

# Graphite

The Legend of Toontown



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# Contents

Prologue	3
Chapter 01: Adventure is Born	8
Chapter 02: Rewind	19
Chapter 03: Oldman Island	31
Chapter 04: The Lost Slave	39
Chapter 05: Space	48
Chapter 06: Family Reunion	57
Chapter 07: Camping	67
Chapter 08: Protectors of the Night	79
Chapter 09: The Cave	90
Chapter 10: The Labyrinth	100
Chapter 11: Into the Dark	100
Chapter 12: Gray Rising	118
Chapter 13: The Book	126
Chapter 14: Off the Page	136
Chapter 15: New Friend	146
Chapter 16: War in the Park	155
Chapter 17: On Stranger Rides	166
Chapter 18: Man vs. Metal	176
Chapter 19: Doomed	188
Epilogue	200

# Prologue

It was a dim and dirty alley, the last place any normal person would want to be standing, but there was a man there. He was leaning casually against a wall. His face was long, tight, and pale. His eyes were dark and narrow. His lips seemed to be permanently curled into a scowl so strong that he always appeared either haughty or intimidating. But despite his dark physical appearance he always dressed extremely well. The suit he was wearing was almost new.

Motionless he stood and waited for something. It was something that he was almost afraid to admit might never happen. Still, he was willing to put up with all of the garbage in the world in the hope that the thing he was waiting for would eventually arrive.

He hated everything about his life the past several years, yet at the same time he had come to be more accustomed to it. Things like the foul odor of smog, the dreadful traffic, and even the stupidity of people no longer bothered him as much as they once did.

Oh how he loathed people, even though his life forced him to work with them constantly. He couldn't get away from them, their problems, and their ever-changing emotions. They got worked up over such trivial things like how their relationship was going, or when their next paycheck would come, or seeing the name of someone that they liked in a star on the sidewalk. Everything he observed about the people, particularly in this part of town, was made to display their obsession with fame, glamour, and other insignificant nonsense.

Every day he took a few hours to stand alone, away from the others, to think about things and to wait. If it was ever going to happen then it would occur somewhere around here. It would be very obvious, and feel something just like... that.

Wait, could that possibly be it? He sniffed the air, and there was something else there beyond the smog. It was less of an odor and more of a sensation, but he had trained himself to memorize it, and it was coming from somewhere close by.

All the anticipation for this moment had almost faded away, but now the man was filled with new vigor. He walked out of the alley and followed the mysterious feeling. Walking speedily he always looked around him. No person noticed anything strange about his behavior. They were used to seeing things peculiar things all the time.

As he approached the printing shop he felt the sensation intensify. This was starting to make sense; he completely understood now, and there was no way that this could be a false impression. Carefully he sneaked behind the store and waited behind the dumpster in the shadows, watching the back door.

It didn't take long for the door to open and something to step out. Its presence caused the feeling to be stronger than ever.

The man was excited but wary. He watched the figure intently and then got the courage to take a small step towards it. However, it barely noticed the man's movement and took off running. He pursued it and shouted angrily. "Stop!"

It was no use. He was too late; the thing had escaped quicker than he had hoped. However, it was not

a complete waste because now he had the evidence that he needed. His mouth twisted slowly into an awkward lopsided smile, something that had almost never been experienced before. There was no time to lose. He needed to leave now.

He ran to his car as quickly as he could. Now he was headed to a familiar place to find someone he required, a person he needed information from, hoping that his discovery didn't have to be in vain.

It didn't take long to reach the old house and soon he parked on the curb and got outside. The place was simply depressing. It was so run down that it was not easy to think of someone actually living there. He went up to the front door and knocked loudly.

There was some movement inside and the door opened. A much older and dirtier man was inside and his eyes grew wide with fear at the sight of the visitor. The intruder barged inside and the old man ran away to another room.

The inside of the house was just as awful looking as the outside. There were cobwebs everywhere and dust on every surface. The paint and wallpaper on the walls were cracked and peeling off. The furniture was faded with pieces falling apart. The place had not been kept in good shape like a home. Instead, it looked more like a shelter for somebody who had given up on normal life and wanted to hide away from everyone.

The resident's voice came nervously from around the corner. "I told you I didn't want to see you again, Mr. Johnson. Why won't you leave me alone?"

Mr. Johnson followed the voice and spotted the old man again. He showed his evil smile.

"I'll call the police!" the old man wailed, his voice shaking.

"No you wouldn't." Mr. Johnson argued.

"Otherwise you would have done it already. But you know they wouldn't believe you, right? There's too many things that you wouldn't let them know, things that they must never know. What kind of story could you make up for them?"

"Go away..."

Johnson took an old artifact from a shelf and smashed it on the ground.

"Please don't hurt me."

Now the intruder knocked the whole shelf down. Everything hit the floor with a loud crash which startled the other.

The old man cowered in a corner. "Alright, what do you want?"

"I need to know how to fight." Johnson demanded. "I have the evidence now. I saw the enemy with my own eyes."

The other lifted his head up to face him. "But... how is that possible?"

"Many years have gone by and everyone has forgotten the truth, but you haven't now have you? You are the last living witness of seeing them in our world. So I need your help to stop them."

"Well how many were there?"

"Only one, but there will be many more soon. I know it."

"But why does this matter to you?"

"That's none of your business! Just tell me what you know."

The old man warily got onto his feet and hobbled over to an ancient desk covered with an insanely thick layer of dust. He opened a drawer and picked up a small glass vial filled with liquid, his hands shaking. "Do you know what this is?"

Mr. Johnson's dark eyes widened. "Oh yes... of course."

"This is the oldest but simplest recipe. I can teach you to replicate it. And it is the most effective weapon you could use against the enemy. Extremely dangerous to them, but it is harmless to anything else. They called it the dip."

# Chapter 1

## Adventure Is Born

Evina Gearloose was feeling excited. It was a stronger eagerness for adventure than anything he had experienced for almost a year. The young red duck was standing in his dirty garage. He looked down at his clothes smeared with stains of car grease, and he was unsure whether he was ready to go yet.

"Yeah, you should go pack your stuff." His father suggested. He was an old white chicken named Gyro Gearloose, a famous inventor of the past whose creations only sometimes worked, and more often they could lead to disaster. His eyes were still dark with the entity that was within him, and each day he felt a twinge of guilt over creating the cogs who had invaded his world for fifteen years. However, his life was starting to improve now that he was home and completely forgiven. Each day spent with his son lightened his disposition a little more.

Evina turned to go back into his house, but then he suddenly remembered something. Zany, one of his best friends, had just walked away from here only a minute ago. "I'll be right back!" he exclaimed.

Out into the sunshine he ran as he chased the light blue figure walking away on the sidewalk in the distance. He ran as fast as his feet could take him, even though his fitness wasn't all that good anymore. Soon he finally caught up and she turned around to look at him.

"Oh, Evina, are you ok?" the other duck asked.



He took a moment to catch his breath. "Yeah, I'm ok. No, I'm *great* actually. There is something I need to tell you." He took a few more deep breaths. "Gyro told me that there might be some trouble."

"Trouble?" she asked worriedly.

"Yeah, and I was thinking. Would you be up to having another adventure? We could use some extra help."

The smile on her face slowly melted away, and Evina's excitement waned. "Um. Thanks for asking but... I'm not sure if I'm ready for it."

Evina was fazed for a minute. He couldn't believe that she wouldn't want to come. "But didn't you just say that your life is boring now? How can you take this?"

"It's because I'm getting accustomed to it, to being normal like everyone else. And unlike out fighting robots, it is safer here." Evina suddenly felt empty inside. He silently listened to her continue. "As much as I loved it all, I wouldn't be able to do that again. That was just... too much. I want to be with friends and family and move on with life. I'm sorry."

Evina took some more breaths and paused awkwardly. He didn't previously think about how she would feel about this. "Well... that's ok."

"We can still be friends, right?" she asked.

"Sure..." he answered quietly. "I guess I'll see you in the future then." He turned and walked away sadly without waiting to see if she would say something else.

Now his pace was slower. He wasn't in a rush to get into the spaceship and fly away because his thoughts kept him too occupied. Change seemed to be happening around him much more rapidly than he first

supposed. Maybe he hadn't changed so much because of that thing inside of him, that part of the cog, the mysterious thing. His desire to keep fighting and exploring was reignited and he had to follow it. It was part of finding his true purpose, his usefulness to the safety of Toontown when he didn't feel like he fit so well inside it.

By this time he was almost back at his own house. Gyro glanced at him slowly as he walked by.

"I guess it didn't go so well, did it?" the older one asked.

"Yep," Evina replied, "I think I'll go pack my stuff now." He opened the door and walked back into his home, then up the stairs and into his bedroom.

He opened a trunk and picked out some of the clothes that he wanted to wear. He wanted to travel light and there wasn't much that he really needed anyway.

After lifting the clothes up and placing them in a smaller suitcase he tried to get it closed. As he did this he thought about the last several months. Would he miss being here? Would he still care about this rickety old place filled with lost memories of some other life? Would he miss being alone? Probably not. Would he want to see the warm glow of the summer sunlight shine in through the window? This was something to think about. Where he was going there would be no sun. It would just be the dark emptiness of space. Also the sun on Earth was probably going to be foreign to him. He was going to be so far away without any of the comforting things that he had lived with his whole life.

What about the danger? Gyro still hadn't told him about what they were going to do or even what the

troubling situation was. Still, with all these worries in his head, it wasn't enough to prevent him from going. This adventure was another crucial step of his journey towards destiny.

With courage he walked downstairs and out of his house for the last time in however long it would be. He tried to keep his mind from thinking about anything that would present hesitation of going on this adventure. For all he knew, his mind could invent an even stronger excuse, and he didn't want that to happen.

"Are you all ready to go?" Gyro asked. He was leaning up against his spaceship casually.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Totally. Let's not waste any more time here."

Gyro opened the hatch and gestured for him to go in first.

Evina climbed inside and took his seat in front of the console, next to the driver's seat. He spun it around to look at the rest of the ship as Gyro came inside, shut the hatch, and took his seat.

The little helper was looking at some complicated tech stuff in the back. It turned around and kindly waved at Evina. Then it saw that Evina was using its seat and it looked disappointed.

"Hey, I got here first." The duck teased.

"Ok, enough with the chatter. It's time to get moving." Gyro announced. He started the engines while Evina turned his chair around to the correct position and put his seatbelt on.

The ship rumbled and vibrated slightly, then rose off the ground. The thrill was beginning to return as

Evina saw his neighborhood shrink away. Actually, he had never seen Duckburg from the sky before. As they went higher he could see the whole city. It was very large and beautiful, sitting at the edge of the sea glistening in the rising sun. It was old and impressive for toon work. Lately it was a place he had been learning to call home. Yet it was still strikingly toony in style, in contrast with Cogtropolis. Both of the cities had unique beauty in their own ways, and Evina, being part of both cultures, could understand and accept them.

"I wouldn't feel too bad about Zany." Gyro assured his son. "There are plenty of others who I'm sure would love to come with us."

"You're right," Evina replied as he noticed that the ship turned towards the mountains in the distance and Pete's Palace, "as long as this ship has enough room to live comfortably." He looked behind his shoulder to get another look at the interior. It was much larger than he remembered. "Did you... change something?"

"I am always improving and adding to this ship." Gyro responded as they flew into the clouds. "Some of the modifications I've been working on for a long time now. This extra space could prove to be useful."

Evina was always amazed at his father's work. There still remained a lot of toons that believed he was unable to invent anything useful. "How small did this ship use to be?"

"Very small. It was more like a little flying saucer."

He thought about this. Gyro must have been the world's greatest expert on metal and machinery. Then he began to wonder where the knowledge came from to

make this stuff. Anyway, he didn't want to think about things too much. He wanted to look out through the clouds, over the beautiful world, and just relax. There wasn't anything he would allow to bother his mind and ruin his trip.

The mountains approached rapidly. Evina looked below and saw Acorn Acres and the winding river. From this height, the mountains didn't look all that large. With ease they flew over the sparkling snowy peak to reveal the spacious other side. Down in the valley there stood Pete's Palace. Gyro descended and circled the city until he landed gently on the grass.

Evina was excited to find more of his friends; he wanted to see the excitement on their faces when he told them about the new adventure. From his pocket he took out a card where he had scribbled each of their addresses. He took a breath of fresh air and then set off to find them.

