Ti voglio tanto bene

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Ti voglio tanto bene

by mrsluigivargas

Summary

Here’s the thing.
Mario liked Peach.
And he knew she had a crush on him. And by all rights, she was the kind of person he was *supposed* to be dating.
So, he figured, he might as well give it a try.

Notes

This one falls out of step with the rest of my aro!Mario headcanons, with the Mario/Peach ship and all. But the overarching shape of this narrative is one of the major reasons I headcanon Mario as aro (and ace) in the first place, aside from me personally projecting an aspect of my identity onto a character I’m fond of. So I wanted to write it like this anyway.

Mario couldn't tell you to this day why he'd gone to rescue Princess Peach the first time.

He'd hardly seen as much as a glimpse of her in the first few weeks after he and Luigi moved to the outskirts of Toad Town, busy as they were settling in. Sure, there were photographs of her in various houses they'd done plumbing jobs in, and there was the far off stained-glass of the castle itself, but it hadn't been until their self-proclaimed best friend Toad — one of dozens, all content to share the same moniker to an extent — had cheerfully cajoled them into attending an upcoming parade in town that he'd gotten to see her in person for the first time.

She'd stood on a parade float, waving to the crowd with a smile, and Mario's first thought had been that she was more beautiful than those photos could even try to do justice.

Every Toad they would meet spoke of her reverently yet fondly, and in the following weeks he'd see her around town now and again. Her kindness was overflowing, filling the hearts of her people and spilling out to touch Mario and Luigi in turn, relative strangers to their town. So the morning they'd woken up and found out she'd been stolen in the night, Mario couldn't help but want to repay this town — his home — by getting her back.

So maybe he could tell you why, after all.

Regardless, he'd had no idea what he'd gotten himself into.

Honestly, a lot of the rescue mission had come down to luck and good timing and the element of surprise. He hardly remembered the back half of it, hopped up on adrenaline and stubborn determination and whatever Mushrooms and power-ups the Toads along the way had chosen to stuff him with. He still had no clue what the deal was with that giant axe Bowser had, or why it was so near the cables to a bridge, but he'd tripped on it anyway and knocked it over, sending both the bridge and the brute dropping into lava. He'd needed a few minutes to catch his breath afterward; he'd honestly thought he'd never get to see Luigi again after failing that stunt.

With the kidnapper dealt with, all that had been left was to escort the kidnappee home. Finding her cell hadn't been hard; it had been just beyond the room he'd fought Bowser in. She'd looked surprised to see him, he remembered, like she hadn't expected to be rescued at all. That thought had made him sad.

The beginning of the long trek home had been quiet, at first. It had been Mario's first time truly being up close to Princess Peach since a few days after that parade when she'd come up to him and Luigi while they were having lunch to introduce herself and personally welcome them to the town — something that'd had his brother hyperventilating afterward about chatting with *royalty*; Mario's panic had been much further buried by comparison. But then something had broken the ice; Mario couldn't have told you what it was, only that by the time they stepped into town they had been chatting and laughing like friends. Beyond the royal airs, she was a woman who was surprisingly easy to talk to. Though by the looks everyone in town gave them, maybe she wasn't like that for everyone.

And that was when Mario’s problems had started.

Where before if they saw each other in town they would go about their days, now Peach would come up to say hello, and they would sometimes chat for a while. Peach invited Mario to the castle a few times, too, something that always had Luigi grinning at him in a way that meant he wanted to tease Mario. He never did, though, knowing Mario truly didn't like that particular flavor of teasing.

The Toads didn't have the same restraint, though, and every time Mario stopped by they tittered amongst themselves. And whenever Mario returned home with Peach after the next kidnapping, and the next, and the next, and the next, Mario would hear echoes of their gossip as he left, burrowing into his brain and taking root. Mario did his best to weed them out as they sprouted, casting them aside so they wouldn't choke the budding flowers of his and Peach's friendship.

Until dinner one evening, when Luigi responded to Mario telling him about a favor Peach had surprised him with earlier in the day with a, “I think she’s totally into you, bro. But don't worry,” he continued at Mario’s alarmed look, “you should totally go for it!” It had Mario’s mind spinning as he laid in bed late that night, mind running back through all his interactions with Peach; reconsidering the various flustered excuses given to him regarding pinked cheeks and prolonged contact and lingering stares, feeling quite foolish.

Because here’s the thing.

Mario liked Peach.

He liked her trusting nature and the way she held herself and the way she smiled at him after he saved her, grateful and happy. As a person and as a friend, she was a joy to talk to, on the long treks back to her home from wherever Bowser had spirited her out to this time, talking about their homes and their families and themselves, and the moments spent hanging out in town or at her castle never felt long enough. They would never feel long enough, even if they hung out until the universe was reborn.

So by all rights, she was the kind of person he was *supposed* to be dating. And she already liked him.

So, he figured, he might as well give it a try.

Because here’s the thing.

Mario didn't date, in school. He’d much preferred to be partnered up with the ideas of his mother's *polpette al sugo* and doodling in his notepad instead of taking notes and being the best older brother he could be for Luigi. But he’d gone to a couple of school dances nonetheless. Mostly as moral support for Luigi, but one year they’d each had their own dates, because Luigi’s girlfriend at the time had had a friend who hadn't anyone to go with herself. So Luigi had volunteered Mario to take her — without asking Mario first, of course. But it had been fine; despite barely being acquainted with the girl in question, the least he could do was make sure she had fun that night. If only to help keep Luigi in his girl’s good graces.

He’d pulled out all the stops he could, even if doing so cost hours of sleep instead spent squinting through the light of his computer screen to figure out what those stops were supposed to be to begin with. But his research had paid off, both by the delight on the face of this date for the evening and by the way Luigi had joked that he was making him look like a terrible boyfriend in comparison. So all in all, a resounding success. By the time the brothers had stepped into school the next Monday morning, he’d tucked the entire experience out of his mind almost completely.

And it had stayed there until a week later, when he’d been approached after school one day by that same girl he’d taken to that school dance. She’d had an air of nervous bravado about her, and Mario’d had the errant thought that it was the same air that would surround his brother before he marched out to talk with some girl he fancied. And then she opened her mouth to do exactly that. Talk to a boy she fancied, rather. A boy who happened to be him. Because she’d had her eyes on him for a while, it seemed, and letting him take her to the dance had meant to be some sort of test. A test he’d apparently passed, so...here she was.

