting for what!?"

"Peasley..."

Lady Lima stood in the doorway to the grand foyer, a grim expression set upon her wizened face. She beckoned silently for the Prince to follow her inside.

"Nana Lima, why has Bowser imposed himself upon us?..."

She was silent for a few moments. "You've being staying with that boy, that brother of Mario's?"

Peasley frowned, nonplussed. "Yes... what's that go to do with..."

"There will need to be some priorities reshuffled. You must come to understand, my dear."

Something sickening and metallic began to bloom in Peasley's stomach.

They entered the throne room. The Prince had to rein in a mortifying shiver as he looked upon Bowser's huge horned head and slitted eyes. A menacing strain of sulfur was on his heaving breath. Two elite Koopa Troopas stood to attention at his sides.

"Peasley," Queen Bean greeted from her throne, nodding at her son slightly. "I was beginning to worry you didn't get my message."

"So is the deal on, woman?" Bowser growled impatiently, arms crossed against his massive front. Queen Bean favoured him with an unctuous smile. "But of course, your Majesty!" She turned to her son. "You see, my dear, we have found the perfect solution to our surplus problem, which will be of benefit to both ourselves and the Koopa Kingdom. Mister Pinto?"

A watery-eyed man that Peasley recognised as the Beanish Minister of Trade and Agriculture stepped up onto the throne's dais.

"You see, your Highness, Lady Lima and I spent many fruitless weeks trying to find a trading partner who would take our surplus bean crops. After facing rejection from almost every corner of the globe, I was approached by the Koopa Minister of Industry. Their manufacturing sector is booming at the moment, and they are currently looking to extend their trade in beverages."

Oh yes, Peasley thought. The notorious KoopaCo., Inc. Producer of the world's shoddiest, crappiest, most aggressively advertised pieces of plastic and sugar in the world. Overpriced and underdeveloped, made by workers earning a pittance for their long hours, in factories that ravaged what was left of the Koopa Kingdom's green wilderness. The C. E. O.s were pitted to the public as
"Glamorous, devil-may-care entrepreneurs, but anyone clever enough to doubt the tabloids was well aware they were merely pawns of Bowser himself."

"KoopaCola," Bowser interjected. "The brightest Koopa minds have been experimenting with refining and processing your native beans to make a refreshing drink, good enough to rival Chuckola Reserve itself."

With this, another Koopa retainer scuttled up to Peasley, bearing an aggressively bright aluminium can on a silver tray.

Peasley had no choice. He took a prissy little sip of the stuff. It tasted halfway between sugar and cough medicine. The Prince fancied it an abomination of nature that anyone could take the fresh, rich, delectable nectar of a Beanish bean and turn it into that. He summoned a brave poker face to mask his disgust, and quickly replaced the accursed can on the platter.

"The only problem is," Bowser continued, "the blasted tariffs on the raw ingredients. They drive up the final retail price of each can to an astronomical rate. I know that the Beanbean Kingdom and the Koopa Troop have never been on the best of terms, but I was willing to make nice with you little green pipsqueaks to find a profitable solution."

"Indeed," the Queen said. "It has come to this. We shall allow a Koopa industrial complex to be built on Beanish turf, next to the plantations."

"Isn't that Chucklehuck Woods?" Peasley inquired, frowning deeply.

"Oh, they'll only require a section of the land." Queen Bean waved a pudgy hand in the air dismissively, and chuckled. "All your precious wildflowers and trees will still have a bit of space to themselves. Anyway, Koopa Co., Inc. will have direct access to our surplus crops, and the Beanish throne will enjoy a clean 50% of the profits from all sales of KoopaCola!"

"The process of making the stuff will be much cheaper this way. We'll be able to fob it off to any kid with a pocketful of spare change, and still rake in a generous dividend." Bowser laughed harshly.

If Peasley's stomach had been uneasy before, it was now lurching like mad. He thought of his father.

"And what do I have to do with all of this?" The Prince demanded.

"There is one caveat," Bowser announced. "You yourself are to be connected with our great dynasty."

Peasley wondered at the meaning of this, until two more members of Bowser's guard proceeded into the room from the Eastern doorway. In their wake flounced Wendy O. Koopa, the sole Princess of the Koopa royal family.

"Oh, Daddy, he's ever cuter in person!" The girl pushed her two guards out of the way, bearing down on Peasley. Her angry hot pink lipstick made an unwelcome collision with his face.

"Meet your fiancee, your Highness." Bowser declared. "The wedding has been set for late Autumn, the same time our factory is scheduled to open. Welcome to the family, son." He grinned, his pointed teeth were yellowed and horrid.

***

"Peasley!"

Another hapless vase smashed against the molded walls. Hot tears flew from the Prince's cheeks as he heaved a rosewood telephone table onto its side, its contents clattering across the tiles.

"My fiancee!!" He screeched, and a petite parlourmaid that had been caught in the crossfire ran from the room, giving up all efforts to clean up after him. "Without even ASKING me! She's ruined my LIFE!!"

Lady Lima had had enough. She grabbed his arm, and despite the ropey muscles that struggled against her, he was overpowered. His Nana Lima was not to be disobeyed.

"What on earth do you hope to achieve by destroying half of your things!?!" She admonished.
The price fell at her feet, a fresh wave of tears dampening his frantic anger. "She can't make me," Peasley menaced through his sobs, "I won't do it! I won't marry her!"
Lady Lima sighed deeply. "I can't say I'm any more pleased with the situation..."
He shot her an affronted glare, but she was not swayed by this. "I too know what it's like to have a boundary put up between myself and someone I love, someone from another Kingdom."
They shared a meaningful look. The tension pulsing through Peasley's nerves started to recede a little, and his head drooped downwards.
"Go and talk to your mother. Just talk to her. Ask her about this situation."

After calming down and washing his face, he found the Queen in the gardens, sitting in her favoured garden seat before the lily pond. The moon was entirely obscured by the airship still hanging in the sky. He sat down next to her, not saying a word.
"I know you don't like the idea of a factory in the woods."
"Neither would Father," Peasley shot back.
The Queen shook her head, exasperated. "But think what this will mean, son. How much money this will bring to our coffers. Money we can invest in schools, hospitals, transport."
"More dentists to fix the cavities of young children addicted to KoopaCola," the prince muttered. "It's more than just that, Mother. You're forcing me to spend the rest of my life with a woman I barely know. I don't love her. And what I do know of her, I detest."
The Queen finally looked him in the face. "It's time, darling," she said simply. "I have allowed you a very long leash. I've never wanted to crush that free spirit of yours. But someday, you will be King. You need to start anchoring yourself, taking more duties on board, important duties. Marrying your future Queen is an ideal start."
"I don't love her," Peasley repeated weakly. "Yes, she is a vapid, silly girl. But I think Peach's approach towards the Koopalings is correct. Reaching out to them in their untested youth, and directing all their energies to doing good. Princess Wendy has power and connections, you have principles and intelligence. You could make an excellent team."
Peasley kicked the grass at his feet. "Father once told me of the evening you two met. You shared a waltz at the Summer Cotillion, and he gathered up a bouquet of lilies for you from this very pond."
The Queen's eyes grew moist at the memory. "Your... your father and I were very lucky. As you know, my parents were Chucklehuckian nobility, both campaigning for the same causes as he was. It was a happy accident that we were so..."

Forgetting his own woes momentarily, Peasley laid a warm hand over his mother's own as she collected herself. She exhaled heavily. "I'm getting old, son. The end of my reign is coming, whether we like it or not. I don't want you to be unprepared for your future. And I certainly don't want you to be alone when I and your Nana Lima are gone."
"Oh, Mother, you know Nana Lima will be hanging around this castle for the next couple of centuries at least."
The two shared a quivering laugh, which quickly faded away in the dim night.

***

The rose bushes were sagging under a crowd of fat, glistening golden blooms. The petals had scattered upon the grass like snow, and Queen Bean had threatened to turn the whole thing into potpourri in her son's absence. Lady Lima adamantly guarded the precious plants, taking as many of the overflowing blossoms as she dared and placing them in vases opposite the throne room, beneath the portrait of the King. Their fragrance had besieged the whole castle.
The very next day saw the hoopla of the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the site of the future KoopaCola factory complex. As Peasley's reluctant hand was forced to snip the band of yellow satin, po-faced Koopa construction workers began felling the ancient yews and oaks of Chucklehuck Woods. The applause of the press and the politicians was punctuated by the grand boom of enormous trunks crashing to the earth.

Having very little time between this morbid spectacle and his next social engagement, Peasley dashed to his room upon returning home. He pulled out his writing implements and scribbled a frantic letter to Luigi, determined to keep his word. In handwriting less elegant than his usual script, he emphasised how confident he was that the lovers would meet again soon, and that he would allow nothing to stand in the way of this. He proclaimed his adoration for the boy ardentely, flamboyantly, repeatedly. He prayed that the post would reach Luigi before the Beanbean tabloids did.

"Are you ready, dear?" Lady Lima was waiting for him in the hallway. "I would brace myself if I were you, they'll be positively rabid."

The betrothal of Peasley to Princess Wendy was to be publicly announced by the Beanish Queen and the Koopa King that evening. And, as was the norm when it came to such things, a lavish party was to be held in the castle ballroom. As he tramped down the green miles of hallway with Lady Lima, he promised himself he would put a stop to this. The first few nails may have been in the coffin, but he was not licked yet. Somehow he would convince his mother that this was a disastrous idea, and the presence of the despicable reptilian tyranny would be expunged from his verdant, peaceful nation. Furthermore, he would be able to choose a spouse of his own, someone he loved, someone who cherished the life that blossomed from Beanish soil rather than tearing it up.

"There he iiiiiis!" His fiancée flung herself at him from the middle of a gaggle of aristocratic girlfriends. Her painted claws dug into his shoulder. "Isn't he dreamy!? Daddy said we'd go on Honeymoon to Diamond City and Glitzville and Kongri-la! And look at the engagement ring I got!"
She flashed a rock large enough to concuss a whale. It was embedded in a band of garish gold, almost saffron in its hue, encircled with an alternating pattern of smaller rubies, emeralds and sapphires. The young ladies oohed and ahhed, their shrill twitterings drowning out the hum of the crowd and the chamber orchestra.

"And when I'm Queen, I'll invite you all over for fabulous dinner parties every weekend! And I'll have an enormous bedroom with an even enormouser wardrobe! Won't I, darling!?"
She talked at him, favouring him with the same kind of squeaky voice that was reserved for lapdogs and unlucky babies, until the formal statements began. Peasley smiled his way through them, the starched mandarin collar on his state robes itching like mad, and when asked to give his speech he complimented the charm and beauty of his fiancée as every well-bred prince must. The agonising small talk and the labourious show of pretending to be deeply in love with his wife-to-be nearly wiped him out. He took momentary gulps of fresh air from the gardens, and muffled the worst of the droning niceties with a near constant supply of good champagne.

As the crowd thinned and the evening died away, the horrid realisation of what life would be like shackled to Princess Wendy became blazingly clear. Her shallow babbling had been ornamented with intermittent tantrums about minor trifles, such as disagreements with her girlfriends over the shade of the bridesmaid's dresses or the temperature of her drink. Mostly, she ran screaming to her father, who promptly set things right by terrorising the hapless young ladies and wait staff who had dared to displease her. The idea of having to contend with Bowser himself every time his wife couldn't get her way was a doom too terrible to concede. Compared to the gentle patience and sweet attentions of his dear Luigi, it was rendered even more intolerable.
Long after the last of the straggling guests had left, and the servants had clambered back to their quarters, deciding to leave the cleanup for tomorrow, Peasley paced to and fro in his room, absently gazing out of his arched Palladian window. At a time like this, when he had no clear solutions and no helpful ally close at hand, he would have to call upon a higher power. Carefully shutting his salon door, so as to mute its thud as much as possible, he snuck into the hallway. His intended destination was a chamber so sacred that not even he was allowed to come and go from it at will.

Up in one of the highest rooms, guarded heavily, the Beanstar radiated her light and energy. The Prince reverently asked to convene with her alone, stressing to the guards that he had a pressing, urgent, and ultimately sensitive conundrum. The troops gave him a disconcerting look before reservedly leaving him in peace.

The beautiful star floated just above a plinth of pure amber, the god in her face impassive and undisturbed by the Prince. It was like standing before a gentle hearth, gracing the room with light and warmth without the scorching dazzlement of hazardous flame. Being in her presence calmed the Prince greatly, allowing him the self-possession to put his dilemma into clear words.

"You know the kind of damage that the Koopas will do if they are allowed to make our land a part of their Empire. And you know where my heart lies, to whom it belongs. Surely there must be away to make my mother see sense? To sway the Kingdom back to a happier and brighter future, free of factories and oppression?"

The Beanstar did not respond, her eyes remained shut. The few times that Peasley had begged her guidance in the past, she had taken a drawn out while to ponder her response.

Preparing to wait, Peasley leant an arm on the single window of the room and stared out at her glittering cousins in the sky.

A band of wispy clouds lazily rolled over and drifted away before she had begun her reply. Her opalescent eyes rolled open, and she sang in a voice that stopped the night wind:

"An old tradition dies away,
We herald in a fruitless day.
And Prince, you must renounce your cause,
A partnered fate was always yours.
Through friends your corpse will soon be sold,
True glory stems from earthly gold."

The verse, performed so prettily, throbbed forcefully through the Prince's head and crystallised the fears that had been swimming through his nerves all night. The manifesto of the Beanstar, far from being the providence he had thirsted for, was a taunting and absolute damnation. It just couldn't be so.

"That no-good, lying, weasley little crook. If I ever see him again I'm gonna rip out his tonsils!..."

Mario wore down the already threadbare rug in his living room, ranting and raving and steaming and huffing. On the sofa, Daisy stroked Luigi's hunched shoulders as he shook with sobs. Toad and Mannie Muscaria looked sadly from one brother to the other, the servant standing awkwardly by the doorway and the maestro reclining in a plush armchair, a Beanish tabloid in his bejewelled clutches.

"We thought it best to tell you..." Mannie said to his student sympathetically.
"He said he loved you! Over and over, he swore it! In this very house, in this very ROOM! And now he's getting hitched to that freakin' Koopa bimbo! Traditore! Serpente! Arlecchino! I'll hunt him down myself and rip him apart with my bare hands!" Mario's nostrils flared wildly.

"No!" Daisy cried. "I don't believe it! I saw the look on his face when he came to see Luigi in the garden. He loves him, he must! This marriage was probably forced upon him by Bowser himself." She allowed herself a small bout of laughter. "I mean, what right thinking bachelor would willingly propose to a stupid spoiled floozy like Wendy O. Koopa?"

"I dunno, maybe a stupid spoiled floozy like Peasley?" Mario shot back.

"Please, Mario, you're not helping to make your brother feel any better," Mannie chided sternly. Luigi made an effort to reclaim speech. "He—in his letter... he said nothing would stop us from being together... he... he said my love was more precious to him than anything."

"Ya see?" Daisy exclaimed. "I'll bet he wrote that to reassure you that this whole silly engagement is just an obligation forced on him. And that he's going to call it off!"

Luigi's violently red eyes glimmered with hope up at Daisy. "You think so?"

Bereft of points to argue, Mario gathered the half empty cups of lukewarm coffee and moodily started rinsing them in the sink.

Toad spoke up, his voice steady and even. "Perhaps the best thing to do is call for intervention from an international council—order an inquiry into this new deal between KoopaCo and the Beanish government, and demand sound legal reasons for each stipulation."

"That sounds extremely sensible, Toadie," Mannie replied to his colleague, "which is why it won't happen in a million years. The nations of this world can barely co-operate enough to agree upon unified international statutes, much less enforce them. Why do you think Bowser and his kind are able to run amok so much in the first place!?"

"So..." Luigi whimpered, "we won't be able to save Peasley from...?"

Mannie sighed. "I think the poor Prince's fate is as good as sealed. I have seen custom and convention win out over the hopes and wishes of the young too many times to doubt this."

Just as Luigi curled back in on himself to bawl again, a marvellous crash was heard from the garden. Mario ran to the front door to confront whoever, or whatever, had made the startling noise, but was instantly bowled over by Peasley, barging into the house and effortlessly shaking off the leaves and soil from his less than perfect descent.

"Luigi!"

"Peasley!"

They swept into each other's arms, and Daisy lifted herself from the sofa and backed into the corner to allow them space.

"You know I have absolutely no intention of marrying that vile princess, right?" Peasley declared. Luigi just wordlessly clung to his Prince, burying his face in Peasley's neck.

"Nothin' to see here, folks," Mario announced, suddenly deadpan. "How about I take the rest of you out for pizza? My treat."

One by one, the onlookers vacated the room. Daisy gave one final, bittersweet glance over her shoulder at Luigi, lost in the impassioned embrace. The door clicked shut behind her.

Peasley suddenly held his beau out at arm's length. "Good. Now they're all gone, I can explain to you where we are going."

"Huh?" Luigi rubbed his eyes.

Peasley rushed up to Luigi's bedroom, and when the plumber had caught up, he found the prince tossing un-ironed shirts and dungarees into a bag that had been hanging off the back of a chair. "No-one at home will dare cross Bowser. He has my mother in his claw, Nana Lima has just
surrendered to the whole mess, as much as she hates it, and all the Beanstar can do is spout prophecies of gloom and doom. Which is why we are going to be visiting a very clever old associate. Someone with the sense to see that we need to stop Bowser, and with the energy, cunning, and resources to help us do so."

Having finished packing Luigi's clothes, Peasley then ducked into the bathroom to retrieve his toothbrush and a bottle of full-strength sunscreen.

