

You were having a lousy week.

It started bad, with your smug jerk of a boss informing you that he elected you to oversee a new project in a backwater country on some far-flung island continent. They didn't even have a proper airport, so you had to find a ferry to this place.

The week got even worse when your ferry couldn't dock at the port because some local warlord was currently running a blockade. You eventually docked on the other side of the stupid continent and had to trek on foot to your destination, with nothing but a ratty map to guide you.

To cap this all off, you were now captive to some savages who were now hauling you off to their lair. Trudging along, hands and feet in chains, you only had one thought: You really should have stayed in New Donk.

The thugs who had jumped you were less than intimidating, to put it mildly. Pitiful mushroom things lacking anything even resembling arms, and turtles slightly smaller than yourself that didn't move much faster than the ones at the zoo back home. Hell, you actually killed one of the mushrooms by accidentally falling on it when they ambushed you. Still, they had the numbers, and while your dungarees were tough, they weren't enough to protect you from a dozen fists and fangs.

Your questions over where you were being led were ignored. Honestly, you weren't sure any of them could even speak. As far as you could observe, the turtles had authority over the mushrooms, and one turtle, with a raggedy scarf secured with a brooch depicting a demonic face, seemed to be in charge of the whole band.

You and your lame abductors marched on for days, and eventually the quaint if untamed woods of the country ended, and rocky, dead grounds took its place. Soon, the terrain grew even worse. Open streams of lava scarred the land, and clouds of ash billowed into the air.

Man, no wonder these guys were relying on goddamn fungus as muscle. This place was a shithole.

Eventually you stopped, a river of lava between you and a towering stone fortress. The bridge to cross was raised, and so you and your captors silently waited. A turtle finally came from the castle, hovering on a cloud, and came out to meet you. He exchanged some words with the assumed leader of your kidnappers. So they *could* talk. The bescarved leader seemed to be named Kolton, but that was all you could catch from their conversation.

Soon the bridge lowered and he ushered you inside the imposing structure. You gazed around at the vaulted halls. Soldiers, bulkier and better equipped than any in your pitiful escort, lined the walls. Weapons designed for giants adorned the walls, as well as banners emblazoned with the same monstrous face as Kolton's brooch.

You lost track of the number of corridors you had walked through, but at last you were stopped in front of a massive set of double doors, guarded by the beefiest turtles yet. The guard stationed right of the door sized you up, and eventually he nodded to his partner. They both strained to open the behemoth metal doors, and you were obliged to step in.

As you guessed, it was a throne room. A massive spiked throne stood at the far side. Lounging on it was a figure who was so small they could barely reach the armrests.

Kolton grabbed you by the arm and triumphantly marched up to the big pointy chair. At this distance you could now clearly make out the seated figure. Well, that didn't look like the thing depicted on the banners.

It was another turtle, obviously. This one was decked out in golden jewelry and bold make-up. In place of any sort of crown on her head, however, was a big pink ribbon. An intricate wand lay on the throne's armrest. She regarded you with a barely raised eyebrow. "Who's this guy?"

Kolton stepped forward and gave a goofy salute. "Underboss Wendy! I have apprehended one of the Mario brothers!" He beamed.

What?

'Underboss Wendy' seemed to share your confusion for a moment. Then her features hardened. "You bum! This guy ain't Mario! *Or* the other guy!" she barked.

Kolton's dumb grin vanished. "B-but, he's a human in overalls, he's even wearing green-"

"How do you not know what they look like? Don't we train you morons?" The female turtle was now threateningly waving the wand in his direction. Kolton threw a desperate glance at you, as if you'd back him up. You didn't, of course, but looking at you seemed to give him a flash of inspiration.

"He-He's a plumber!" He finally said.

At hearing that term you were compelled to speak up. No, you weren't a plumber. A plumber is a guy who unclogs toilets, *you* constructed warp pipes, closed-loop FTL-matter-transfer systems that are infinitely more complex than anything-

"See! He is a plumber!"

Fuck, you hated when people called you that.

"Are you trying to make a point?" the turtle girl asked.

"We-well Mario's a plumber too! And if nothing else, he's an outsider! We can use this guy as bait *for* Mario, right? He'd have to come if he heard someone else was held prisoner because of him!"

Wendy stroked her chin and stared at you. "Alright. It'll work. Now you get outta here." She said, shoosing Kolton away. She turned to you. "You, you're staying right here."

Kolton had left, leaving you alone with the little tyrant and her personal guard. You were ordered to the side of one of those big-boned turtles. Well, not turtles, koopas.

As your sentry had explained in a strained, practiced monologue, you now stood in the presence of Underboss Wendy of the Koopa Clan. The real leader of the clan, his terribleness Boss Bowser, was out on campaign, and Underboss Wendy was minding Koopa Castle in his stead. Ah, right, the blockade of the port. The hulking koopa had refused to respond further after giving his mandatory spiel.

Well, this was boring. Wendy had settled back into just lounging about on her boss' giant chair. You watched as she fiddled with one of her oversized bracelets. Maybe she would talk to you. You asked Wendy why you were being kept in the throne room rather than some sort of dungeon.

To your moderate surprise, she responded. "You're too important to leave to the boys. You saw that sorry excuse of a koopa who brought you in. I'm not leaving my biggest resource in the hands of *them*, not when Mario is on the line."

She had a point. You *might* have been able to take on Kolton and his gang of dipshits, but there was no way you were busting out of this castle yourself, especially not under the watch of a half-dozen royal bodyguards and their sorcerer boss. You kicked yourself for not at least trying to run earlier.

This Mario must be a real nuisance if you were considered so important to his capture that the acting ruler of this domain has to personally detain you. You decided to ask why there were humans in this part of the world.

"I don't know!" She snapped. "We were so close to taking the whole stupid continent when some guy from nowhere showed up and stopped us from grabbing the rest of the Mushroom Kingdom. He likes their blonde bimbo princess so we usually lure him with her. You better hope he thinks you're just as good as her, I ain't keeping you all month."

You wanted to ask what she'd do if this guy didn't show up but you had a feeling you wouldn't like the answer. And what if he did and she won? What would happen to you then? Could you seriously pin all your hopes on some stranger managing to penetrate this fortress and save you? No, that would be stupid.

Maybe you could butter up Wendy into letting you go. But how? Minutes went by without a satisfying answer to your self-posed question. You ended up half-heartedly complimenting her bow. Pink looked good on her.

She gave you a sideways glance. "I know it does."

She hadn't shot you down yet, so you kept going. Her lipstick was great too. The soft pink was such a nice complement to her complexion. Her blue eyes also stood out brilliantly. Her necklace was a bold but carefully calculated injection of color to her ensemble-

Wendy let out a mirthful laugh. "Are you falling for me, human? I can't blame you. I'm the glittering princess of the Koopa clan!" The little koopa proudly stood up on her huge seat and struck a pose, her face brimming with self-satisfaction.

It was working. Your success prompted a genuine smile from you. You gave her your name: Anon.

"Anon...You will have the honor of assisting me in doing what my brothers and even my own father could not do: bring down Mario!"

Well then. Wait, no, you could work with this. You asked her what will happen if-no-when when she succeeded.