Mario felt a bit foolish for not seeing this coming.

She’d been his *date* for the evening, after all.

That foolishness was immediately drowned out by all the personal satisfaction from that night curdling and souring with this added context; this had been a scenario he’d only ever considered in hypotheticals, but faced with the real thing it had been all he could do not to panic as her words had hung in the air. They curled around him, heavy like lead, spiraling his thoughts down and outwards to what it would be like, to have attained an ideal everyone his age, his brother included, seemed to be striving for. To maintain that ideal for however long it lasted; a pre-written destiny with a lifetime of this sour feeling to accompany it.

Overwhelmed, he could do nothing but stand there as his frozen silence was taken as rejection, and the girl had shuffled back around the corner from which she’d surprised him. His sigh of relief at her disappearance had been swiftly chased by guilt.

Luckily, there hadn’t been any girls at school who’d wanted to even talk to him after that.

Unluckily, they hadn't really wanted to talk to Luigi, either.

Despite everything, at the end of it all whenever he thought back to that night — the dancing and the food and the conversation and those little chivalrous touches — he’d always come to the conclusion that in spite of the romantic context retroactively added to it, he honestly had kind of liked the experience, to be honest. And, well, he liked Peach. So...maybe if he did date her, then weathering the associated sour feeling wouldn't be so bad. And maybe it would eventually be replaced by the normal feelings he was supposed to feel when dating someone.

He hoped.

And most days, Mario was sure it was working.

When it was just the two of them in their own little world, walking in the gardens shoulder-to-shoulder or him looking up at her balcony waving a third goodbye or when she’d

convinced him to bake with her and he’d gotten a mess of flour in his mustache and she’d laughed and laughed and laughed and the sound had sparks going off in his head as he left her castle by the light of the setting sun.

But then he turned the corner and the castle guards saw the way he was smiling, and the amused glance they exchanged doused everything into sludge.

It was the way Toadsworth stared at him when he came to steal her away from a long day of work to do something relaxing, an almost inevitability sitting in his gaze and boring straight through him like a knife.

Sitting together in Peach’s drawing room, she asked him why he’d been a bit withdrawn recently. He chalked it up to inexperience; it wasn't like he’d dated very much, and he was nervous about doing something wrong. Peach hummed, and admitted this was all new to her, too.

That was good. At least he couldn't be disappointing her too much.

That was good, because it gave him some wiggle room to figure out how dating actually worked in practice. For instance, he got used to kissing her, less so for the act itself and more so for the look on her face after he did. He got used to holding her hand, too, and that was something he actually liked doing for the act itself. So he did it often, in the castle hallways, out on the hills overlooking the town walls, wandering around the town market. Especially then, because once in a while he would consider not doing it, the imaginary stares of passersby floating in his mind’s eye, looming over the gesture and turning it into something that had his stomach churning. But then whispers in his mind would echo, ones that almost had him looking over his shoulder for someone pointing at him saying he wasn't good enough at pretending, that they knew what feelings really lay deep within him. So he took her hand. It was warm, as was the smile she gave him for it, and the warmth that settled in his soul to match would last up until a shopkeeper caught a glimpse of them and cooed about young love.

And while its absence was brief, quick to return thanks to Peach’s presence, the effect of it would still linger, sometimes, after he left her. Increasingly so, as the weeks went on. Luigi noticed him wilting, noticed him take longer and longer to recharge when he got home, curled up on his bed or on the couch, hiding from the world for a while. Worried, he would ask if everything was alright; Mario wouldn't know how to begin, if he wanted to. Which he didn't, because while Luigi had come to him all those years ago to tell him about the true breadth of the fish in his sea, Mario could hardly muster the courage to do the same. How could he admit those in his were fake? Carefully crafted based on what studies showed were meant to live in those waters, though he cared for them as if they were real? Luigi had always been the braver of the two of them, and Mario really felt it now.

So Mario didn't tell Luigi the whole truth. There was more than one reason to be nervous about a relationship, and it *was* true that now that his and Peach’s relationship had hit its stride, the fact that he was dating a real life *princess* was starting to get to him a little.

Predictably and immediately, Mario’s admission had Luigi taking a deep breath and launching into a spiel of all the reasons Mario was in her league, actually, and all the things

about him that surely made him a good boyfriend. It was as if he'd been saving the sentiments up his whole life, stockpiling the compliments and reassurances his brother had given to him over the years on this topic for the perfect moment to give them back all at once. And despite the fact they weren't addressing the real issue, the surety with which Luigi gave his little speech nonetheless made it seem as distant as if they were. Mario patted the hand that had clasped his shoulder during a particularly passionate outburst, a weak smile curled up under his mustache. He wondered how many of Luigi's points Peach would have agreed with, if she were here.

Something about that idle thought threw a burst of ice water at Mario's spine, and it didn't take long to figure out why — he wasn't sure Luigi and Peach had substantially interacted since he'd started dating her. Which, even if Luigi tried to insist he didn't need to be that formal, wouldn't do at all.

Mario racked his brain for a way to fix this. Luigi watched him think, bemused. His first idea was to bring Luigi to the castle for tea, but the last time he'd suggested simply visiting the castle gardens Luigi had turned a particular shade of pale that had told Mario he'd be overwhelmed with anxiety long before they reached the front gates.

Mario's eyes caught on the kitchen table, the remnants of their dinner strewn upon it. He remembered a conversation he and Peach had one afternoon, when she'd asked about where Mario and Luigi had grown up and Mario had woven tales of running out of the house to catch the school bus, babysitting the neighbors' kids, bullies in alleyways, the consequences for neglecting his homework for video games. She'd reacted especially to his description of the chaotic mealtimes they'd shared back then; losing her parents young and growing up in a castle with employed kitchen staff effectively eliminated her chances at getting the type of home-cooked meal Mario described to her. It wasn't for Toadsworth's lack of trying, but for as well as he'd raised his charge cooking for a growing girl was one of the things forced to fall by the wayside in the face of sparing Peach from having to run the Mushroom Kingdom at the age of twelve.

Mario had thought at the time that he wanted her to have a true home-cooked meal one day, one that rivaled anything she'd seen in movies or through windows, and it seemed like now was the time to deliver. And he'd do it himself if he had to.

"Eh? But you don't know how to cook?"

But Luigi did know. And he could teach him!