Lizzy wasn't at her home so Evina went to the library where he thought she would be. She was sitting with her face buried in a book, and politely told Evina that she wasn't interested in another adventure because she would prefer to continue a nice quiet life. This disappointed Evina more but he wasn't extremely surprised. Lizzy was never of the most adventurous type.

Next he headed to a fort behind the palace. It was surrounded by a bunch of thorny bushes and Evina wasn't happy to be jabbed relentlessly in order to break through. Catman lived there in his so-called lair and he was elated to see Evina. But just like all the others, he also wasn't interested in going. He had rediscovered his life of helping others. Evina didn't exactly know what

good he could do with an enormous ego and some cheap gadgets, but he told him that it would be alright. He could have stayed longer to talk and learn more but instead he decided to leave instead. Another one of his friends, Bebop, was a lot cause. So that left one more place that he needed to go to.

He made his way to East Street and then began jogging until he found the right address. The twins lived in an apartment near the end of the street and so he ran inside to find their number.

Knocking on the door a few times, he waited. There seemed to be some moving inside and soon enough a blue dog peered out at him. Evina believed it was Dynoboom.

"Evina? Oh, it's nice to see you again!" He swung the door open and shook the duck's hand vigorously.

"Yeah, do you mind if I come inside?" Evina requested. "I'm just feeling a little down." The dog let him come inside. He looked around the room and saw that it was rather messy. That wasn't entirely surprising. The other dog, who went by the funny name of Paddlewhip, was sitting on the sofa with his eyes glued on the TV screen, a bowl of cheesy puffs resting on his lap.

"Don't mind him. I always told you he was the lazy one. You just don't want to bother him when he's in that trance." Dynoboom teased his brother, acting out the hypno goggle stare.

Evina was a little too annoyed today to be able to enjoy the dog's humor. He sat down at the table, propped up his arms, put his face down, and sighed.

"So... what's going on?" the host asked.

“Well. Gyro came to talk to me today, and he said something like Toontown might be in trouble. We’re preparing to go on another adventure right now but I can’t seem to find anyone who wants to come with us. You’re the last ones here at Pete’s Palace.” He paused for a moment, listening. But after hearing no response his lifted his face from his hands to look at the dog’s face. The smile was gone, just as he had feared.

“You know what I’m going to say, right?”

“Oh no...” Evina sighed. He stood up and was about to leave when the dog protested.

“Wait! I want to talk to you. Please just sit down and hear me out.”

Evina reluctantly dropped down on the seat to look at him. Dynoboom looked into the duck’s gray eyes looking remorseful.

“I really have to tell you the truth. All those times that we had together were a blast.” The dog grinned briefly, thinking about the dynamite pun. “But I don’t know of a toon who could take more than that.” Evina listened, not looking very happy. “I think you’ll have to accept the fact that after coming back to our old lives, we need to have some more stability. We need to stay. And that might not apply to you ever since you... changed.” He broke eye contact. “But I really hope you find someone to have a great time with you.”

“Thanks.” Evina answered quietly. The words were nice but offered him very little consolation.

“Are you sure that there isn’t anything else I can do for you?” the host inquired.

“No, I think my time here is done.”

“Oh wait! I forgot something.” The dog dashed away and then returned moments later with something in his hands.

“What is it?”

“It’s a gift for you!” he exclaimed. Evina took the tiny glass vial. It looked like the ones that used to hold deadly dip, but this time it was full of something different. It was a thick, opaque, dark red liquid.

“Um, alright, I appreciate it.” The adventurer didn’t know what else to say.

“Only use it in case of an emergency, got it?” Dynoboom added. “Seriously... just use when you absolutely need to.”

“I’ll remember.” Evina smiled faintly. He waved and walked to the door to leave. That was the last rejection he would take from Pete’s Palace.

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Evina returned to the ship. Gyro was working inside, double-checking all the systems with the assistance from his little helper. The duck climbed into his seat and sat quietly.

“Did you have any luck?” The inventor asked. Evina sat silently and unhappily. “Oh, I was afraid of that. Um, there’s always Princesspinkcat and Goopy, right?”

“What’s the point?” Evina argued. He knew that Dynoboom was right. The kind pink cat was probably too shaken up from the last journey, and Goopy was more famous than ever before. He wouldn’t be able to devote more of his life to another foolish adventure. Really there was nobody left except for his father, who



wouldn't be a whole lot of help if they had to fight something.

The old chicken climbed into the pilot's seat and looked over at his son solemnly. "Well, I'm sorry about everything. Let me know if there's anything I could do to help.

Evina breathed to calm himself as the ship rose into the air again. He could think of something that would help, if his father would actually explain to him in detail what they were going to do. But he didn't want to bother someone else right now so he kept his feelings to himself. There was even a chance that this time alone could be better for their relationship. As he looked out the window he noticed that they seemed to be going back to Toontown.

Gyro looked as though he knew what Evina was thinking. "I think we are ready enough that I can officially announce our departure to Flippy." He explained. "It won't take too long, and then we can start having some fun for a change."

Evina knew he would see his friends again soon enough, so he decided not to fret. Ever since the change had happened, his emotions had been more intense. It was still going to take a lot of practice to completely take control of his mind.

The bright colors of Toontown Central met his eyes and the ship landed hastily in the middle of the playground. Evina was worried that Gyro might be scolded again for ripping up the grass.

"Just give me a few minutes." The chicken assured him as he hopped out. "In the meantime, you should take some time to rewind."

Evina smiled again. He forgot about his memories. With his history he would never be alone. Toontown would always be a part of him. Using a special technique he had practiced, he leaned back into a comfortable position and closed his eyes. Time was rushing back, faster and faster, rewinding to repeat some pleasant times from the past.

## Chapter 2

### Rewind

The excitement was almost too intense to bear. Evina ran through the Goofy Speedway tunnel to find his kart. But he wasn't the only one; there were hundreds of others rushing to get their vehicles, preparing to go out and explore.

One of the old grease monkeys from the shop was leaning up against the outside of the kart shop watching the other toons with a kind smile. If anyone here could remember a time when the highway was open it would be him.

Evina walked up to the elderly toon. "Hi, um, would you happen to know how to get to Duckburg?"

The monkey turned to look at him. He was still smiling. His eyes were focusing on the medal around the duck's neck. "I see you're one of the toons that helped clean up the cog mess."

"Yes, sir."

"Then I must thank you again for your service to Toontown. If anyone deserves to get to Duckburg it would be you. Now let me think... Alright, you should get on highway blue going south. Take this for a few miles until you get to Pluto Park. There you should get on highway green going westbound to Calisota."

"Thank you so much." Evina grinned. He ran to the highway, dropped the kart, and it expand on the pavement. It was finally time to be free.

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This was unbelievable. The world that he thought he had known well was in reality so huge and beautiful. He was flying through the desert on the highway with the warm wind blowing through his feathers. Every minute he had to check that this wasn't just a wild dream. He had judged everything so wrong and didn't want to think badly of the toons ever again.

Signs on the side of the road told him that he was getting very close to Duckburg and the first indications of population were visible. The road winded back and forth up a series of hills, the anticipation rose, and when he made it to the top to look at the other side he was completely amazed.

In a valley between the hills, on the coast of a huge sparkling ocean there was a gorgeous city. Evina instantly felt like he belonged there, even though he was still on the highway going down the hill.

He rolled into the city with awe. Some of the ducks were on the streets waving to new visitors. He wondered if any of them could be related to him, even in a distant way. Deep inside he wanted to have toons who would love and accept him. *And where did dad go to anyway? If I remember correctly he just disappeared unexpectedly.*

As he went further he saw some teams of other ducks cleaning up piles of scrap metal, large gears, and other debris. *There must have been some really strong cogs here.* Now he realized why the Toon Council didn't want just anybody to come in and get hurt.

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Now he was feeling properly responsible. He was living in his own house, a small one in an old neighborhood, not very far from where his father resided. They would now have plenty of time to meet and talk together whenever they wanted to.

He was happy, and his life was unusually peaceful. He had explored the town and met some nice toons, although he didn't expect he would make any close friends anytime soon. Money was something he had never really had much of, but that didn't feel like such a big problem.

Yet today was very odd. There was one thing that he couldn't explain. Why did Scrooge want to see him so badly? Evina was wearing his best clothes as he walked up the path to a very large mansion. It was so large and rich-looking that it almost appeared intimidating.

He nervously rang the doorbell and after a few moments the butler opened the large door. He let Evina step inside to behold the magnificence. This was even larger and more luxurious than The Golden Gear Hotel in Cogtropolis. Every detail from the paint to the floor to the furniture shouted a message of extreme wealth.

"Ah there you are." Scrooge beamed, slowly coming down the staircase. "I've wanted to properly meet with you for a while now."

Evina stepped forward to shake the billionaire's hand, but he didn't expect to receive a tight hug. "Uh... thanks."

Scrooge released him. "You saved us, and more importantly, brought me back home to all of my possessions."

"Really, it's not such a big deal. I didn't do it for fame."

"Follow me." The old man ordered politely. Evina followed him reluctantly to another long hall with a high ceiling. Each of the walls was lined with dozens of extremely large paintings in solid gold frames. "You live in Duckburg now, so you should learn about the history, a history that you have diligently preserved and now became a part of."

Evina was going to protest, but he kept his mouth shut and continued following Scrooge. He decided to enjoy his time here as much as he could.

"For example, Michael Mallard the Maverick, he reminds me a lot of you. Strong, courageous, handsome, and continuously fighting for freedom, wouldn't you agree?"

Evina was nervous. He looked up at the impressive painting and just shrugged. Scrooge continued talking about famous leaders and heroes of duck history until they reached the end of the hall where there stood an empty frame.

"And this... this is for you." He smiled. He turned to look at Evina who really looked confused now. "Well, aren't you excited to be in the hall of history? Don't you want to be one of the greats?"

"Well, to be honest. I'm not sure. Do I really deserve all of this?"

"Why of course you do! You defeated Cog Nation!"

"Yeah, and it's nice. But will I ever be able to have a normal life? Will this ever fade away? I want the toons to remember working together to fight the cogs. I want them to remember what they were supposed to

have learned, not just a single toon who became a war hero. That was never the point!”

Scrooge stood there silently with his mouth slightly open. He leaned more heavily on his cane.

“Anyway, thank you for the tour. It was... nice.” Evina excused himself to leave.

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*What is this all about?* Evina was watching some kind of rally in a park. A duck stood in front and he was obviously covered in some sort of paint to make him look red.

“Cogs... they’re so stupid, am I right?” the actor asked.

The crowds cheered. The real Evina looked on at this horrible demonstration. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Yeah, well I’m normally modest” the actor continued, “but I did DESTROY THEM ALL!”

The fans cheered. Now Evina noticed that many of them were holding signs with crossed out pictures of cogs, and wearing shirts with Evina’s face on them.

“But now I have nobody else to save.” The duck said. “So if anyone has their doodle stuck in a tree, you know who to call. Me!”

As the crowd went wild Evina stormed away from the scene. He didn’t want to watch any more of it. He didn’t want to be angry or cause any trouble. He only wanted everyone to just keep their mouths shut and forget about him.

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He closed his mind for a minute and stood in the darkness to rest. The memories speeding through his head were getting more and more unpleasant, so he decided to try and reflect on something more interesting. He sent his mind to another time and place.

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A large group had gathered in the Toontown Central playground. Evina walked over to this scene to find out what was going on. They appeared to be shopkeepers from all over Toontown. It was quite a peculiar sight to see until he noticed who was standing in the front, and everything suddenly made sense.

A brown duck was standing there with oddly shaped feathers on his head and a smug look on his face. Evina recognized him as Jared Sparx, the former Vice President of the cogs who was later converted into a toon after he became sick of his old life.

"Now I know a lot of you have been trying to do your best," Jared began, sounding very professional. "But come on, people. We need to do better." His eyes bore into Sticky Lou who gulped and looked back with fear. "What do you sell, son?"

"Uh... blue glue."

The duck found this a little strange but dismissed the feeling after remembering the way toons were. "Alright, but how do you convince people to buy your product?"

"I... sit on it to prove how strong it is."

Jared's eyes grew large. He backed away, looking disappointed.



"But I speak in rhymes when toons come in. I get extra points for that, right?"

The duck ignored him. "And what about you?" he pointed to another toon.

"I sell ice cubes on a stick."

"Please elaborate."

"Well, first I take ice, freeze it into cubes, and then I put them on sticks. It's not really all that popular I must admit."

