

Unbeknownst

“Alright, young’un! Them’s the crow! Git! Git I say!”

The old koopa’s voice rang out over the wide fields of Sirloin Farms, calling out to the lone woman herding the last of the Lil’ Oinks back into the barn with her staff. With a nod, the young koopa girl shut the barn door tight and fetched her crate of items, walking it back to the little cabin in the distance.

On the porch sat Kroopaw, leaning back in his rocking chair next to the massive brass megaphone affixed to the railing that he’d use to call out to his workers. More accurately, he’d use it to call out to the one, for there was only one worker.

The red-shelled koopa girl approached, setting down the box of items harvested from the Lil’ Oinks: a repel gel, a super mushroom and a thunder rage. She’d no doubt need to sell them in town tomorrow for Kroopaw, the old koopa could barely do anything on his own anymore.

“Ok, ok, Kootess, set’er down nice n’ easy.” The old Koopa instructed, lazily rocking back and forth. “Those critters give any good haul?”

“It was ok, should be good money.” Kootess set the box down by the rocking chair. “Even better if Goldchop ever drops her Ultra Shroom...”

“Now simmer down, can’t rush a Lil’ Oinks. I’m happy if’n they ain’t hopping the fence from some oaf blundering in.” He let out a raspy, hacking laugh.

“Better you in the fields than that good fer nothing brother of yours, Koopo or...eh...don’t tell me now.”

“Koopov, sir.”

“Feh! Waste o’ shell, I says. Ain’t no money in gallivanting off to some daring-do nonsense. Not like this!” The old koopa spat a chewed up fire flower into a spittoon. “He don’t know what he’s missing out here. The family’s where any good Koopa belongs, let me tell you.”

“Well...” Kootess began, trying to find the words to end his rambling and get her day’s pay. “...he seems happy, at least.”

“Ech...” A hand wave was his only reply, reaching down, bones creaking, to take out his coin purse from a dufflebag sitting beside his chair. “I got some nappin’ to do. Here’s yer coins, 50 for today, and I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow, now.”

The old koopa unceremoniously dumped the coins into Kootess’s hands, and without another word tipped down his hat and fell right asleep.

Kootess let out a heavy breath she had been holding. No lecture today.

“Yeesh, rotten old koopa...” She huffed, dumping her money into her satchel. “What’s he know about Koopov? Creaky little dried shroom’s just jealous he couldn’t do half of what bro does.”

The woman trudged down the winding dirt road leading back to Windyville, past trees and fenced-off fields as the sun crept past the horizon, the sky turning into a bright display of stars.

She and her older brother Koopov used to walk this path together.

In the village, dim lights from windows spilled on the stone roads, the silhouette of a proud windmill decorating the hill in the distance. Even in the dark, Kootess recognized her and Koopov’s house. Though, ever since her brother moved into the city, it had been left to her.

The little abode, purple in color and adorned in flowers and a weather vane, was a welcome sight after a long day of herding Lil Oinks.

Stepping inside, she tended to her nightly routines. She removed her apron and head cloth, brushing the hay from her black and red shepherdess dress, and carried them into her room at the end of the hall to the right of the entryway.

She didn't even stop to look at door to Koopov's old room. Not anymore.

She smiled to herself, slipping her shoes off and leaving them by the door, one of them knocked over on its side. She didn't quite have the energy to set them right, simply dropping her effects onto the bed before leaving.

Once more it was up to her to make herself a quick dinner and wash up. It had all become routine in the years since she was left alone. While there were days the house was a little too silent for her tastes she had to admit being alone was nice. She knew that Koopov probably wasn't missing the rural life, either.

She could only be proud. The last letter she had received told her that Koopov had finally tracked down his life's ambition: Gigafruit Island. He'd be sailing in a few weeks, which probably meant he was already out on the high seas, on what was sure to be another legendary adventure.

She sighed, turning on the stove to boil the water. The more she thought, the heavier her body felt, and the colder the floor felt.

She knew he wouldn't be coming back, and that he wouldn't have it any other way.

It was only through glimpses of writings, or doodles in the margins of maps or notes. She had an inkling there was more to this adventure than a simple hunt for discovery.

She paused in the middle of her cooking.

She wondered if he would honestly be happy with something like that.

The dishes were push away and the ancient wooden grandfather clock struck 11. Kootess at last removed her dress and the flowers adorning her head, now down only to her red shell. She clicked off all the lights in the house; no reason to rack up an electricity bill considering how little she already made. She was lucky enough already to have inherited this house from her parents.

At last, she settled into bed, swinging her feet under the covers and nestling her head on the pillow as the silver moon shone through the window onto her.