The facial expression he received at that request could be described by the word "daunted", at best. Nonetheless, he wanted to help Mario, so Luigi — dear, sweet Luigi — agreed to a mini-Cooking Bootcamp of sorts.

First things first — they needed to decide what they were making, to give themselves a focus. But none of the recipes they could come up with offhand seemed worthy of serving to Peach as a first meal in their house. Their journey to find a suitable dish took them to the attic, to the boxes they had packed way back when they were freshly graduated, still half in their caps and gowns as they prepared to leave the only home they'd ever known, bright-eyed yet buzzing with nervous energy; to the boxes they had packed when they returned to that home

years later, suit jackets draped over the couch, packing a house full of memories into cardboard with shaking hands and watery sighs.

Mario and Luigi shared a glance, a deep breath. They broke the tape on one of the boxes and pulled it open. Luigi reached inside for a recipe card booklet. Mario flipped it to the recipe for his mother's *polpette*. The handwriting in the margins tugged at his throat; the notes she'd taken were abundant. For the day either Mario could stand still long enough to watch the stove without getting distracted, or he brought home a potential in-law who could do that for him, she used to sometimes say.

"But I'm sure she wouldn't mind we're the ones learning it, yeah?" Luigi murmured, melancholy in his voice.

...yeah.

To be honest, learning how to cook the *polpette* and accompanying *polento* start to finish was almost exactly as painful of a process as Mario and Luigi had both expected. But Mario was nothing if not stubborn, and somehow he was able to consistently make it well enough that the smell wafting through the house was pleasant and enticing by the time Peach knocked on their front door.

From where he stood at the stove, Mario heard Luigi let Peach into the house. Out in the entranceway, the two exchanged greetings, and Peach's marveling at the interior of the house floated into the kitchen, as well as Luigi's increasingly outgoing answers to her questions. She was managing to bring him out of his nervous shell, and as someone who'd watched him stress-clean the house at least three times over the past two days, Mario was quite grateful for it. Their conversation picked up, and it pulled a smile onto Mario's face.

Until he heard Peach ask Luigi about Mario and Mario raised his eyes skyward and sighed, because now Luigi was walking into the kitchen whispering to Peach about how the landscape picture they'd just passed was Mario's original work and Luigi had to convince him to let him hang up because for some reason he didn't think himself a good artist, and that Mario had carved their kitchen table himself, you know, dragged half a tree from the forest out back to the house one afternoon on a whim after borrowing a handsaw from their neighbor to chop it down, oh and he carved the chairs with the leftover wood too, and used some spare fabric to figure out the upholstery even though he pricked his fingers *so* many times, and and and —

Peach giggled at Mario's exasperated glare at his brother. Smirking, Luigi danced to the other side of the kitchen to shoo Mario away from the stove and save whatever Mario was about to burn. Shooed away, Mario took Luigi's former place, greeting Peach with a hug and pulling out a chair for her. Peach kissed him on the cheek and sat, commenting on how good whatever was on the stove smelled, and how the *pohl-peh-teh* probably tasted just as good. Even though she hadn't tasted it yet, and for all she knew, it tasted terrible.

Still, Peach remained one hundred percent confident in Mario's cooking abilities despite him trying to temper her expectations, until he was eventually forced to concede, color in his cheeks. No matter what she said or how the food actually tasted, he already knew it wouldn't come close to how mother used to make it, anyway. Peach softened at the statement.

Food on the table, Mario was in the middle of sitting down to eat when he caught a flash of green out of the corner of his eye. In the middle of sneaking out of the kitchen, Luigi froze. Notably, he hasn't taken any dinner with him.

“Oh, it's fine,” Luigi said at Mario’s frown, waving his hands in dismissal. “I can just...order somethin’ or somethin’!”

“That’s not fair,” Peach protested, before Mario could say something similar. “Come eat with us — oh!” Peach pursed her lips, looking around. “Is there another chair?”

No, there wasn't. But they *did* have a couch in the living room.

“Wha — hey,” Luigi complained, as Mario and Peach moved around him to gather the food. “This is supposed to be you guys’s time!”

Peach leveled him with a stern look. Luigi stood strong in the face of it for approximately three seconds before he sighed and gave in, grabbing a chair to drag to the living room. Mario smiled at Peach. Peach grinned proudly back.

So the three of them ate dinner in the living room. To Mario’s relief, Peach took her first bite and hummed in appreciation. “Told you it would be good,” she winked. Mario blushed, pleased. Luigi chimed in with a mention of how terrible Mario’s first few attempts were, you’re lucky you didn't see them it was awful, and wasn't it nice he was willing to learn all this for you —?

Mario kicked him. Luigi yelped, almost falling out of his chair. Peach stifled laughter, and the sound took most of the edge off Luigi’s embarrassing behavior.

In the middle of dessert — some homemade cupcakes neither brother noticed Peach had brought, initially — Mario excused himself to use the bathroom. When he returned, Peach and Luigi were chatting; they’d discovered their mutual love of reading, by the sound of it. At the same time, they both noticed and smiled at him, and it hit Mario in that instant that they could figure him out. Together, they could pool what they knew about him and figure out that the way Mario felt for Peach wasn't the way he was supposed to be feeling. The thought should have worried Mario. But in the face of the two people he cared about most getting along, Mario found he didn't really care all that much. He smiled back at them.

As the evening wound down and the sun began to set, it was just about time to take Peach home. As her and Mario left the house, Luigi tugged on Mario’s arm to hold him back for a moment. His grin was easy and warm. “She really makes you happy, huh?” he asked with a nudge to Mario’s arm.

At the edge of their driveway, the fireflies were out and about, bumbling and flying around. While waiting for Mario and Luigi’s conversation to end, Peach was sneaking after them, catching and releasing them. A few floated around her face, casting it in a near-ethereal glow.

Mario was hardly aware of the soft look on his face until his brother elbowed him, snickering. Mario rolled his eyes, equal parts sheepish and cross. Well, she *did* make him

happy. With one last fond chuckle, Luigi thumped Mario on the shoulder and disappeared back into the house.

Mario and Peach’s walk back to the Warp Pipe was filled with idle chatter, about dinner, about Luigi, and about the next time they could do something like this, lower-key and away from prying eyes. In no time at all, they arrived at their destination; Mario offered an arm to help Peach into the Warp Pipe. And in the moments before following her he took a deep breath, steeling himself to leave the easygoing bubble of the house for the world of outside expectations that lay beyond it.

It was hard, but here's the thing.