"We're going to Oho Oasis."
Mario’s fears were confirmed. By the time he had rushed home from the pizza parlour, fare-welling his companions even before they had wiped the grease off their faces, Peasley and Luigi had vanished. There was a scrawled note stuck to the fridge, indicating that Luigi would be ‘gone for a while’.

At this time, he and the prince were soaring over the Eastern Mushroom-Beanbean borderlands, the near-featureless stretch of grassy savannah that lay between Hoohoo Mountain and what was left of Chucklehuck Woods. Luigi had spotted the international security checkpoint long before it had encroached upon them. They had avoided the notice of the border patrol below by making use of a fortuitous band of low-hanging cumulus clouds.

Peasley was determined not to rest until the two had reached their destination of Oho Oasis, which still lay many miles away out to sea. The light fell from the sky, and the horizon still held no hint of the coastline. The Leguminos Sylphus smacked into a high branch of one of the few copses of trees dotted about the grasslands. The prince staggered, his centre of gravity was almost heaved off the mount. He was pulled back by Luigi.

"Let’s stop for the night," he begged. "You’re exhausted."

Mercifully, a small town was not far away, its streets picked out by pinpricks of light against the endless plains of now black grass. As Peasley hid in the dimmest corner of the narrow streets that he could find, Luigi booked a room at the inn and purchased a cheap dinner of bread and apples. The Leguminos Sylphus would be hard to sneak up to the room, her large tongue hanging from her mouth and her large wings limp with fatigue. Luigi swaddled her as best he could in Peasley’s voluminous velvet cloak. The two swapped clothes, and Peasley tucked his blonde curls fastidiously under Luigi’s hat, pulling the brim low over his face. As far as he could tell, they were only subject to one or two funny stares as they shuffled up to the private respite of their dingy little room.

On the following day, it was close to late afternoon when they finally saw the rocky, tree-lined mass that was Oho Oasis rise from the seascape before them.

The landing sent a great surge of diamond white sand flying through the air. As Luigi wiped what he could of the grains from his eyes, Peasley started surging forward up the beach, his energy redoubled by arriving at his destination.

"See?" he panted, flinging a finger out to indicate a building on the headland. "Here we are at last. My, what a lovely retreat!"

Luigi and the Leguminos Sylphus followed, taking in the sight of the airy, large-windowed beach-house that was perched up the hill, nestled between clusters of palm trees.

"I really don’t know how he expects to get any research done in a place as beautiful as this," Peasley said to himself.

While Luigi was still struggling his way up the path, the sand giving way to yellowed grasses dotted with coastal shrubs and stretches of smooth volcanic rock, the prince knocked on the front door vigorously. There was some muffled bustling heard from within, and they had to wait a long,
protracted moment before the door creaked open.
"Oya Mā! Your Highness!"
Professor Elvin Gadd, wearing a floral printed shirt and brightly coloured, mismatched flip-flops, bowed deeply.
"Elvin, dearest, we need your help desperately. May we impose upon you?"
Professor Gadd noticed the Prince's travelling companion. "Why, Luigi! You are still acting as the Prince's travelling aide, I assume? I read all about the royal tour in the papers. Please, come in, come in!"

They were led through a stucco and terracotta-tiled hallway. Professor Gadd scratched the head of the Leguminos Sylphus as she trotted alongside him.

"I had this beach-house built after the Starbeans franchise took off internationally," he explained. "I've become rather tired of those dank old woods back in the Mushroom Kingdom, and I heard of what a scientific curiosity this lovely little island is. The local tribe insist that there are ancient elemental spirits in the old temples here. I haven't found them yet, but the thrill is in the chase!"

With hands behind his back, Luigi playfully conjured up a small orb of lightning between his fingers. The tiny flash caught Peasley's eye, and he sniggered.

"What can I do for you boys?" The Professor asked, as he lead them through a large living room furnished with bamboo furniture, potted palms, and many, many books.

"We need your help to mitigate this disastrous agreement between my mother and Bowser," Peasley explained. "A great portion of Chucklehuck Woods has already been destroyed, and I warrant that the Koopa factory now being built will poison the remainder of it. If the government treasury becomes sustained by Koopa-fuelled profits, I predict that our government will eventually be at the mercy of Bowser's whims. And furthermore," here he shared another, much graver look with Luigi, "I have been betrothed to Bowser's daughter."

"Yes," Professor Gadd murmured, "this is a ghastly business, most ghastly indeed. KoopaCo, Inc. has no respect at all for the old ways of brewing Beanish beans, nor for the culture and environment of the great Chucklehuck region. It is an issue close to my heart…"

They headed through a slatted wooden door, into a sun-dappled courtyard bursting with orchids and palm trees. At a table in the centre, perched upon scrolling iron chairs, sat two Beanish aristocrats, sipping at chilled glasses of sparkling nectar and slowly roasting in their heavy embroidered frock coats. At the sight of the Prince, they jumped up from their seats, and bowed in perfect unison.

"Zut Alors...! Your 'Ighness!" the shorter one said breathlessly.

"We are deeply honoured by your présence, mon Dauphin," announced the taller.

"Hey, you're the guys who were at the château, back when Mario and I were looking for the Beanstar!" Luigi remarked.

"Messrs. Corque and Casque du Chucklehuck. Their family are part of the Chucklehuckian nobility and also the owners of that grand old place," the Professor explained.

"So nice to see you again, gentlemen." Peasley shook their hands and took a seat at the table. The others followed suit, and the two brothers fought over who would pour their Prince a glass of the delicate nectar.

"Zis eez our finest reserve of white beans," Monsieur Corque declared, handing the Prince a flute of the lightly fizzing drink.

Peasley took a dainty sip. "Delicious," he asserted. "So much better than that horrid KoopaCola I was made to sample. I take it that this new scourge is of much concern to the both of you."

"Zees Bowser King, bah, 'e has non understanding of zee true art of Le Vigne! 'Is industry will undermine zee tradition of our Kingdom's finest brewing expertise!"

Professor Gadd was in total concordance. "As fellow ambassadors of true Beanish beverages, I invited Messrs. Corque and Casque here to discuss what to do about this whole mess. It is most fortuitous that you should show up and lend your support to this cause, Your Highness."
Peasley nodded. "My father was devoted to the preservation of our culture and our environment. And I am devoted to continuing this legacy."

Monsieur Corque produced a newspaper. The photograph showed an ominous band of heavily-armed Koopa officials supervising the washing and the packing of the bean harvests, prepped for their doom of being squashed to pulp in the forthcoming factory.

"Zee farmers of zee area are all uneasy," he said, "zey 'ave not welcomed zee Koopa présence. Zey are très worried about zeir safety and zeir lifestyle. If we can encourage zees résistance amongst zee people, maybe we weell make La Reine see sense and stand up to Bowser."

Peasley smiled. "Messrs. Don't forget that despite her status now, my mother is still your cousin. She may lend a more sympathetic ear if you can remind her of this fact. Elvin, perhaps we should organise a conference? Messrs. Corque and Casque could represent not only the people of the Chucklehuck region, but the sentiments of my mother's own family. Meanwhile, you could speak for the local merchants and gastronomists who will be affected by KoopaCola."

The Professor scratched the back of his neck, looking awkwardly down at his glass of nectar. "Um… perhaps I should delegate someone else to that role… it would be best for me to remain behind the scenes. The Queen and I are not exactly on the best of terms."

Monsieur Casque looked sympathetically at him, placing a gloved hand over the professor's own tenderly. A light blush tinged the old man's ghostly white features.

"Casque and I met many years ago, on my first visit to the Beanbean Kingdom. I had come to expunge ghosts from the parlour of his family's manor-house, and… well…" His speech dissolved into a coy giggle.

"Mon cher Elvie took great interest in my knowledge of Beanish 'orticulture. One moonlit evening, our 'ands brushed as we tended to a Chuckle Bean vine… eet was magique!"

"Unteel our cousin, zee young Queen-to-be, revealed your rendezvous to our papa, Le Comte du Chuque'lehuque," Corque interjected brusquely. "Casque was affianced to a young duchess from Sarasaland, 'ooze maman was zee owner of zee biggest crop of sugarcane in zee world."

Casque sniffed prissily. "Je l'ai détestée! She ran off weez a prize fighter from Diamond City trois jours after zee wedding." He looked at Peasley with earnest eyes. "I know 'ow eet feels to be tied to a woman you do not love, Your 'Ighness. Eet eez all zee worse to know zat your maman has done zees to anozzer one of her famille… especially considering zat she 'erself was lucky enough to marry pour l'amour."

Peasley wrung his hands on the tabletop. "I still can't hate her…" he said slowly. "I'm convinced she's just misled, blinded by the promise of riches for the Kingdom and too old to care about the future impact." He set his eyes on the horizon. "She will come around, I know it."

"Oh, I am glad to see such resolve," Professor Gadd declared. "I am sure that together, we will formulate an effective plan of action. But while you are staying here I must appoint guest rooms for you and Luigi." Here he rose from the table. "Come, I believe there are two spare bedrooms left on the third floor. I will ask my housekeeper to prepare them for you."

"Actually, Elvin," Peasley spoke up, taking Luigi's hand in his, "we'd prefer to share."

In a rare moment of boldness, Luigi lay a little kiss on his Prince's cheek. Monsieur Casque's face veritably lit up.

"Oh, combien beau! Jeune amour! Il est comme la poésie!"

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There was lots of talk, lots of wine, and lots of sunshine.
Peasley's initial hypothesis that Oho Oasis would not be a place conducive to action was proven correct. While discussions had taken place about who to appeal to, and what national laws and logical arguments could be used to annul the Prince's betrothal and the KoopaCola agreement, nothing major had been implemented. The afternoons had mostly been taken up by wallowing in the simple luxuries afforded by the island. One evening, beneath a crimson sunset, a passing thought came to the Prince that perhaps they should relocate their strategising to the mainland, but this notion was buried as Luigi leisurely pressed another slice of papaya between his lips. They were cuddled together on the grass, tended to over their meal by the light ocean zephyrs, the dull rhythmic roar of the surf, and the unhurried sway of the palm fronds above. Peasley rested his head on Luigi's chest as his eyes drifted shut. The sounds of nature melded together in a hazy half-conscious symphony.

"There they are!"
The weighty thud of boots approached them across the turf, and before Peasley could collect his faculties he was jostled violently upon the ground. He looked up.
"You are under arrest in the name of the Beanish crown for the abduction of Prince Peasley, and under suspicion of conspiracy. You will come quietly with us and be held in the dungeons of the Castle Town until such time as a tribunal will decide your sentencing. Any attempt to escape shall compound your crimes against our Kingdom and be brought into consideration by said tribunal. Do you understand?"
A forbidding pair of shackles was snapped around Luigi's trembling wrists.
"Kidnapping!?" Peasley cried. "Are you insane!? I came here voluntarily!"
"Please do not interfere, your Highness," one of the royal guards replied flatly. "The Queen sent us here to seek out and apprehend two dangerous conspirators who are suspected of plotting against the Beanish crown."
"We've been trying to stop the desecration of the crown! You don't understand!" He tugged at one of the guards' bulky arms.
"Your Highness, please. If you try to intervene we shall be forced to arrest you as well," he warned. All Peasley could do was follow the guards as they hauled Luigi back to the beach-house. A dozen stocky blue winged mounts hovered in a flank before them. Some other guards stood by the front door as their colleagues dragged Professor Gadd out, the feeble man almost tripped up as he was pushed along.
"You fiends! You brutes! I am one of the Beanbean Kingdom's most loyal allies! How dare you do this to me!"
Monsieur Casque tried to tearfully run to his cher Elvie, but Monsieur Corque wisely intervened, holding out a shielding arm before him. The brothers' snowy white moustaches both drooped miserably.

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"Your Highness, you may not interfere. The Queen has demanded that you go to the throne room immediately to speak with her."
"I'm not leaving until you let both of them go!" Peasley screamed. "I am the heir to the throne, you must do as I command!"
"PEASLEY!"

Nana Lima had appeared in the doorway to the dungeons. She needed not utter another word or gesture. After one last pained glance toward the cell containing Luigi and Professor Gadd, their eyes desperate and morose, Peasley reluctantly followed her.
"Monsieur Corque had a top secret letter sent to me, asking me to join you on the island to contribute to the resistance against KoopaCola. It was intercepted before it reached me."
Peasley was silent.
"I'm not happy that you have behaved so recklessly. But do know that I sympathise with you. I have been in touch with Toadsworth already, he is planning to attempt extradition of Luigi and Professor Gadd back to the Mushroom Kingdom. Relations have already been strained by this pact with Bowser… things are bound to get worse. But hopefully we can still keep them safe."

They approached the door to the throne room. The vases under the King's portrait opposite still held the roses, which were now wilted and listless.
"She's positively livid. I advise you to remain silent and compliant, at least for now."

Peasley heaved open the polished oaken door, entered, and shut it behind him.
The Queen had been staring into space, seated on her throne. Her head snapped up as her son walked in. The two shared a heavy, silent stare.
"Kidnapping? Conspiracy?" Peasley ejaculated. "Neither Luigi nor Professor Gadd did anything of the sort!"
"I can't afford to have the people sympathise with them," the Queen responded. "Nothing must be allowed to diminish popular opinion of the KoopaCola agreement or the wedding."
"Popular opinion is already against both of—"
"Bowser is furious," she cut in harshly. "I knew you weren't keen on this arrangement… but to so carelessly endanger us by flaunting your disapproval in his face!?"

Peasley said nothing, his brow furrowed.
"Listen to me," his mother affirmed. "Bowser can be either a powerful ally or a formidable foe. You have a responsibility to put the interests of this Kingdom before your own personal fancies. Getting friendly with this… this sidekick of Mario's sends out entirely the wrong signal to both Bowser and your fiancée—"
"—I love him, Mother!"

The Queen reeled momentarily. "Just like you 'loved' that tailor from the bayou and the jazz musician from Diamond City, I suppose." She huffed. "Now I see where the real heart of the matter is! You'd be willing to risk the welfare of your people for the sake of some childish fling!"
"I LOVE HIM!" Peasley exclaimed. He ran back out into the hallway, grabbing a handful of the perishing roses from beneath his father's picture. He held them up to his mother's face.
"Do you see these? These roses here, that were grown just for me by Father? The roses so extraordinary that no other hand but his and mine could bring them forth!?"
He clutched them tight, and slowly, they began to regain some of their colour and bloom.
"HE has grown these! From one little cutting I gave him, he has grown a whole bush of these roses!"
Peasley's breathing was shallow, and a mist of unreleased tears had settled in his eyes.
The Queen was silenced. Slowly, gently she took the flowers from her son's grip, and reverently replaced the revived blossoms in the vases below the King's picture. She stared up at the painting for a long time before turning to her son once more.

"You must give him up," she commanded calmly.
"I will not," Peasley retorted, resolute.
She returned to the throne room and sat down.
"I am his, and I always will be. Do you hear me, Mother?"
"You must give him up," the Queen repeated. "There is no worse fate for a monarch than marrying for love."
"What are you talking about?" Peasley snorted. "You and Father were always happy together."
"Until he died!" The Queen exclaimed. "When the man you love is a hero to the people, he has obligations to protect them. He sacrifices his time, his energy, his desires, all to his position. And in
the case of your father, he sacrifices his very life."
Something cold bloomed in Peasley's core. After a moment the Queen continued. "And, being in a
position of authority as you and I are, you have to be a bastion of strength for the masses, simply to
keep the morale of the land from crumbling. You force laughter, you emblazon every last inch of the
royal icons with his smile, you stuff yourself with pastries in some mad unconscious attempt to fill
the great deep hollow he leaves…"
Peasley looked over to the vacant spot on the dais where his father's throne once sat. After some
agonising years, unable to look at anymore, his mother had ordered it discarded.
"You will forget this boy as you have forgotten the boys before him, you will nip this love in the bud
before it takes over your life. You will marry a woman who you share no sympathy with. Our
Kingdom will be strengthened by the alliance that the marriage will facilitate, and of the heirs it will
produce. And should either one of you lose the other, you shall be able to continue unencumbered,
ever knowing the horror of a grief almost too heavy to bear."

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She didn't get it. She was too late for such measures. Years too late. The moment his father had
yielded those first golden blooms, love had touched the Prince. And inevitably, grief had touched
him in turn, the moment that a crude Kremling musket ball had exploded in the King's great heart.

He lay on his bed. A fog had fallen over the town, and the view out his arched window came in
grey, blurred masses, floating wanly before his eyes.
His television hummed softly in the corner. A Chanterelle music video swanned about on the screen,
some godawful cheery number about hearts entwined and wedding bells ringing. Cherry blossoms
flew before the diva's made up face. Peasley turned onto his side. He tried to doze his way into
oblivion as the music program ended and the familiar sting of the Beanish evening news theme
began.
His *Leguminos Sylphus* hopped onto the bed and snuffled up to him, he stroked her smooth back
absently. As he couldn't fall asleep, he focused on her gently wheezing breath and the wet sound of
the creature smacking her chops.

Some of the news report unavoidably seeped into the periphery of Peasley's attention.
"…the intervention of Princess Toadstool of the Mushroom Kingdom has been swift and exacting.
She has ordered the extradition of the two perpetrators. This afternoon they were transported from
the castle to Little Fungitown, where they are currently being retained at the Mushroom Embassy.
Prince Peasley, who before the incident was looking forward to his upcoming wedding to Princess
Wendy O. Koopa, is yet to be reached for comment…"

The window latch had been busted open. Not a trace of the Prince or his trusty steed were left in the
room – both were dark shapes in the sky, zooming above the thick morass of fog.