The koopa girl closed her eyes. Nights were always the hardest. That moment where she'd try to sleep in the utter silence of the house. She always slept better with some kind of sound of life outside. Her dad listening to the radio, Koopov playing video games into the long hours of the night, something to keep her brain company as it was lulled to sleep.

But there was none of that now. This ,too, she was slowly getting used to.

Kootess's eyes opened to see a darkened ceiling. She didn't feel tired, she must not have been out long. Her brow furrowed. What had disturbed her? Why was she awake?

She lifted herself up, looking around at the still dark room that surrounded her. She looked bleary-eyed at the alarm clock sitting on her windowsill, lifting it up: it read 12:01 AM. She'd been asleep 30 minutes at the most.

Setting it back down, she heard something odd. It was faint, barely audible, just three low, bassy beats. Almost like someone had gone down a warp pipe outside. But the nearest warp pipe was currently under construction a few blocks from her house.

Kootess scanned her head around, trying to see if she could hear anything else. But nothing else greeted her, only the silence of the house. She began lying back down in her bed; she must have imagined the sound. Just one of those odd creaks or groans of an old wooden house.

It felt as though she had just closed her eyes before she heard something else. Her eyes cracked open again and she lifted herself back up.

She heard a very faint tapping or scratching on wood flooring, coming from the direction of her door.

Kootess perked her head up, quickly swinging her feet over the edge of the bed, jumping down onto the floor with a heavy thump.

“What’s that...?”

Her voice was clear to herself in the darkness as she spoke. She reached over to her writing desk and switched on the lamp, its dull orange glow filling the room. She looked back towards the door and didn’t see anything.

The scratching had stopped.

Kootess hesitated, then walked forward, the only sounds in the room were her footsteps giving hollow thumps on the floorboard. There was nothing by her door but her discarded shoes, her dresser and a little hook to hold her satchel. Her door was slightly ajar but looked otherwise undisturbed. Nothing had moved out of place.

She reached over and flicked on the light switch, the main light brightening everything much better and banishing the heavy shadows cast by the desk lamp. Nothing.

She opened the door, looking out into the hallway, flicking its light on as well. Nothing out here but old framed photos and paintings.

There was another noise, faintly, like something tapping thick leather, but it was hard to tell where it came from, if it was even real. Kootess crossed her arms, thumping back into her room. The noises were hard to hear over her footsteps.

“What’s making that noise? I don’t see anything...” She muttered. Her eyes darted around the room, but even this third new noise ceased. She stood in her room at the doorway a moment, simply listening, body swaying as she tried to not feel freaked out over what she could only assume now to be made-up noises.

Though she couldn’t shake the feeling she was being watched somehow.

She huffed, shaking her head and cutting off the light in her hallway. She closed and locked the door and switched off her bedroom lights.

“I can’t believe I’m already cracking from isolation.” Kootess lowered the blinds on her window, blotting out the moon. “I thought that was just for old people like Kroopaw. I’m too young to be sectioned!”

The girl flopped back into bed, pulling the covers up to her beak.

“Paranoid episodes. Pfff, whatever. This’ll seem dumb in like...an hour.”

She was silent a moment, not going to bed yet.

“...or at least tomorrow.”

Kootess lied down in the bed, wide awake for at least an hour before finally drifting off to sleep.

The alarm clock was disabled with a click five minutes before ringing, just how Kootess liked it. The girl lifted herself from bed, stretching, reaching over to lift the blinds from her window to let her room be bathed in a brilliant sunlight. No more late night sounds, and here she was, safe and sound.

“Yep, silly, told me so.”

The girl didn't have much time before work. The walk over to Kroopaw's farm was so long that she always tried to cut it close to let herself sleep as much as possible. A piece of buttered toast would be all she'd need.

Kootess swung her legs over the side, thumping down onto the wood floor without a moment's hesitation. She was definitely a morning person, and she had to be. She stepped over to her closet, lifting out a fresh shepherdess gown, looking the same as yesterday's, and slipped it on, fitting her arms, legs, and shell through the holes. Next she got on her head cloth, flowers and apron. Faster than yesterday, too.

She approached the door, trying to optimize her time. She wouldn't have long to make her toast so she didn't want to waste a single moment. She

lifted her satchel from the hook while slipping one of her feet into its shoe. She grabbed the mouth of the one that was turned over with her toes, lifting it right side up and promptly shoving her foot inside without a second thought.

She took only a second tapping the toes of her shoes onto the floor to adjust them before stepping out into the hall.

As she rushed into the kitchen to make her toast, however, something immediately felt off. Her mind was so occupied with her breakfast making that she couldn't really pin it down.

"Whatever..." She muttered, quickly lathering up her toast with butter and carrying it out with her, making sure to grab her herding staff as she set out.