Jared's face tightened more in frustration. "How are we supposed to be supporting the growing economy? Hmm?" He pointed to a graph behind him. "Toons are looking for products that suit their needs and you need to provide them. Why? It's because, as I used to say, marketing is the spark of life!"

Evina turned away from this scene smiling. He was glad to see that the V.P. had found his rightful place in a new life.

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"What are you doing?" the blue horse shouted above the noise of the machinery. A pig looked like he was about to doze off. "All these coins must be in perfect condition!"

Evina had just entered the busy Toontown mint where Mike Grease, the former C.F.O. of the cogs, had taken control of since he became a toon.

The horse spotted him. "Ah, Evina. How good it is to see you. I take it everything is going well for you?"

"Yes, thank you." Evina answered. "You look like you're doing a good job here yourself."

"I am. Still, we have a lot of work to do if we're going to replace the old jellybean system with a more modern one. I mean, currency shouldn't rot or decay, and it should never be... edible."

"Well, it's nice to hear you have a plan. So far you guys have been doing pretty well, you know, adjusting to toon life."

"Well it has its perks. Most importantly, there's not a single train around for miles! Ah... I still have such a phobia of those things."

Evina didn't want to evoke any more awkward thoughts so smiled and turned to leave. "See you later."

~~~~~

The red rabbit sat in his tidy office with his papers sitting in unusually orderly piles on his desk, his hands folded gently together. "Come in."

Evina entered and took a look around. "Nice place you got here."

"It will do." George Sprocket answered. He was formerly the Chief Justice of the cogs, and now performed that duty for the toons.

"I'm just visiting everyone who... changed. I want to make sure that everyone is adjusting their new life."

"Yes, I'm doing just fine." The rabbit answered. He tried to grin, but it was difficult.

"Um, is something wrong?"

"This world seems to have more issues than I anticipated. Have you seen some of the things going on in Toontown?"

Evina's mind briefly glimpsed back to the demonstrations, the rallies, and the imposters. "Yeah, I think I know what you mean."

"It's my responsibility to maintain social order." George spoke. "But that will only continue to work if the toons keep respect and responsibility. They must never forget the lessons we have taught them."

"I don't think things will be as bad as before. The cogs helped them get along very well. And you are a great lawmaker."

"Well, the best solution, if needed, would be to bring back the cogs."

"No!" Evina shot back sternly. The suggestion frightened him, especially now that both sides were his family. "A war worked once, but we cannot let history repeat itself, maybe with much worse consequences than before."

The rabbit sighed. "Well, I'll do my best."

"Please do. You're doing a great job." Evina turned and exited the room.

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A pink bear raised a golf club to swing.

"Stop! You can't use your driver for that!" The light green dog, former C.E.O. of the cogs, bent over and picked up a different club. He handed it to the bear. "*This* is your putter, much more suitable for this type of hit."

Evina was striding towards the dog and he was quickly noticed. "Evina! That is the *real* you, isn't it? I haven't seen you around for a while."

"Well as you can imagine, becoming an instant celebrity overnight can make one very busy... and stressed. So, how are things going for you?"

"Oh, excellent." He grinned. "Golfing full time is something I've always dreamed of doing."

The bear waited patiently, watching as the two of them talked.

"I have a personal question to ask, if you don't mind." The duck started. "Do you ever... miss your father much?"

The dog sighed, looking back at his memories in the old days. "Sometimes I do, but other times... I don't. It's not quite as sad as I thought it would be. I mean, after I found out he was a crazy toon hunter who wanted to destroy me, I lost my trust in him."

"So... you wouldn't want to see him again?"

"No. I think we're just content with how we are. Even though I heard of your story of talking to him in a dream, I think those days are over."

"Well, I wish you the best of luck." Evina said. "And I hope a life of golfing is all you wanted it to be."

The green dog watched the duck walk away, but then he had a sudden thought. "Wait! So what are *you* going to do next Evina? You know, after all that has happened, are you ever going to be... normal?"

Evina stopped in his tracks and his smile disappeared. "I don't know... Maybe I-" he walked away without finishing, feeling confused.

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Evina had had enough rewinding through the memories of his past, and he was ready to return to the

present, but a final vision came into view without his consent. He wasn't sure when or where it had happened. No, this actually wasn't his memory at all. In fact, he realized it wasn't a memory at all. This was actually happened in the present, live through the eyes of his father. A sudden connection had been made, and now Evina had a clear view of the interior of Flippy's office. The cyan dog sat behind his desk, and didn't look very happy at all.

"So, that's basically the plan. Wish us luck." Gyro finished.

At first Flippy didn't answer. He stared back into the face of the Chicken with his mouth open slightly, looking rather menacing. "Is this some sort of joke to you?"

Gyro was surprised and paused for a moment. "Uh... excuse me?"

"You probably think this is funny, don't you?"

"I... I don't think I understand-"

"Let me put it to you this way." He answered. "For the last sixteen years or so, you've been a rebel, running away from home, doing crazy things, disregarding the law, and changing the fate of our world."

Gyro didn't answer. He looked back at the leader of the Toon council with fear.

"I don't like this at all." Flippy continued.

"But we helped Toontown!" the chicken protested.

"That was luck! You best be happy that your little war didn't destroy everything. And no matter what you may think, you're not the leader here. How can I trust you? How can I know that when you take these

situations into your own hands that everything won't turn out disastrous? You have no idea how serious this situation is? Do you? How can you expect me to believe anything you say?"

Gyro's mouth was sealed shut.

"Because if you've been hiding this information from us, that concerns me. The security of Toontown is of utmost importance to the Toon Council. You aren't holding back any details, right? If so, then I would like to hear about it this instant."

"No sir."

Flippy sighed loudly and leaned back into his chair, closing his eyes, and raising a paw to rub them. "Sadly, you leave me with no choice but to let you go, hoping that you can fix this mess."

"I will fix it."

"And you can't come back until this problem is resolved."

"Yes sir."

"Then go." Flippy finished. "And uh... good luck."

Gyro stood up to leave the terrible tension of the office.

Evina's mind quickly zoomed away back to his own body in the present. He still wasn't sure what was so bad on Earth that was putting Toontown's safety in jeopardy. He especially didn't want to tell his father what he had accidentally seen. It was best to just forget about this and enjoy their adventure as best as they could.

## Chapter 3

# Oldman Island

Evina waited patiently in his seat and watched as Gyro returned to the spaceship, the stress clearly etched in the lines on his face. He climbed inside and started the engine without speaking.

“So...” Evina spoke carefully, “are we going now?”

“I think you and I need some cheering up first.” His father suggested. “This could be one last chance to find a friend to come with us, and a final memory to have of Toontown.”

Evina wasn't sure if he understood what Gyro was talking about. *Does he know that I had seen the end of that conversation?* He thought. Meanwhile the spaceship rose higher and higher into the sky, increasing to high speeds and heading out to the ocean in the distance. “What exactly is it?”

“Have you forgotten your best friend so easily? It's Harry!”

Evina's heart was flooded with powerful emotions of the past. “What! How could I forget?” He suddenly remembered what he had heard his father say earlier that morning, how Harry and Clara were now living on a tropical island. Looking back behind the ship, the world of Toontown was moving far away and there was nothing but the beautiful blue water below him.

Despite living the last few months in Duckburg he still hadn't taken any time to go to the beach. It was one of those experiences he had never tried before. But now this might change. He was excited to see his old

friends again, and to see the ocean. Nobody had ever talked about wanting to see the tooniverse more than Harry had.

For a few minutes Evina sat back and watched the waves below. They looked so small from his height. At the speed they were flying it wouldn't take long to reach any island. Then something eventually came in sight, it had to be Oldman Island.

They circled around the small piece of land and descended, carefully resting on a beautiful sandy beach.

Evina immediately hopped out and his feet sunk into the hot sand. It was surprising at first but he got used to it. Someone was approaching him from behind. He turned around to see a red rabbit.

"Oh, hi guys!" Clara greeted them. She was wearing a straw hat and sunglasses. "We were wondering if you were ever going to visit us. Harry is inside. You should come see him."

The two of them followed her. Evina was a little nervous about talking to Harry but the interesting atmosphere was more than enough to occupy his attention and keep him calm.

They came to a large bamboo structure that looked like an amazing house for anyone to live in. Once entering through the front door, Evina was hit with a breeze of mildly warm air and tropical fragrances.

To his amazement, the inside was even more colorful than the outside world. Every surface was decorated with artifacts that were completely foreign to him.

Harry was soon spotted sitting in a reclining chair and dozing slightly. The light green rabbit was dressed similarly as his wife, wearing shorts with a shirt that had



colorful flowery patterns all over it. He was lying directly under the window in the ceiling where the sun provided almost all the light for the room. Everything about him was much younger than Evina's first memories. After being redrawn he was refreshed again, and he hoped to stay like this way for a while. It was going to take a while for Evina to get used to how he looked now.

Suddenly Harry woke up. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. At the sight of the visitors his eyes grew wide. "Evina!"

The duck ran forward and they hugged.

"I haven't seen you for months! How have you been doing?"

"I'm fine." Evina admitted, even though there were so many things on his mind. "Uh, I have something to talk to you about. Do you think I could speak to you... alone?"

Harry hadn't been expecting to hear something like this so soon, but he led the way into another room where he sat down a table. This looked like the dining room and the light came in through a back door.

The duck sat opposite to him and looked into his face was anxiety. "I need to get this off my chest." He said. "We are going on another adventure today. Now I don't know exactly how dangerous it will be, but we can't find a single toon to come with use. I know how much fun you had leading that last adventure and wondered if you could come."

Harry's smile vanished and Evina was filled with horror, just as he had feared. He already knew what the answer was.

"I'm sorry..." the rabbit spoke, breaking eye contact.

"Let me quote you." The duck interrupted. "*It would be my dream to explore all the other worlds in the tooniverse.*"

"Listen." Harry stopped him sternly. "Do you remember what happened towards the end of our trip?"

Evina sat still and silent like before. He listened to every word although he didn't like it one bit.

"We went to face the cogs and... I died. To be perfectly honest, *everyone* died."

Evina closed his eyes and breathed heavily.

Harry continued. "Do you know why I aged? I was stressed, much too stressed. And I wasn't supposed to let that sort of thing happen to me. As you have probably seen, Scrooge's obsession with money wasn't exactly healthy on his appearance either. You know what I mean, right?"

Evina opened his eyes but turned his head. He was too afraid to answer or look into his friends eyes.

"The only reason why we are sitting here today is because of your... uh..."

"My problem." Evina finished in a nasty voice. "My curse."

"Now listen..."

"I know you all see me for who I am, a monster, just like my dejected father."

"No! What you've been given is special. I know you've probably been told this before, but please try to listen, just try to understand. Your change may not be curable. It's not something that you *chose* to get at all. Neither did you do anything to deserve it, but it is *very* important. Without it, we wouldn't be alive, and knows what other use it has to the entire toon world."

Evina tried his best to not let any tears fall.

“You have a blessing that none of us can claim, it’s an entirely different perspective. Do you know just how valuable that is? Although you can’t fully understand us just like we can’t understand you, this difference is vital to our world. If you think about the pros instead of the cons then you will feel better. That is the only way you will ever learn to accept this.”

Evina stood up to leave the room. “Thanks for talking with me, Harry.”

In the main room, Evina plopped down on a chair next to the one that Harry had used. He was feeling uneasy. *What are we still doing here?* He thought. *He already said now. I need to make my time here useful somehow.* Then he spotted something on a nearby table under the lamp, it was a pamphlet that seemed to explain the theme of their home.

He opened it and quickly saw pictures of happy looking humans on a beach. It took him only a couple of minutes to read it thoroughly. Apparently, all these unique things were inspired by a place called Hawaii, which happened to be on Earth. That world sounded like such a bizarre place. He thought about their journey ahead, full of amazement and probably full of just as much terror as well.

Next to the spot where the pamphlet had been sitting, a phonograph was there, waiting to have its record played. Evina turned it on and set the needle to the beginning. He heard a form of music, very peaceful, quiet, slow, and calming. It was probably from that Hawaii place as well.

Clara and Gyro seemed to be away, but they returned moments later. The chicken sat down at another chair while the rabbit brought Evina a drink. The

glass had a tiny pink umbrella floating on top. He took a sip and tasted a tart mixture of many odd fruits. It was good, though.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, feeling the sunlight. The panic was fading. Just traveling alone with his father might not be that bad now that he thought more about it. At least they couldn't complain about the "problem" because they each had it. They were together on the same level whether it seemed to be above or below others. There would be fewer heads to feed and fewer silly toons running around causing trouble by not knowing what to do.

They were going to discover many things out there, but what he secretly hoped most of all was that he could discover who he was on the inside, the true Evina. His identity was still so confusing, even after having his mind reopened. It seemed as though the thing had touched his life in many ways, even from the very beginning.

Still, he was going to miss Harry. Once he came to the island he started feeling the familiar emotions that he hadn't felt for such a long time. This was nice for a change, but also so difficult to leave behind at a time like now.

Wanting to be alone again, he got up and headed outside to the beach. Now he could have more time to examine the scenery. The island wasn't very large but it was very tranquil. Palm trees dotted the landscape all around. He sat down under one of the trees and watched the waves crash against the shore with a quiet whooshing noise. This was much better than Donald's Dock. After a couple of minutes, the water sounded like a whisper. He could also hear the wind, and it felt cool

and tasted salty. A seagull squawked somewhere in the distance.

To his side he found a bunch of shells. He spent time chucking them one by one into the deep blue waters, seeing how far they could go.

But soon he was interrupted by the sounds of footsteps in the sand. Gyro came to see him, and he was now wearing a strange wreath around his neck made of colorful flowers.

“Uh, are you ready to go, son?”

“Just a little bit longer...” Evina requested. He was finally beginning to accept going alone with his father now. His feelings of being a monster were pushed out of his mind, for a while at least.

“I hope you don’t hate me.” It wasn’t Gyro who spoke but Harry. Evina turned around again to see the rabbit standing there looking embarrassed.

“I could never hate you.” The duck smiled. He jumped up and embraced his friend in one last hug. “I’ll see you again soon.” He assured him. But that statement sounded strange and insincere to him. This could take a lot longer than he wanted, and there was still that possibility that he might not return at all. At least his mysterious change looked like it could increase his chances of survival.

“Have a great adventure.” Harry waved at them as they headed back to the ship. Evina looked back and tried to think optimistically.

It was amusing to see that Gyro’s little helper had made its own little wreath out of tiny flower petals, hanging around its small light bulb head.

As Gyro was arriving back at the ship he was carrying a briefcase with him. It was probably given to

him by Harry. Evina wondered what it was about, but that wasn't important to discuss now.

The duck kicked the sand off his feet as he climbed inside, then he headed to his seat to rest again. As the doors shut and they rose into the air, he looked down at the island, seeing the small figures below waving up at them. He savored the moment, and he felt so many different things. But most importantly he actually felt happy.