**

Mario and Luigi sat by the fireplace in the Embassy drawing room, both silent.
"Rest assured that you will be free from persecution back at home," Peach assured them, looking
also to Professor Gadd, who was gazing out at the rainfall, lost in thoughts of his own.
"However," Toadsworth added, "It would be pertinent for all of us to avoid associations with the
Beanbean Kingdom for the time being." There seemed to be a choke of something forlorn in his
voice as he suggested this. "It is hard to say how this alliance with Bowser is going to turn out.
Opinion is divided… and I am sure that the citizens are wise to how their beloved Prince really feels
about it all. The suggestion that he was kidnapped is hardly convincing."
"Please, I implore the both of you, don't go rushing into the middle of this," Peach begged the brothers. "If something bad does happen, we will be in a much better position to help the Beanish if we don't try and strain our relations with the Queen now."

"Right. I guess we'll just stand by and let Bowser screw up everything for them, so later we can rush in and say 'we told you so',' Luigi said bitterly. "I'm going to bed."

"Luigi…” Mario went to follow him.

"Let him go," Professor Gadd instructed gently. "I am sure he needs some time alone after all he's been through. The last thing he'll want is someone else telling him what is supposedly the correct way to react."

Mario couldn't help but comply, and flopped back down in his chair despondently.

**

A fire had also been lit in Luigi's room, and the warmth was stifling. He opened the window. The sound of the chilly Autumn rain splattering upon the trees and the towering mushrooms was some comfort.

He undressed and took stock of the last few days. Tomorrow they would head home, and everything would go back to normal. Mario would return to adventuring, Peach would return to her busy schedule of ruling the nation, and Luigi would return to his daily motions of cooking, cleaning and gardening. No more picnics on the palace roof, no more romantic serenades, no more flights above the clouds. He would just have to forget. Perhaps with enough time and concentration, he would be able to. A bush of golden roses would be all that remained, which he would continue to tend to, every day.

There was a noise at the open window, a thump upon the sill. Luigi started, dreading some horrid nocturnal animal drawn inside by the fire.

"Peasley…!"

Their arms sought each other.

"You shouldn't be here," Luigi said weakly, his voice muffled by the Prince's curls.

"I'm so sorry," Peasley lamented, "I'm so sorry. If I had known they'd find us, that they'd arrest you…!"

A sob shook the Prince's body, and Luigi held him all the tighter.

"It's OK… it wasn't your fault. You didn't know."

He sniffled, and found his voice again. "I don't care what my mother wants. I don't care about Bowser or Wendy or any of them. I love you!"

Luigi held Peasley's face in his hands, wiping a trickling tear away with his thumb.

"I love you, Peasley," he returned. "I love you more than anything."

He brought his Prince before the fire and they collapsed together on the rug.

"I don't know what we're going to do," Peasley mumbled. "Everyone is counting on my marriage."

Luigi snaked his arms about Peasley's torso, clasping him protectively. "They'll have to come to their senses at some point. Making a deal with Bowser is like unleashing a dragon. They can't really expect you to go through with this."

"My mother is convinced that if I marry you, you'll eventually break my heart somehow. She doesn't seem to realise that simply being parted from you would break my heart all the same."

Luigi raised his head. "You would marry me?" He asked.

Peasley's eyes met his, they were brimming with devotion. "I couldn't picture myself being happy any other way."

"But what about your royal line? What about an heir?"

Peasley shrugged, and smiled playfully. "We could adopt," he suggested. "I'd love to see the look on Nana Lima's face if a little orphaned Mushroom child were destined one day to inherit the Beanish throne."
They laughed together. "We'll figure this out somehow," Luigi affirmed, and he kissed Peasley's shoulder. The Prince tried his best to sink into this sweet, credulous optimism.

They made love, deliberate and impassioned. Afterwards, Peasley continued to latch onto his beau. He pulled the duvet over both of their heads, and they lay content in the balmy darkness, slightly reddened by the embers in the fireplace.

"We could leave it all behind, you know," Luigi suggested, stroking Peasley's arm. "We could elope, somewhere far away. Maybe Yoshi Island. I could show you all the beautiful fruits and flowers and trees that grow there. So many bright colours."

"...But what about the others? What about my Kingdom? And yours?"

Luigi rolled onto his back and huffed. "It seems that they just care about gaining the upper hand, in whatever twisted way they see fit." He pulled Peasley onto him. "I don't care about their power play or their politics. All I care about is us."

Peasley was moved by this sweet declaration, but there was something that clashed with his conscience in the way it was said. He loved Luigi desperately. He wanted to bring him to the castle and the Kingdom that he also loved, and show him off as a husband to the people that he loved. However, it could not be denied that those same people were anticipating his spouse should be a spoiled and insensitive Koopa socialite. The castle he loved was playing host to one of the world's greatest ever enemies to peace and goodwill. The Kingdom he loved had falsely declared Luigi a kidnapper and a criminal.

"Then let's do it," Peasley said finally. "Let's leave them all behind, and go to Yoshi Island."
"Really...?" Luigi had not been expecting such an answer, but his heart began hammering faster.
"Alright! We will! We'll go and build our own lives together, just how we want! I'll plant you a massive garden and we'll adopt a little orphaned Mushroom child! I'll make you fat on pasta as I go grey and bald, and no-one will ever bother us again!"

Luigi scooped the laughing prince into his arms and smothered kisses all over him. In this way, the covenant was sealed.

**

"At 6 am, I'll meet you here, and we'll head over the ocean to the Kong Archipelago."
"Yes."
"From there we can head directly North to Yoshi Island."
"Yes."
"I will be waiting for you without delay."
"Yes."
"And this time, I'm not leaving a damned note for Mario."

Peasley smiled.
"Until then, my love."

He took off into the night on his mount, and Luigi closed the windows behind him.

Before he could be clear of the Embassy, Nana Lima hailed him down in the stone courtyard below. Toadsworth was with her.

"Will I never be rid of your blasted orders?" Peasley exclaimed. "I don't know what underhanded means you used to sniff me out, Nana Lima, but it's no use," he asserted coldly. I don't care what she'll do. I don't care if she cuts me off, Luigi and I are—"

"Bowser is going to have all of our farmers killed."

She produced a grainy polaroid of a Koopa soldier holding a long knife to the throat of a terrified Beanish girl. She couldn't have been more than four or five.
"He's already had the spokesman for the Beanish Farmers' Union executed. He was beheaded this afternoon. He was the most vocal critic of the Koopa presence. The girl in the photo is his youngest child. Our troops can do nothing. Not only are they severely outnumbered, but if we issue the order for them to fight, every man, woman and child in the farming towns will be murdered before the troops can reach them."
Peasley crumpled the photo in his hand. "That… how could Mother have done this to us!?"
"Don't blame your mother," Lady Lima snapped. "How could she have anticipated this? Anyway, what is done is done, and we have to achieve a solution."
Toadsworth approached the Prince. "Bowser has said there is only one thing that will call this threat off…"
Unable to sleep, Mario had been pacing the corridors of the Embassy. The echoed voices from the courtyard drew him out, and he listened from a sheltered doorway.
"…You must return to the castle and marry Princess Wendy."
Peasley's breath was staggered and heavy.
"No… I don't w… I, I just c- can't… can't we find a way to—"
"Believe me, my darling. Toadsworth and I have tired the moon tonight trying to find another solution. But the reality is that blades are being held to our people's necks as we speak. One foul step and we will have a massacre on our hands."
Peasley uncrumpled the photo, examining the little girl, screaming at the mercy of the Koopa weaponry. So recently orphaned, her father dying for the cause of his nation.
"Take me back to the castle, then," he said, his voice purged of spirit. "Let Wendy have me as her shotgun trophy. Let her adorn herself with my pelt, so my people can live." He turned to Toadsworth. "Luigi…" he began, and a flare of agony flooded through him. "Promise me that Luigi will be okay."
Toadsworth clamped a hand on the Prince's shoulder. "I will ensure he is made as happy as possible given the circumstances."
Mario padded back to his room, his mind as unquiet as ever.

**

Luigi smiled when he saw Peasley astride his mount, the pastel rays of morning sunlight glowing in his hair.
"I was wondering where you were," he greeted. "A few of the Embassy staff will be up and about by this time, so—"
"I can't go with you." Peasley was determined to maintain a blank face.
Luigi frowned. "Do you need more time to prepare?" he asked.
"I can't go with you, ever," Peasley insisted, his arms clenched by his sides. "Bowser has troops stationed in all our farming towns. If I don't return to the castle and marry Princess Wendy, he's going to have every last citizen of those towns killed."
The light slowly died from the boy's blue eyes, and Peasley fought back the desire to hold him.
"But… maybe Mario and I could…"
"Mario!? Blasted Mario!? Do you really think all the world's problems can be solved by jumping into the thick of the action and pulling off a few daring deeds!? If we make a single move that's remotely against Bowser's wishes, my people will die!"
Luigi shrunk back, away from the pool of morning sunlight.
"I am expected back at the castle by noon. For every hour I delay, Bowser will order one child to be beheaded publicly. No international force exists that is strong or quick enough to intervene in time. I must be on my way."

Peasley turned to fly off into the spotless, azure sky, but before he could move, Luigi cried out:
"That's it? No regrets, I suppose? Now that you need to save your people, I've just diminished to
nothing in your eyes? There's no way we can beat him together!? You'll just leave and be the big hero and marry that stupid girl and become King, and everything will be golden for you! Happy and content in the fact that you alone are responsible for all your subjects, and you won't waste a single thought on that lowly common foreigner that you used to—"

Without sparing him so much as a glance, the prince flew off. In the very next moment, Luigi was completely alone on a silent morning. No trace was left of the previous rainy night. All was dry and untarnished.

Mario stood at the doorway, having witnessed everything. As his baby brother descended into an abyss of tears, he ran over and caught him, holding him fast.

**

Sheltered by a far-flung glade of trees, watched by no-one but the wild creatures and plants around him, Peasley wept violently. Conforming to Bowser's ultimatum, he strolled through the doors of Beanbean Castle at twelve p.m. on the dot, his eyes dry but severely bloodshot. Wendy heaved herself upon him, and together they strolled through town, smiling and swamped by paparazzi, and dined at a fashionable café on the Vanilla Promenade.
THE ROSE  
A Fairy Tale  
Chapter 8

THE DAILY VINE  
Monday 24th September

PEASLEY AND WENDY  
Royal Wedding Sees Thousands Crowd The Streets Of Castle Town  
Article by Mungus Mann

The punters lining the streets of Beanbean Castle Town all held their breath at once, in anticipation of a moment which will no doubt be remembered as the most celebrated of this year: the appearance of their new Princess, Wendy O. Koopa, as she exited the luxury town-car which had conveyed her to the front gate of Cacao Temple. All were eager to glimpse the flawless white wedding gown, a custom-made Zsizsa LaGa for Harhall Studio. The tiara was white gold, adorned with four dozen gems sourced from the fallen meteors at Shooting Star Summit in the Mushroom Kingdom. Her dress, a tasteful ensemble of Chucklehuck lace and Sarasaland silk, boasted two hundred separate pink satin bows, all tied and arranged by Harhall himself. It is also estimated that the ivory-and-Ukiki-hide pumps on her feet, crafted by Jimmi Koo, were worth enough to feed the population of Hoohoo Village for eighteen months. The bride waved magnanimously to her new subjects as she ascended the steps to the temple entrance, treading the green velvet carpet that had been laid out for the ceremony.

Originally scheduled for late November, the wedding was fast-tracked in a joint decision made by King Bowser and Queen Bean last week, primarily to help cement the new economic bonds between the Beanbean and Koopa Kingdoms. A spokesperson for the Queen asserted that in the wake of the attempted kidnapping of the groom by a pair of Mushroom agitators, it would be best to seal the new alliance as quickly as possible. Also, reportedly, the young prince and princess have fallen so deeply in love, they were both impatient to become husband and wife.

"The pair are ecstatic," said a source close to the Prince. "Peasley has lavished attention on her since his return to the castle. They have spent almost every moment together – you couldn't find a more devoted couple anywhere!"

No expense was spared for the ceremony. Wendy was walked down the aisle by her father to an eighty piece orchestra playing Kondonini's Kanon. The aisles were bedecked by handmade flowers, bright pink roses and white peonies crafted from silk. The bride and groom recited their vows and exchanged a pair of gold rings which have been insured by Lakitu's of Diamond City for a whopping three million coins each. Guests remarked on the groom's deeply reverent manner as the temple's High Priestess sermonised, and the choke of emotion in his voice as he promised his life to the radiant princess. The bells pealed and the guests burst into applause, and the newlyweds swanned back down the aisle before the flashing cameras, eager to kick their heels up at the reception hosted at the Castle.

Duchess Vanna Vane, celebrated Sarasaland socialite and a VIP guest, had this to say:
"Oh, it was quite clear that Peasley was feeling the enormity of the day: to take the plunge and devote himself entirely to the woman he adores. His mood was quite contemplative, not at all like his usual debonair self. While Wendy was out on the dance floor, dubstepping the evening away, he was mostly seen sitting at his place on the high table, deep in conversation with old friends: Lady Lima of the Beanbean Royal Court, Monsieur Casque Le Vicomte du Chuque'lehuque, and Princess Daisy of my own Sarasaland. Perhaps he was asking for advice on how to be a good husband – well, for one, now that he does have husbandly duties to perform, there won’t be any more gallivanting off to faraway lands on his winged mount, I can assure you!"

One other noticeable aspect of the big night was the overall absence of Mushroom luminaries. Upon the discovery of the kidnapping attempt, all the figures who had received an invitation to the event were issued a formal rescindment: Princess Toadstool, Mario, Toadsworth, even Chanterelle and Sir Amanito Muscaria, both of whom had been asked to perform during the bridal waltz. "Pfft. Lousy fungal riff-raff. Who needs 'em?" King Bowser was overheard saying.

A fountain of soda served as the centrepiece of the banquet table: a five tier silver structure spewing an advance batch of the much-anticipated KoopaCola, set to hit the shelves early next year. It was topped by an ice sculpture of the bride. When the toasts were made, the guests sipped on this innovative new beverage.

At the close of the night, Peasley and Wendy took off to the airport. The first leg of their honeymoon is in Diamond City, and from there they will tour the Kong Archipelago, Sarasaland, Isle Delfino and the Koopa Kingdom. Many have also noted the fact that they are steering well clear of Toad Town, Glitzville and Mushroom City.

A full account of the reception, including the cake cutting, the bridal waltz, and the speech made by the father of the bride can be found on the front page of the society section.

CHUCKLEHUCK WOODS BEING POISONED?:
Startling Claims Made Against KoopaCo, Inc.’s Factory Complex
Article by Hyacinth Greenie, Environmental Correspondent

Maurice LePodde has lived on the same farmstead in the Chucklehuck region for sixty-eight years. His great grandfather established the thirty-hectare farm which he is the current head of, specialising in the cultivation of the prized Hee Bean (Phaseolus Canarius). He has grown up with Chucklehuck Woods on his very doorstep. He can recall playing in its broad, twisted trees as a boy, and collecting winkles in old jam jars. He has come to know the various rhythms and cycles of its ecosystem like the voices of his loved ones. And now, this native of the ancient site is convinced that something is wrong.

"Zee air and water, zere is sometheeng amiss in zem," he tells me as we walk together beneath the branches of a silvery birch tree. "Zere now exists an 'orrible metallic taste to everytheeng. Eet was once sweet and refresheeing."

Since the clearing of almost three hundred acres at the North end of the Woods to accommodate the new KoopaCo. Inc. soda factory, Monsieur LePodde has watched convoy after convoy of trucks storm through his small farming town, carrying everything from construction supplies to industrial brewing equipment and enormous pallettes of corrosive chemicals. The factory has not even opened, and already, he claims, the surrounding woods have become severely contaminated.

He shows me around the affected areas, and the deep-set frown on his face intensifies as he points
out the examples of withering foliage and glaring lack of birdsong.  
"Zee Koopa public relations *hommes*, zey insist zat eet eez all just zee natural dormancy zat comes weez Autumn," Monsieur LePodde gruffly tells me, "but I ’ave seen soixante-huit Autumnns een zeeze Woods. I ’ave never seen leaves fade from green to brown to metallic grey, or squeerels drop dead from zee trees, poisoned by zee nuts zey ’arvest." The undeniable effect of the construction is further indicated by the stream he shows me, once crystal clear and teeming with fish, now a swamp of runoff and construction shrapnel, stinking of sulphur.

A concerned group of researchers at Hoohoo University, led by Professor Cerys Lentilla, has appealed to the Beanish government for resources into investigating the damage, but they have been blocked by parliament consistently. 
"Zee government, bah, zey let zee Koopas run rampant ’ere," Monsieur LePodde declares, holding his nose as a cement mixer trundles by over the mud. "Bowser's troops are stationed een every town in zee region and monitor us *jour et nuit*. Most of zee farmers, zey are nervous, scared for zeir lives. Zere has already been one… ah, *incident*..." here his eyes darken, "even now I wonder eef I weell be next, ’aving tattled to zee mainstream press. I volunteered myself to speak to you today seemply because I do not want zee young people to put zeirselfs at reesk. We shall we what weell happen eef zees story ever makes eet to print."

As we part, and I hop back in the jeep which has taken me out to this once picturesque rural locale, Monsiuer LePodde farewells me with a sad, slow wave goodbye. I clutch my camera and my notepad tight, feeling at every level the volatile precipice at which our once prized agricultural industry stands.

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Leaves fell from the trees, and eventually, sleet formed on the roads of Toad Town.  
After coming home one dark afternoon, tossing his padded coat on the back of a chair, Mario mused upon how different the living room looked compared to some months ago. Everything was stacked and ordered. The floor gleamed with polish. The place was well-aired, and not a speck of dust was to be borne. From the kitchen wafted the tantalising smell of a slow-cooked stew.