Outside, Kootess took a deep breath of the morning air. It was laced with dew, but she could tell it was going to rain later. Nothing worse than a drizzle however, she'd manage. The other villagers were beginning to stir from their homes as she set off onto the dirt road towards Kroopaw's farm.

As she quickly scarfed down her toast she kept feeling like something wasn't right. She hadn't forgotten anything, right? Her hand brushed the flowers on her head, her head cloth, her satchel. Everything was in order.

No, it had to do with how she was walking. Something felt uncomfortable. Almost like her left shoe was just...off. Tighter or something? It was hard to say, but it's not like she had time to wonder about it, especially as Kroopaw's cabin came into view on the horizon, the rolling hills of Sirloin Farms silhouetted by the pink morning sky.

"Morning young'un! Came back, didja? Least that makes one of you!" The old koopa's voice rang out from the porch, followed by a hacking laugh.

"Sir..." Kootess began, still trying to be as polite as she could to her boss. "Let's not talk about my brother today, please?"

"No true brother takes off from his sister!" Kroopaw said, banging his fist onto the arm of the rocking chair. "Lookit me! 70 years in this ol house and still going! Doing nothing but raising Lil Oinks! Going out, feeding them, taking the items, bright and early every day. And we didn't have no qualms about rain 'r sleet 'r snow I tells ya."

Kootess cringed, the grip on her staff tightening.

"This here farm's over 200 acres but we started with only 10. Everything here's from nothing but elbow grease and determination. Hard work, them's what kids these days need to learn. And manners, fer pete's sake! Why just the other day there was this goomba boy, couldn't've been more'n eight..."

The koopa girl stepped to the side, subtly reaching for the bucket of slop for the Lil' Oinks. Eventually, Kroopaw's eyes wandered away from Kootess as he reminisced and rambled his version of wisdom to nobody, giving her an opportunity to slip away to tend to her chores.

The bucket of slop in her hands was fairly large, enough for a whole trough. There was a cooler near the barn where the rest of the slop was kept. Back when she started the bucket was heavy and hard to lug around, but in the intervening years she had grown accustomed to lifting it without trouble, especially without Koopov to do most of the hard stuff for her.

As she walked about the farm's multiple Lil Oink pens, filling troughs with slop and refilling her bucket at the cooler, she kept noticing how *off* her shoe felt. Like she kept stepping on something. She had been in such a rush to get to work she hadn't given more thought.

But now that she was out here and alone with her thoughts she realized it was kind of bugging her.

She stopped in her tracks, stomping her left foot, trying to figure out what the feeling was. That's when she felt something shift and tumble under her sole. Almost like there was a rock in her shoe. But it wasn't exactly a rock. She had rocks in her shoe before, they were uncomfortable and really cut into her foot.

Whatever this was, it felt pretty different. It was probably more like a seed or a thick piece of grass.

She stood there a moment longer, brow furrowed, just *feeling* whatever was in her shoe. She let her foot press down on it, almost testing it. She clenched her toes a little, and could hear her toe claws scraping on the fabric insole inside.

She quickly snapped out of her thoughts. Her face felt hot. Was she blushing? She huffed, hoisting the bucket back up with a goofy smile on her face.

It felt kind of nice. Even if it was just some seed or something, she was mildly amused pretending it was something else. Like a tiny person, perhaps, trapped under her foot. She would have to seem like some kind of colossus if she had someone in such a situation.

Perhaps it was her solitude that made her like this, though she always liked the idea somewhat. While her brother secretly loved being smaller than others, she knew she was the opposite. She loved the idea of others being smaller than *her*, the people at her feet treating her as someone special.

“Maybe working under that old coot’s gone to my head...” She laughed, dumping another bucket of slop into a trough. Ultimately, she knew she wasn’t anyone special to anyone. That’s why it was just a fleeting, silly

fantasy. A dream she liked. It sure beat being stuck working for the old man and being subordinate all her life. Unlike Koopov, she didn't have much else she could do, and she'd sooner die than mooch off her brother.

So, the little seed in her shoe would simply let her pretend a bit, nothing else. No harm in that.

Once the last trough was filled and the Lil' Oinks were let out to feed, Kootess made her way back to the cabin.

"...not five minutes without no marmalade flooding the reception. Stars above it was everything, an soaked the wife's white dress until it was bright pink which she fancied which is why she kepted it. Plenty o' chance and happenstance in keeping..." Kroopaw paused his ramble at last.

"...eh...where was I again? Oh yeah, you got yer chores to tend to, Young'un. Get to feeding those Lil' Oinks and take this here box of goods to the store. And don't let me catch you pocketing any of that, you hear? That money is MINE."

Kootess stepped up onto the porch, setting her cane by the door and lifting the heavy box of items from yesterday, right where she left it. She honestly wondered if the old man had even moved from his chair.