## Chapter 4

# The Lost Slave

Evina believed he was fully content and ready to start the new adventure. This was finally the time for some real awesomeness to begin. "So, away we fly, I guess."

Gyro looked sheepish. "Uh, I need to make one more stop." Evina shot back a distrustful glare. "This is the very last stop! I promise! I want to make sure we have all the supplies we need, stuff that could be found in Cogtropolis. For an adventure of this scale we must be *completely* prepared."

Evina decided to accept this last stop and he rested again to save all possible energy when the time came to explore. This time they were traveling to Cogtropolis across the ocean, a different way than the route they had taken last year going the opposite way.

The ship rose higher until there was nothing but a blue blur below. Whereas it took the toons weeks before to get to Cog Nation, Evina was getting a trip there in an hour and a half.

But after resting and possibly dozing off for a short time, he looked out and saw an end to the blue. There was a stretch of grey needles out there, Cogtropolis, the capital of the extinct Cog Nation. It was tremendous in size, especially when visible from high about the ground. The edge did indeed touch the ocean.

Evina suddenly remembered his night long ago on the roof of their cog apartment, smelling the seawater in the warm wind. This memory brought back so many others, and he had to assure himself that his

friends at home would be safe. He lost them once and he was determined he wouldn't let that ever happen again.

"Welcome back to our city." Gyro proclaimed. "Population: us." He landed the ship on a random street. "This really won't take too long."

"I'll be patient." Evina answered, but he exited the ship as well.

"Please, don't wander too far." His father begged him.

"Seriously, dad, this place is one hundred percent empty."

Gyro smiled weakly, something he did quite often, and then slowly walked away.

Evina strolled in the opposite direction. Because it was the other side of the world, it wasn't day yet. The tiny lights from dawn were barely visible on the horizon, but it was just enough light for him to see where he was going.

It was a very strange but thoughtful experience. This was the great empire he had inherited, a giant city of gray and metal with not a single living thing in sight. All he heard was the sound of wind blowing through the gaps between the buildings.

He looked up and saw the countless rows of needle-like towers pointing up to the clouds, giants standing in the darkness. One of them far away stood above the others. It was the headquarters of Cogs Inc. Today it looked much less intimidating than before. This was probably due to the fact that the cogs were no longer a threat to anyone, but the faint light of dawn also made it look beautiful. *How is it possible that I survived falling off that thing?*



Although some things appeared be the same as before, there were so many details that were different. As he walked down the street, there was tons of litter everywhere. Rusted pieces of cogs and cars blanketed every surface on the ground. Up above, the city lights were gone as the power was cut off. Many of the buildings had broken windows, caused by the explosion of cogs. Together, the whole place looked like some abstract piece of art.

Now he figured he had walked far enough, and he turned to head back to the ship before he got lost. After all, everything in each direction looked very similar.

But an unfamiliar noise scared him. It didn't belong. He immediately stopped and turned around to see where it had come from. *Was it really that manhole? No, that can't be.* He thought. But then he heard it again. There was something under there, and it sounded alive.

He approached it cautiously. He had not expected to encounter anything unusual until after their adventure began. Lifting the metal cover, he slowly peeked inside. The sound was louder, and he could smell food. *Is it possible that someone could live in here? But somehow after all I've seen happen, I'm starting to believe that anything is possible.* He shouted down. "Hey, is someone down there?"

A small yelp was heard and the scuffling of feet was heard. A pair of eyes stared back at Evina, the rest of the body hidden. "Are you going to hurt me?"

"What? Why would I-"

"Oh, well in that case, feel free to come down."

Evina hesitated, but it did not sound like someone unfriendly so he climbed down the ladder and into the tunnel.

The place was set up like a tiny house with everything stuffed into one room. Trash and food were lying everywhere and a television was tuned in on a soap opera broadcasting from Toontown. A toon was sitting in a dingy armchair in front of the screen. It was a horse, and even though the lighting was bad, he thought it looked brown.

"What... how are you here?"

"I could ask you the same question." The horse replied.

"But... don't you realize this is Cogtropolis?"

"Uh, duh." The other shot back.

Evina wasn't sure how sane this toon was, or how it was even possible for him to live in a place like this.

"So anyway, how did you get past the cogs?" the horse continued, interrupting Evina's thoughts. "I thought there weren't supposed to be any toons in Cog Nation."

"All the cogs are gone. The whole nation was destroyed."

"Oh really? I was beginning to wonder why I haven't seen one lately. It felt like a while."

"Half a year to be more precise. Now you have to answer some of *my* questions." The duck demanded. "How did *you* get here?"

The other toon sighed and turned off the TV, leaning back into his ugly chair. "Well, it was long ago. I was the victim of a strange event. I used to be normal like you, honestly I was. One day I was in the Sellbot

Factory in Toontown, fighting cogs, but when we got to the supervisor, he was busy talking to someone I didn't recognize. It was a level 32 Mr. Hollywood, apparently the supervisor's supervisor. All the toons with me immediately fled when they saw him, as you could imagine. And I stood there alone facing a bunch of Sellbots, and nobody frightened me more than that Mr. Hollywood. He kidnapped me, seriously.

"After traveling with limited oxygen for a while I arrived in Cogtropolis. The cog wanted me to be his slave and perform a lot of menial work for free. I had no choice, and for a while I wondered what my life was worth. But that cog became more nervous every day. It turns out he wasn't supposed to be taking any toons into the nation, and he didn't want me to be discovered.

"And so he hid me in these sewer maintenance tunnels. Nobody ever came down here so it was the perfect place to live. My work for him became less and less frequent until at last he gave up on me. I still had a huge supply of stuff like food so that wasn't a problem, and meeting a cog became very rare. Then I suddenly stopped hearing them at all."

Evina was shocked. "So you mean to tell me you've been living down here for years and never left?"

"Yeah, I guess. Time flies when you're doing... well, I don't really know what I'm doing." He tossed another empty bag of chips away.

The duck rubbed his head and leaned back against the tunnel's metal wall. "I can't believe this."

"Yeah, well stuff happens, man." The horse told him. "It's a thing we call life."

"What is your name, anyway?" Evina demanded.

The slave looked up and pondered. "Hmm, I don't really remember. But the cog nicknamed me Glue Stick."

"That's awful!"

"Actually, I think I've become accustomed to it. Now who are you?"

"I am Evina Gearloose."

"Pleased to meet you. Anyway, it was a nice chat but I have some more shows to catch up on."

If anything shocked Evina, nothing was as strong as this. "No, you have to get out of here!"

"What for?"

"Come on!" He grabbed the horse and dragged him to the ladder. It seemed like the other toon had become too weak to climb so Evina had to push him out.

"It's cold out here." He said as soon as he stepped out.

"Get used to it!" Evina climbed out and sat next to the freed slave who looked like he completely forgot what the outside world looked like. "Now we need to get you back to Toontown."

"Uh, no offense, but I don't think I belong there anymore. Those days are long gone. Do you even have a clue what I've been through?"

Evina felt like retorting with a lengthy explanation of his troubled past, but he ignored it. "Alright then. Would you like to come with me and my father?"

"Where?"

"On an adventure out to other worlds."

The horse didn't seem to believe him.

"Really it would be great."

The other one sighed. "Ok, why not..."

“But as long as you are willing to accept danger.”

Glue Stick gave him a weird look. Evina suddenly realized that he shouldn't ask that sort of thing so soon after saving some guy's life. “You know what? Anything that happens will probably be better than going back to Toontown... as long as it's not boring.”

“Alright, let's go!” Evina took the horse's dirty hand and led the way back to the ship. Although this guy was annoying, he once again felt that excitement at the thought of having someone else to come with them. *Hopefully this guy will prove to be useful. Wait, okay, maybe not. I'll ask Gyro anyway.*

“You're weird.” the horse said unexpectedly.

“What?”

“Well how come your eyes are all funny?”

Evina didn't want to explain, he just led the other back to the ship. Once they came up to it, Evina opened the door and let him step inside.

“Hmm, nice place you got.” Glue Stick remarked. “Can it really fly?”

“Oh yeah.” The duck beamed. Then there was a loud squeak behind him. He didn't realize that Gyro's helper had stayed in his ship. Looking at the little robot, he could clearly see its anxiety of having an unfamiliar toon in the ship.

Evina tried his best to him it down. “Don't worry. He's a good guy.”

The tiny robot didn't seem to believe him, and turning to look out of the back window it saw Gyro returning to the ship with a ton of random stuff.

The old chicken slid a door open with a free finger and looked up at the others. He instantly dropped

all the objects when he saw Glue Stick and his mouth fell open.

"It's alright dad." Evina calmed him. Then in great detail he explained how he had found the horse and what had happened to him. The whole time Gyro's expression told him he was unconvinced.

"So even if he is telling the truth, how will he be of any use to us?" Gyro asked with his arms folded. He sat down in the pilot's seat and glared at the horse.

Evina wasn't sure how he was going to answer. He didn't seem to think this through very well. And maybe Gyro had also become too used to the idea of going alone with his son.

"Well, I know a lot of stuff." Glue Stick answered.

"Like?" demanded Gyro.

"For example, all that cog tech that you dropped." He pointed out each item. "That's a neutrino modulator, and that's a negative energy battery unit, and that is... ooh, a full set of industrial grade gralt ion turbo engine fuses."

Gyro looked mildly impressed, and even Evina hasn't been expecting that. "Oh, alright. You can come."

The horse looked pleased and comfortable for the first time in who knew how long.

Gyro took out a clipboard. "Now it's time for the final inventory." He glanced at his helper which saluted back at him. "Food and water supply." He began. There was an affirmative squeak. "Fuel." Squeak. "Backup energy." Squeak. "Spare parts." Squeak. "Pencil." Squeak.

Evina jerked his head to see where the helper was pointing to. The giant magical pencil they had

stolen from the cogs last year was locked away in a drawer at the back of the ship.

“Good, good.” Gyro smiled. “And now for the systems.”

The helper walked over to a series of computer controls against a wall and turned it on. Evina hadn’t seen this system turned on before. It was covered in lots of multicolored lights and monitors and emitted a mechanical hum.

“All systems are go.” The chicken announced. “Seal hatches.”

There was a suction noise and the doors were sealed airtight. They didn’t look like they would ever be opened in this state.

“Prepare for liftoff.”

Evina made sure that everyone’s seatbelts were secure, and then he gave his father a thumb up.

“Here we go!” Gyro grinned. The ship rose into the air, above the street, above Cogtropolis, and higher than they had ever gone before that year. With incredible speed it blasted away into the sky.

## Chapter 5

# Space

Evina's body was pushed further back into his seat as he watched the clouds fly past them. They went almost straight up into the sky, and the engine rumbled loudly. It was thrilling, but a little hard to breathe.

Then, as he expected, the sky became darker and darker until there everything was black with lots of little stars. At this point the pressure eased up and instead of being held to his seat, he felt held to nothing. He was falling, such an unusual sensation which quickly became wearisome. Then there was a loud electric zap as the helper activated the artificial gravity.

Evina looked back and saw Glue Stick's face. The sarcasm, the excitement, and anything he had been before was all gone. There was nothing but sheer terror on his face, and he didn't look like he was going to calm down. And then he looked further back through the rear window. It was odd that they weren't orbiting the world as he remembered before. They were moving away. At this point Evina started looking scared just like Glue Stick. Everything he had always been, both of the toons and the cogs, and all of their history, and anything that had felt real, it was all fading away. Their wonderful planet looked smaller and smaller, a beacon of beauty in the empty silence and darkness.

He stood up and walked over to Glue Stick. "Okay, now calm down." His words were for both the horse and for himself. The other didn't seem to be listening to him. "You're still alive, and everything is



fine." The horse was finally starting to breathe more evenly and he took his eyes off of the fading world.

It was like claustrophobia, because their fragile lives were contained in this small ship, even though it was still of comfortable size. Also, it was like the opposite of claustrophobia, the vast expanse of space was intimidating. It was never-ending nothingness.

"Is everyone alright back there?" Gyro asked.

"Yeah," Evina returned uneasily.

"Well you need to say goodbye to Toontown and get back into your seats. Things are about to get wilder."

As Evina buckled up again, he looked back and caught one last glimpse of his world, so tiny in the middle of nothing.

"Also, I hope you're not sensitive to motion sickness. Helper, activate warp." Gyro ordered.

The ship suddenly blasted forward faster than Evina had ever felt before. He didn't know what was going on as the pressure against him was intense and all the stars were a blur. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe, and then things became calm again. When he opened his eyes again there was nothing seen outside the window. All he heard with the low rumbling of the engines.

"Where did the stars go?" Evina asked.

"We're going too fast to see them. We are traveling using technology that hasn't ever been used by our toonkind before."

Evina was stunned. Now they were completely isolated in this ship without seeing where they were going.

"You better get used to it," Gyro explained, "because it's the only way to get anywhere in this huge tooniverse."

"It must be incredibly vast..." the younger one replied.

"Oh yes, and it just keeps expanding. New ideas and creations are constantly streaming from the human world."

Evina took a moment to consider this. "So how long will it take us to reach Earth?"

Gyro shrugged. "It's uh... kind of hard to tell, especially more so because my ship is still rather weak. It needs to charge frequently using toony radiation. So we'll need to land on several worlds along the way. Is that alright with you?"

Evina beamed. "That's great. I wanted to explore all kinds of places."

"Plus you know what they say..." The older one continued. "It's not so much about the destination, but the journey that counts."

A groan came from the back. Glue Stick was looking sick. "I wish we could just turn around and go home. Why did I decide to come with you kooks?"

Evina tried not to laugh. Instead he got up and walked around. "I think we need to familiarize ourselves with this place."

"Ah yes!" The chicken agreed. He jumped out of his seat and walked back to them. "Let me show you everything."

He walked over to a large control panel and pointed. "Don't touch this. If you look here, there is a clock with Toontown time on it. We will base our schedule on it."

Then he gestured to the area they were standing in. "This is the main area. It can be our game room, lounge, kitchen, et cetera."

He now faced the back of the ship. Those are the bedrooms. Evina can take the one on the right, and Glue Stick can take the one on the left. The rest of them can be left alone for now. I will be staying on the room at the back left across from the bathroom.

Evina couldn't help but look at the horse. "Uh, speaking of which, you could probably be the first to check it out. One might need a shower after all those years of being a cog slave."

While the horse went to clean up, Gyro and his helper were still checking things on the ship, and so Evina was free to do whatever he wanted. He went to his room to check it out.

He turned on the light and saw that the place was very small. It was not claustrophobic so much as it was compact and hard to move around in. Still, it was more than anyone could ask to have on a crazy adventure like this one. His bed was on the floor, and above it was a series of shelves and drawers where he could keep stuff. Right next to his pillow there was a window looking outside, although there wasn't anything to see now.

He lay down on his bed and noticed that above him on the underside of the shelves there were some controls to manage air flow and extra lighting. It was similar to the airplane he took in Cog Nation. *How could Gyro make all this so detailed? Did the helper do most of the work? For that matter how could he fit all this into the small ship? How could he even design all of this? Where can a toon possibly get so much knowledge on*

*these topics? Is it somehow related to that thing that lives inside us? I think there might be a lot more to it than we realize.*

He shut his eyes to try what it felt like. Surprising, it was relaxing. The hum of the ship provided a calming noise to sleep by. But obviously it wasn't time to rest now. He needed to stay on schedule, and it was only five in the evening on the clock.