Back in Spring and Summer, the room constantly looked as if a hurricane had ripped through it. Things were flung haphazardly on the floor and the furniture, and the only beautiful things to be seen were the resplendent bouquets of golden roses that chased away the musty smell of disused spaces. Now, those vases lay empty and clean. No errant petals littered their tables.

"Oh, hey Mario. Dinner's almost ready." Luigi did not bother to exchange eye contact with his brother, but instead collapsed onto the newly-vacuumed sofa and reached for one of the newspapers that had been folded in a neat little pile on the coffee table.

The familiar titling of 'The Daily Vine' unsettled Mario. Silently, he read over Luigi's shoulder. The headlining article expressed the people's frustration that no baby bump yet protruded from Princess Wendy's midsection. (There had been a false alarm the previous week as she and her friends had been seen exiting the famous restaurant Chez Fève, after partaking in their celebrated nine-course degustation.) A paparazzo shot of Wendy dragging her listless husband along the Vanilla Promenade was blasted across two thirds of the front page. Another smaller article reported the concern of Hoohoo University's top botanists. Beanish Winters were not known for being very cold, and they were confounded as to why all the plant-life in the Kingdom had so rapidly fallen dormant, even the perennials. The journalist's article took a disparaging tone to their fears, but the small black-and-white photo of naked palm trees at Gwarhar
Lagoon, totally barren of leaves and nuts, was made no less unsettling. Too many times, Mario had snatched these publications out of Luigi's hands and thrown them in the recycle bin, insisting it was not good for his brother to be reading this 'tabloid trash'. But, thanks to his subscription, those damned newspapers just kept on coming, and eventually Mario decided that it wasn't worth the constant arguments. After all, perhaps they were a means of helping his brother to work through his grief.

Apart from cleaning the house and following the press, the only other thing Luigi devoted himself to was the guitar. His lessons with Mannie Muscaria continued, and master and pupil had become good friends. However, this was by no means a relief to Mario. Though Luigi's skill had increased and the sounds of strumming from his bedroom had become much more melodious, the tunes were heavy with melancholy, often accompanied by the singing of bleak, broken-hearted lyrics. The house would fall under the dreary spell, and every time Luigi started up, Mario forced himself to get out and brave the cold so he wouldn't have to suffer as well. The garden was untouched, most days blanketed with either frost or powdery snow. Some of the hellebore was growing rampant and choking the other plants in the flowerbed. The very day they had returned from the Embassy in the Beanbean Kingdom, Luigi had entered the garden to find that his rose bush had dropped all its blooms. The once proud flowers lay withering on the soil, while the thorny stems had become infested with rot.

**

"The last of Bowser's troops vacated the Chucklehuck farming towns this morning."
"I'm glad for that."
"Have you picked out an outfit for the KoopaCola launch party tonight?"
"Wendy picked one out for me."
"Mm, good."

Queen Bean meditated over her tea, staring out at the world of white haze, a town gripped by Winter and completely devoid of green. Her son's face was not visible, only a limp mop of blonde curls mulling over a double-strength Chuckochino.
"The researchers from Hoohoo University…"
"They won't be able to do a damn thing, mother."
"They are doing what they can. Who knows – their efforts could prove fruitful."
A huff came from under the mop of curls.

Earlier that day, Professor Cerys Lentilla and her team had collected the last half-rotten remnants of the dead golden roses, leaving the greying skeletons of the bushes to shiver in a Winter chill they were unused to. There was a hugely felt collective desire to revive the precious flowers.

The Queen got up from her chair and plodded over to the window. "All we can do is hope that good will come of all this. At the very least, Bowser has incentive to look after us now. His progeny has become a part of our Kingdom."
"And all we had to do was let him kill one of our farmers," Peasley spat. "Before the wedding, I visited the executed man's family. The bank was about to foreclose on their farm-house. I managed to have their mortgage paid off and got his wife a secretarial job at Château de Chucklehuck, but… his children are still deprived of a father."
"Peasley…"

The Prince turned around to fire off another indignant remark, but seeing the sadness in his mother's face, he couldn't bring himself to do it. His shoulders sagged.
"Maybe you're right," he sighed. "Maybe I should stop fighting this fate and just make the best of it. Finally consummate this confounded marriage and give the people their heir – their half-Koopa heir. The idyll we all wallowed in was just too good to last. The agricultural bubble had to burst at some point." Here he laughed bitterly. "Maybe we can convince Bowser to drain the bayou and build a string of casinos and theme parks there. It's probably what would have happened if Father hadn't been on the throne…"

In the frosted light, Peasley caught the sight of tear tracks on his mother's round face. He approached and hugged her, like he hadn't done since he was a small child.
"I love you."
"I love you too, son."

**

"Aw c'mon, enough of the sappy stuff. Play me some of that 'Frankie Mercury' guy's music!"
"Freddie Mercury, Daisy."
"Whatever. C'mooon! 'Don't Stop Me Now'!"
"Okay, fine then, I won't stop you."
"Smart-arse!"

The sound of laughter pricked Mario's ears, from his position in his favourite armchair.

Daisy had been coming over at every opportunity. However, her visit directly after the wedding had not been a success. She had relayed to Luigi what Peasley had told her at the reception: a miserable account of how shattered he was to be forced into the marriage, and how dearly the prince wished he could be by Luigi's side instead. After doing what they could to appease the boy's tears, Mario had pulled Daisy aside and asked her instead to distract him from the whole mess. Games, activities, small talk, jokes, anything to lift his spirits. Of course, Luigi had responded to most of these endearing entreaties as if he were a lump of unmovable rock. But ever compassionate and attentive, Daisy's visits had not relented. She kept at him, until he was up and doing merely to allay the princess' pestering. For a few weeks now they had been taking little trips out into Toad Town (Starbeans was duly avoided), baking various sweets and mocking all the lousy sitcoms on TV together. Finally, it seemed, Luigi was allowing himself to actually enjoy it.

The boy now accompanied himself on his guitar, obliging his friend. At first the sprightly song he performed sounded a little stilted and awkward, but as he picked up his momentum, the energy increased, until it was almost buoyant enough to pass as a decent performance. Daisy clapped along, and cheered as Luigi chucked out the last few chords.
"Another one, 'Weeg! Encore!"
"Y'know, I'm actually kinda hungry. Why don't we see if the cupcakes have cooled down yet?"
"Even better. I've had me a hankering for some double chocolate chip for three days now…"
The thundering of footsteps clomped down the stairs, and into the newly-messed kitchen.

As evening approached, a blizzard hit, and one peek out into the gloom made it clear that Daisy would not be returning to the castle that night. Luigi gallantly offered the girl his bed, and he arranged fresh linens for her after chucking his own blankets on the sofa downstairs.

As the sounds of the boy struggling against a large goose-down duvet carried downstairs, Mario and Daisy sat in armchairs, staring out at the wild whorls of snowfall and clutching at mugs of cocoa. Daisy's eyes roved about the living room, and fell upon the sofa.
"Oh."

Upon a patched green pillowcase sat a perfect silk glove, ivory-white and glittering with gold...
embroidery.
Mario gave a wan smile. "He sleeps with it."
Daisy stared into her cocoa. "...If only there was something more I could do for him..."
Mario smiled. "You've been the single bright spot in his life for the last few weeks. In fact..." his eye
contact with the girl was broken for a moment, "I have been meaning to tell you, Daisy."
"Tell me what?"
The plumber's voice was gentle and low. "Well, it's painfully clear how you feel about him. How
you've always felt about him."
The bold princess seemed to shrink into herself, drawing her limbs and head in like a koopa reacting
to an outside threat. "So?" She threw out rather curtly.
"You've been a friend to my brother and doted on him from day one, even though he never..." It
was hard to find the right words. "Actually, when you two first met, I thought you might be a good
companion for him."
Daisy fixed a wary, questioning eye on Mario.
"I guess what I'm tryin' to say is, anything you can do to help Luigi get over this, you have my
blessing."

She was somewhat staggered by this. Mario was all but commanding her to fulfill an unlikely dream
she'd cherished since she'd first beheld Luigi— her sweet, shy Luigi. The two of them were hardly a
paradigm of storybook romance. He was practically afraid of his own shadow, and she was a joke of
a princess, untidy and headstrong with none of the feminine poise of her ladylike peers at court. The
two had bonded over outdoor games and pizza, like children. Nevertheless, he had obliged her
attentions, taken long moonlit strolls with her, sometimes let her kiss him. He was clearly unenthused
about these amorous endeavours, but in the spirit of true chivalry, had allowed her at least to pretend.
He did this, she supposed, because he loved her.

She settled down to sleep that night, and luxuriated in Luigi's lingering fragrance, which still clung to
the freshly made bed. That spicy lime aftershave he favoured, a slight hint of perspiration, and a
delicious overtone of soil and fresh grass. Even in the dead of Winter, always fresh grass.
She hugged her pillow, and her mind ticked over. She silently vowed that somehow, she would
make him truly happy.
Chapter 9

THE ROSE
A Fairy Tale
Chapter 9

The thin fissure of silver sky that snaked along the horizon slowly darkened.
Brittle, naked branches lurched with the bitter winds. The air heralded no echo. Twilight songs of roosting shrikes carried no further than a few feet. The only trace of humanity Daisy could taste was a faint wisp of sweet firewood in the air, carried into the Forever Forest from a solitary farmhouse.
Damp evening air nipped at her dark skin, for the thin velvet cloak she had donned was poor protection against this kind of cold. Her stride quickened along the twisting path, careless of the mud and icy water that had already caked upon the hem of her dress. She clutched a large cloth bag hanging from her shoulder tightly against herself. She had to make it to the river soon— upon nightfall, the path would disappear into the moonless, murky darkness.

She soon sighted it: a wide, cloudy thread of water running silently through a shallow valley, flanked by a thin but dense patch of dead trees and rock. Wasting no time, Daisy veered from the path and picked her way down the vicious slope, plunging into the shadows.
Her eyes began to gradually pick out details within the gloom, and she managed to find a large old root to sit down upon. A dull ache ebbed through her body, and for a few moments all she could think of was how glad she was to have reached her destination and be off her feet.
Above the trees, the final glimmer of daylight was at last extinguished. Somewhere far away, Daisy thought to herself, the unseen stars would be shining.
A wild dog's howl bled through the silence. A pang of fear struck the Princess' nerves. She had dared to parley with figures of the most horrid disrepute and trickery— what if they broke their word and were not even going to show up?
Her breath quickened, plumes of warm vapour blooming and dying in front of her face.
It was only a few moments before she realised that a second stream of hot breath was grazing the back of her cloak.
A deep, soft growl issued forth with it. "Hello there, my pretty."
Large hands suddenly clamped her shoulders like pinching talons.

A flash of fever passed through Daisy. She swivelled around, grabbed the creature by its thick neck and brought its enormous bulk down hard on the dense tree root. It roared in pain.
"Can't a man greet someone without being attacked!?” Wario whimpered, clutching his now throbbing jaw.
Daisy crossed her arms and scowled. "You sneak up on a solitary woman in a dark wood, she's gonna defend herself."
The thin face of Waluigi broke into a unkind smile, illuminated by the kerosene lamp in his grasp.
"That's what you get for touching that little spitfire, bro."
Shaking off the blow to his dignity, Wario straightened up. "Did you bring the dough?"
Daisy took a tiny silk purse out of her bag and undid the sash. The dim was splintered by a dazzling pool of golden light, reflected by the lamp.
"On a bad day, one ounce of Sarasaland gold is worth a thousand Mushroom coins. There is enough here to keep you knee-deep in garlic for years."
The agonising pain in his jaw forgotten, Wario's eyes twinkled with lust. Gaze fixed on the treasure, he thoughtlessly reached out a stubby hand to grab the purse. Anticipating him, Daisy swept it up out...
of his reach.
"You're not getting a single nugget until the job is done."
The stout man snarled. "Alright, alright. So what do we do?"
"First, we wait for the other member of our little group to arrive…"

No sooner had she finished speaking, a squealing, screaming, pulsating blast of sparks and coloured light zoomed into view in the skies above. Three pairs of eyes followed it as it lost speed, spluttering and jerking, and it finally tail-spun right into a nearby bush with a spectacular crash.

Daisy rushed over to the wreck, coughing from the volleys of smoke, and the two brothers followed suit. Beneath the mess of broken branches and burning, acrid grass, a little lump of a creature let out a tortured moan. The princess unceremoniously hauled the figure onto its feet. Curious, Waluigi held his lamp up to the stranger's face.

Kamek squinted in the flash of lamplight. "Yes, yes, I see it. Now get it out of my face," he snapped.
"What's speccy doing here?" Wario remarked.
"He's your partner in all of this," Daisy replied.

After rearranging his deep blue robes and smoothing out the bent twigs on his broomstick, Kamek peered through his thick spectacles at the three humans.

"Now, Your Majesty, you said that you had a rather considerable inducement at hand if I agreed to assist you."

Wario smiled again. "She brought a stash of Sarasaland gold."
Kamek huffed. "Is that all? What do I care for piddly human trinkets like gold?"

Daisy assumed a look of superiority. "Gold isn't the only treasure my kingdom has to offer."

Once more, she reached into her bag. Carefully, almost tenderly, she produced a large leather-bound book. Its cover was crisscrossed with elaborate designs.

"We are an ancient people. The magic in use by Sarasaland covens today has been developed over countless ages, much older than the jinxes you Koopas toy with."

Kamek scrunched up his face, about to retort, when his eyes fell upon the thick yellow pages of the spellbook. Despite being in possession of thought processes much loftier than that of Wario, the sorcerer's expression suddenly mirrored the beastly look that the large man had given Daisy's purse of gold.

"Such power…" he breathed. Slowly, unconsciously, Kamek's claws closed around the sides of the book.

Without warning, the princess whisked the precious tome away, snapping it shut and concealing it safely once more in her bag. "Now we come to my side of the bargain…" she announced.

"Yes…?" Wario and Kamek chorused, not tearing their eyes away from the cloth satchel hanging from the girl's shoulder.

"You are going to kidnap Prince Peasley."

Wario and Waluigi blinked at her.

"Who?"

With an aggravated sigh, Daisy reached into her bag yet again (Wario and Kamek gasped) and pulled out a newspaper.

"Honesty, don't you boys read the news?"

She pointed to the photo gracing the front page. Standing on the front steps of a grand castle was a young newlywed couple. Wendy O. Koopa posed for the camera, sporting flashy accessories and an even flashier smile. Her husband, tall and lean, was a pitiful sight. With what would normally be described as rather beautiful features, he had the look of a faded flower that had been kept in a dark room for too long. His long blond hair fell onto his shoulders limply, his large eyes were pale and joyless, and a stiff, artificial smile had been forced onto his lips.

"Prince Peasley is the heir to the Beanbean throne. He was recently married to Bowser's daughter
Princess Wendy." Daisy rattled off this information as if she was trying to reason with someone very simple. "And I want you to kidnap him."
"And what, pray tell, do we do with this Princess Pea character once we have him?" Wario inquired. "Prince Peasley," Waluigi corrected.
"The three of you will take him to an old abandoned temple in the West of the Sarasaland desert. Then, Kamek…"
She paused here, once again producing something from her bag: a yellowed scroll tied with string. "…You will cast this spell on him."
The sorcerer's greedy claws snatched the scroll and yanked it open. His beady eyes hungrily trailed along the lines of swirly, elaborate calligraphy. "Two handfuls of Datura… three leaves from a blooming Weeping Sabicu…" he mumbled, fixated on the directions. "This is just a foretaste of what's in the spellbook," Daisy remarked enticingly. "What will this spell do to him?" Kamek asked, finally looking up at her. Daisy gave an odd smile. "It will send him into a deep sleep…"
Kamek "ooh"ed appreciatively. "…from which the only way to wake up is True Love's Kiss." She announced the latter three words with a great sense of importance. Before her companions could "eww" in response, the Princess continued. "Once you have done that, the three of you must send a ransom note to the Beanbean Royal Family telling them what you have done. Demand something valuable from them—say, the Beanstar. Then wait at the temple. Make no mention of my involvement."

Waluigi had been listening intently, baffled by Daisy's plan. "Why?"
She lowered her green eyes, displaying vulnerability for the first time. "I don't want the people I love to know I'm doing something like this," she murmured. "Oh." Waluigi was overcome by a sudden feeling of pity springing up in his heart. An awkward silence followed. "So do we get the gold then?" Wario persisted. "Not yet," Daisy said firmly. "At this point, no doubt, the Queen will recruit Mario and Luigi to rescue the Prince." She saw the brothers wince at the sound of their enemies' names. "Your job then will be pretending to defend your quarry."
"'Pretend'?" Waluigi repeated. "Can't I just wail on Mario a teeny bit?" Wario whined. "Or at least beat up the green dude some—"
"HARM ONE HAIR ON LUIGI'S HEAD AND I SWEAR I WILL RIP OUT YOUR WINDPIPE!"
All three conspirators jumped back at the ferocity of her voice. After a long moment, she sniffed prissily and composed herself. "Anyway, make them think you mean business, but allow them to defeat you. Only once the brothers have taken the Prince and he is resting safely in Beanbean Castle will you receive your rewards."
"That's all? Then I— er, Waluigi and I get the gold? ARIGHT!" Wario punched the air with an exultant fist.

Curiously, he and Kamek then took part in some graceless manner of victory dance. Waluigi continued to stare at Daisy, mystified. She frowned back at him. "What?"
"I… I don't understand," he declared. "You want to stage a phony kidnapping so those miserable Mario brothers can rescue some prince? What's in it for you?"
Daisy sighed. "The only one who could wake the Prince is his true love. Thanks to his marriage, his true love has been barred from his life forever. There are two hearts that lie raw and bleeding under the stars tonight… two hearts that I happen to care for deeply. I want to reunite them."