"Yes sir, with all haste." She said, robotically. It was the response she had carefully crafted over the years to avoid a time wasting ramble. She'd have

been more interested in what he had to say if he didn't *a/so* get mad if work didn't get done because she was listening to him.

Still, she tried to not give him the chance and promptly turned away, box in tow, carrying it down the dirt path back to Windyville. The manifest for the items was tucked away in the box; the old koopa knew exactly how much money to expect from the item shop.

So here she was again, alone with her thoughts as she trudged down the dirt path. She began to feel like all this isolation was really unhealthy for her, especially after last night. She was already making plans to spend a day or two with her friend in the village, Bombesti, but she was starting to think it'd be best if she did that sooner rather than later.

For now it was really just her.

Her left foot came down on the dirt road, and her pliant sole morphed over the thing inside her shoe and she smiled.

"Me and my little...foot slave." She mused, teasing herself with a snicker. She must have sounded so corny, she was glad she was alone.

"Are you enjoying it in there?" She muttered to herself, playing out the scene in her head. "Do you *love* it in my hot, sweaty shoe? Stepped on

over and over by my heavy foot...how does it smell, I wonder? I guess *you'd* know better than me..."

Kootess thought for a moment.

"...loser." She whispered with a shudder. That felt good. Every step she took she could feel the object pressing into her sole. The day was getting hotter, and she could feel the space in her shoe heat up and moisten from her sweat as she walked. Nothing too extreme, but she could feel it. She could only imagine how it'd *actually* be, trapped in her shoe in such a tight space.

In reality, she doubted there'd even be enough oxygen, so it's not like anyone would actually survive. That's only *if* she didn't completely pulverize them underfoot.

Still, playing it out in her head was fun.

"Oh yes my goddess~!" She cooed her a deep voice. She assumed it'd be a guy in her shoe, lots of guys (her brother included) were into this kind of thing, though she'd never consider doing something like this with Koopov, that'd be gross.

Instead, she imagined it was the cute guy from the inn that worked on weekdays. The koopa with glasses and the blue shell. "Mmmm, your feet taste so goooooood."

"Good, my pet." Kootess said, turning her voice low and sultry, whipping her head haughtily, eyes half lidded. "Then I'll allow you to keep worshipping your goddess, like the little insect you art."

"Oh, oh, mistress~!" She said, again in her masculine voice. "I am so blessed to be under your divine soles."

"Silence," She said, in her most dominant voice, pointing her left foot's toe at the ground. "No more talking. Lick between my toes, slave. Relish in all my toegap has to offer, for it will be your only food forever more."

She didn't know why she was now talking all fancy. She was just kind of winging it.

"Mmmm goodess," she began, closing her eyes. "Ooohhh goddess, your toes are so cheesy-wait, no...that's kind of gross." She paused, stroking her chin, now thoroughly out of the moment. "Uhhh..."

Kootess blew a raspberry, having completely ruined her own scene now.

“Well...whatever.” She said, pausing to lift her leg, letting the thing in her shoe tumble into the front of her shoe so she could squeeze over it with her toes. “You just stay put while I work, kay?”

Now finished pretending, she swung her foot forward and kept walking as normal, at last reaching the village. Every step her took pressed her powerful toes down into the object, letting her digits morph over it with each heel lift.

Kootess made her way to the center of the village, passing by the inn. She peeked a glance through the window, seeing that blue-shelled koopa working there again, if only to refresh his image in her head. She blushed, seeing him. She didn't even know his name, but she swore one of these days she was going to work up the nerve to ask him out or something.

Though she doubted he'd ever be into what she was imagining him doing in her shoe. Still, the idea of feeling his tongue pressing into her sole was simply electrifying. She almost felt like a creep, but surely thoughts were harmless. Everyone had them, right?

The girl approached the item shop at last, backing into the door to open it. The bell rang, and the toad with the green spots came out the storeroom to greet her.

“Ah, Kootess! There you are, I was hoping you’d get here.” He stepped around the counter, grabbing his pencil and notebook. “What’s the old coot got for me today? I just ran out of my supply of repel gel.”

“Yeah, I got some right here.” She set the crate onto the counter, presenting the tube of repel gel. “Today’s a little light. But, tell you what, we had a couple of eggs show up and they should be hatching today. Next week I’ll have a lot more for you.”

“Well, alright.” The shopkeeper sighed, scribbling in his notebook. “There haven’t been any adventurers on daring quests for the last month, I think Bowser’s on vacation out in some country. Unless he launches a plot soon I doubt I’ll have too much stock trouble.”

Kootess nodded, leaning on the counter as the shopkeeper took the crate over to an abacus to start calculating the price. While she waited, Kootess rolled the object in her shoe between the toes, squeezing, imagining that cute blue shelled koopa hugged in her toegap, somewhere in the dark of her shoe. She had to look away, covering her blush.