Evina returned to the main hall. Gyro and his helper had finished their work and were now building a card tower. Then the horse emerged from the bathroom, wearing new clothes that Gyro seemed to randomly have with him. Glue Stick looked much better in this condition, and the duck hoped his attitude would eventually be cleaned up too.

"How are you doing?" Gyro asked his son.

"Good." Evina answered, and this time he was telling the truth. Glue Stick went to his room and then suddenly the image of the pencil came into Evina's head. He knew this was the perfect time to discuss some things on his mind. "Could I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure thing." His father answered.

"Uh... alone." Evina said kindly to the helper who then walked away. When they were alone, Evina sat down on a seat nearby across from his father.

"What's on your mind?"

Evina was hesitant to ask, afraid it might be something wrong to say. "I was just thinking about... the pencil."

"Yeah?"

"Well, we used it bring back my friends, and even the four cogs. Why can't we also use it for something else?"

Gyro looked nervous like he knew where this question was going. "You mean..."

"Mom." Evina finished.

"Uh, well, I'll be honest. That thought occurred to me too."

"So why not?"

"Because... son, some things are complicated. Some things are not meant to be tampered with?"

"What could possibly be wrong with being together as a family again?"

"There's nothing wrong with a happy family, but you don't understand. The tooniverse has moved on without her. So many things have changed. Too much of our world can be changed by modifying fate. We must be extremely careful."

"Why?"

"Because... we just can't! Literally anything could happen and we couldn't ever take that risk!"

Evina was feeling sad yet again that day. He wondered if it would be even harder on him if he had known her when she was still alive. "I... uh... what happened to her?"

Gyro's eyes looked slightly wet now. "For the time being, I'll tell you this: It was an accident. Nobody can be blamed."

Evina was only barely satisfied for the moment, so he decided to change to another topic. "Why did you bring that pencil with us anyway? What use is it if we aren't supposed to change fate?"

"It has immense power. I thought we might use it bargain with the humans."

"Bargain for what?"

The chicken gulped and was silent for a while. "Alright, son, I'll be completely honest with you now. I wasn't on Earth for long because something happened, something very sinister."

Evina began to sweat. "What was it?"

"I encountered a man in a dark alley. And his mind was briefly open for a second so I could see inside. It was seething with rage and anger. He knew exactly what I was and he wanted to destroy me. There was nothing that would ever deter him from completing his mission. Also, there could be a change he located the portal that I used to enter Earth."

"What? We could be destroyed any moment!"

"Well take comfort in this small thought: if there was a way he could use it, we might be gone already. I don't think he can hurt us from over there, but we'll have to go there to try to stop him anyway."

"What did he look like?"

"I can't say. It was dark and I just ran. Only the thoughts in his mind that moment were what I saw."

Then Glue Stick exited his room and came over to them. Evina had had enough information to think about for now, so he decided it was time to eat and go to bed.

"What's for dinner, dad?"

"Space food."

"What?" Glue Stick asked.

"It's not as bad as it sounds, or at least my version is better." He walked them over to a cabinet neatly filled with cubes. "This is it. Just choose your

flavor and add water. The cube is the most efficient way to store nutrition.”

Evina didn't know what to do so he chose at random, taking a small but heavy white cube of mac and cheese. Then he took a plate and placed the cube on top. “Is this right?”

“Yes, now just add water.”

Evina noticed a jug of water was already sitting nearby. He poured some onto the cube which began to burn immediately. It glowed white and hot for a few seconds, and then with a pop it exploded into a full steamy meal on the plate. “This is epic! How did you do this?”

Gyro smiled. “Well, I've been studying toon science, specifically physics, which happens to be much different from the human world. And from the things I've learned I put them into developing things like this. The ideas have been around for a long time, plus I've had fifteen years alone...” the helper suddenly squeaked. “Sorry, *almost* alone. That was plenty of time to think some things through.”

All of them were optimistic about the trip so far. Even Glue Stick began to be more polite once he had eaten well.

“So,” Evina began while cleaning up the food, “do you have a plan on where we're going?”

“Not really, except for tomorrow. We are going to see something very special, and I want it to be a surprise. After that, well, we could go anywhere!”

The lights in the ship were dimmed when the clock said nine at night. It had been a really long and eventful day for everyone, especially Evina. That morning he had woken up far away, in his home in

Duckburg, unaware that that night he would be in space, traveling to other worlds.

Gyro's helper stretched, then sat down on the floor and plugged himself into an outlet in the wall, going to sleep.

Glue Stick and the Gearlooses headed back to their respective rooms. Evina didn't worry about changing clothes but slid into his bed drowsily. The temperature was nice, the low hum of the ship was relaxing, it was dark, and he was comfortable.

There was so much behind him, so much ahead of him, so many memories, and so much confusion from so many unanswered questions. But for now he could be patient and set those things aside for later. Tonight he only peacefully drifted off to sleep.



## Chapter 6

# Family Reunion

The duck's eyes opened. He didn't know what time it was but he felt relatively well rested. No, it was actually very hard to tell how he felt. If he could get a clock in here that would be useful.

He stood up and felt his way to the doorknob in the dark. He opened it and stepped out into the dimly lit main chamber. The clock said 7:13 in the morning, so it wasn't quite so bad.

The helper seemed to have charged quickly because it was already checking the systems, reading the monitors, and pressing buttons.

"Are we on course to get to Gyro's first stop?" he asked. The helper nodded in reply. "That's nice." Now that he was standing up he could begin to notice how tired he still was. Sounds of movement coming from the other rooms told him that the others were beginning to wake up as well. He decided it would be best to eat now.

There was a cabinet devoted to breakfast and he scanned the items. A breakfast burrito sounded interesting, and this suddenly reminded him of his friend Rocky. While he waited for his food to heat and inflate, he checked his pocket, making sure that the glass vial he was given was still there. He still have no idea what the thick red liquid was, but it needed to be put somewhere safe, so he quickly returned it to his room.

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“So how are you doing this morning?” Gyro asked at the kitchen table. Although they were in space, the aroma of food after waking up was something familiar and comforting, and the inside lights were turned up brighter.

“I’m fine.” Evina replied sleepily, still unaccustomed to the effects this strange adventure was having on him.

The chicken finished a glass of orange juice and then looked over his shoulder to read a monitor. “Oh, we only have three minutes until we drop out.”

“What?”

“We need to get into our seats.” Gyro said, doing his best to clean up everything rapidly. “Did you bring any formal clothes?”

“What? No.” the duck replied feeling astonished.

“Hmm, well, it probably won’t matter too much. Just make sure you and Glue Stick have your seatbelts on tight enough.”

Evina went to his seat and buckled up. It didn’t matter how tired his body still felt because he was excited to see what their first stop was going to be. The countdown timer only had a few seconds left.

“Brace yourselves,” the pilot warned, “this may be a little rough.”

Suddenly Evina felt like he was being pushed forward out of his seat. It was the reverse of yesterday and he felt like he was slowing down a whole lot. Then after a few moments, everything returned to normal. After a slow and blurry flash the stars could be seen outside the window again. They were headed towards a planet that shined silver. “Is that where we’re going?”

“Yes.” His father confirmed.

As much as Evina tried, he could not think of a reason why they were going there. But he also found it hard to contain his excitement of seeing a new world.

The glimmering silver sphere grew larger as they neared it. Something down there was very shiny. The ship fell faster and faster. This world didn't look like it had any atmosphere.

The helper turned off the artificial gravity as the gravity from the world began to be felt. Gyro was navigating to a point on the surface that his computer was guiding him too. Soon it looked as though the ground was made of glass, in towers of so many heights and shapes.

They approached the world rapidly and Gyro attempted to brake as they sunk down past the glass structures to a circle in the ground. A glass dome shut over the circle, trapping the ship inside.

Evina was confused and worried at first, and then there was a sudden flash of red light which startled him. Several lasers seemed to be thoroughly scanning the ship inside and out.

After the lasers stopped there was a hissing sound of air moving. According to one of the monitors he looked at, the outside pressure increased until it matched the pressure inside the ship.

"Unseal hatches." Gyro ordered, and promptly the suction sound happened again.

Evina opened a door cautiously and looked out at a beautifully bizarre alien world. He took a step out on the polished metal floor. Then he looked up at the black sky and the many stars and galaxies out there. "Where are we?"

"You'll see very soon." His father answered.

Just then, on the far side of the dome, a door opened and a cog walked out. It was definitely a cog, and Evina was certain of it, but it looked different than any one he had seen before. It was wearing a formal white suit with a gear on the front.

By this time the duck was beginning to understand where they were. He remembered Gyro saying yesterday morning how he had sent the President's hard drive to another world. But how could they have built this so quickly?

"Welcome, honored guests. Please come with me." The cog requested with a familiar cogish tone, although friendly.

Gyro followed it and Evina was about to go as well, but he noticed that Glue Stick was still sitting in the ship.

"Are you coming?" He asked.

"No way! I just escaped the cogs and now you come to see more of them? This is cruel. I'll stay here, thank you very much."

Evina smiled a little and then ran to catch up with the other two. As far as he could see, everything was made of glass. Every building and hall could be seen out of every wall. He was walking with Gyro and the cog in a hallway, lit by bright lights. They soon reached another set of doors that looked like a wide elevator.

"He wishes to see you upstairs." The cog finished, bowing to them as they entered the doors.

Even the elevator was made of glass and Evina could see the rest of this huge place behind him. They didn't need to press a button on the elevator because

one was automatically selected and they began a smooth ride upward.

They quickly arrived at another set of doors identical to all the others they had seen before. After the doors opened they stepped out into a large oval room with guards standing around and leather seats set neatly at the end of the room.

In the center seat sat William Gears, the former Chairman of Cogs Incorporated. He wore a smile, a white suit like the others, and had his eyes wide open.

Evina had seen the eyes many times before, mostly filled with anger in dreams, then once on the rooftop above the clouds, filled with confusion and fear, but this time was different. Now the gleaming silver eyes were full of compassion. The face was no longer pulled tight and now it was polished clean. It didn't even look the least bit threatening any more.

"Welcome Masters Gearloose." The cog spoke in a calm but very deep voice. "What a pleasant but unexpected visit."

"Well I'm sorry that I didn't call ahead of time, but you know, we do live on another planet." Gyro grinned sheepishly.

"It's perfectly fine." Bill continued. "Please come and have a seat." Both Evina and Gyro went and sat in leather covered armchairs facing the chairman.

He waited for one of them to speak, but neither did, so he continued. "Um... would you like a beverage?"

"No thanks, we're fine." Evina responded.

"Ok, I'm curious, what are your first impressions?"

"It's wonderful." The chicken answered.

"Yes, I do like your new style." Evina agreed. "But, uh, how did you manage to do it so fast. Weren't you all... extinct... only last year?"

"Our new constructionbots work extremely fast and efficiently. This planet is perfect for us as it is filled with metal that's easy to extract. And as for the glass, it's a nice theme, but you wouldn't believe how much work it is to keep clean." He paused for a while, still looking confused as to why they were here. "Why did you decide to drop in and visit The Crystal City?"

Gyro shrugged. "You are our friends, well, our family too, and I created you. We wanted to say hello, that's all."

"Then I take it things are doing well back in Toontown?"

Evina waited a moment to answer "Good enough."

"And what about Jared, Mike, George and my son?"

"They're doing fantastic. Each of them has found the place in Toontown where they fit in."

"That's marvelous. I feel bad for the way they were treated back then, you know." His eyes drifted away to bad memories. "And I hope the... scars of war have healed." He finished softly.

"They are still healing, but at least there is progress." Evina replied honestly. "But I'm afraid we will find ourselves in war again."

If it was even possible, the cog's eyes opened wider than any other time before. This looked like the new information he was seeking. "How so?"

"Well, you see, we have just started another journey. It is also for exploration as it was before, but

there is more to it. We believe there is a... threat to the entire Tooniverse. And it probably has to do with the humans."

The chairman sat perfectly still for a minute, and the silence was awkward. Evina began to wonder if it had been the wrong time to tell him that. "Well, that does sound a little worrisome. But there is nothing that we can't accomplish when we work together."

"Actually there are only three of us." The duck explained. "The last one is still in the ship."

"What I mean is we, the cogs, want to be your allies. We want to help you in any way that we can."

The father and son looked at each other. They were flattered.

"So if you ever need us," Bill went on, "Well... we will know. There is that connection, you see?"

"By the way, where is the president?" Gyro asked, looking around.

"Oh, he's busy being retired. He appointed me to be the president now. After all, I once showed to the world that I enjoyed that leadership sort of thing. Perhaps too well..."

"So, speaking of this connection..." Evina interrupted. "It's obvious that my father and I have this sort of bond, and it likely has something to do with you."

"Yes?"

"Well, would you please explain it in some way?" Evina begged. "Did he give some of his life to you? How can metal be alive and have feelings? Well, no offense. I've seen so much of cogs in Cog Nation that I know you are fully aware of your existence. What happened?"

The chairman dropped his head and sighed. "I wish I could tell you, but I still know hardly more about it than you. There seems to be a connection somewhere between us and you. That much is certain by looking into your eyes. But I am also confident that this is not caused by natural means. The source of it I can't even begin to understand."

"So you don't even have the slightest idea of how to... cure it?"

"I'm afraid not. Although, you should be more proud of who you are, master. Have you even considered how *you* could be alive when you are the result of some human's imagination?"

Evina was now more curious about this thing than he had ever been before. Whether he was going to accept what he had received still remained a puzzle to him. The emotions were all too confusing.

He looked outside the glass to see the rest of the city in clear view. It was nothing short of breathtaking. He saw the millions of cogs moving through the glass passageways with that beautiful rhythm that he had admired before. In his heart he was very happy for them, for this special side of his family. They had finally reached what they had always wanted, and there was nothing to stop their progress anymore.

Gyro decided to take this brief moment of silence to ask a question of his own. "Say, how did you manage to get that pencil?"

"The pencil? I had almost forgotten all about it. I believe we just found it somewhere. Its origins are unknown. It seems to be very old and possibly could have been in possession of many hands throughout history."



Gyro looked dissatisfied. "But it is unusually powerful."

"Extremely powerful!" The chairman exclaimed. "We were not foolish; we wanted to keep it safe for study. So until more knowledge is found about it, you should never let it fall into the wrong hands!"

"We are doing all we can to keep it secure."

"Good." Bill responded with relief. "Are there any more topics you want to discuss? I'm rather enjoying this."

"Probably not now," the chicken apologized, "but we will meet again."

"I know. So until then, have a great journey." The cog smiled. It was amazing to see how much he had changed since that last adventure.

The father and son stood up to leave. The chairman rose and saluted Evina, which the duck also returned with a smile. He was glad that there was someone in this humongous tooniverse (other than Gyro) who cared for him and wouldn't judge him. How many others could look at him as a toon instead of a mysterious heroic figure or some peculiar artifact?

On the way back to the ship, even the inventor had a lighter disposition. Evina had seldom seen this side of him before. "This visit was a very good idea." The man remarked. "I hope it gives us the courage to face whatever we do next."