The three villains looked at each other, and then let out a collective shriek of disgust. "How on earth is THAT supposed to be wicked?" Wario cried.

Daisy once again took on a frightening tone of voice. "It's NOT, you fool! Does everybody you do business with HAVE to be interested in causing harm?"

After recovering from the verbal onslaught, Wario grunted curtly at the Princess. "Whatever. As long as I get what I want. Come on, Waluigi, we've got us a prince to abduct." He tugged on his younger brother's skinny arm, moving to leave the woods.

"Well then," Kamek conceded, "I'd better go get my beauty sleep if I'm to set up shop in some old desert temple in the morning." Without any ceremony, he mounted his broomstick and took off into the overcast night sky in a spluttering puff of smoke.

Waluigi made to follow his brother back up the slope, but his eye was caught by Daisy, staring dubiously out at the dark and pulling her flimsy cloak about herself. He was going to hate himself for this.

He cleared his throat loudly. "Um… a princess like you probably doesn't want to head back to town all on your own."

Daisy raised an eyebrow. Staring determinedly at the ground, Waluigi held out a gloved hand to her.

A smattering of soft warmth met his hand as Daisy slipped her fingers over his. "What're you doing!?" Wario growled.

"Well, we can't very well leave her all alone out here!" Waluigi shouted defensively. His brother gave him a Look.

"Because… well… if she's got our service fee on her, we don't want her getting mugged or nothin'…"

The thickset man gave a low humph. "Good point. Now come on, let's head back, I'm killing for a nice warm beer."

The three walked in silence for some time. Eventually, the road widened, and the odd weather-beaten lamp-post cast gentle pools of light upon the ground.

Her face now at least somewhat visible, Waluigi noticed that the forlorn look that had previously cast itself upon Daisy's delicate features now reappeared.

He cast his mind back upon what she had said. "It's Luigi, isn't it?"

"Huh?"

"The Prince's true love. It's Luigi, right?"

The Princess gaped at him. "How did you know—"

Waluigi suddenly cackled. "Oh, that's classic! The crummy little wimp's into prancing princes!" He flounced about like a klutzy ballerina in mockery. "IT'S NOT FUNNY."

The man obediently withdrew his scorn.

"I suppose it was just a lucky guess, then," Daisy concluded sourly.

Waluigi shook his head. "It's just that you said that you really cared for the two heartbroken people and—"

Waluigi blushed, tripping over his own train of thought. "...A-and, you... y'know... with Luigi, you kinda—"

"I love him."

He looked back at her. A little stream of teardrops twinkled softly upon her round cheeks.
"What of it?" She muttered heatedly. "As much as I do I can never give him the kind of love he needs. He loves Peasley, and Peasley loves him. If the both of them are to be happy, this is what I must do."
Waluigi said nothing.
"Well? Go on and laugh. I suppose it is funny to someone like you. I'm sure you've never felt what it's like to yearn for someone you can never have."
Waluigi lowered his head. Faintly, too faintly for Daisy to hear, he answered: "You would be surprised, Princess."

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The Beanbean Castle Gardens were a world of white. As Peasley wandered over the blanket of snow, he took in the sight of the iced over lily pond. In a way, it was sort of pretty. This desolate stretch of once magnificent vegetation was still a refuge, especially compared to the madness that was currently taking place inside.

The echo of Bowser's frustrated roar still rattled about in the prince's chilled bones. His father-in-law was far from pleased with the situation that he currently had to deal with. The projected sales of KoopaCola issued by KoopaCo, Inc.'s accounting executives had proven awfully presumptuous. Within a few weeks of the beverage's launch party, a sample of the stuff had been thoroughly analysed by an unknown whistle-blower. This figure had provided evidence that KoopaCola was not only a sugary drink prone to cause hypertension and high blood pressure, but was also carcinogenic and contained dangerously high levels of heavy metals. Once this information got into the hands of the international press, mothers everywhere were adamant that their young ones should never touch a drop of the vile fizzy liquid. And when an unfortunate young Kong had been done in by a dose of the drink mixed with alcoholic spirits, the sales slowed down to naught. Peasley had sent a handcrafted funeral wreath of silk flowers, and his heartfelt condolences, to the victim's parents. (Of course, supplying real flowers was now out of the question, but that was another problem entirely). KoopaCo, Inc. was currently inundated with lawsuits, ranging from piffling claims that the drink had robbed consumers of a good night's sleep, to the very serious matter of where to place blame for the young Kong's death. The elaborate advertising campaign had been pulled overnight. The flyers and posters for KoopaCola ended up lining the litter-boxes of family pets right across the country. Bowser had suddenly found himself with a commodity that he couldn't even pay people to take.

His first impulse was to wreak his vengeance on the Beanbean Kingdom itself, but as Lady Lima had reminded the king, the whole KoopaCola enterprise had been started by himself. And considering that his dearest precious Wendy was now a part of this realm, it made the place untouchable. The princess had stamped her foot, demanding that her daddy leave the kingdom alone, so the designer boutiques of Vanilla Promenade and the upscale night-spots of the Castle Town would remain for her royal amusement.

All he could do was marshal his squad of lawyers for the ensuing court battles, lay off all the workers at the Chucklehuck factory, and storm about Beanbean Castle, yelling at the servants and smashing the furniture.

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Queen Bean and Lady Lima had locked themselves in the throne room, patiently waiting out the storm and leaving the royal guards to the formidable task of dealing with the irate Koopa King. Peasley was tempted to tell them that Mario and Luigi could have easily taken him out, but instead he kept his mouth shut. Wendy was nowhere to be found, presumably she had flounced off to another highly publicised social event.
By contrast, it was peaceful out here. The wind moaned and the naked cypress branches swayed slowly.

Peasley knelt in the ex-rose garden, a mitten-clad hand reaching out to touch the greyed thorns of his father's rose bush. Professor Cerys Lentilla of Hoohoo University had sadly reported that the prince should not expect any new growth come Spring.

The words of the Beanstar suddenly wafted through his mind, summoned unfathomably from the depths of his memory:

"An old tradition dies away,  
We herald in a fruitless day.
And Prince, you must renounce your cause,  
A partnered fate was always yours.
Through friends your corpse will soon be sold,  
True glory stems from earthly gold."

"Are you sure that's him?"
"Positive, bro! Sad lanky blonde guy? Who else could it be?"
"Shhh, keep it down, will ya?"
"Alright. Gimme the satchel…"

A faint spark of Peasley's heroic instincts told him to whirl around and draw his rapier, but mentally and physically, he just felt too drained. Besides, his rapier was hanging in his private salon, it had not seen use for months.

A sound whack to the back of his golden head was all that it took.

**

Captain Thelonius Vert, decorated hero of the Beanbean Royal Guard, came before his queen in bandages and a wheelchair.

"Your Highness…" he rasped. "The temple… a vast stone labyrinth, deep underground… I led my men fearlessly. And…" he paused here, beckoning to his nurse for a sip of water. Once quenched, he continued. "The big chamber… no moonlight… so dark. And then…" Horror bloomed in his eyes. "No-one could've guessed… the monster… n-no sword or missile or musket fire could…" Tears spilled onto his bruised, emaciated cheeks. "So many of my men!… so cruel!... The monster…"

His laboured breathing was stifled even further. His nurse hovered over him as he made piteous, tormented noises like that of an animal.

"Get the poor man out of here!" Lady Lima ordered.

Queen Bean picked up the ransom note again, her terrified eyes scanning its contents for the thousandth time:

"wE HAVe kiDnAPPeD yOur PRInce. HE iS POWERless to EsCaPe. BRing The BEAnStAR to ThE ancIEnT TemPLE of PROSERPINA iN the saraSAlanD DESert, 7 miLES WesT of POmmEGRa SPriNGs. Only THen WiLL yOU eVER sEE hIM aLiviE AgAiN, DO NOT EVEN THINK of FighTING BacK, we WiLL DesTROY you. & Don’T Even think OF SendINg ThOSe MARIO BROTHERS out TO rescUE ThE prINCe, yOU’LL reGreTe iT. ALSO brINg a 6-PaCK of bUlLEt BiLL LaGER and 3 LaRGE PiZZA, 2 GARLIC & cHEesE & 1 SUPeR SupREME. & LeaVE iT in the VeSTiBuLE oF The souTH sHRINE. oTHERWise tHE prince GETS iT.

sIGned WaLu AnOn."
Given it was such a clumsy, ill-conceived threat, the Beanish court had assumed that their foe was a force that the royal army could have easily defeated. They had been sent off a week previous by a distraught Queen Bean, with adamant instructions to teach those pizza-loving thugs a lesson and bring back her son safe and sound. The night before last, the few surviving troops had been admitted to the Castle Town hospital, burnt, bruised, battered and blabbering wildly about a horrible monster lurking in the depths of the temple halls. Their weapons had been no match for its fury. According to the soldiers, great volleys of flame and lightning, dazzling in the pitch dark, had obliterated their comrades from the face of the Earth.

"My baby…" the Queen whimpered.
"Your Majesty," Lady Lima knelt before her, counselling and comforting her in the same fashion she had when the grand matriarch had been but an inexperienced princess, "we must contact Princess Toadstool and implore her to recruit the Mario Brothers."
"We've been through this, Lima, it's clearly a bluff!" The Queen exclaimed. "If we did so, we'd be playing right into this monster's hands. The brothers would fail, and our relations with the Mushroom Kingdom will sour further. And my son would still be in danger!" She rose from her throne.
"There is nothing else for it… we must sacrifice the Beanstar. Lima, order the High Guard to bring it here. And get the head chef to start on those dratted pizzas."
"Majesty, I will not!" Her frail form blocked the doorway, her long fingers grasped at the frame.
"Lima…"
The two women stared at each other square in the eye.
"If we surrendered the Beanstar, we would be playing into the hands of chaos for sure," Lima declared, her voice firm and even. "Yes, there is a risk involved in sending Mario and Luigi to the temple. But I have faith in the brothers' fortitude, you must remember the many kinds of evil and brutality they have vanquished in the past… for the sake of our prince, I am willing to allow this game to play out as it will."
The Queen was silent for a moment, and then turned to one of her retainers.
"Send a messenger to the Mushroom Palace," she commanded sternly.
Chapter 10

THE ROSE
A Fairy Tale
Chapter 10

Heads turned as the royal Mushroom carriage rolled through the wide, icy streets of Beanbean Castle Town, making its way up to the castle gates. The morale of the citizens had hit a low not seen since the dark days of King Ringspot I. The slew of misfortune that had been plaguing the kingdom – the degradation of Chucklehuck Woods, the suspicious 'kidnapping' of the Prince in early Autumn, the failure of KoopaCola, the freakishly cold Winter, and ultimately the death of King Favius' rose bushes and the genuine abduction of his son – had left the once chic and self-assured people paranoid and pessimistic. To boot, many had fallen to superstition. There was a prophecy currently circulating that losing the two living legacies of the beloved late king meant that the country was on the verge of total collapse. The Winter wasteland would persist into forever, and predatory industries similar to KoopaCo, Inc. would destroy what was left of the nation. As no lush green wilderness existed anymore, the people gloomily supposed that greedy entrepreneurs would soon make short work of their universities, museums and temples.

A few onlookers booed and spat as Peach's carriage wheeled along. "This is awful," the Princess lamented, staring out of the window at the frozen town and the unfriendly faces. "The Beanbean Kingdom used to be such a paradise." Mario crossed his arms. "They invited it all when the Queen welcomed Bowser and his stinking lot." "You mustn't be too hard on the Queen, Mario," Peach told him. "She saw a chance to make peace with the koopas… really, she was overly optimistic about much they could be trusted. Even I have hoped for a day when we could live in harmony with them."
"Pity the only thing Bowser dreams about is crushing all the other nations on Earth," the hero grumbled.
Luigi, who had been fidgeting and staring at his fiddling hands, looked up with horror in his eyes. "You don't think Bowser is the one who kidnapped Peasley, do you?"
"Who knows?" His brother answered. "Maybe it's his revenge on the Beanish for the downfall of that nasty soda of his."
Peach frowned. "I'm not so sure…"

Their attention was grabbed by the coach grinding to a halt, and an anxious Toadsworth swinging the doors open and hopping out of his seat. "We're here, your Majesty!"
Lady Lima ran down the castle stairs to greet them. "I'm so glad you've agreed to come and assist us!" She clasped hands with Toadsworth. "Please come to the throne room, we will need to speak with the Queen right away…"

**

The air could have been cut with a knife. The Queen sat on her throne, the Mushroom emissaries stood opposite. After Toadsworth and Lima had made full salutations, silence draped itself upon the group.
Eventually:
"One thing confuses me, your Majesty," Mario spoke up, "how can you trust us to rescue your son when Luigi here so recently 'kidnapped' him himself? Obviously Luigi is a dangerous criminal who
can't be trusted—"
"Mario!" Peach scolded. The plumber fell silent.
"Yes. Well." Queen Bean cleared her throat, not looking at the brothers. "The press seemed to make
some unfair exaggerations regarding that… ah… incident, but Luigi and Professor Gadd did act
against the interests of our government…"
She could feel Mario's indignant eyes boring into the side of her face.
"But, of course, in light of recent events, we are willing to forget this incident, and we fully
acknowledge Luigi's value as a loyal ally of the Prince."
"We need your help," Lady Lima entreated. "Please, if you ever valued our alliance, now is the
time to act upon that bond. We had enough to deal with over the fallout of Bowser's enterprises here,
but for us to also lose our prince… he is so loved by the people."
"He's my child!" The Queen cried.
"As I understand it," Mario cut in, unmoved, "that ransom note told you not to send us on a rescue
mission."
Lima sighed. "The implications of that command are hard to tell," Lima responded. "It could be that
you would easily vanquish this monster, but it is also likely that this is a trap set precisely to defeat
the both of you."
"Even better!" Mario growled. "We're being led to our deaths, just like your troops were!"
"Listen here, short stuff," the Queen suddenly snapped, waving a pudgy finger in Mario's face, "the
most precious treasure of our Kingdom is lying in the hands of a force whose wickedness we cannot
begin to imagine. Are you gonna live up to your name and be the hero our people need, or are you
gonna huff and pout in the corner like a spoiled little child, sulking over an old grievance?"
Mario's temper flared to its peak. "I HAVE A RIGHT TO PROTECT MY BROTHER FROM—"

"WHERE ARE THEY!?"
Princess Wendy burst into the throne room, the doors slamming violently on their hinges. The
moment she spotted Mario and Luigi, she leapt upon them with the full force of her wrath. The brawl
was ferocious but short-lived, the palace guards quickly stepped in to apprehend the princess.
"YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO BE HERE!" She squealed at the brothers as she struggled in the
guards' grasp.
"They have been invited here as guests," Lima told her firmly. "They are the only hope of rescuing
the Prince."
"I won't have my husband rescued by a couple of hairy, smelly old koopa-crushers! Do you have
any idea how mad Daddy's going to be when he finds out—"
Lima rose an eyebrow. "Do you really want to be the one to tell him that the Mario brothers are
involved in his son-in-law's rescue? Especially while he is currently bogged down in those lawsuits
against KoopaCola?"
Wendy could not come up with a counter-argument, but stewed in her spot and stamped her heeled
foot.
"Besides, I would have thought the safety of your beloved husband was much more important than
any timeworn grudge of your father's."
Wendy's gaze found Luigi. She narrowed her eyes and bared her carnivorous teeth. "I know
exactly why those stupid brothers are involved…"
There was a time when Luigi would have cowered behind his brother at such a menacing affront.
But now, he looked hard at Wendy, unafraid, and stood at his full, considerable height.
"Yes. Because I would do anything to protect Peasley."
Mario looked from the reptilian princess to Luigi. He then straightened up as well. "And if my
brother is determined to rescue him, then so am I!"

Wendy made a strange noise, halfway between a squeak and a roar.
"Oooh… you—WAIT TIL MY DADDY FINDS OUT!"

Lima looked to the guards. "Why don't you take her up to her rooms? Lock the windows, guard the
doors and give her a nice warm cocoa filled with sedatives."
"Yes, ma'am!" The guards seemed to answer this command with relish as well as obedience.

**

The brothers were given a send-off at dawn the next day, with the blessings of the Beanbean army.
As Mario descended the castle stairs, Peach kissed him goodbye, issuing a prayer for his safety. Two
days later they were received at the desert town of Pomegrea Springs and hailed warmly by the
Sarasaland citizens. A full garrison of elite guards had come from Birabuto, the nation's capitol,
along with Princess Daisy.

The brothers took refuge at the local inn to eat and rest, conserving their energy for their venture to
the temple. The sun outside was merciless, and they were glad for the shade and the cool that the
stone-and-stucco structure afforded. Luigi sat at a mosaic-studded dining table, demolishing a plate of
flatbread, roast lamb and chickpea salad. He looked across at Daisy, and his rampant chewing
slowed to a halt. She was staring down at the tabletop, looking utterly dejected.
"Hey… buck up…" he urged her, reaching a hand out to rest upon hers. "I know things are bad, but
we gotta keep the faith. That's what you told me recently, right?"
"I saw the Beanish soldiers return from the temple. They were so…" he voice wavered. "I had no
idea that what was down there could do so much damage… that people would actually be killed!"
Luigi got up from the table and knelt before her. "I promise Mario and I will be careful. And when
we've come back with Peasley, we'll come for a visit at your family's palace. For real." He kissed her
forehead.
"I'm gonna go lie down. You can finish my lunch if you want, I'm not hungry anymore."
He disappeared into his room, and Daisy's head dropped into her folded arms.

**

Mario and Luigi set out as the sun diminished into the West, and the desert slowly cooled.
They were equipped with lanterns, a knapsack of supplies, a map and a compass. Mario was
adamant to stick to the path. Conversely, Luigi had picked up a tip from an old-timer in town, who
advised him that the position of the stars would easily allow them to navigate the dunes.