“Hey, where’s Leva-T? Is she not working today?” Kootess asked, looking around.

“I guess not!” The shopkeeper grunted. “I haven’t seen her for the last two days, and she left in the middle of taking inventory! She’s probably gone off

with her fourth or fifth boyfriend. She'll probably be back by the end of the week."

"But..." Kootess hummed, tapping the toe of her shoe on the floor. "...what if this one's the one? That she stays with?"

"Well shoot, guess that'd be the last I see of her. S'not like she's ever put in a two weeks' notice before. Only reason I keep her around is because I owe her family anyway. She leaves for good then that's one obligation taken care of."

Kootess snickered, drumming her fingers on the counter as the shopkeeper finished up. Just as he was returning the empty crate to her, the item shop bell rang.

"Well hey, Kootess! Nice to see you!"

The koopa jumped at the sudden loud voice, shoes clacking on the ground as she landed, looking back. Entering in the shop was a small red bob-omb girl, a blue bow tied to her puffy white fuse that looked like a pony tail.

Funny how she was thinking of Bombesti earlier.

“I didn’t think I’d actually catch you on your delivery. You’re always so quick to get out the door!” She quickly made her way over to the counter. “Is Kroopaw actually easing up on you?”

“Pfft, no way, girl. I’m probably going to catch it now for being late.” Kootess nodded to the shopkeeper, giving a ‘thank you’ as she lifted the empty crate. “How *are* you? Aren’t you on the clock?”

“Naw, I’m taking the day off! Relaxing! What’s a few sick days, I’ll get ‘em back!”

“Wow, uh...gee, that sounds really dishonest.” The koopa snickered, walking out as Bombesti left a few coins on the counter, taking a tasty tonic with her. “Dontcha think Ms.Pilfery will get mad if she sees you walking around the village *not* sick?”

“That two-faced bandit? What do I care?” Bombesti downed her tasty tonic in one gulp, however it was that bob-ombs ate or drank anything. “She runs a rigged Happy Lucky Lottery, she’s used to brazen dishonesty! She should be proud of me!”

The bob-omb lazily dropped the tonic glass on the path, leaving Kootess to pick it up for her. The pair’s footsteps turned from clomps to crunches as they stepped onto the dirt road leading out of town, Bombesti following Kootess out of the village for a bit as they talked.

“So anywaaay, you get off early tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, it’s Friday!” Kootess exclaimed. “Just gotta feed the Lil’ Oinks and make my one delivery. Why, you wanna go out?”

“Boy, do I!” Bombesti exclaimed, her fuse practically lighting. “I was thinking you and I get a hot air balloon out of Windyville and go out to Rainbow Star City!”

“The city?” Kootess paused, shifting her weight on her left foot, feeling her toes spill over the object inside her shoe. The sensation caught her off guard, making her blush. “Gosh, I haven’t been out that far from the village in a whole year.”

“You sure haven’t! I think being cooped up in this dusty old place is messing with you! I know it’s got *me* all loopy!” Bombesti hopped up and down, stomping on the dirt and kicking up dust clouds. “I gotta get out of this place for a bit, go somewhere, DO something, you know what I mean? I’m not cut out for the village life!”

Kootess swatted away the dust, tapping her left shoe on the ground to readjust the object inside.

“I don’t think it suits *you*, either, Kootess.” Bombesti continued. “You’ve been doing that demure Shepherdess thing for that old coot so long that you’re walking all funny!”

The koopa’s heart skipped a beat.

“Walking funny? Whuh...what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You keep walking all unbalanced, swaying a bunch.”

Kootess clenched her toes in embarrassment, even now feeling the thing inside get scooped up under them.

“Well...maybe I didn’t get enough sleep last night.” Kootess replied at last. “Might not have even noticed.”

“Sounds like Kroopaw’s workhorse is getting burnt out!” The bob-omb girl nodded. “Meet me tomorrow the *moment* you get off work. You need some relaxation, a day at *least*! C’mon, Kootess!”

The koopa girl sighed, a big smile creeping on her face. She looked up in thought, grinding her left foot in the dirt idly.

“...alright, alright, fine.” She said, giving in to her bombastic friend. She laughed, walking down the dirt path back to the farm, turning back one last

time. "You'll have to show me around. You know I'd be a country girl lost in the big city."

"Good! That's the spirit!"

"Alright, young'un! Them's the crow! Git! Git I say!"

The blue afternoon sky gave way to a deep orange as the work day came to a close at last. The field had been much hotter today than yesterday, and Kootess's forehead was caked in dry grass and sweat, a layer of dirt covering her aching hands. She hurriedly herded the Lil' Oinks back towards the barn, closing the door behind them. She was almost panting from the heat, giving the fields a final once over for items, filling a crate with a shooting star and a mushroom.