Evina agreed with him, but he smelled something as he approached the ship. It was the odor of cheese.

As the hatch was opened, Glue Stick jerked his head to see them. He was sitting casually in the dark, watching some random film on one of the monitors with a slice of pizza in his hand. It looked like it wasn't the

first piece because the place was a mess and there was trash lying around.

The chicken looked noticeably distressed but surprisingly he did nothing but groan. The Gearlooses got into their seats and the hatches were sealed. The helper looked like it was pleading with Gyro that it was innocent and had nothing to do with the horse's behavior.

"Buddy, you still have a lot to learn." The pilot said sternly, but with a faint smile. The dome opened, the ship rose into the air, the planet grew more distant, and they were back into space. "Next stop, unknown." Then with a blast they went into warp.

# Chapter 7

## Camping

Everyone was very bored. Sitting in the ship they tried everything to waste time. Evina eventually settled in front of one of the monitors and read all kinds of stuff for a long time. He read statistics, maps, history, and other things. For a while it was good enough to keep him happy. He had always had some hidden hunger for knowledge, not just for adventure only.

Gyro spent time navigating the ship but it was easy to tell how bored he was too. In warp he was unable to do a whole lot except check every few seconds that something wasn't going wrong, and nothing was probably ever going to be wrong. Every once in a while he opened up a dusty old book, his journal, where he read some old memories from many years ago and then wrote some more in it. Evina began to wonder what his life was like long ago back in Duckburg. Evidently, from what he heard, his father was a different man back in those days.

The helper wasn't needed very much to help out so it sat idly most of the time, sometimes looking at the monitors with Evina. Later it turned on its light bulb head and made shadow figures to entertain Glue Stick.

The horse was very difficult to live with. He rolled around on the ground lazily and groaned or complained every once in a while. It was hard to imagine him spending all those years alone in this state. Maybe it was because he had tasted freedom and doing nothing was no longer interesting to him, or more likely it was

because Evina was using the monitors for reading so he couldn't watch Gyro's movie collection.

Finally, the pilot decided enough was enough. He shut his book and marched over to the others.

"Alright..." he announced, "Now I know how easy it is to veg out and do nothing all day, especially in this little ship, but we have to keep active. This adventure could eventually take its toll on us and we need to be fit."

Evina turned away from the screen, knowing that the words were true. He got on the floor and tried doing push-ups. Instantly he discovered how weak he had become since the last journey. For that short while he had to be fit to survive, and he did so many crazy things like climbing with suction cups on buildings.

"Oh, and you too." Gyro grinned teasingly at the horse. Glue Stick rolled his eyes and tried doing a couple push-ups before giving up.

"Don't you think we could drop out and find a place to spend the night?" Evina asked.

Gyro considered it. "Oh, alright. But I want to cover a lot more distance tomorrow. Into your seats, everyone."

The ship dropped out of warp and they scanned their surroundings, being in an entirely foreign part of space. There appeared to be several habitable planets within range.

Evina was eyeing a world in the distance that was clearly visible because of how brightly colored it was. "I wonder what's over there."

"Out of pure ridiculous chance I think I actually remember being in this area before." Gyro remarked. "I've seen that world before, and it is doing fine being

left alone." His eyes darted away without looking at the other two.

"You really did do a whole bunch of exploring, didn't you?" Evina asked.

"Sure did. I've seen thousands of worlds. I was obviously an outlaw from Toontown and had a whole lot of time to waste. That's when I developed a lot of these new ideas. I learned to love exploration and it became my new goal in life. It was so different from the things that other toons did that I was sure I could do it fairly well. I was always like that... different from the others."

"Well now you won't have to do it alone." Evina smiled.

"Ok then. Try choosing another world and we'll go there." The chicken assured him.

Evina thought about his choices, and then he pointed to one on the map that was a lovely shade of green.

Gyro hurried away and steered the ship in that direction. "Nice choice. This sounds interesting."

"So you really have no idea what might be down there?" Evina asked.

"Nope. That's what makes it so fun! The vast majority of them aren't dangerous. You just need to take the first step out into the unknown."

The colors on the world they were going to had patches of other colors on it. They all looked like forests. The side that they were facing had a spot of yellow that they were going to.

As they entered the atmosphere and the ship began to rumble, Evina was excited to see something entirely new and finally get out to breathing real fresh

air again. It was something he had taken for granted before.

It looked like there were lots of trees just as he thought. They blanketed the mountain and the slopes of the valleys in brilliant yellow.

The ship landed on the soil, the engines turned off, and the hatches unsealed. As Evina opened the door he was suddenly hit with cool air.

"I'm not going out." Glue Stick said defiantly.

"Oh no, you're not getting out of this so easily." The duck retorted. "We didn't bring you on this adventure so you could hide from anything new."

The horse grimaced as he looked outside towards the forest. "You know, I take everything back that I said about Toontown. I could probably get more used to it if I tried."

"Too late now." Evina smirked. "Now get out."

Together everyone stepped outside. Even Gyro's helper hopped off the ship to see the bright sun and the clear blue sky. Once they were outside things looked even more spectacular than they originally thought. Off the mountain they could see the trees stretching on forever, a golden paradise with leaves that looked like coins and shook with the sound of a gentle whisper.

"Okay, I guess it's not all that bad." Glue Stick admitted.

"Exactly." Gyro remarked. "Now let's stop complaining and enjoy the scenery."

Inhaling the air Evina discovered it was thinner and drier than the normal air he had breathed before, but it was fresh. Only moments later he decided he would go off on his own again. "I'll see you guys later."

The father suddenly looked concerned again.  
"Now wait a minute. Are you thinking of going alone?"

"Yeah."

"Well Cogtropolis was one thing, but this place... We have no idea what could be out here!"

"I thought you said we need to take a step into the unknown."

"Yes, but..." He paused and grunted in frustration. "Just don't go far, okay? If anything happens to you, I don't know what I would do."

"I'll be safe, dad. I promise." He headed off to the trees with confidence that everything would be alright no matter how far he went.

Once under the leaves he noticed that the trees were dropping them slowly just like autumn time back home. They crunched under his feet and when he looked up he could see the sunlight coming in through the cracks between the golden leaves. On the ground he could see how the light danced around playfully. It was mesmerizing, and he almost felt dizzy, but in a good way. This was nothing like the strange forest he had been through on his last adventure back in Toontown.

After he was satisfied with a good spot, he sat down on a log and rested. He had seldom seen anything as serene as this before. It was a place where even the thing residing inside him was happy. Things felt completely open, and he couldn't even begin to explain it.

There was no intention of staying close to the ship like his father had warned him. The farther he was from everything, the deeper the peace would feel. And there was practically nothing out here anyway.

He stood up again and walked away even further down a random path he chose to make. Because everything looked the same, the feeling of being dizzy and disoriented returned, but it didn't feel scary at all.

Then suddenly a thing caught his attention. It wasn't a tree. He turned to look at it. A couple hundred feet away there was a toon. It was white like many of the old toons he had known before, but he had never seen this one before. He couldn't identify it, but he knew it was a toon standing there. Then he blinked and it vanished. He was scared now. The image was still burned into his memory. It had been looking straight at him. Even though all his instincts told him to panic, the thing living inside him ordered him remain calm. Its influence was so much more recognizable to hear out here.

He listened to the thing inside him and took a deep breath. This was probably a sign that he needed to head back to the ship. But he also knew it was a little too late now. There were no more landmarks, and he couldn't help feeling scared he had forgotten what direction he came from. The leaves were everywhere on the ground and there was no track to retrace. There wasn't anything good enough to guide him back to the others.

Once again the thing told him to relax. It was taking control of Evina and told him to close his eyes. Evina obeyed and soon saw how the forest faded away. He saw his father away at the ship, but he looked like he was getting ready to leave. The connection was so strong it was almost tangible. It was like a compass to guide him home.



The duck opened his eyes and ran in the direction that he felt was leading to his father. It was a long walk but one that he knew was the right direction. Surprisingly, it wasn't nearly as long as he thought because Gyro was spotted not too far away. He and Glue Stick seemed to have left the ship to do a little exploring into the forest.

"So there you are!" The chicken exclaimed looking in the direction of his son. "Didn't I tell you not to go far?"

"Uh yes."

"And did you get lost?"

"Well, yeah, but somehow I found my way back to you."

Gyro looked unsatisfied with the explanation.

"The connection with you inside me..." Evina continued, "It sort of pulled me here. It felt like it was talking to me."

"Well that... odd." The inventor admitted, still in disbelief. "But at least you're back with us and safe."

Now Evina began looking nervous thinking about what he had seen.

Gyro continued to talk. "But I do suppose this world is harmless from what I've seen."

"Yeah, about that..." the duck said sheepishly. "I saw something."

"You did? What?"

Evina just stared into the grey eyes of his father and wasn't sure if he had the strength to speak. "It was... a toon."

Gyro didn't break eye contact. They just stared at each other in silence for a minute while Glue Stick

looked at them awkwardly. "I think you need to get some rest."

"Dad, I know what you're thinking..."

"You're seeing things." The father finished. "And whatever is causing it can't be good. Let's head back to the ship and relax. We've had plenty of fresh air."

Evina went back to the ship, glad to be safe again, but still not at all convinced that what he saw was just an illusion.

"If you want, I can give you a science lesson about how I invented those food cubes."

"Interesting idea." Glue Stick admitted, "But that stuff is probably way beyond us."

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In the darkness they sat in front of one of the monitors, watching some pointless movie that Glue Stick had suggested. The ship still needed to charge a little bit more so they decided to stay the night on the planet and camp out. Gyro had brought a lot of popcorn with them for some unknown reason and they were beginning to use it now.

At some point Evina wanted to go back to his room. He had collected some leaves and shiny rocks that he wanted to keep as souvenirs. As he entered the dark room he located a drawer and set the items inside. It was beginning to get dark outside, and he looked out his window to see the peaceful forest in a different light. In the distance he heard a low rumbling, and he didn't know what it was.

It was tempting to go to bed early because his sleep was still hardly adjusting to this adventure.

Overall today was interesting but he was going to need some rest for some more exciting stops coming in the near future.

Yet this was the perfect opportunity to do something else while the others were distracted. He crept out into the hall and went to the lockers where things were protected. He had figured out the combination that held the pencil and used it to open the door.

Sitting inside was that giant magnificent artifact. It was so beautiful. The act of simply touching it filled Evina was a sense of power. Last year he had held this and used it. He had personally witnessed its strength. *What hands of previous generations have used it before? How can any other toon know of this power?*

He finished admiring it and then closed the door quietly, but unknowingly to him it didn't latch shut all the way. Then he headed back to the main room.

"Do you want to do something else?" Gyro asked, turning away from the screen.

"Yeah, maybe." Evina replied. "And by the way, do you know what is causing that sound?"

"What sound?"

"I heard it back there. It was a low pitch noise like... like that."

"What?"

"Listen."

There was something that sounded like growling. It was louder than Evina had remembered hearing a minute ago.

"That's interesting." The chicken remarked. "I don't think that makes sense..."

They sat wordlessly to listen to it, but the sound stopped and was replaced by what sounded like quick feet on the leaves.

With a loud crash the ship was hit violently and everyone was jolted in the same direction. Some creature had rammed into the side of the ship and didn't sound like it was stopping. Heavy breathing continued directly outside.

All of them, including Gyro's helper, huddled together with their eyes shut, not speaking, hardly breathing, and just hoping that everything would be alright.

The sound of the beast seemed to be circling around the ship now. It was standing near the side where they were seated. Soon there was the shrill noise of claws scratching the exterior.

Evina mustered the courage to open his eyes for a fraction of a second, and he regretted it. He barely glimpsed what looked like black fur and a huge dark eye staring at him. With his eyes shut again he hugged the others tighter. *Why did I have to choose this stupid planet? It was supposed to be safe! Did I get us into too much trouble too quickly? We aren't even close to Earth yet!*

Time passed and Evina wasn't keeping track of it. All he knew was that he was scared the ship wouldn't be strong enough to keep them safe. But there came a point in time where the monster was gone and they felt comfortable they could open their eyes. Looking at one another, their faces were sweaty and looked ill.

"What... was THAT?" The horse cried. And Evina was feeling a very similar reaction.

"We need to get some sleep and then assess the damage tomorrow." Gyro said. "We can't do more than that."

Feeling relatively confident that they would survive the night, Evina went to his room. He still glanced out his window every few minutes, afraid that he would see the eye of the monster. But he started falling asleep soon enough. The last thought on his mind was the figure of the white toon standing in the golden forest. It was etched so deeply in his mind. And even though this sort of thing had happened so many times before, he couldn't prevent himself from thinking about it. It had to be something important.

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"Oh, this is awful." Gyro grimaced at the sight of his precious ship when he first got out the next morning. The surface was covered in nasty dents and scratches.

"Is it still going to work?" His son asked nervously.

"Yes, only a couple parts got damaged and my helper is working on the repairs right now. We can fly, but the rest of this has to be fixed soon." He climbed back into the ship and Evina followed him.

Evina looked out once more at his first truly alien world, not including the cogs' planet.

"Get your seatbelts on." The pilot directed. "You can grab breakfast while we're flying but we need to get moving first."

According to the monitors, Gyro's helper was turning the warp setting to a pretty high level. They

planned to travel a lot of distance today. With a blast forward they were off to another unknown destination along their trip towards fate.

## Chapter 8

# Protectors of the Night

"Oh, please don't go, baby. You are my golden jellybean. You keep on running away like you never want to be seen. But I want to love you and treasure you next time we meet. Because you are my jellybean and I think you're really sweet."

"Please don't start the next verse..." Evina pleaded.

"Why? It's a good song."

"Maybe it was for the first dozen times you sang it. But I would like to have some quiet now."

Glue Stick shot back a glare knowing he was defeated. All he could do was argue with Evina all day. The boredom levels were just as high as the day before and they still had a ton of time to kill. "I could do something else but you want to hog the monitors to yourself!"

"Your old movies are worthless. At least I'm learning something." The duck retorted. "So why don't you-"

"Hey!" Gyro shouted. "We can't keep going like this! You both need to learn how to stay happy and get along."

"Well maybe it would help if we did some exploring instead of sitting in this ship all day." Evina grumbled, but with a less harsh tone to not upset his father.

"I already told you. We need to cover a lot of distance. You can't imagine how far Earth is."

"But didn't you say we were in no rush?"

“Yes, but I don’t want to act like this isn’t a big deal when it is. Flippy said...” the chicken paused. Evina had accidentally seen the end of their conversation and remembered how harsh the dog had been. “Never mind. We need to try something that will really bond us together.”

“What do you have in mind?” the horse asked.

“I have plenty of games we can play.” He suggested optimistically. Then he saw their dull faces and knew it was hopeless. “Okay then, wallow in your depression if you wish.”