It was worth it, because he really liked Peach.

He really liked her dainty little hands, the way her eyes squeezed shut in the midst of uproarious laughter, how her nose ever-so-slightly crinkled when she was sufficiently focused and even though playing this part had him chipping away at himself it was worth it because of the love she gave him in return. It was bright, it was precious, it was heavy in his arms and burned to the touch it was so much it was too much it was *hers* and he would give in to his selfishness and guard it and protect it with everything he had for the rest of his life as long as she let him stay by her side.

Hm. The rest of his life. Mario rolled the thought around in his head.

He’d only ever really thought about spending the rest of his life with Luigi, before; it had always felt like a given growing up. But then Luigi had started searching for someone to spend the rest of his life with, and Mario realized he maybe couldn't count on it as much as he’d hoped.

But the idea of possibly spending the rest of his life with Peach felt as good as his imagined rest of his life with his brother. The timeline stretched out before him — the picnics and garden walks and late night chats, and hopefully fewer kidnappings and scares. Letting her sleep in while he made her breakfast, brushing her hair as she prepped for a gala, traveling with her on vacations, listening to her vent about the whims of her council, standing on that parade float beside her, hand in hers to keep her warm.

He very pointedly ignored the guarantee for that vision, the natural conclusion about how to get there given his circumstances, deciding it would be a bridge to trip over once he’d gotten there. Who knows, maybe he'll be better at pretending by then.

However, aside from him and Peach, no one else was content to ignore it, and as the weeks flew by the gossip and the remarks and the unsubtly dropped hints compounded and compounded, in a refrain that threatened to pull Mario under. Mario wasn't sure Peach knew she was unconsciously contributing to that refrain, too. When he thought about it for too long, it sent pangs running through him. He wasn't sure he could give her that. He knew he was eventually supposed to. She surely had childhood dreams of her own about it.

But despite all of this, it was Bowser who was the one to shake up the increasingly untenable status quo, with one of his biggest schemes yet — one where he decided to arrange and hold

a wedding to marry Peach. Without her permission or say-so. Because of course.

Mario possessed way more adventuring and rescuing experience by now, so though this particular one had taken him all over the world he was flying back home on the Odyssey with Peach relatively soon, trying to forget the fool of himself he'd made mere hours prior. They'd made some stilted small talk for the sake of their Bonneton companions, but after they'd dropped the two of them off in the Cap Kingdom there was nothing to buffer the awkward air.

Peach, who had been frowning out the window, turned her attention to him. She asked what Mario didn't want to answer, and the silence hung thick.

Mario tried to form a response. He'd wanted to say *I don't know*. He'd meant to say something about how seeing Bowser trying to propose to her again made him want to do it twice as hard to spite him. His hands took the shape of *I was supposed to*, instead, and Peach furrowed her brow.

"What do you mean 'supposed to'...?" she wondered aloud, and Mario's heart dropped down, down, down through the floor, cast into the oceans below and drowned by the uncaring waves.

...You see, here's the thing.

Peach loved Mario.

She loved the calluses on his fingers, the way he looked in a well-tailored suit, the way he smiled at her when he saw her, warm and bright and infectious. The sparkle in his eyes when he presented her with a gift, his absolute inability to stifle his own laughter, the way his mustache rubbed against her cheeks when he kissed her. She felt like she could spend the rest of her life with him, and admittedly would stay up thinking about what that would be like many a time, taking joy from it. In a fit of inspiration she'd even found childhood drawings of what her future wedding would or could go, ones she remembered gleefully telling Toadsworth about, growing up, to which he'd tease her about not growing up too fast, lest she left him in the dust.

And then Mario had started to wilt.

He'd extracted himself from joking with Toad with a troubled frown on his face, one day, one that had remained even as he brightened upon seeing her. When she'd asked him about it, he'd told her about the pressure of escalating their relationship, and she'd nodded, assuring him they would take things at their own pace.

"I love you," she'd said afterward. He'd responded in kind, in that shy way of his that was oh so endearing.

It had been a simple matter for her to confide in Toadsworth about Mario's worries, framing them as her own, and it was relatively simple for the two of them to work to halt some of the rumor mill. When she'd told Mario she'd done so, he'd looked surprised, she remembered, as if he hadn't expected anyone to be in his corner in that way. That thought had made her sad.

But the echoes of those worries had remained; she'd see him thinking about it, sometimes, and she tried to keep the rest of her thoughts about it to herself. Because she loved him, so it didn't matter how she spent the rest of her life with him as long as he let her do so, and it wasn't worth making him uncomfortable for a silly childhood ideal.

Even so, when Mario had looked at her on the moon, before Bowser had butted in, a small part of her had honestly thought those childhood dreams would soon be reality.

She was glad they didn't.

She was glad, because she watched Mario try to take back what he'd said, something building behind his eyes; that layer of feeling pressured to propose to her folding back to reveal something else, something more core to him, and he was so *scared*.

He assured her he still loved her. *I love you* shifted to *I like you, I care about you, you're important to me, you make me happy*. The memory of the way he smiled at her lay overtop them. Tears in her eyes, she found she believed him.

But still her heart swooped down, down, down through the floor, cast into the waves below and shattered on the ocean floor. If he had been feeling like this the entire time...while she'd been busy with her daydreams Mario had been having nightmares, ones she'd been contributing to, in her own way. How could she call herself his friend, let alone...? She loved him, but if loving him hurt him then maybe it was better if she —

The Odyssey rumbled. Through the window, the horizon line lowered, green hills stretching across it. They'd arrived in the Mushroom Kingdom.

Peach exhaled, and inhaled, schooling her expression into something more composed. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mario copy her. Her expression shifted into something more genuine, at the sight.

The door opened as the Odyssey settled onto the ground. As one, Mario and Peach stepped out. Toadsworth was standing there to greet them, and as soon as Peach stepped a foot off the metal ramp of the ship onto lush grass he immediately began fretting over her. Her smile deepened, and she knelt to embrace him. Her castle stood tall in the distance behind him, the smell of flowers on the wind. She was home.

When they pulled apart, it was then Toadsworth blinked at her. "What in the world are you wearing?" he asked her, incredulous. He saw Mario, the suit he hadn't changed out of, the same color as her dress. He looked between them. "Did the two of you..."