"See, Mario, that big bright one just coming out now is Raphael the Raven, and he always points
due North, so we just gotta travel forty-five degrees left of his position. And when it's darker we'll be
able to see The Prince And The Minstrel. They're a big constellation spanning a good stretch of the
zodiac, and their topmost star is the point of the Prince's crown, which is True West at the height of
the dry season. So to find our fair prince, we just gotta follow the prince's crown, you get it?"
"I'd rather stick to the map, thanks," Mario replied flatly.
As the older brother squinted against the light of the lantern to decipher the squiggles and distances
of the map, the younger brother continued his dissertations.
"Daisy told me about this temple once. It's dedicated to Proserpina, an ancient goddess of Sarasaland
who was worshipped thousands of years ago. There used to be a priestess cult there, who performed
sacred music at the beginning of the wet season every year, and the people believed that the songs
invoked the goddess and made the rains come and the flowers grow…"
"Interesting." Mario checked the map, and hauled Luigi up a hill to their left.
"And the idea that a monster might be inside it has upset many Sarasaland witches and astrologers
and mystics, because the temple is meant to be a site dedicated to new life. The shedding of blood
inside it was a grave sin in ancient times, and everyone's worried that Proserpina will take offence and strike the kingdom."
"This way, Luigi."
The ascent became steeper, and Luigi could no longer rattle off his anecdotes. The brothers laboriously picked their way up the rocky incline. As they rose, a sickle moon became visible above the sand. And directly beneath it, looming up from the position of the long-gone sunset, a massive monolith of stone. Once white, greyed with the centuries.
"Woah…"
A domed roof was supported by enormous columns. The temple was long and narrow. Its yawning entrance was flanked with a relief of fertility nymphs, their plump bodies twisted in a gesture of dance. Their joyous motion was frozen in their eternal station of solid rock.

The brothers scrambled up the weathered path that led to the entrance. While Mario plunged into the cavernous space, Luigi paused at the threshold, taking in one last glimpse of starlight.
"Knock knock…?" Mario beckoned. His hushed voice echoed with startling force off the high ceiling. The disjointed tiles of the floor gave way to a sunken area in the middle of the chamber, and there sat a statue of a grim, morose male figure. As Mario marvelled at its beastly features, Luigi's eyes roved to a faded fresco on the back wall. The images were filled with iconography, and were composed of a series of separate panels.
"Maybe this guy is the monster that levelled the soldiers… they all died of fright when they saw how ugly he is!"
"Mario… come and check this out…"
The bare thread of breath in Luigi's voice unsettled Mario, and he rushed to his brother's side. Luigi continued to stare up at the decorated panels.
"It's so weird that symbols like this would be used in a desert region…"
And he pointed to four different goddess on four different panels.
"Spring… Summer… Autumn… Winter!..."
Mario was impressed. Sometimes his absent-minded little brother could be surprisingly sharp.

"Yo, losers!"
Mario and Luigi recoiled at the unmerciful echo of this churlish address.
"What the hell are you two doing here!?" The unwelcome forms of Wario and Waluigi leant against the sides of the doorway.
"Isn't it obvious?" Wario grunted, as he sauntered up to the brothers, his gold tooth gleaming in the dim. "We're protectin' our investment. We want the Beanstar, see, to grant us all our wishes. And when those soldier goofballs came to the temple without it, we showed 'em what for."
"Where's Peasley!?" Luigi demanded.
Wario simpered scornfully. "Now why would I go and tell ya somethin' like that? He's tucked up somewhere nice and safe, and we ain't handin' him over til we get that Beanstar."
Mario crossed his arms. "And how exactly did you defeat a squad of the Beanbean Kingdom's best soldiers? Did you fart on them or something?"
Wario snorted like an enraged bull. "Why don't I show ya, pipsqueak!?" He raised his fists, and thus prompted a brutal brawl with his foe.
"Mario!" Luigi called out. "Remember that any blood spilled in here is an offence to Proserpina—"

He was cut off by Waluigi's long arms closing around his neck. After a wild scuffle, Luigi got the better of him, slipping out of his clutches and hauling him through one of the open archways lining the temple walls. The bandit's gangling body hit the desert sand below with a graceless thud. The plumber followed suit, heaving himself off the parapet and mercilessly body-slamming Waluigi.
"You little…"
Shaking off the nauseating pain, Waluigi lunged at the smaller man, but was bested yet again. Luigi slipped away and cajoled Waluigi to chase him. The pursuit kicked up great masses of sand, and eventually Luigi's shorter legs gave way. Waluigi lunged forward and seized him around the waist, pinning him down.
"Whatcha gonna do, pansy? Cry for Mama?"
Luigi wriggled one hand free, pressed his fingers together, and suddenly a massive blast of lightning hit Waluigi full in the chest, sending him rocketing through the night air into the trunk of a nearby date palm.

With a satisfied smirk, the brother blew the residual smoke from his fingers. As he watched Mario heave Wario by his twisted moustache into an obliging patch of cacti, he sauntered up to his bested rival and stared down at him.
"I'm going to ask you again," he said calmly. "Where is Peasley?"
Waluigi groaned in agony, trying to simultaneously clutch his head and his torso.
"You'll find him easily enough yourself," he coughed. "But I'm tellin' ya, you and your brother just don't have the power to beat the monster underground in battle. You'll need to make it dance to a different tune."
"What?"
"I said blow it our yer ass, minstrel boy!"
Luigi struggled to make sense of his meaning. The plumber turned to walk away, paused, and then tossed Waluigi a small amount of dried food and a bottle of medicinal alcohol.
"And you'd better not drink that, either," he muttered, then departed.

The brothers met up again at the temple entrance.
"Do you think that was a little too easy?" Mario remarked.
"Mario, the monster is underground, and I'm sure that's where Peasley must be too. Waluigi implied that I can find him easily enough myself."
"How can you tell he wasn't leading you down a false path?..."
Luigi looked towards the back wall again. "Let me try something."
He pushed the panels with his palm, in sequence.
"Spring… Summer… Autumn… Winter."
The brothers held their breath. Nothing happened.
"I knew it couldn't be that simple!" Mario declared.

Luigi leant back, staring at each panel, trying to soak in as much of the time-ravaged detail as he could. The Spring Goddess was a nubile creature swaying with the new green shoots of vegetation, luxuriating in a generous rainstorm. The voluptuous Summer Goddess was perched in a lotus position beneath the sultry sunlight. The Autumn Goddess used her wiry sinew to slay a sheep, presumably for food, and the Winter Goddess slept in frozen wastes, little more than a bag of bones. He touched the Spring panel once more. He willed a shot of lightning from his hand into the impassive stone. At this, the blanched form of the Goddess suddenly glowed a warm, bright green, similar to the hue of Beanish skin in full health.
A smile split Mario's face. "Spring storms! Luigi, ragazzò genio!"
He reached up and ruffled his baby brother's head. Excited by his success, Luigi grabbed Mario's hand and thrust it against the Summer Goddess.
"Mario. Fuoco."
Flame seeped through the very centre of the stone panel, rendering it akin to brimstone. The Goddess glowed a radiant red.
"Now… next one," Mario pondered. "Autumn. Leaves? Harvest?"
Luigi looked to the slain sheep.
He would have to be forgiven for this.
"Mario, do you still have your pocket knife?"
Unthinking, the older brother extracted it from his belt, coolly handing it to Luigi. When he turned to look at his brother again, his eyes grew wide with dread.
"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING!?"

His baby brother had slashed open the palm of his hand, and pressed it to the Autumn panel. As the blood oozed and dripped down the surface of the stone, the Autumn Goddess and her sacrament glowed a darker, crimson red.
"But I thought spilling blood was meant to be forbidden in here!" Mario shouted, snatching the knife back off Luigi and searching for the first aid kit in his knapsack.
"Maybe that was a story invented to scare away intruders," Luigi mused, holding his injured hand tenderly. "Or maybe it's only forbidden to spill another's blood."
Once Mario had bandaged up the wound, they both turned back to the wall. Three panels glowed in the gloom, one remained. Winter.
"She's dead." Mario remarked. "You don't think…"
"She's not dead, she's just sleeping," Luigi countered.
"Man, you are so naïve."
"Well, what should we do, then?"
"Maybe…"
Mario reached into his knapsack again, drawing out his reserves of food.
"Is there anything dead in here that would work…?"
He held up a slab of jerked meat to the panel, nothing.
"Hey!" Luigi suddenly reached into Mario's sack, and pulled out a bag of seeds.
"Oh, you have got to be kidding me."
He pressed the little pods up against the panel. Again, nothing.
The hollow, languid eyes of the Winter Goddess stared down at Mario and Luigi, cold and unsettling.
In a fit of frustration, Luigi hurled the bag of seeds out of one of the open archways. "Oh, this is hopeless!"
They could hear the distant scattering of the seeds on the ground outside.
"Way to go 'Weeg, we needed those."

The Winter Goddess glowed white.
"Mario, look!"
A deep rumbling started beneath their feet, and the spectrum of colours of the four Goddesses ran down the walls and along the tiles. The old man statue in the sunken pit descended slowly into the dust, shuddering and thundering, and the ground opened up.
Eventually the quake subsided, but the echoes took much longer to die away. The brothers gingerly approached the newly formed chasm in the centre of the room.
A black stone stairway, spiralling down into the depths, awaited them.
Luigi grinned, then beamed, then jumped up and down for joy, heedless of his aching hand.
"We did it!"
Mario smiled, his eyes twinkling. Luigi gave him a look.
"What?"
"The old Luigi would have run away screaming from an long staircase leading down into a monster's den. Now you just can't wait to charge in and confront it."
Luigi shrugged. "I always feel braver when you're with me."
Mario slung his plump arm around his brother's shoulder, and together, they descended into the darkness.

**

This darkness became more and more oppressive the further they descended. By the time they had reached the bottom, their trusty work boots thumping down upon the cool subterranean floor, their lanterns did not even light the hands which held them.  
"Fat lotta good these will do us," Mario grunted, plonking his down on the stairs.  
"At least if we leave them here, they'll be a beacon for the exit..." Luigi recognised the foolishness of this statement as soon as the words had left his mouth.  
"In this?!" Mario declared. "This dump is blacker than a corporate lawyer's heart."

"It doesn't feel natural..." Luigi murmured, drawing his arms about himself.  
The brothers stared into the void.  
"It seems as if this is the start of a hallway..." Mario surmised, recognising the echo bouncing ahead of him.  
"How are we going to find our way!?..." Luigi's voice was quivering.  
Mario put one tentative step forward. It echoed off into infinity. Then another. Then another.  
"Augh!" The thud of a body falling to the floor followed.  
Luigi squeaked.  
"I'm okay..." Mario assured him. "I just slipped in something... slimy..."

Luigi's hands clasped together, in reflexive prayer. As he trembled, blue flickers of lightning bloomed and died before his face.  
Mario groaned, struggled to his feet, and conjured a warm red flame in his hand. He reappeared.  
"Oh..." His brother followed suit, creating an orb of lightning. The corridor before them was suddenly demystified.  
It forked off into a series of twisting paths, the ends receded into yet more darkness. It was also quite beautiful. The frescoes on the walls had been protected from the elements, and their colours were much brighter and more intact. The slimy substance had turned out to be a bed of fungus. As they progressed, the brothers saw more patches of it growing throughout.  
"Kinda makes ya feel more at home, huh!?"  
Rows of sealed doorways, painted with iconography, also lined the walls, alternating in turn with each fresco. But the brothers were afforded no access – the only way was down the hallways. Without speaking, they seemed to follow each other along the same route. No logic guided the turns they made through the labyrinth, only mutual fraternal instincts and the colourful were-lights of the Firebrand and Thunderhand.  
"These frescoes are beautiful..." Luigi gushed, glad to have something pleasant to focus on. "And in every single one of them, the figures are all making music."  
"I suppose that would be the sacred music that invokes the Goddess," his brother commented.  
"I thought you weren't listening when I told you that!... Mario?... Mario...?"  
The older brother's eyes had scanned the length of the walls, down into the distance. The end of the corridor was in sight. He dared not speak. He muffled his footfalls as best he could. Luigi did the same, a few paces safely behind him.

The main chamber was a cosmos of black. The place was obviously colossal, given that the walls fell away to nothing but open space – not even the enchanted light of the Firebrand and the Thunderhand could reach into the abyss.  
The nearby wall was lined with plinths of coloured stone – objects obviously sacred to the priestesses. A hand-plough, a water jug, a rainstick and a lute.
Luigi approached the plinths, drawn to the beautifully crafted talismans. His hands hovered hungrily over the old scrolling lute.

"I wouldn't touch those..." Mario warned, backing away from the objects as if they were predators waiting to strike.

He bumped into something solid behind him.

The whole of the underground suddenly boomed with an horrid, unintelligible noise. The brothers jumped. In the centre of the room, another orb of light began to grow, quaking and thrashing as it expanded. The whole of the chamber, from its vast vaulted ceiling to its distant far wall, graced by an altar, was set ablaze with a fierce red glare. The orb in the centre grew and grew, and grotesquely began to take shape. Limbs like tree trunks, groping, razor claws, a flaming spiked tail and soulless reptilian eyes. The demon was at least twenty feet tall.

It roared, and time stopped. The brother's cores turned to stone.

The demon bared its teeth.

"You will be burned to dust..." it hissed. The frequency of its voice ravaged all the nerve endings in their bodies. Between its claws, it crafted a massive fireball. With the strength of a thousand mortal men, it hurled this flame towards the miniscule Mario.

The little plumber's Firebrand flared out like the wings of a phoenix, shielding both brothers from the onslaught.

The demon growled, and summoned the volley of flame back to itself. As it closed within its fist, all the unholy light of the chamber was sucked away with it.

After a vacuum of pitch dark drifted before their eyes, an explosion of blue-black sparks fell around them, playing havoc with their vision.

"I shall strike your hearts and char them black..."

Great strings of electric charge were shot forth. Luigi curled in on himself and prayed to be anywhere but here, but nevertheless his Thunderhand was outstretched. It blossomed into a flower of bright sparks, absorbing all the force of the storm.

"No matter. I shall wear down you mortals until you can fight back no longer..."

And so the demon continued. From his right hand issued forth a river of fire, from his left a cord of lightning. Mario and Luigi rallied all their energy in shielding themselves from this siege. The seconds ebbed passed, then the minutes. None relented. Their vision and hearing were rendered helpless under the hazard of heat and sparks and noise. Slowly, the brothers felt their precious stamina dripping away.

Then Mario groaned loudly.

"Wait just a goddamned second, grumpy!"

Suddenly, the demon's hands fell to his sides. The elemental inferno of the violent duel vanished into the musty air. Why wasn't the little human shaking in his boots?– Why was he, of all things, sassing the demon? Some people just didn't appreciate theatricality.

"What?"

"Obviously you're a very powerful force of evil. And we're just measly little mortals, right? So where's the challenge in offing us by sheer brute force? I challenge you to a contest – to prove who has the greater magical skills. If you win, you can do what you want with us. If we win, you have to get outta our faces."

The demon stared down at the brothers, as if they had just slapped its face. It whined, and the sound shook a few slabs of stone from the high walls.

"Aaawww! I was having so much fun annihilating you the old fa
Sheioned way, and now you go and invoke the old 'contest clause'."
It sighed, and somewhere far out in the ocean, a tidal wave occurred. "Very well. I'll play along. I'll blow your puny little minds with my unholy powers. Get a load of this, wimps!"
For a few moments, the air began to settle again. Then the demon opened its claws.

Strange glowing rings of greyed light rose up from the ground. And forth from them spewed fissures of dark crimson fire, an unnatural hue. Ash whirled about inside the flames like objects caught in a tornado. These ashes spiralled in on themselves, grouping together densely to form grim structures of bones. Black skulls with hollow eyes crowned the figures.
The skeletons moved as one, each of them willing shields, helmets and swords out of the gloom. The weapons that materialised were scratched and dented, and bore the smiling emblem of the Beanbean Kingdom. The demon had exhumed its hapless victims, turning their undead forms of dust and bone into its own puppets.
One swung its sword at Luigi, the chipped blade crackled with lightning. The petrified plumber recoiled, and his outstretched palms issued a defensive thunderbolt that obliterated the skeleton's precarious structure. Its metallic armaments clattered to the ground, upon a pile of dry, useless ash.

The moment Mario witnessed this, he instantly sprung into action, wielding his Firebrand mercilessly at the advancing, plodding horde of blackened skeletons. Some were demolished instantly, while others were conscious enough to raise their shields and blades up against the volleys of white-hot, virtuous fire, remaining unharmed. It seemed that Luigi's Thunderhand, which could conduct the metal, was the only certain way to defeat the monsters.
"LUIGI!" Mario screamed, surrounded and outnumbered by a great cluster of skeletons.
Forgetting his cowardice, the younger brother rushed over and shot out a great stream of lightning at the group.
As one skeleton was electrocuted by the attack, it collapsed upon another, who received the charge, and another, until the whole ring of bony assailants was nothing but a scattering of soot and decimated steel encircling Mario.
"Nice, bro!" They bumped fists.