~~~~~

Evina was in his bed again, staring up at the darkness. He had been thinking about his past and tried to be grateful that he was bored instead of in mortal peril every second. Still, there was one thing that was hauntingly similar about this trip, the things that he saw. In the forest he knew he had seen a toon. It didn’t seem likely that the light was playing with his eyes, he definitely wasn’t dreaming, and he wasn’t going to accept he had gone crazy just yet.

Feeling guilty that so much time had passed by doing nothing again, he went back to the main room to exercise again. There appeared to be a little improvement in his strength, or maybe that was just his imagination.

“You know, seeing you do all of that makes me scared that we might have to fight. We might encounter something... scary.” Glue Stick remarked.

“Uh... yeah?”



The horse stared back at him for a minute like he was thinking about something. "I know you like to think a lot of things about me." Evina didn't look at him but continued doing more crunches. "I know how easy it is to judge me. I know you think I look so lazy and useless. But you got to remember where I came from."

"I haven't forgotten."

"So you're saying you don't think badly of me?"

Evina sighed. "Ok, you are a little annoying but I can forgive you for that."

Glue Stick's expression didn't change. He still sat there solemnly "Good. Then don't say 'I told you so.'"  
He got on the floor with Evina and tried to work out as hard as he could.

Evina was glad that they were finally starting to be more like friends now, even though the process still had a long way to go.

Gyro came back into the main room shortly thereafter and was pleased to see that the others were talking peacefully together. "Well I looked at our progress and, well, we're actually doing better than I thought. I guess we can eat an early dinner and then drop out to find another world to explore."

"Oh, thank goodness." Glue Stick groaned.

"So you really want to explore now?"