Peach could see the wave of discomfort racing up Mario's spine, now that she had a sense to look for it. She wondered how often that had happened over the past few months. A knot formed in her throat. It was large enough for Mario to see, and he grew even more upset. To Toadsworth, he shook his head; to her, he waved. He turned and *ran*, faster than he'd burst into the wedding chapel, faster than he'd chased Bowser when he'd snatched her away to take her there, a white speck in the distance in no time at all. He'd taken the light in Peach's heart with him. She wondered if he knew.

Toadsworth stared after him. “What *happened*, my dear...?” he breathed, worry in his eyes. Behind him, the Toads that had accompanied him began whispering to each other.

With a shaky sigh, Peach stood. “I’ll tell you inside,” she promised, and Toadsworth nodded. Peach gave in to the urge to hold his hand as they walked to the castle.

Perhaps she’d grown up a little too fast, after all.

Luigi returned from the airport to a quiet house.

This wasn't unusual, as Mario tended to be out of the house more often than not these days, whether on an adventure or visiting the Princess. It was probably the latter, as Luigi had heard Mario had returned from rescuing Peach from another kidnapping recently, and he tended to stay around her more in the days after doing so.

But this quiet felt...off. Stifling. Suffocating.

Hand nervously gripping his bag, Luigi stepped further into the house. The third step he took almost slipped out from under him; lifting his foot revealed something white and singed brown and burnt black. It was a strip of silken cloth, more of which dotted the floor of the entranceway, accompanied by a dress shoe smeared with ash laying discarded near the shoe rack. The other shoe was laying overturned in the kitchen doorway, similarly damaged, and nearby, one of the pictures on the wall had fallen. Though the glass of the frame had cracked, the landscape painting inside was fine, and after re-hanging it Luigi picked up the glove that had been underneath it. It smelled faintly of smoke.

The trail of disarray led deeper into the house. To the living room, a complete mess, half-full takeout containers strewn throughout; sitting in the center of the couch was Mario, in his boxers, listlessly staring off into space.

Luigi froze, though Mario hadn't reacted to him entering. Luigi crept into Mario’s field of view, and even then it was a while before Mario met his gaze. He looked tired. Despondent. Drained. Luigi bit his lip, feeling way out of his depth. He'd never seen Mario like this before. He had no idea how to break the silence.

In hindsight, he really should have picked a better opener.

“So...the Toads can't decide if you and Peach either got hitched or broke up...?” Luigi ventured.

He watched Mario blink, processing his words.

And then Mario

just

crumpled.

Luigi stood shocked still up until the first sobs tore out of his brother’s throat, at which he dropped his bag and practically vaulted over the table to get to him. All he could think to do was hold Mario as he fell apart, rocking him back and forth and back and forth while trying not to fall apart himself. “What *happened*, bro?” Luigi murmured when the crying died down, eyes shiny with sympathy.

Mario looked up at Luigi and, well.

He'd already made one person he cared about upset with him, recently.

Mario didn't know where to start. He started from as far back as he could. He started when they were young kids, reading fairy tales about knights in shining armor chivalrously helping those in need. When he would go around the house pretending to be one, Luigi as his prince, sweeping him off his feet as best as his little arms could manage; when Luigi would play along, agreeing with Mario when he would declare that nothing could hurt the two of them as long as they were side by side forever and ever, in a misremembering of the oath he was supposed to give.

When their parents had watched them, and idly remarked that Mario would make a girl real happy with that act one day. When he had scrunched up his face about the very idea of it; when they laughed at him, and told him to wait until he was older.

When he grew older.

When his game of Knights had long since faded from memory. Not for lack of trying; if one were to ask his mother, she would tell them in exuberant detail about how long those old books and VHS tapes had captured her eldest’s attention, moreso than almost anything else. It was just that when the game was introduced to the wider sphere of his playground peers, Mario was also introduced to the parts of the game he’d left out when playing at home. The knight and the princess usually lived happily ever after, in most stories.

And Mario had not fully grasped what that had meant until some of the other girls he’d ‘rescued’ began getting upset with him for ‘ending the game wrong’. And there was a sour taste left to it all, when without a clear explanation he’d ask the adults what he was doing wrong, and they would only smirk and tell him he’d understand when he was older.

Well, he grew older.

He grew older and with that came *changes*, and with those came explanations, everyone piled into the gymnasium right after lunch with a slideshow on the front stage. Information that went in one ear and out the other, partly because he had trouble paying attention and partly because he wasn't sure how exactly it applied to him, yet.

But he had another chance to figure it out, as growing older still came with even more changes, and with those came more explanations, everyone piled into a classroom with a teacher and a slideshow at the front of it. Information that went in one ear and out the other, partly because he was no better at focusing on a lecture than last time and partly because he still wasn't sure how any of said information applied to him.

They had all walked out of the room in various states of embarrassment and disgust, commiserating about a shared mortifying experience. By the middle of the next year, he was seemingly the only one who still felt that way.

But still, he grew older.

All around him, everyone talked and talked and talked about who liked who, how that person looked, this person’s body, whether they had a chance with whoever, and and and —

And when he’d take the wondering about if they could talk about literally anything else out of the privacy of his own head, he’d be met with strange looks. What do you mean, they would more or less say, these are the sort of things we’re normally supposed to talk about, right? It’s just normal teenager stuff!

...He hadn't brought it up again.

He’d flitted in and out and between and through friend groups because he didn't want to talk about these normal things, because he didn't want anyone to get close enough to find out he didn't know how to fake wanting to. Although it had helped that whenever someone did get close to figuring it out, there was always someone else ready to jump in with a joke about how Mario was too busy minding his little brother to bother with normal things like those.

His little brother, a social butterfly despite his general anxiety who got invited to parties and get-togethers, who went to meet new people and connect with current friends and get better at socializing and maybe run into someone he fancied, his older brother tagging along. Because although the risk was higher, if Mario didn't go, then Luigi wouldn't even consider it, and Luigi deserved to go to these things because he was normal. He’d always do his best to appear normal, too. So his brother wouldn't have to worry too much.

Except he couldn't even manage that; despite it all, Luigi was still able to at least pick up on something not quite right with his brother as the years went by. Enough to conclude that Mario usually tended to avoid romance-related things if he could help it. And enough that Mario hadn't found out about his brother being unofficially courted until he’d come across one of the letters Luigi and Prince Peasley had apparently been exchanging in the three or so months after the end of their adventure in the Beanbean Kingdom. And wasn't that something? A whole piece of his brother’s joy that he’d missed, that he’d been unable to partake in like he should have because he couldn't pull it together and be *normal* for him.