"Hoowee! What a haul!" Kroopaw exclaimed, patting the tall stacks of crates filled to the brim with items. Kootess set the last crate for the day down next to the others. "You'll have yer work cut out for you come Monday when you deliver all this, ey? Might need a trip or two!"

Kootess only nodded, dabbing her forehead with a cloth.

"Heh heh heh...you look tuckered out, young'un. Here, take yer coins and I'll see you bright and early tomorrow."

No rant about Koopov today. Kootess was worried she'd have to spend another ten minutes listening to the old man disparage her brother again. Without a word, she took her fifty coins and left, exhausted.

The air was hot as the sun set, making the trudge back home even rougher. Kootess felt dehydrated. The cloth of her dress stuck to her body.

Her left foot crunched into the dry dirt. Under her sole, she felt the object that had been with her all day. Her foot felt sensitive from hours of standing, and the inside of her shoe felt overwhelmingly warm and moist. What was it like for the little seed or whatever it was in there?

Returning home at last, the girl decided to leave her shoes on just a little bit longer, just teasing herself from taking them off for a few minutes more. The little object trapped inside had kept her company while she worked, and she enjoyed toying with it immensely throughout the day. Pretending it was that blue shelled koopa was a dream. Just imagining him inside that dark enclosure, gasping for breath, huffing her scent, trapped under her like she was a titaness. Just a little bit of fun before she packed it in for the day.

She opened the door, feeling the cool air inside wash over her. Instantly relaxed, she set her cane aside and removed her apron, dropping it onto her bed and returning to the kitchen to wash up before starting dinner.

Her heavy footfalls creaked the wood in the old house as she moved through it, reaching the sink in the kitchen. Kootess turned on the faucet and began washing her hands, scrubbing the dirt and hay off.

As she wet a rag to wash her face, she began to feel something very strange. The strain on her feet from the day's work had left them very sensitive, and as her toes pressed down on the object in her shoe, it began feeling different, like she was noticing something about it, but she couldn't tell what it was.

She ran the wet cloth over her face, the strange feeling growing and growing, until it finally struck her:

The object in her shoe was squirming. Something on it was moving.

She froze, taking a step from the sink to look down at her shoe, a confused look crossing her face.

She didn't imagine that. It was moving. Something was brushing her toes so very lightly. She'd never have noticed it if not for her sore feet.

She threw the rag over her neck, walking out of the kitchen and back into her bedroom. Kootess flicked the light back on and hurriedly pulled out the chair from her writing desk, sitting down at once.

Gingerly, she slipped her right foot out of her shoe, feeling a rush of cold air bathe her toes, sweat rolling off the surface. Then, she did the same with the left foot, her toes lifting off the object inside for the first time in several hours.

She quickly lifted her foot onto her knee, inspecting its surface. It was pliant, blushed and fairly grimy, caked in a layer of dirt and dust both from the field and walking around the wood floors of her house barefoot. A distinct scent of hay and dried grass wafted into her nostrils. It was nothing strong, but it was distinct. She didn't see anything else out of the ordinary, though.

Kootess dropped her foot back to the floor and looked inside the shoe, trying to see if she could locate the mysterious object.

That's when she saw it. From the darkness of the innermost parts of the shoe, crawling along the worn, imprinted, dirty orange insole fabric, was a toad. A tiny toad girl with red spots, a smart looking shirt and a single long mushroom ponytail. She looked battered, worn out and was gasping for breath.

Kootess's eyes widened. She recognized her.

"Leva-T?" Kootess muttered audibly, squinting her eyes. The toad looked up desperately, face bruised, arms shaking as she could barely lift herself.

“Koo...Kootess...please.” She begged, falling again and having to lift herself up once more. “Get me out. Get me out of here, I’m begging you.”

Kootess only stared for a moment, then leaned down and picked her shoe up. Leva-T fell and rolled at the force of the koopa picking up the shoe. It was like watching a person stumble as their entire house was lifted. The toad couldn’t have been more than an inch tall.

“What on Earth are you doing in there?” She asked, tilting the shoe.

“I’m...I’m sorry, okay? I was stupid!” Leva-T yelled out. “I admit it! I admit all of it! I shrank myself with a mini shroom, ok??”

“What? Why?”

“Because...because I...” Leva-T stumbled on her words. Kootess’s eyes drilled into her, studying her. “...look, fine! I like you, a bit, and I wanted to...sneak in your shoe. It’s just a kink! It was stupid! I know I messed up! Just get me out!”

“Wait, you *purposely* got in my shoe?” Kootess asked, looking shocked.

“You could have died!”

“I...I thought it was a good idea! I’m a creep, a freak, a weirdo! Do whatever you want to me, I just...I just can’t spend another second in here.