The demon was not done. They turned, and prowling out of the dark came glowing red eyes and ominous growls.
Wolves with blood red mouths and silver coats bounded forward. Mario was prepared for them, shooting his Firebrand left and right. This seemed to be an effective attack, and the pained howls of some beasts falling back into the pitch strengthened the hero's resolve.
Luigi squeezed his eyes shut, encircling himself with a protective boundary of electric charge on the ground.
Opening his eyes, he saw a great flock of enormous birds of prey circling above him. They had faces the same as that of the grim male statue at the temple entrance. Their eyes were blank and expressionless, and from their bearded mouths they shot forth flames equal to Mario's firebrand.
The older brother met fire with fire, dextrously intercepting each flaming orb with his own.
Meanwhile, the wolves continued prowling forwards across the ground. Luigi saw that some of them were bounding towards Mario, eyes flashing, fangs bared.
He abolished his defensive circle of lightning, and whistled.
"Hey, Fido!"
The wolves' ears pricked, their keen sight now turning to Luigi.
His hands behind his back, he summoned a new ball of electricity in his palm.
"C-come and get me!..."
The pack galloped forward, hungry for their prey. Luigi drew his Thunderhand out and flourished the thunderbolts at the predators.
They made contact with the head of the pack, and bounded harmlessly off its silvery coat. The furtive fear crackling in Luigi's system now blazed into fully realised terror.
He tried a few more shots at the other wolves, the bolts fizzled out feebly. The wolves advanced. Luigi curled in on himself.
A horrible cold sensation whooshed through his body, stinging every inch of him, like falling into an icy lake. The stampeding of the wolves' paws upon the stone was thunderous in his ears.
It passed, and all went dark.

"Luigi…"
The horrid shriek of one of the birds alerted him. He slowly opened his eyes. Before him, Mario was grappling with the alpha bird. A tether of fire, spurting forth from the centre of Mario's palm, had ensnared the creature's talons. It flapped about in panic, and the lesser birds did the same above it, unsure what to do without the force of their captive leader.
"Luigi, those wolves passed right through you!"
"What…?"
"They didn't maul you or attack you. It was like they were just holograms or something. I've figured it out! This demon guy is just a two-trick pony. He can conjure all the boogiemen he likes, but his only real powers are fire and lightning! No matter what guise he takes, we're pretty much evenly matched!"
"Pretty much' evenly matched?" Luigi repeated anxiously.
Still struggling against the madly thrashing bird of prey, trying to make himself heard over the unholy flock's collective shrieking, Mario made a gesture with his head over to the plinths of sacred objects.
"Take the lute."
Luigi's brow knotted. "What!?"
"It's a long shot, but if music can invoke the goddess of the temple, then we have him."
A howl bled through the chamber. The red eyes of the wolves re-emerged through the darkness, ready to charge and sting their quarry once again.
"Are you crazy?!" What was left of Luigi's composure faded to nothing. At the encroaching shadow of the wolves, panic started rising higher and higher.
"Luigi, just do it!!"
"What would I play!? I don't even—"
"ANYTHING! A Latin hymn, something majestic, anything!!"
The old man raptor broke free of its tether and spat a fireball at the unprepared Mario. It scorched his cheek, and the plumber fell to the ground.
Luigi ran for it, trying to reach the plinth bearing the lute before the wolves could advance upon him and incapacitate him again.
The moment he drew close to the sacred objects, the predators vanished, and the brothers stumbled.

A freezing, blinding, devastating wind whirled about the chasm of the chamber.
"Y O U  C A N N O T  D E F E A T  M E . . . ."
"Mario!"
"Luigi!"
The brothers tried to find one another, but at best they could only stagger about, lost in the howling vortex of unnatural wind.
Eventually, out of the chaos, came a sound that pierced the two victims to their very core.
"Mimi...! Mimi...!"
Mario and Luigi recognised their father's voice.
The two glimpsed each other from across the storm, but between them lay a sight that sapped them of all hope, strength and resolve. It was a vision, clear as day, of a black moment from their past.

A seventeen-year-old Luigi had been dragged out of his math classroom, through the rain, by a distraught Mario. The older brother had tossed the younger in a cab and urged the driver to take them to downtown Manhattan. The corner where they jumped out was jammed with ambulances and police cars. The alternating blue and red lights of sirens assaulted their senses. A pile-up of demolished cars, their windows cracked and bonnets twisted out of proportion, loomed down upon the pandemonic crowds of victims, emergency workers and rubbeneckers.

In the downpour, with grim-faced paramedics circling about her, lay their mother Mimi, on a blank white stretcher. Her face was as pale as the moon, and a rose-red gash seared its way across the crown of her head.

"Mimi…! Mimi…!"

The funeral had taken place one week after this day. Papa never recovered from the grief, and three days shy of his fiftieth birthday, had died of a heart attack.

"Mama…” Luigi sunk to his knees. The dreadful vision before him blurred through a film of thick tears.

As he wilted, a distressed Mario spied something bronzed, curved and graceful behind his baby brother's head.

"The lute… the lute, Luigi!!"

Luigi blinked his tears away. Beyond this nightmare spectre from his youth, he recognised Mario’s wild eyes, shining in the dark.

"Right there behind you!"

He twisted round, his hands closing upon the blessed instrument. It was warm to the touch.

Before him he witnessed the head of the demon rising behind Mario, its eyes and fangs burning and terrible.

Fumbling, clumsy and panicked, his injured hands grappled with the lute and found a chord, any chord.

"The year drags on, I gaze down at the troubled land
On the earth beneath, so many hearts are bleeding and in pain
The sun ticks off another day til I can awaken and take your hand
You'll climb to heaven, hold me, and we'll be complete again
The stars align, they light your eyes, you'll turn the dark sky light
Just as before!
My heart will open, arms will open, you'll be mine til the dawn

I am here, my love, I'm here, I'm here in the infinite
As we dance, my love, we trace the endless sky
Don't let time assail us, love, don't ever let this night end
Just watch the dream go on and on…"

If Mario was not certain that they would be permanently swallowed up in the darkness, he could have killed Luigi. Of all the songs he knew… all the holy hymns of childhood mass, all the magnificently romantic Neapolitan canzone, all the Mushroom folk songs honouring the great heroes of the past… he chose that song!? The schmaltzy Chanterelle pop ballad that had played on the night
of Peach's Springtime Soiree— the ode to the Prince and the Minstrel!? It was the kind of thing played on late night easy listening radio, the kind of music teenage girls chose as their cell phone ringtones, and Luigi was trying to bring down a gargantuan demon of fire, lightning and nightmares with it!?

"The bird's first song, a shaft of sun
The stars descend and so must you
Sink back to life and longing, labour on the land
My heart won't fail, despite my tears
For I know that this time next year
We'll meet again and yet again and dance for all time…

I am here, my love, I'm here, I'm here in the infinite
As we dance, my love, we trace the endless sky
Time cannot assail us, love, for this same night is infinite
Just watch our love go on and on…"

And, as the final note of the love-song echoed off into deepest recesses the chamber, the storm settled, the frightening mirages faded, and a sight lay before the brother's eyes that was more bewildering than all the monsters and volleys of fire and lightning put together:

"O h, K o n s t a n z a . . . M y s w e e t K o n s t a n z a . . ."
The demon sobbed. Its claws cradled its face as enormous fat teardrops seeped down its cheeks. Mario's incredulous stare met Luigi's. Gingerly, they crept slowly up to the demon, until they were right underneath its massive heaving form, in danger of being drowned by the tears that were dropping like bombs.

"Excuse me?" Mario squeaked. "Signor Demon?"
He tried to tap it on the ankle, and the demon's form flickered, like a bad television signal. Astounded, Mario thrust his fist at the enormous leg, and it passed through like water. Slowly, the spell that had created this 'monster' was dwindling away. As the brothers continued to the far end of the hall, towards the altar (now lit by the meanest sliver of distant moonlight), the sniffling and crying of a small, pitiful creature could be heard.

"Sweet little Konstanza… oh… I love you so much…" The frail voice echoed in the abyss. The brothers finally advanced upon the hunched figure.

"Kamek!" Luigi gasped.
"YOU!" Mario picked the diminutive Koopa wizard up by the collar of his robe. "YOU kidnapped the prince! YOU created that demon! YOU set Wario and Waluigi on us! All for the hope of getting your miserable little mitts on the Beanstar! Why, I oughtta…"

"All for nothing," Kamek sniffled. "This ridiculous farce… it was a total waste of my time! And you can tell your pudgy little princess girlfriend that I don't even want that stupid spellbook anymore."

"Huh?" Mario screwed his face up.
"You, boy…" Kamek pointed his claw at Luigi, who still held the lute in his hands. "That song you played… it was Konstanza's favourite…"

"Who's Konstanza?"
"I used to waltz her around to that song in the rumpus room… what a perfect little fairy she looked in her wee sparkly tutu… and when she couldn't go to sleep for the things that went bump in the night… I would sing it to her as a lullaby."

Another wave of tears broke out, and Luigi sniffled in sympathy. "Poor little Konstanza…"
"Shut up, Luigi."
Kamek composed himself enough to continue. "I'm never late on my child support payments, and yet my ex-wife is always cheating me out of visitation rights! One weekend a month!? That's criminal! A little girl needs her father!"

He extracted his wand from beneath his robe, gave Mario's hand a prompt zap, and once freed, composed himself and shook Luigi's hand.
"Thank you, skinny green Mario, your sensitive musician's soul has inspired me to reprioritise. Stuff this evil magician schtick, I'm putting it on the backburner to find the best family lawyer in the Koopa Kingdom! My little Konstanza and I will sing the tale of the Prince and the Minstrel together once more."

He turned to leave, but then halted himself. "Oh, by the way…" he reached into his robe again and tossed the brothers a rolled up piece of parchment. "This resurrection spell should set everything right. Just get Greenie there to perform it." With a sweep of his robe and a flick of his wand, he then vanished into thin air, off in search of a reputable law firm.

Luigi glanced down at the page. It was a musical manuscript, a score with no lyrics. The notes had such colour and life, they seemed to speak for themselves.

Mario peered up at the document, which was indecipherable to his eyes.
"Can you read that?"

Luigi traced the melody slowly with his fingers, and 'ah'ed along. As he did so, glorious tendrils of light flew off the page, growing as they ascended through the chamber and filling the space with warm gentle light.

It lit the ancient torches set into the wall one by one, and the beauty and grandeur of the priestess' place of worship was revealed. The frescoes on the walls, the statues set onto massive plinths, the mosaics beneath their feet—all were life-affirming depictions of nature. The space, so recently thick with darkness, had become glistening and resplendent. A fountain had risen in the very middle of the chamber, and crystal waters began to gurgle happily from its spouts. A relieved Mario rushed forth to drink deeply.

As he was about to dunk his head in the water, something bubbled up from beneath. The unfortunate plumber toppled backwards, startled by the helmeted head of a member of the Beanish Royal Guard emerging from the depths.

More followed, rising from the fountain like breaching whales. Their armour glinted in the light.

"What the…?"
"Gary?"
"Norbert!"
"You guys are OK!"
"Is this a hospital?"
"Maybe it's hydrotherapy…"

The revived soldiers gawked at the Mario brothers. Luigi recognised the faces of two troops who had arrested him on Oho Oasis, and he couldn't fight the urge to shrink back a bit.

"Hey, what's that?"

One of the soldiers pointed to the far end of the hall, to the altar teased by moonlight. Upon its marble tablet, something golden shone softly.

Heart racing, Luigi strode forth, leaping up the altar's marble steps two at a time.

The body was still, and lifeless, and breathtakingly beautiful. It was stiff as its stone surroundings—not even the sweetly curled ringlets of hair or the smooth firm chest made any hint of movement.

Peasley had been turned into solid amber. His eyes were closed, the gossamer lashes resting upon his
cheeks, and his full lips were parted slightly in calm repose. No heart pumped, no breath flowed, no blood circulated. The prince was nothing more than a statue. Struck dumb, Luigi caressed one of the cold golden fingers. "Why didn’t the spell work on him?" Mario asked from behind, having followed his little brother. "We have to take him back… we need help," Luigi’s voice was full of fear.
Chapter 11

THE ROSE
A Fairy Tale
Chapter 11

A pale, hesitant sunrise met the brothers and the soldiers, as they bore the amber prince up the old stone stairway. With a great heave-ho, they lifted their precious cargo onto the tiled floor of the temple entrance. The statue of the ugly old man had reclaimed its spot at the top of the steps.

"Seven miles, carryin' this," Mario gestured to Peasley's body. "It's gonna be a long trip, boys."

The echoed scuffle of footfalls met them, as a member of the Sarasaland Royal Army approached them from the doorway.

"By the mane of Totomesu! You…! Here!... and now!... Here…!"

"How ya doin', officer," Mario greeted the astonished sentry, whose mouth remained hanging open. "We found the source of the trouble below: Kamek, Bowser's highest ranking regimental wizard. He'd created a huge demon that spat fire and lightning. Me and Weeg managed to smash it and even got the wand-happy little twerp to resurrect the Beanish soldiers."

"We also rescued the Prince… in a manner of speaking," one of the officers added, and the Sarasaland sentry gaped further at what had become of Peasley.

"And we did all a'these daring deeds in one single night, to boot!" Mario declared, resting hands on his hips.

The sentry blinked hard, and wondered if the lack of sleep had finally addled his brain.

"I'm sorry?"

"We only needed one night to sort it all out," Mario repeated. "I'm sure Queen Bean will be pleased to see us return so quickly."

The sentry frowned. "What are you talking about? You and your brother have been gone for over six weeks!"

A shiver went through both Mario and Luigi. For now, perhaps, it was best not to think about this.

The trek back to Pommegra Springs was solemn. Heat glopped into the air sluggishly, as the light strengthened, and the amber prince began to shine brilliantly in the morning sun.

A guard in the Pommegra Springs watchtower spotted the party rising over the dunes, and was quick to alert his compatriots. A few of the early-rising civilians caught wind of the commotion amongst the guards. By the time the returning heroes were in sight of the town gates, the roar of an excited crowd of supporters—guards, merchants and common people—was ringing in their ears.

The moment this crush was upon them, the Beanish soldiers formed a rank that kept Peasley's body well protected. It was still their sworn, utmost duty to safeguard their prince, regardless of the state he was in.

A robust, animated little figure pushed her way to the front of the crowd.

"Oh, thank the stars…!"

Daisy held Luigi in her arms as tight as she could.

"Hey… we're OK, Daisy. Sorry to give you such a scare."

"You have no idea how distressed I've… we've all been!" She cried. "Peach has been beside herself!... She kept on hoping and praying that you boys were alright… I tried to hope that, too…"

She sniffled. Luigi returned the hug with equal vigour.

Over his shoulder, she sighted Peasley.

"Oh… Luigi, you brought him back."
"Yeah, but… look at what's happened to him." He couldn't hide his anxiety.
"But you know what you have to do, right? It's obvious, isn't it?"
He shook his head.
Daisy's eyes glinted with fervour. "Only you can break the—"
"Move aside, your Majesty. We need to escort the party to the hospital. They must be inspected for injuries and infection."
"But… can't I just have a minute alone with them…?"
"It is for your own good, Majesty."
And she was hauled away by the Sarasaland troops. By the time Mario and Luigi had been given the all clear by the town doctor, she had been tossed into a royal carriage destined for Birabuto Palace.

**

It was a barren Spring.
The only remnants of plant-life that remained in the Beanbean Kingdom were the dry, leafless skeletons of the trees and bushes. The Spring rains had not come, and the waterways were clogged with dirt and silt. No grass grew, no flowers bloomed. The birds did not come to nest. The citizens had been advised to stay indoors as much as possible. Braving the choking, dust-filled air outside required protective clothing and face masks. Worse still, many towns had been at the mercy of erosion, dust storms and landslides. The Queen had to dolefully add up the cost of the damage, the injured and the dead.

The whole nation had been declared a disaster area. Princess Toadstool and other allies had willingly sent what aid and personnel they could spare. Bowser, on the other hand, had summoned his daughter and her entourage back home. Without a prince or a fruitful economic pact, he declared, the marriage was wholly invalid. Thanks to some fortuitous loopholes in the law, no divorce proceedings were necessary.

One dim afternoon, the Queen and Lady Lima were poring over the national treasury, trying to budget for their continued relief effort against the disasters. A servant rushed, breathless, into the throne room:
"He's… he's here, your Highness!..."
"Who? Do make yourself clear, man!" The Queen demanded, raising shakily from her seat.
"The Prince… they have brought him! They have finally brought him!..."
"Peasley!..."
The Queen thundered out of the room, and Lima followed behind, desperately praying that this would portend a change in the kingdom's fortunes.

He had been placed on a table in one of the front grand salons. Somehow, a ribbon of the shrouded sunlight had cut through the dust, and it illuminated his beautiful, golden, motionless body.
"My son…" The Queen lay a smattering of fingertips upon his cold cheek.
"One of Bowser's wizards cast a spell on him, your Highness," Peach reported cheerlessly. "He has been turned into solid amber."
All breath left his mother's body. "Isn't… what can we do…? Isn't there…"
"Fetch the Beanstar," Lima demanded, and two castle servants rushed off upstairs.
Luigi shuffled his feet in his position behind Mario. He stared at the floor.
Peach rested a hand on the Queen's shoulder. "Perhaps we could summon the court phys—"
"Please, Princess… please… " She stifled a rising sob. "I wish to first hear the counsel of the Beanstar. Before we court any deeper misfortune." She returned to stroking her son's cheek, and for the first time, Mario felt a pang of sympathy for the old matriarch.
Some unbearable minutes passed, as the party were subject to the pitiful mother and child scene—the Queen hunched over the lifeless, rigid body of her only son, laid out like a piece of wreckage on the dark oaken slab of the table. At long last, the Beanstar was borne in on an amber base, carried by the elite soldiers who guarded her.

Lima gestured for them to set the star down by Peasley's feet. The glow she emanated lit him up like a yellowed smoky moon.

Her milky eyes opened, and patiently examined the worried faces huddled around the table. Her gaze then serenely moved to that of the prince before her. Her light pulsed ponderously.

The sweet, resounding voice seemed to come to them from across the heavens, almost from another universe entirely.