And he couldn't pull it together for Peach, either. Wonderful, lovely Peach who deserved so much better than someone who could only ever love her wrong. Who let the illusion slip through his fingers when it mattered most; who was arrogant enough to think he could keep it up forever, that he wouldn't end up leaving her with a broken heart and wasted time. He’d *hurt* her with this, and he hated himself for it, he hated the part of himself that couldn't be normal, that caused him to be out of step with Luigi, with Peach, with everyone, unable to fall in line no matter how hard he tried, and the reality of never being able to do so curled around him, heavy like lead, forcing him to confront the unbearable truth, that he was going to be like this for the rest of his life, disappointing the people he cared about just by existing and he can't do this anymore, he *can't* —

Luigi grabbed Mario’s wrists. “What do you mean, ‘this’?” he asked.

Mario gestured vaguely at himself.

“Mario...” Luigi’s grip tightened. “What do you mean, *‘this’*?” he asked again.

There was an undercurrent to Luigi’s voice Mario couldn't identify, yet it bade him try once more to elaborate further. He locked his gaze to their hands. *Being broken*, Mario signed underneath Luigi’s palms. Being a freak, Mario thought, squeezing his eyes shut so he wouldn't see that sentiment reflected in his brother’s face.

Luigi was quiet for a long moment.

He pulled his hands from Mario’s. Mario’s own chased them, too slow, and he whimpered as they slipped away. “I’ll be right back,” Luigi whispered, and his footsteps faded away. Mario dared to wonder what he’d do if they didn't return.

But they did.

Luigi came back, and he sat next to Mario. He was muttering, “I swear there’s *gotta* be...” and Mario took his head out of his hands to see Luigi staring intently at his phone, brow knit in concentration, typing and scrolling. All of a sudden, he gasped, raising a fist in triumph. “I knew it!” he burst out, sounding relieved. He shoved his phone under Mario’s nose. “Look at this!”

Mario took the phone. He looked at the screen. On it was a sunset over an ocean’s still waters, spilled into a rectangle and separated by color into thin stripes. Or maybe it was more of a sunrise, with the way it rose as he read the words underneath and lit up some long-dark place in Mario’s heart. Luigi reached over and did something to change the screen. The shades of green at the top blurred. Funny, he’d thought he’d be out of tears by now.

Mario wiped his eyes and kept reading, so absorbed in falling into rabbit holes and backing out when they didn't resonate with him, rereading the articles that echoed with something deep within him he thought was beyond saving, that he didn't notice Luigi had left him to go prepare a late dinner. When Luigi got back, Mario was staring at a different flag, one that reminded him of Peach both by design and by name. He looked up at Luigi, wide-eyed, and Luigi’s returning smile was knowing, of what it was like to discover there was a *word*, there was a *reason* he was like this and it wasn't that there was something intrinsically wrong with him and him alone.

Luigi retook his place on the couch, setting the food on the table and pressing a glass of water into Mario’s hand. “That’s a pretty one,” he remarked, gesturing to the flag on the screen. “Very pink!”

Mario swallowed past the lump in his throat. It was strange being on the other side of the unconditional acceptance, for a change.

As they ate, Luigi traded phones with Mario; on Mario’s phone were the articles Luigi had led him to, for Mario to continue reading, and on his own phone he read testimonials and

blogs and stories of people — people like Mario. Who were misaligned with what was expected of them, who crashed and burned for it, who found they weren't alone, who found there was still hope, community, happiness, even if it was far off in the distance for them to chase. Luigi read, and Mario's eyes drooped, and he fell asleep against his brother looking peaceful, for once. Luigi wrapped him in a blanket and kept reading, to himself, this time, wanting to be there for his brother like Mario had been for him all those years ago.

And that support continued into the next morning, as Mario stood at the threshold of his own house, dressed to go out. Though Luigi had encouraged him to settle in his identity a little bit first, Mario knew he had to tell Peach about what he'd learned as soon as he could. She needed an explanation, at least, as to why he'd acted the way he did. She deserved that. She deserved a lot.

But the smidgen of courage his brother had given him barely overcame the worst case scenarios for how she'd react. So his journey to the castle stalled before it really began.

Worriedly, Luigi watched him dither. "You can still wait," he said. "I could drive you," he offered next when Mario shook his head.

Mario took a deep breath, hand tightening on the doorknob. He opened the door, and took a step onto the porch; Luigi followed behind, keys in hand.

As he walked to the kart, Mario mentally planned out how his conversation with Peach was going to go, with more of an optimistic lens. Except as soon as the imaginary him and Luigi approached the town gates, Mario stopped short in the driveway, and the last of his borrowed courage fizzled out completely.

He tugged on Luigi's sleeve before he could get too far ahead, trying to figure out how to explain this new source of unease. He settled on *Destiny del Vecchio from high school*, and upon hearing the name, Luigi winced.

"Hm." Luigi frowned, biting his lip. "Ok," he decided, clasping Mario's shoulders with both hands and a determined crease to his brow. "I'll go to town first, then, and scope things out! I'll be back soon!"

Mario nodded, and Luigi — dear, brave Luigi — got in his kart and drove away.

Mario watched Luigi's kart disappear down the road, the sting of his last-minute cowardice echoing in his chest. He frowned, disappointed in himself. Well, what's done was done. Luigi would be back soon. He might as well clean up around the house while waiting for his return.

The front door opened an hour later, as Mario was putting the last of the dishes away.

"Mario!" Luigi called. "I have bad news and good news and news-news!"

Mario poked his head out of the kitchen. Luigi poked his head out of the entryway.

"So, um. The bad news is the Toads definitely thought you'd broken up with the Princess. But!" Luigi hurriedly continued when Mario's face fell. "The good news is it was pretty easy

for us to convince them you hadn't!”

Us?

“Oh.” Luigi looked sheepish. “The news-news is, well. Uh.”

“...Mario?”

Mario ducked back into the kitchen, wide-eyed.

“Um.” Peach’s voice floated through the house. “I-I think we should talk. Luigi...gave me a pamphlet?”

Pressed back against the wall, even if Mario could speak his heart would be too far up his throat to make a sound.

Luigi found him there, struggling to keep from hyperventilating. “Bro...” Luigi said at Mario’s look of betrayal. “Bro, it’ll be fine,” Luigi said. “I talked to her and everything. She just wants answers, yeah? And you have those now!”

