

How This Came To Be

a Pumpkin in the Forest short story

I want the reader to become introduced to some side characters which have prominent roles but little context. More specifically, I want the reader to learn who Toodles is and why she is the way she is in the game. Though it is hinted throughout, it is never fully explained as to why. This short story will be that explanation, as well as some other tidbits such as introducing other side characters and their relationship with Toodles.

Thunder boomed in the distance, lightning following not far after. Rain soaked the soil, turning it to a mushy mud. Not too far from the destruction of what she had just learned to call home, Toodles hid in a small hole on the side of a hill. Rocks and roots kept the hole from flooding, leaves and berries kept it warm and cozy. Toodles slowly backed further in toward the dirt walls, burrowing herself in her pile of leaves she had gathered three days prior. Most of her berries were gone, but she was having trouble eating during all of this upset anyway.

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Toodles awoke to the sound of birds chirping. The ground was still muddy, but fallen leaves worked as bridges for Toodles' little legs. She made her way to a nearby bush where she gathered more berries, more twigs, and more leaves. After a few trips, she felt content with going back to the hole to rest in case the storms picked up again. This life was harder than the luxurious one she had lost, but it also had a lot more moments of relaxation. Toodles yawned, stretched her little legs, and took a nap upon her throne of leaves.

Toodles dreamt of Casey, Molley, and that cursed dog, Francine. She dreamt of the cage she once had, the treats she would get, and how often Casey would make sure her hair was nice and clean. She kicked a bit in her sleep as she imagined the struggle of keeping Casey from pulling at her hair with the little brush. Her mouth salivated as she received sunflower seeds from Casey; she had to hold the seed with both paws to nibble it down, she saved another in her cheek for later. She would hear the two girls argue as Francine barked. She would work off this stress on the wheel.

She woke up grasping for a seed she thought Casey had slipped her in her sleep, though there was no seed, nor was there Casey. Or Molley. Or Francine. Francine not being there was the only good thing about any of this. Toodles peered out into the patch of forest overlooked by the hill with which her hole resided. The sun shone down upon a sliver of land occupied by a large tree, some bushes, and a pond. Maybe this was also a good thing about any of this.

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The routine of waking, gathering, snacking, and dreaming had become essential to Toodles. She found herself near the bottom of the hill, toward the pond. The sun was beginning to set, and in the past she had been afraid, but this time around she felt content. She enjoyed the orange-blue hues and the abstract reflections on the pond. Her fear of the dark said it was time to go in, but her curiosity said it was time to wait and to appreciate. Maybe this had all happened for a reason; maybe Casey was right, maybe Toodles would be better off in the forest away from that wretched beast, Francine.

Toodles sat under one of the trees, grasping a twig and gnawing it for sport. She watched as the last light of day set in the horizon, revealing a blanket of darkness and a subtle fog in the distance became

more prominent. The fields ahead were speckled with little lights going on and off, little lights of fire. Dozens of little, flying fires.

“This isn’t all bad,” Toodles thinks to herself. She picks up a berry in her two paws from next to her and bites into it.

Toodles wondered briefly if Casey had truly done the right thing. Would she have even known? Molley was always fixing Casey’s mistakes. She had accidentally let so many of her fish die—so she overheard from an argument Molley and Casey had. Maybe the actual good in this was Toodles’ escape from Casey. She didn’t have it bad, no, but—she patted her chubby belly—maybe she had it a little too ideally. Toodles thought about the beauty in front of her and finally agreed with Casey—this felt natural. Maybe all pets like her belong in the forest.

Toodles added the fields of fireflies at night to her daily routine, slowly returning to her nocturnal ways. Night was scary, sure, but the daytime was boring.

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“What do we have here?” a voice said. Toodles opened her eyes slowly to see a gray critter looming over her. “A little rat? A friendly rat?”

Toodles didn’t know how to react, but she let out a small squeal.

“Are you feral?” the voice asked.

“I am not a rat,” Toodles said. “I am a fancy hamster.”

“Fancy, huh? Right, and I’m a fancy raccoon.”

“What is a fancy raccoon?”

“A harmless little trash rodent friend,” the voice said. “Rapture is my name on the streets. And everywhere else. But mainly in the streets, because that’s where my girl and I spend most of our time.”

“I’m Toodles. I come from the homes on the sides of the streets.”