This was a...a huge mistake.” Leva-T sputtered. “I know you must be mad, just please get me out...”

Leva-T lifted her head, her pleading, shimmering eyes starting at the titanic face of the koopa girl.

Kootess could only stare and she started at Leva-T for a long time, simply processing what she was looking at. She felt her hand ball into a fist on instinct. Her toes quietly splayed and flexed, her mind in deep thought.

All at once it hit her. All day, the little object she didn’t suspect was the girl in her shoe. All the stomping, pressing, kneading, squeezing...all the long hours and instead heat. All along it had been her.

And now she had a tiny girl right here in her shoe. A girl who had crawled inside of her own volition and wanted to be close to *her* feet. Willingly.

Kootess licked her beak subtly. Her mouth felt dry. Her face felt hot. At last, she opened her mouth to speak.

“Leva-T...” She began, slowly.

“W-what?”

“What did you *do* in my shoe?”

Leva-T lifted up rolling to a sitting position as she was questioned.

“What did I do? Wh-what’s it matter?” She asked.

“C’mon...just answer. What’d you do inside of my shoe?”

“I just...when I crawled inside, you were asleep. I wanted to...know what it...”

“Smelled like?”

Leva-T gulped and nodded.

“I thought you were going to find me out.” The mushroom girl admitted.

“I...think you heard me. You woke up and started walking around while I hid in here...”

“Mm...” Kootess mused. “What did it smell like?”

“What?”

“My shoe. What did it smell like?”

“Uhm...musty, I-I guess? Kind of like hay. Or dried grass?”

Kootess hummed thoughtfully, tilting her shoe to get a better look, making Leva-T tumble a bit.

“Aaaand...what didja do when I put my shoe on? I mean, clearly you stuck around for that, right? You *wanted* me to step on you?”

“Y-yeah...”

“So what did you do?”

“What do you mean? I mean...when you put it on I was just kinda...p-pinned and couldn’t move.”

“Did you kiss it?”

“What?”

Kootess cocked and eyebrow. “My foot, girl, did you kiss my foot? Lick it?”

“I...”

“Did you?”

Leva-T gulped again, recoiling. “...yeah...I-I did.”

“What’d it taste like?”

“Dirt...sweat mostly. Like grass.”

Kootess, lifted a hand up to her cheek, resting her head on her knuckles.

“Did you like it?”

Leva-T just started, squirming. She looked like she was blushing like crazy.

“I...I don’t know what that...has to do with anything. Aren’t you mad?”

Kootess stared a moment, then snickered.

“Nah, I’m not mad. Not mad at all. In fact, I’m the opposite of mad.”

“W...what?”

“See...this is kind of my thing, too, you know.” Kootess confessed, raising her eyebrows. “I’ve always dreamed what it’d be like to have someone small at my feet, worshiping me...at my mercy like I were a...goddess I guess?”

It almost felt cliché to put it like that, but all the same, Leva-T’s look of fear made her feel powerful.

“All day I’ve felt you in there.” Kootess continued. “I figured you were some seed or piece of grass that got caught inside. I was *pretending* you were that cute boy from the inn, you know the one?”

“I...I don’t...”

“Buuut...I guess you’ll do for now...”

Kootess leaned down. She could feel the lingering body warmth from the shoe, the scent of hay wafting from inside, sensations Leva-T was no doubt engulfed by. She opened her beak to speak.

“...*loser*.” She whispered.

“No...no no no, this can’t be happening. Kootess, please let me out!”

“Nah, nah...I think I’ll keep you in there for a while.” She gave the shoe a playful shake, making Leva-T stumble as she protested. “Come oooon, you’re the one that shrank yourself and climbed in to begin with. *Some* part of you has got to want this. I bet your brain is positively on *fire* knowing I’m going to keep you. Aren’t you *lucky*?”

“No! Don’t do this! I don’t wanna stay in here! You’re going to kill me!”
Leva-T screamed. “Someone! Help me! Help me!”

Kootess leaned over, grabbing the washcloth she was using.

“Quit that, I’m not going to be able to sleep with all that noise.” She said, slowly beginning to put on her sultry voice, just like when she was pretending while walking to the item shop. “Now you just hang tight, because you’ve got another big day ahead of you...foot slave.”

Leva-T screamed in pure bloody, bone-chilling horror as Kootess blotted out the light with the washcloth, plugging up the shoe and silencing her. Not even a muffled noise, though she could hear a faint scrambling of a tiny body thrashing and running around inside.

Kootess panted, staring at the plugged up shoe. It didn’t feel real, she couldn’t believe she was actually doing this, that she had someone in her possession. Someone she just called a ‘foot slave’ without a hint of irony. Her body tingled. She felt incredible.