...and he has those now. Mario glanced out to the living room, where Peach sat waiting. He glanced back at Luigi, and mustered up a smile as best he could. Luigi beamed, pulling him into a hug. It was a long moment before they parted.

“Promise, bro, everything will be fine, as long as my name’s Luigi!” Luigi cheered in a whisper, and Mario couldn't help but huff a laugh.

With an exaggerated thumbs up and a grin at his back, Mario steeled himself and exited the kitchen, to where Peach was perched on the couch. The silence hung thick as they stared at each other. She had her gifted pamphlet clutched in her hands, crinkled up as if squeezed. It crinkled further as Mario hesitantly sat on the couch next to her.

Peach held the pamphlet out to Mario. He opened it to green and purple and gave it back. She read. Her breath hitched. She turned to him, eyes shining. “...can I hug you?” she asked, sounding miserable.

Mario opened his arms. She dove into them, trembling. “I'm sorry,” she hiccuped. Mario shook his head and held her, because he was so much sorrier.

...Here's the thing.

Mario really, really liked Peach.

He told her so, when upon exiting the hug she asked him if he wanted to call their relationship off, voice small, and his eyes widened in alarm, and his hands moved in a blur to detail all the different reasons he really, really liked her, of which there were many, big and small, until her tears gave way to that flustered giggling that had always been and would always be music to his ears.

He told her he didn't know if that *like* would shift to anything else, something that aligned more with how she felt about him, but regardless he wanted to stay by her side any way he could, if she'd have him.

"Except for getting married, right?"

Mario shrugged. Peach frowned. The frown grew as Mario reminded her that while she wouldn't mind never getting married, her subjects would certainly have something to say if they didn't, probably.

"I'll make them have something to say, alright," Peach grumbled. Mario laughed as if she was joking. She wasn't, really.

Because here's the thing.

Peach really loved Mario.

So they talked, carving out boundaries previously implied and assumed into something concrete and real. They pored over the pamphlet again, and over the articles from Mario's phone, and found there were more to relationships than only friends or lovers, with their own terms to match. For instance, Peach had been delighted about potentially being able to call Mario her marshmallow, to Mario's fond chagrin.

It all made Mario self-conscious about how many lines in the sand he had drawn and detours she was forced to take for him until Peach quieted him with something that sat well behind one such line on a beaten path, a kiss to the cheek that dusted his face pink. Because she wanted to stay by his side as long as he'd have her and she wanted him to be *happy*, and the idea that she could still do both had the darkened place in her heart lighting up as if it was a new day.

The hours flew by, and soon Luigi popped in with dinner, a zucchini lasagna that had Peach clapping her hands with laughter and Mario rolling his eyes with a grin. And when Luigi tried to excuse himself to let them have time to themselves, Mario grabbed his arm and yanked him down onto the couch next to them. Peach thanked Luigi profusely for his help, Mario nodding along. Luigi sheepishly tried to deflect the praise, to little avail.

The three of them ate and talked, mostly about topics related to Peach's new pamphlet. It turned out that most of what was just becoming accepted common knowledge in the Metro Kingdom by the time Mario and Luigi were moving away from its borders was hardly even a thought in the Mushroom Kingdom; and for what was known in both places, the language was quite different. And after an offhand remark from Luigi, he and Mario had to talk Peach down from spontaneously adding yet another parade to the Mushroom Kingdom's holiday itinerary. They couldn't talk her away from going to one that already existed, though. Not that they'd minded very much. Though they were both nervous about how much they'd be carrying home, given her enthusiasm.

As they finished their food, Mario was slumped against Peach, her arm around his waist. Her touch was pleasantly warm as they sat there, no expectations other than full bellies and good

conversations and the promise to stay by each other's side. A promise that neither of them intended to break.

But here’s the thing.

At the end of the day, Mario and Peach still had a part to play. They would have to do *something* public-facing to definitively quash the rumors they’d broken up. The idea of it had Mario frowning. But not as much as he would otherwise, looking at Peach and Luigi, who knew the true nature of his and Peach’s relationship. This new state of affairs made other people assuming their relationship was romantic feel a lot more bearable, in theory.

Luigi offered to go with them so it seemed like less of a date at first glance, though, and that — that was also very helpful. Mario’s sigh was audible, and it had Peach hiding a laugh behind a wrist. But Mario knew Luigi couldn't act as this sort of buffer forever. It wouldn't be fair to him, even if he was happy to do so.

Mario stood to help Luigi gather the dishes. Peach tried to help as well, but the Bros wouldn't let her. She huffed. They gave her the TV remote as a compromise.

In the kitchen, Luigi tapped Mario’s shoulder in the middle of washing and drying. “I can be your buffer,” he said, having read the earlier thoughts on his brother’s face. “I want to help however I can, too!” He extended a hand to Mario in camaraderie. “As long as we’re together, right?”

Mario blinked at the outstretched hand. Luigi’s face fell. “Did you really think...?”

Mario looked everywhere other than his brother’s face. Luigi already had someone to maybe spend the rest of his life with, miles away in another kingdom. He’d...thought it was only a matter of time before...

Luigi pursed his lips; Mario hadn't been the only one growing up to notice friends drifting away and back based on their relationship status, after all. But Mario was his *brother*. They’ve had each other since they were born, and they've only had each other for a good while. Nothing could pry him from his brother’s side, no one else, and if they dared then he would sooner stay by Mario’s side than whoever would make him choose.

And if Luigi somehow lost his head and drifted away — which he would actively try his damnedest to prevent from happening — he’d hope that Mario would be there to knock some sense into him as Luigi would for him. Because they were brothers, and he wouldn't dare leave Mario behind, not while he still lived.

“Forever and ever, yeah?” Luigi slung an arm around Mario’s shoulders, sweeping his hand in front of them as if to demonstrate that impossible length of time, grinning at him sidelong.

Mario huffed shakily. He slung an arm around Luigi’s waist, leaned into Luigi’s side. They stood like that, the sound of running water from the faucet accompanying their shared peace.

...And then Mario skittered his fingers up Luigi’s side.

Luigi pushed him away with a startled laugh. “Mario! That — no fair!”

A smirk grew on Mario’s face as he lunged for Luigi again. His fingertips brushed the space beneath Luigi’s ribs as Luigi dodged, setting him off again. A third lunge had Luigi dashing out of the kitchen. “Princess!” he yelled through laughter as Mario chased him. “Help!”