“Ah, you mean the suppliers of our stock. Listen, I fish this pond. I don’t really go for rodents, it didn’t seem like you had your guard up or anything, but just so you know—you’re safe with me.”

“Thank you—you’re the first critter I have come across since arriving here, and I have been here a while.”

“Really? I’m impressed. Haven’t seen you once! Stealthy little friend.”

“Thank you, I really just pace between here and my little home up there, on the hill.”

“Well, Toodles. If you ever need a friend, or some help of any kind, I’m trying to work on being a better dude for when my kid comes along—and y’know, I wanna help around as much as I can. Just give me a shout.”

“Oh, well thank you.”

“I’m mostly offering because these woods can get pretty scary. There are things with wings, things that run fast—things that glow. I don’t want a fancy friend like you getting hurt.”

“Thank you, Rapture. I’ll be here and I will let you know if I ever need any of your assistance.”

Rapture gave a wave before departing into the night. The forest was still shrouded in darkness—Toodles could hardly make out Rapture's figure as he loomed over her, his sleek, silver coat shimmering under the moon. Toodles thought about her diet, the berries, and wondered if maybe Rapture had any tips. Or if maybe he had some sunflower seeds. She'd ask him next time.

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Two days passed, Toodles going about her mundane routine, not going further anymore into the forest or toward the fields, since she felt perfectly content where she was. The food, though, was exhaustively boring. She'd been sleeping mostly, and unsure of when Rapture would come back by. Tonight, though, was the night Rapture came by to grab a fish or two to enjoy.

"Hello, again," Rapture said. Toodles was planning to confront him, but he was too quick and stealthy for her to notice him first.

Toodles hopped back slightly. "Do you know of a good place to find sunflower seeds, or anything tastier than berries around here?"

"I was hoping you'd ask, my friend. I know just the place...how fast can your little legs walk?"

"Not fast...but I'll manage."

Up and over the hill, past a field, and into the artificial light, Toodles found herself in a foreign yet also familiar place: the streets, surrounded by houses, all of which reminded her of where she came from. Rapture guided her through holes in fences and various garbage cans. Rapture dug as Toodles watched from below.

"No sunflower seeds, nothing really good at all," Rapture said. He threw an old button out, placing it in a little sack he had previously scavenged.

"A collection?"

"Of sorts. Toys for the kid."

"Maybe the kid will like sunflower seeds."

"I was already helping you, but my determination has now doubled," Rapture said. He laughed.

The two bonded over trash, though the scraps found so far had not been the kind a hamster would like, Toodles told Rapture. She had a particular taste. Exquisite things. Things that smelled like wood.

"What's this?" Rapture asked, tipping over the can he was in. Displayed near-perfectly amongst the trash, Toodles noticed what seemed to be a small cage.

"It looks like my old cage."

"Is it?"

"No, just one like it, I think."

"Well, if they had a cage, there's probably something a rodent like you would indulge in."

Toodles felt a wave of emotions—fear, confusion, but mostly anger. She was having difficulty justifying Casey's abandonment. Sure, Francine was scary, but the streets were no place for a hamster.

Toodles liked the idea of taking from the humans, but the idea of the humans abandoning their pets and their pets' things made Toodles upset.

"You okay, friend?" Rapture asked, gnawing on a plastic bag covered in chip dust.

"No," Toodles said. "I think I want to go back home."

"Alright. I'll gather some of these tidbits here and we'll head back."

The two headed back, Rapture holding on to his little bag of rarities and some seeds he'd give to Toodles upon their return. The two discussed humanity and their place in the world as animals among them between moments of silence. Toodles imagined, in those moments of silence, a world where she had never been abandoned. She lived in safety and had the luxury of three sunflower seeds a day. Maybe she didn't belong in the wild, but she also didn't belong with Casey.

"Thank you for taking me," Toodles said.

"It's my pleasure, friend," Rapture said. "If you ever wanna go back out there, let me know. 'Else, just give me a list and I'll see what I can bring back for ya!" He waved and made his way off into the night, leaving Toodles to her thoughts and the chilly midnight breeze that surrounded the home and slowly drifted its way in.

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Toodles woke, the sky still dark, the breeze still present. She stretched, thinking about life, time, and purpose. She wondered about why the days work as they do, and if they was ever any change to the routines. She wondered if perhaps going outside now would disrupt this routine, and if maybe it would help her find closure with her intrusive thoughts of abandonment.