She sat in silence, just drinking in the moment, feeling the tiny vibrations of the shoe in her hand. Leva-T was probably slamming into the walls in some futile bid to escape.

She knew, deep down, it was wrong. But it didn’t matter. Leva-T chose this first. Kootess was just following through for her.

She stood up from her chair, slowly walking over to the bed, setting the shoes down on the side. Standing back up, she once again just...stared at the shoes on the floor. Besides the washcloth sticking out of one, they looked so normal, so everyday. One would never know what one of those shoes was hiding. For some reason, that made it better.

At last, Kootess broke her gaze, removing her Shepherdess dress to put into the laundry. Her heart was racing, her brain was firing off like crazy, but she wanted to pace herself. Going about her normal schedule, showing that kind of ambivalence, even if Leva-T couldn't see it...

She finished washing her face and arms, cooking another pot of pasta, eating it in the living room while listening to the radio. She sat with her feet kicked up on the table as she ate.

For a moment, she wondered if she could feel any lingering saliva from Leva-T's licks. She wondered, briefly, if Koopov was doing something similar by now, if he'd truly found the Yoshi of his dreams.

The alarm clock was disabled with a click five minutes before ringing, just how Kootess liked it. The sun shone down on her, filling the room in a familiar cheerful light. The koopa girl stretched, feeling happy and satisfied. Today was Friday, which meant a short day of work and a weekend hanging out with Bombesti in the big city.

Then, she remembered the other detail about today.

Her eyes glanced over towards the door. She almost expected to see her bright red shoes sitting there like normal, like any other day. The events of last night felt so surreal, almost like it could have been a dream. Yet, when she looked over the side of the bed, she found her shoes sitting there.

Her left shoe still had a washcloth plugging the hole.

Kootess's face curled into a smile slowly, her heart was racing already, all the emotions of last night flooding back to her.

She swung her feet over the side, letting them lazily hang above the shoes. She stretched a foot down to grab the washcloth between her toes, slowly pulling it out of the shoe and discarding it to the side.

There she was. Lying in the imprint of the heel, Leva-T was already wide awake, lying on her side, eyes staring directly at Kootess with a blank expression. Her eyes were red and puffy. She had been crying.

"Heeey..." Kootess cooed, tracing the rim of the shoe's opening with a toe. "You ready for another fun day?"

Leva-T didn't answer at first, simply staring at the colossal foot that towered far above her. At last, her weary eyes fell back onto the face of the giantess, and she nodded.

"...yes...yes my goddess." Leva-T spluttered, getting on her hands and knees. "I love you...I love you..."

The koopa girl snickered, covering her mouth and looking away. It was so utterly cliché, but she was being serious. It only took one night and the girl was already broken in.

'Broken in'...that was a phrase Kootess has never considered she'd use to describe someone else.

Still, with a smile on her beak, Kootess began slipping her foot into her shoe, the light inside turning to darkness. She caught the little toad between her toes, carrying her all the way to the end of the shoe.

Kootess gasped at the sensation. This was real. She actually had a tiny girl between her toes. One that *wanted* to be handled and smothered by her feet. It was like a dream come true, even with the required 'convincing'.

Still, even with her new 'guest', Kootess had a job to get to. Her teasing had probably already made her late. So she slipped her other shoe on, got

herself a fresh new Shepherdess dress, put on her effects, and went to the kitchen to make her morning toast.

All the while, she could feel Leva-T's body smushed and pressed and kneaded by her feet with every step she took. She relished in every moment she was aware of the girl's presence.

She imagined what it like again, to be so powerless. To be in a musty shoe, in total pitch black darkness, only able to feel pliant and grimy toes knead and squeeze you. Her body heat would be filling the shoe. The sound of her shoe sole on wood and dirt would surely be deafening, blotting out all the muffled sounds of the outside world, always feeling her full weight as she towered above unseen, the scent of hay and grass filling her lungs, her only oxygen.

Kootess sucked in a shaky gasp thinking about it. That was Leva-T's entire world now, and she gave it to her, right in her shoe. Kootess's cheeks were flushed, she bit her lip. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. She huffed, speedily eating her toast.

She had to focus on work, even if it was absurdly difficult.

Kootess realized one day she'd find Leva-T either dead inside her shoe or missing altogether, not that the tiny toad could do much other than be snapped up by a wild animal were she to escape.

Or maybe Leva-T would just stay forever, a pet inside her shoe until the end of time for the both of them. The koopa had no idea.

Still, as Kootess walked down the familiar dirt path in the cool air of the morning, she decided she would enjoy this for as long as she could.

And as Kroopaw's cabin came into view, silhouetted by the pink morning sky, and Kootess's paw bathed in the sensation of the tiny girl trapped underneath, the lonely trek didn't feel so lonely anymore.