"Winter came and took his prize,
The light is stolen from his eyes.
Naught beat his heart, naught bloom his bloom,
He must be laid within his tomb.

That tomb of shadows and of kings,
Where lie all past forgotten Springs.
Oh Queen, you must renounce your cause,
He never shall be as he was.

The rose was pricked by love and grief,
His reign has been but all too brief.
The price to pay for common greed
Is burying your precious seed.

But heed these words, and please take heart:
A new and wiser life can start.
For soil that's rich in heart and soul
Can turn the incomplete to whole.

Jewels may tarnish, swords may rust,
Empires crumble in the dust.
Man-made things are bought and sold,
True glory stems from earthly gold."

The Queen had been shaking her head madly.
"No... no." She insisted with a rickety sort of calm. "There must be some mistake. Perhaps we need to consult the court physician, or the priestess at Cacao Temple, or some higher authority..."

The tears seeping down Lady Lima's wrinkled face suggested otherwise.

"The Beanstar cannot be refuted, Majesty." She made no attempt to steady her cracking voice. "All we can do is lay him with his father..."

Each person in the room sank into their own wretched reaction. Peach's high, thin weeping, percolating through her silken gloves, drowned out every other sound.

Luigi had sunk to his knees, his face obscured. Mario had instantly sought to comfort him, bracing him with one strong, stocky arm.
"Luigi…?"
He was not crying. "Send for Toad."
"What?"
"Tell him that our spare key is under the potted apple-mint on the porch. In my bedroom, in an old
vase on top of my wardrobe, will be a rose. It will be faded and withered by now. Tell him to bring it
here and be careful not to damage it."
Mario frowned. "I thought all the flowers died?"
Luigi shook his head. "That one seemed to resist. I kept it under a sun lamp and fed it plenty of
nutrients. It seemed to hang on, but… even so, it was slowly wilting."
Mario smiled. "One last hope?"
Luigi looked back at him—a skein of tears did rim his eyes, but he had held them back
tremendously.
"Hope for what, Mario? Lady Lima said it— there's nothing else we can do. Peasley will be buried
in the royal tomb. And the last of the golden roses should go with him."

**

Over the years, the Beanish reputation for lavish parties and celebrations had grown to international
renown. The castle had seen many hundreds of Spring Soirees, Summer Cotillions, Autumn
Festivals and Winter Feasts. In addition, every court wedding, anniversary and funeral had been a
nationwide event. Schools and business were ordered closed, the citizenry were invited to line the
streets and join in the revelry. With its warm weather and abundance of natural resources, the
Beanbean Kingdom had every reason to celebrate.

However, a new era had begun.

Less than twenty mourners attended the funeral of Prince Peasley. They pulled their black apparel
about themselves as they braved the stinging, dirty air of the castle courtyard, proceeding across the
stones to a domed mausoleum in a corner of the wasteland that was once the castle gardens.
The violent coughs bounced down the dank stairwell. The group assembled before an empty marble
altar, unnoticed by the sleeping occupants that had already taken their place in the sepulchre.
A priestess read last rites, a cantor wailed a ghostly, minor key dirge. The black ritual lasted less than
half an hour. Most of the mourners vacated the unsettling chamber quickly, eager to return to the
light and safety afforded by the domiciles of the living.

Luigi hung back, watching the Queen from behind the stairs. Her sobs, held in during the service,
came thick and fierce. She had fallen upon the altar of her son's resting place. One weathered hand
clutched desperately at a still, cold hand of amber.
Luigi then silently shed a wave of tears, solely for her.
Some time later, Lady Lima re-entered the tomb. She joined the Queen, and stared down at the
kingdom's fossilised heir, her last chance to bask in the boy's loveliness. Always golden, preserved
perfectly. Never would he wither.
"Come, Majesty. Your people await you."
It took a long, long while before the mother conceded to be pulled away from her child. But
eventually, her heavy tread made its way back up the stairs, returning to the wasteland outside.
The ominous rumble of the stone mausoleum door boomed shut.

His eyes adjusting to a new level of darkness, Luigi emerged from his hiding place and crept across
the floor. He prayed that his presence would not be an offence to the flanks of dead kings and queens
that lay in the dim.
Luigi padded past one such forebear, and something made the plumber stop and examine him. The grey skin was pulled tight on features that would have once been round and jolly. Empty black hollows stood in place of eyes. In life, this monarch would have been enormous, not just in stature but in aura. There seemed to be a quality to him that gave energy everything around him, even in death. Observing the perfectly bald head, the bushy blonde beard and the dead bunch of roses in his wasted hands, there was no mistaking who he was. Luigi knelt before the great King, habitually genuflected, and rose once again. His sacrilegious footsteps lumbered up to the next perfect, symmetrical marble altar. He dared not look up at the heavenly creature that lay there. Fumbling about in his breast pocket, his gingerly extracted a pale, limp, perishing rose. Its brilliance was long gone: the petals were dishevelled and torn, the leaves dry and brown. Only the slightest flush remained upon the bloom, the ravages of a few hours would soon diminish it to nothing. With all the attention and tenderness of a pilgrim laying tribute at the holy shrine of a dear saint, Luigi's unworthiest hand rested the rose upon Peasley's breast. He finally took a step back to marvel at the sight.

He believed he could stay forever, an eternal sentinel for this angel. On the other side of that heavy stone door, there no longer existed any sight, sound or sensation that interested him. The underground, jealous and prowling, had taken beauty and spirit and light from the world above. Instead of allowing it to mature and weaken and ascend to the stars, it had been snatched in its early flowering, frozen in youth, encased by stone and the dark. He knew he would have to depart from the tomb. The voices of those who loved him echoed in his head. Peach, Daisy, Mario.

Eyes, look your last!  
Arms, take your last embrace! and, lips, O you  
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss  
A dateless bargain to engrossing death!

Luigi's lips, cold and dry from the bitter air of the tomb, pressed those of the amber prince.

Blinding light ruptured the stillness of the underground. His head was whirling diabolically, and his sense of balance was decimated. The shock of painful impact with the stones below throbbed through one half of his body. Frantically, he gasped rasping lungfuls of the stale tomb air and his gormless hands groped for the ground. His eyes slowly opened, and his vision adjusted to the great white glare before him.

Before him, the tomb swam in light. An empty marble altar lay before him. A jolt of panic restored some more of his faculties, he shot up and rushed over to the bare stand. A black bouquet of dead rose stems lay upon the marble. This was the King's resting place. The great noble corpse had completely disappeared. A voice rang clear off the stone walls, saturated with frenzy.
"You shouldn't be here!..."
Luigi turned.

Lips trembling, eyes bright with distress, and golden curls bouncing with the spirited motions of his body language, Peasley sat bolt upright, staring at Luigi earnestly.
"Bowser's in a furious state... he'll pulverise you if he finds out you're here!"
Luigi suddenly remembered Daisy's final words to him, back in the desert. She had said the solution was obvious, and there was something that only he could do.
The perishing rose still rested upon Peasley's breast, threaded through a buttonhole of his jerkin, superb and golden.

*True glory stems from earthly gold.*

Managing to keep the bubbling, shining joy in his core steady, Luigi collected himself. "Peasley… Peasley, it's OK! Bowser's gone. He and Wendy annulled the marriage and took off back home weeks ago."

Fright was replaced by hope in the Prince's face. "Are you serious?"

Luigi smiled timidly.

Heaving himself upright, Peasley flew into his lover's arms. "Oh, my darling… just when I had lost all faith…"

"I love you," Luigi said. One last tear escaped from his eye.

Peasley suddenly pulled back. Stern outrage entered him. "Where is my father?"

"This is where my father was laid! Where is he!? Was this Bowser's doing!?"

His lover could only stutter out: "It's a long story…"

"Come help me open the door, I'm going to find who the miserable grave robber is!!"

Luigi obeyed as Peasley stormed up the stairway. With their combined strength, they slowly prised open the portal of the tomb.

The two were instantly drenched with the crisp scatter of a Springtime shower.

The grass was springy and lush beneath their feet. The bushes and trees sagged with healthy leaves and fragrant flowers. Little flocks of songbirds darted, swooped and chittered about the foliage. The silvery rainclouds, rich with life-giving water, were interspersed with patches of sapphire sky. The sun rippled through, spraying a rainbow right across the heavens.

And, growing in clusters everywhere, were glorious golden rose bushes.

"Father!... Oh, Father!"

Luigi spied a number of servants emerging from the castle, all equally astonished by the miraculous blooming of the wasteland. Cries of relief and gushes of delight were rising up from the gardens, the courtyard, and the streets beyond, and one ecstatic undergardener jumped into the revived lily pond with a magnificent whoop, scaring the daylights out of the newly resurrected frogs, ornamental fish and waterfowl.

Laughing, his soggy curls sticking to his bright cheek, Peasley whirled Luigi about in his arms, a frenetic waltz of exaltation.

Inside, however, the curtains were drawn.

Queen Bean, lost in the bottomless mire of her grief, had heard the squeals and caterwauling of the servants coming from outside her private salon. A chambermaid slammed open her door. "I said I was to be left alone," The Queen growled.

"But your Highness!" She squeaked. "You simply have to see this!"

She stomped down the hallway grudgingly, joining Lady Lima, Mario and Peach.

"What's going on?" She asked them.

"Dunno," Mario replied. "Everyone's in a total uproar. I hope Bowser hasn't come back."
Two giddy house-boys opened the doors to the gardens for the quartet.
The Queen shrieked.
"PEASLEY!!"

They beheld a pair of lovers, ringed by flowers and plants and locked in each other's embrace. They were gilt by the reams of warm sunlight playing between the clouds. The rainbow behind them shimmered, and they kissed deeply.
Words escaped the onlookers, nothing had ever been so beautiful.
The Prince spotted the group from the corner of his eye, and ran to greet them.
"Mother, Father has returned!"
"What...?"
"Look around you!" Peasley exclaimed, playfully batting diamond raindrops from the leaves of a magnolia tree. He plucked a plum from an obliging branch and tossed it to his mother. "He's everywhere!"
Luigi bent down and plucked a golden rose from one of the many bushes carpeting the grounds.
"And most of all, your Highness, he's here." He gently handed the blossom to the Queen.
"H... How...?" she gushed.
"I don't know." Luigi replied. I hung back in the tomb, I wanted to say goodbye to Peasley properly. I had one last rose. I laid it on his chest, and I kissed him..."
A huge smile grew upon Lady Lima's face. "True Love's Kiss."
"Wait a minute, I was dead!?" Peasley exclaimed.
Mario patted his shoulder. "We'll fill you in."

The Queen fixed Luigi with a piercing stare.
"You love my son very much, don't you?"
"Yes, your Highness."
"And you treasure his happiness?"
"Yes, your Highness."
"And you can assure that you will never do anything to upset him?"
Luigi smirked. "No-one could ever really promise that, your Highness. But..."
The Queen narrowed her eyes, slowly twirling the rose between her fingers. Eventually:
"Well... I suppose if anyone is to share their life with my Peasley, you're a much better choice than most."
"Mother?" Peasley's anticipation almost outshone the sun.
She nodded. "If he's who you really want, then he's alright by me."
And once again, they swept into each other's arms, sharing a kiss that they would share again and again, beneath Spring rain, Summer sunshine, Autumn leaves and Winter snow.

As the people emerged from inside, dancing in the rainfall and marvelling at the great streams of roses, flushing the green landscape with glittering pools of golden lustre, an even brighter entity emerged from above the highest turret of the castle. The Beanstar showered those below with dapples of her verdant light.

"What has passed shan't come again,
For no two seasons are the same.
The roses from the previous year
Are not as bright as these ones here.
Though blossoms die and green leaves fall
The plant withstands cruel Winter's pall.
As frost and snow and chill abound
Its roots reach further underground.
Its seeds are spread, they hibernate
Til whole new life can germinate.
Though greed can ravage, rape and burn,
The force of life can still return.
Light and love and faith and soul
Can turn the incomplete to whole.
And when the sunshine stays for longer,
The plant's new growth is that much stronger.
Strong to bask in warmth and rain,
Strong to withstand Winter's strain.

Prince, you have lived out this tale,
And all your years it shall prevail.
The humble minstrel at your side—
All your trials may he abide.
And likewise, all his, you in turn,
Shall offer love and help him learn.
In keeping with our natural laws,
A partnered fate was always yours.
The cold will come back, and its sting.
I pray that future suffering
Bestows more lessons to be learned
Using wisdom ere you earned.
For now, I bless the gilded rose
As through the land it gaily grows.
Though man-made things be bought and sold,
True glory stems from earthly gold."
The Rose
A Fairy Tale
Chapter 12 (Epilogue)

Streetlight pooled in sterile rings on the pavement. Truth be told, this was a surprisingly respectable neighbourhood, if a little gaudy. Brightly coloured stucco mansions jutted out of the headland, all wide windows and sickly palm trees. Each of them jostled for the best view of the sparkling harbour and chaotic skyline of Diamond City. Daisy had dressed in jeans and a hooded jacket, the best way to be inconspicuous on such streets. It was the same way she had dressed when she used to sneak out of Birabuto Palace, underage and aching for an unchaperoned adventure in her hometown. Now, of course, she was free to travel where she pleased, and the members of the Sarasaland Court were too absorbed in other matters to notice her comings and goings.

She pulled the small scrap of note paper out of her pocket, and double checked the address: 1313 Gemcutter Avenue. Her eyes scanned the facades of high fences for any tell-tale street numbers. Before she had the chance to track these down, a garish set of front gates assaulted her vision: a double-wide, yellow iron archway with a massive letter 'W' splayed across its frame. But of course. Finding an intercom on the wall beside it, she poked the button below its speaker with a small finger. "Hello?"

No response was heard from within. She jabbed it a few more times. "Hey Wario, I brought your service fee," she called brusquely. "He ain't here," came a voice from behind her, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. Half lit by the washed-out street light, Waluigi had prowled up to the gate in a dark sweatsuit, his arms full of take-out food.

"In anticipation of receivin' his Sarasaland gold, he took his girlfriend out to the casino downtown. Seein' as he'd be receiving plenty of moolah tonight, he figured he may as well burn some that he already has."

"Charming," Daisy remarked. Waluigi dug in his pocket for his keychain. "C'mon, I'll let ya in. Best that we make this exchange behind closed doors."

Daisy looked warily over her shoulder. "You don't think there'd be anyone around here who'd be lying in wait to snatch the gold, do you?"

"Nah, this place is nuttin' like our old neighbourhood. I just figured you might not wanna be seen hangin' out with the likes of me."

"Fair point," Daisy replied, and she pulled the hood of her jacket snugly over her head. Once safely inside the gates, he led the princess down the slate garden walk, ornamented with narcissus blossoms and the odd piranha plant, and opened the large, atrociously avant-garde front door.

"Warioware, Inc. must be doing well," she commented, taking in the tiled foyer with its fountain centrepiece.

"Oh, we also got various little side projects, including the errand you sent us on," Waluigi replied with a smirk.

He led her into an equally improbable reception room, and she perched herself uneasily on a black leather sofa. Waluigi flopped down and started digging into the cartons of greasy, salty stodge. "Help yourself," he implored.
"Well, I was a bit worried about the plan," Daisy said, half-heartedly picking at a box of fries, "but in the end, it went even better than I'd hoped. The Beanbean Kingdom is green and full of life again. The Queen even set up a new order of knighthood solely dedicated to protecting nature, and Peasley and Luigi are the first members who were sworn in." She nibbled on a fry. "He's the prince-consort-to-be now. The same as Mario is to Peach. The boys had to take off to Rogueport a few days ago—Fawful's re-emerged there, terrorising the citizens. But now Luigi and the Prince are intended. Nothing can sever their bond. Lady Lima went so far to decree that for one night every month, when the stars are aligned a certain way, every governing body in the land must allow them to be together. So in the end, love conquers all." She wiped her fingers with a paper napkin, smiling. Waluigi stared at her.

"You're genuinely happy," he observed.

Daisy raised an eyebrow. "Of course. I've accomplished what I set out to do."

He chewed pensively on the bone of a chicken wing. "I still don't see the merit in this whole drama. For your sake, that is."

Daisy shook her head, leant on the armrest and averted her gaze from Waluigi. "I wouldn't expect you to understand. I've seen joy come to people I love. That's enough." Her eyes gleamed intently.

He leaned back and studied her. "You know…" he said slowly, "I think I do get it."

She huffed. "Anyway, I suppose I'd better give you this," she extracted the little sack of gold from her pocket and unceremoniously tossed it to him, it was caught with large, deft hands. "I'm a woman of my word."

"Good. Another little bauble for my brother to add to his pile. All in a few nights' work, to boot."

He got up, shuffled across the room and opened the drawer to a sleek credenza. He plucked out a small safe deposit box, going through the tedious motions of unlocking it, dropping the satchel of gold in, locking the box again and stowing it safely in the drawer.

"Tomorrow morning, Wario'll be rushing downtown to get that valued. Once he's recovered from his beast of a hangover, that is.

She stifled a giggle. "Well… I'd best be going. I have a nice starchy hotel bed waiting for me." She crossed the room, and Waluigi gallantly leapt at the chance to open the door for her.

She paused at the front gate.

"It just occurred to me… I don't suppose the gold is really much of a reward for you personally. Is there anything you wish for?" She looked up at him, for once without scorn or suspicion.

Waluigi stood there for a few long moments. Then, finally, he smiled.

"Nah, forget about it. Just go easy on me next time we're on the tennis court, 'kay?"

Daisy now found herself laughing heartily. "Now that's something you know I can't give you!"

"Goodnight, your Highness."

Waluigi lingered on the threshold, watching her slowly disappear in the gloom of the streets. The night was calm.

THE END

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