She looked down toward the pond, admiring the moon's reflection upon its ripply surface.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a voice echoed.

Toodles quickly glanced to her left and then to her right—nothing.

"It's dark, but even in the light, I don't think you'd think to look up here."

Toodles looked up, noticing movement on a nearby tree branch. The movement stopped and then came suddenly toward her.

"Hi."

"You can fly?" Toodles asked the shadowy figure.

"Yes, for I have wings. They grant me flight."

"What are you? You aren't a raccoon, are you?"

"No, no. I'm nothing like Rapture. I am what some would call a bat, though I like to think of myself as a 'bird of the night'."

"Are you not?"

"Well, I guess I could be."

“Are you going to eat me?”

The bat laughed. “No, why would I do that?”

“You seem to know Rapture—he told me to watch out, especially at night.”

“He is right, but I’m not what you need to worry about.”

“What do I need to worry about?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just stick by the sides of Rapture and I and befriend all those you can.”

“Do you have a name, bat?”

“Earl.”

“Toodles.”

“So how did you get here?” Earl asked.

And Toodles told him.

They discussed dullness and things to do in the forest. Earl offered flight lessons, or perhaps hunting for insects. Toodles said she missed her wheel.

“Toodles,” Earl said. “I think the best thing to do in the forest is to make friends—and to visit them often.”

“I like that. You should stick around.”

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Days passed, the season progressed; things bloomed, newborn critters roamed. Toodles made new friends, met old friends’ newborns, and had fully accepted her life as a forest critter. Earl, Rapture, and Rapture’s mate Susan were her best friends of the forest. They’d visit, chat, gather, and so on pretty often. It wasn’t that it was no longer monotonous for Toodles, rather, she got caught up in the flow of the forest and no longer was worried about whatever it was that held her back from embracing this life of freedom and friendship.

That is, until that flow was interrupted.

It was a colder day, a day while Earl, Rapture, and Susan were all busy. The sun had mostly set by now, and the rain had just recently stopped. Toodles found herself near the pond, staring in, wondering what was beneath the thin veil of water and why whenever she touched it, she felt chills and a sense of dread.

“You,” a voice boomed. “Rodent.”

Toodles felt that same sense of dread she did when she tried seeing under the veil of water, though this was somehow different. This was the first stranger to approach her in such a manner.

“Earl told me about you, rodent. You listen here.” The voice was gravely and unforgiving.

“Sorry?” Toodles spoke up, perhaps a little more bravely than she meant.

“You have been in my forest for multiple weeks now, and you offer me nothing. You bow not to me, nor do you even pretend to recognize my authority.”

“I am sorry, friend. We just haven’t had the chance to meet. I’m Toodles—”

“Yes, Toodles. Earl told me, and I am disappointed in Earl and Rapture keeping this from me. They know I like to keep record of all my prey—pedestrians...preydestrians...the animals living in my forest, I mean. You freeloader.”

“Freeloader? I didn’t know this was a community with dues.”

“I am Enigma, the debt-collector. The king of this forest.”

“And what debts might I owe you, sir king of this forest?” Toodles’ sarcasm was taken as flattery, Enigma continuing without batting an eye at her tone.

“You have two options, rodent. Either I shall receive three helpings a week from each creature in this woods, or...I shall receive one rodent.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Yes, actually. I am saying that you need to coerce about two to three or more individuals into my den for consumption or else face consumption yourself. I would just do that now, though I know that would then cause two of my royal subjects to look upon me unfavorably, knowing how close they have somehow gotten with you...rodent.”

“I suppose I don’t have a choice, then,” Toodles said.

“That would be correct.” With that, the large, white bird of prey spread his wings and made off into the distance. “I expect your dues by 14 cycles, rodent. I will be back then for my meal. If you don’t have anything, you and Earl will do nicely as a meal,” he yelled, getting smaller and smaller in the distance.

With that, he was gone. Toodles had her task, though she had no idea where to begin. She couldn’t run, nor could she hide. She knew even attempting either would likely lead to her and Earl’s end...there was nothing she could do but comply.

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* With that, we transition into the main story of the game, where Pumpkin the gerbil enters and Toodles is suspiciously unkind and unwelcoming to our new guest in the forest. *

Note: Enigma is the main “Shadow” for this narrative. Toodles serves as more of an instigator/troublemaker and has a sort of henchman to the shadow vibe toward the middle of the game where the reason behind Toodles’ being a booty is revealed.