Torn from idly flipping through TV channels, Peach’s alarm lasted for all but a second before she saw the grin splitting Mario’s face in two, his hair tousled, his sleeves rolled up from washing the dishes. Its unrestrained joy admittedly stopped her in her tracks, though that could also be chalked up to her only-child self not knowing how to deal with the sibling shenanigans suddenly unfolding around her. In any case, she’d already leapt to her feet so Luigi hid behind her like she was a shield. And she was cognizant enough to keep herself between the two brothers as Mario exaggeratedly searched for a way past her. She even brandished the TV remote for good measure.

Finally, Mario seemed to give up. He looked expectantly at Peach, waiting for her to name her price, eyes sparkling.

“Don't listen to him...!” Luigi pleaded, shaking her a little.

Peach made a show of thinking it over. “I recently had the worst around the world trip of my entire life,” she declared in her best overly-haughty tone. “So I want you to be available tomorrow afternoon to come to the castle to hear about it over tea.”

Mario blinked in surprise. His smile widened and softened all at once, and it took Peach’s breath away. With a wink, he gave her a thumbs up, and Luigi wailed in protest.

Peach didn't move as Mario approached her, and Luigi realized too late she was serious about leaving him to Mario’s mercies and bolted. He didn't get very far, and Peach poked her head into the hallway to find them both on the floor, Luigi trapped in a headlock and Mario rubbing his knuckles against his brother’s hair with reckless abandon. Their laughter was loud, and Peach hung back to bask in it.

Eventually, Luigi managed to kick his feet and swat his brother enough for him to let go. He stumbled to his feet, loudly complaining about Mario acting like this in front of a *Princess*. Peach laughed and said she didn't mind. She didn't say she’d truthfully have Mario be this silly all the time just to see all the weight of the world vanish off his shoulders.

Peach held out her hands to help Mario to his feet. She didn't let go of his hands once he was upright; Peach’s cheeks hurt with how much she’d been smiling, and she squeezed his hands to almost-match. She cast her gaze around the hallway, recognizing some pictures on the wall from the last time she’d visited — the photo of Mario and Luigi’s family, the paintings of distant landscapes, the candid snapshot of Mario and Toad in the backyard garden. And there were a few new ones, too — of Toad Town Square, of Luigi and Prince Peasley inside Beanbean Castle, of — of *her*. Mario fidgeted nervously when he noticed she’d noticed. She shuffled closer to better see. It looked hand-drawn. She’d love to ask about it, but...

Peach yawned. It was getting late.

“Wish you could stay,” Luigi said. Peach almost asked why she couldn't, but then remembered how quickly word traveled amongst her subjects. Perhaps, in light of today's conversations, they didn't go tempting fate in that regard.

Mario nodded, a weight settling back around his shoulders. Peach ached to remove it again, and she put her hands on Mario’s shoulders as if to do so. Mario placed a hand on hers, smile small and light.

Luigi interrupted their staring at each other to offer to drive Peach home, since it had gotten dark. Mario, in a fit of impulse, decided to go with them. They needed that public appearance anyway, right? So he followed them out the door. The nighttime air carried a chill to it; Mario offered Peach his jacket and belatedly realized he wasn't sure it would fit her. Peach took it anyway, and it turned out it did fit her, though it was a little loose. Mario ducked his head away, because he was sure his face was doing something silly at the sight of her wearing it and he wasn't too keen on being teased about it.

The drive was quiet, the late hour getting to them all. Despite the late hour, though, there were many Toads still out and about, and Mario could see their faces visibly clear and brighten as they saw Mario and Peach leaning against each other in the backseat. Something in Mario’s chest loosened and tightened all at once. Peach’s hand in his loosened it fully.

Luigi drove up past the drawbridge and parked. Mario got out of the kart first. On instinct, he held out an arm to help Peach out as well, and then realized they’d gained a curious audience, hidden behind statues and bushes and pretending not to eavesdrop. Mario froze.

Peach considered the look on Mario’s face. She took Mario’s arm, And something about her voice when she thanked him for it struck Mario as odd. When she stepped onto the ground she *curtsied* at him, and Mario was admittedly confused until she squeezed his hand and winked at him, mischievousness sparkling in her eyes and oh.

Mario bowed back, feeling a bit ridiculous. He stole a glance out of the corner of his eye at the audience, and they were still watching. Pretending to be “normal” for the world was one thing, but if it was an act that he wasn't alone in...

Mario escorted Peach over the moat’s bridge and to the giant front doors of the castle. They embraced each other tightly, and Peach disappeared inside. Before the door fully shut, Mario saw one of her attendants run up to her. By the time he turned around, the onlookers had dispersed.

“Okay?” Luigi asked as Mario returned to the kart.

Mario thought about it. Okay, he decided.

Luigi looked relieved. They pulled out and drove home, Mario’s eyes remaining fixed on the castle as they went. As they sped out of town by the main road, Mario saw Peach, far off on one of the highest balconies. He thought he saw her waving at him, his jacket in the air like a flag. He took his hat off and waved it back at her. He swore he could see the light of her smile from here. He wondered if she could see his.

Luigi huffed. “You two are the most ridiculous cou — duo I've ever met.”

Mario smirked. No more than the two of them, surely. Luigi dissolved into snickers, and Mario quickly joined him.

“Love ya, bro,” Luigi said, smiling at him in the rearview mirror.

Mario reached up and squeezed his shoulder.

Because here’s the thing.

Mario loved Luigi.

He loved his good-humored disposition, his resourceful cleverness, his unwavering loyalty, his boundless compassion. He was the most courageous person Mario knew, and not a day went by where he wasn't thankful Luigi had been born in those minutes after him, to be the tempering force Mario sorely needed lest he be in a much worse spot in life.

And when Mario compared how he felt about Luigi to how he felt about Peach it was like comparing apples and oranges, if those apples and oranges were his most treasured things in life.

So, like, pasta and peaches, maybe. Ha.

And they both loved him, each in their own way. Their love was warm and precious and something Mario was grateful and honored to have, something he would guard and protect with everything he had as he would them. And he knew they would do the same; he knew it by the way they’d chosen to accompany him in exploring this new, uncharted destiny with him, learning about it just as he was and will be. And no matter what happened in the future while they figured it all out, Mario knew that together, side by side, they would find that everything would be okay.

Nothing could hurt them, after all.

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