"Yeah, why not? Who says you guys can do more than me?"

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The lights were dimmed over the dinner table. Everything was silent except for the engine and the

sound of forks clinking on the plates. Evina was eating his lasagna while another question began to bother him.

"So, uh, dad..." Evina began.

"Yeah?"

"There was that world back there that you didn't want to go to. What was there?"

Gyro slowly cracked a smile. "Life."

"What?"

"You didn't think we were the only intelligent beings in the tooniverse, did you?"

Evina paused as he had never given much thought to the idea before. "So there are other... toons?"

"In a way, yeah. Humans have made countless creations other than just us."

"Wow. So... what would they look like?"

"Anything." The father answered. "The inventions of the human mind come in all shapes and sizes."

"So, do you think we might ever meet some others?"

"Possibly, but I usually try to avoid it, especially last night when you were so new to exploring. Plus, we shouldn't risk interfering with their stories."

"Stories?"

"Yes, you know what I mean." The chicken continued. Then he hit his forehead with his glove. "Oh, never mind, you probably wouldn't understand it yet."

Evina had a lot more to think about. The prospect of finding other toonish life brought up many emotions. He both wanted it and somewhat feared it, just like so much of the adventure so far.

Just like the previous day, they cleaned up, got into their seats, and the ship appeared in another location in space. This time they were only given a

couple options for worlds to explore. Glue Stick was granted the chance to choose which one. He was indecisive but once he made up his mind they headed down there.

"We're going to the dark side?" Evina asked his father.

"Yes. After all, it's supposed to be night for us."

They soared over the dim landscape looking for an interesting spot to land. There were lights in the distance and the pilot went towards them. It appeared to be a spacious decorated area lit up next to a large building. Gyro parked nearby and the hatches unsealed.

As soon as they hopped out they first noticed that the place looked like some sort of huge garden. The grass beneath their feet was cut nicely and the flowers all around were blooming and fragrant.

"This place is actually kind of nice." Glue Stick remarked. "Do you think this is natural?"

"No. This is definitely the work of some kind of toon life." Gyro answered. "I never expected to run into some this soon." He let his eyes examine the whole area which appeared to be empty.

"Ok, that brings me to my next question. Will they be okay with us wandering through their garden?"

"Relax. We're going to be fine." Evina told him. Then he glanced at his father and noticed how calm he still looked. "Right?"

The inventor pointed to a lit structure in the distance. "Do you see that building over there? The architecture is reminiscent of an area of Earth I studied called Japan. The same applies to this garden. Whoever owns this place must be very wealthy."

“Well, we should probably set up our camp here.” Evina suggested, sitting down on a bench near a fountain with crystal clear water. The area was illuminated with torches placed around the perimeter.

“Guys, I really don’t think this is a good idea...” the horse persisted. “Have you seen some of the dark shapes moving?”

Evina turned and looked at him with his arms folded. “No. What makes you say that?”

Just as he was finishing that sentence, cloaked figures jumped out of the darkness and surrounded them. The duck had fast reflexes and tried to run but the shadows moved way to quick. He had no chance at all. Something spun around his waist and his legs which bound his limbs together. He fell to the ground and something was thrown over his head.

The ropes that bound him were too strong to struggle and he knew it would be useless to attempt an escape anyway. Arms picked him up and were carrying him. The sounds of many footsteps were heard around. The others must have been captured and now they were being taken somewhere.

Evina was terrified and his mind frantically thought of all the worst possible things that could happen to them. This continued for several minutes before the footsteps stopped and he was tossed carelessly onto a cold, hard floor. The sound of grunting from the others told him they had been dropped too. The blindfold was removed swiftly and then everyone was gone. Everything was pitch black. He assumed he was alone with his father and Glue Stick.

“Well, that wasn’t a good plan at all.” The chicken admitted.

"We were stupid." Evina continued. "Where are we?"

"I don't know." The father replied. "Are we alone in here?"

"Of course not. You don't know anything about me." A voice answered. It was Glue Stick trying to imitate another voice.

"Stop it!"

"Sorry, I was just trying to have some fun with you." He replied sheepishly.

"Sure, laugh all you want. I know you were right, but this is not the time to say 'I told you so'. We need to know if we're going to survive. Aren't you scared?"

"Very. But I'm trying to break up the tension with a little humor. You can't blame me."

"Shh." Gyro interrupted them. "I think I hear something." It was true. The sound of feet on the stone floor was nearing them.

A torch was lit and it illuminated a face behind their dungeon cell. It looked similar to a human, but not really. Much of it was covered in a black mask. He was obviously a ninja. After staring at them for a moment he turned and spoke to someone in the darkness who couldn't be seen, and in a language that none of them had heard before. Whoever he was talking to then left. He glared back at the prisoners with anger in his eyes. But after another minute the other ninja returned and handed him a clear sphere.

Glue Stick spoke warily. "Please don't hurt us."

"Who are you?" the man demanded. Nobody answered at first because they were surprised to hear the voice in their language and they weren't sure how to explain themselves. "Speak now!"

"We are... toons from another world." Gyro replied, not sure how he was going to give the man a believable story.

"No, you are obviously spies." The ninja spat, leaning forward and glowering at them with disgust.

"We were just exploring and happened to come to your world." Gyro continued. "And who are you?"

"Who are we? We are the protectors of the night, the elite guard of the emperor of this land. Now it's my turn. What is this object full of dark magic?" He held up the pencil.

Evina suddenly remembered not closing the locker all the way. They must have rummaged through the ship and found it.

After not receiving an answer, the man dropped the pencil with disgust and turned his attention to the other ninja. "I will go speak with his majesty. Stand here and watch them."

"Yes." The other spoke. It was a girl. She took the torch while the man left the room. As they sat there in silence she watched them with interest. With her free hand she held a glimmering sword by her side.

"What was that ball?" Glue Stick asked.

"It is the translation orb." She replied. "I don't need it because I learned your language." There was a pause. "And I believe you. I *know* you're not spies."

"So, do you think they will let us go?" Evina asked.

"Unfortunately, no; they never forgive trespassers. You will almost certainly be killed within the hour." The last sentence struck Evina was despair, but then the girl interrupted his train of thought again. "And that's why I need to help you."

"Help us?" Gyro inquired.

"Oh, and you say you're explorers? I'm coming with you."

"What?"

With one swift swing of the sword, the girl broke the lock off their cell door. "Run!"

The toons leaped off the floor and followed her as fast as their feet could take them. Gyro had grabbed the pencil and was slightly delayed behind them.

"Why are you helping us escape?" Evina shouted.

"Shut up and keep running or you're dead." She replied. They hastily fled the emperor's house and sprinted through the garden.

Every few seconds Evina turned his head to look behind, dreading the thought of seeing of shadows silently pursuing them.

Time was slowed and it seemed to take forever to reach the ship, but when they finally did then everyone dived inside. Gyro started the ship in record time and the rumbling of the engines started. Outside the window the ninjas could now be seen advancing towards them. Everyone dropped into their seats as the ship rocketed into the sky leaving the sword wielding warriors below.

"Seal the hatches!" Evina hollered as they got high in altitude. The doors sealed and he grabbed his seatbelt. Everyone's nerves were on edge and the ride was very bumpy.

Once their flight out of the atmosphere was made smooth they took time to catch their breath and relax. That was probably their closest encounter to death so far.

The girl ripped off her mask and looked down at her world below with awe which turned into a smug grin. She had long black hair and was different from any creature Evina had seen before. He never expected to meet another type of intelligent life in person.

Gyro's helper took over the piloting of the ship while the inventor went back to the main room where the others were gathered. He did not look happy. "Ok, explain yourself right now."

"Excuse me? I just saved your life." She responded.

"Yeah, but you were one of them. How can we trust you?"

"Are you going to eat us?" Glue Stick threw in.

She groaned. "They were only like that because you were trespassing on the emperor's property. How can I trust *you*?"

Gyro was defeated. He took a seat and sighed. "Well, why did you suddenly decide to let us go and come with us?"

She folded her arms. "Because."

"Uh, can you give us a little bit more than that?"

"Yeah, I wanted to get away and have a little adventure. Everything down there... I've tried it and it's not for me."

Evina was beginning to recognize how her response sounded oddly similar to how he had once spoken. He watched her as his father went to lock up the pencil more securely. "Why should we take you with us? What was life really like for you down there?"

"I wasn't allowed to do much of anything. It took me a long time to convince my father to let me join the protectors of the night, and he still didn't like it."



“Why was he like that?”

“Because he just is. He’s the emperor.”

Glue Stick’s mouth dropped open at the same time as Evina’s.

“Yeah, okay, I get it. You probably expected me to be daddy’s helpless little princess. But I wasn’t born to be that way. Now maybe he’ll consider whether he actually loved me now that I’ve left him.”

“I still think it was a dumb idea.” Gyro said from the back of the ship.

“All the same I think I can be of some use to you. I have superior training in the art of stealth and fighting. You guys look like you need someone to protect you if you go to another world like mine.”

“Alright, enough with the teasing.” The chicken continued. By now everyone admitted that what she was saying was true. “We don’t even know your name.”

She spoke her name in that other language which was much too complex for any of them to pronounce. It became obvious that they needed to use something else.

“Well, let’s see...” Evina concentrated. “You look like a Kate. We’ll call you Kate.”

“Fine. Anyway, thanks for being cool with this. Where do I stay?”

Gyro pointed to one of the vacant bedrooms and she headed in that direction, the sword swinging dangerously from her belt. He returned to the pilot’s seat. “She is... something else.”

## Chapter 9

# The Cave

After much pestering and pleading Gyro finally gave into the pressure and decided to drop out of hyperspace early to find a world to rest on. The group had suffered a lot of stress and everyone wanted to get some real fresh air without any more threats to their lives. The newest member of the crew, Kate, was given the opportunity to choose the next world which she did without too much trouble.

The ship descended onto a sandy beach on what appeared to be an uninhabited world. They unfastened their seatbelts and stepped outside into the chilly air.

Evina took a look around. The sky was gray but everything around them was surprisingly serene. It was almost kind of sad, and the feelings that he had been hiding time and time before were beginning to be noticeable again. He began to realize that if he didn't deal with this now then he wouldn't be able to face whatever it was that lay ahead.

"I'm leaving now."

Gyro was inspecting the still dented exterior of his ship. "Why?"

"I need some time alone. It's hard to explain."

"Oh, well ok then. We'll be busy here. The ship needs to charge a lot and this can be the perfect time for repairs."

"I can help." Glue Stick remarked.

"Yes, I was planning on having you help. There's a whole lot to do." The chicken responded.

“Then afterwards I need to teach you some of the basics of fighting and defense.” Kate added.

The others looked like they would do well on their own. Evina took a flashlight from the ship because he had a hunch he was going to need it. He didn’t know where he was headed now but that didn’t matter too much right now.

Further along on the beach he sat down on a rock and looked out at the dark waters of the ocean. Just like the beach at Harry’s island he had thought about some of his personal concerns. But still the sky was as dark, just like the feelings inside him that he couldn’t shake off.

The thing that lived inside of him, he felt he *needed* to understand it. There knew there must be a reason why that curse had to be given to him, and he had to know what it was. Otherwise he strongly believed that his chances for any lasting happiness were slim if not nonexistent.

The rock he was sitting on was still too close to the others, and he felt like he needed to explore some more and find some place even more secluded. So he followed the beach without knowing how far he would go. He just walked and never stopped walking.

Then about half an hour later he paused to notice the cliff by the beach, how it was now so high and the rock was so smooth. Something caught his eye, something very interesting. It was a cave in the side of the cliff. He took the flashlight out of his pocket knowing that his instincts had been right once again.

How deep the cave was he didn’t try to guess because it seemed to go back as far as he could see, even with the flashlight turned on. But there was no fear

that could stop him now. He was on a quest to save himself from the forces that held him down.

As soon as he entered then the sounds of the wind and waves faded away. He had to rely on the flashlight to guide his way. In and out of the tunnels he wove, going ever deeper into the unknown, and it didn't seem to bother him as much as he thought. Mineral formations were seen after not much time had passed. This included many little crystals that sparkled eerily. Sometimes he would pause to stare at something but then he continued on. The path became steep but he still marched downward and arrived at a large pool of water with a small island out at the center. It appeared to be the end of the tunnel from what he saw so he sat at the pool's edge.

He looked down at his reflection in the water. It was perfectly still and his faint image was realistic like it was a mirror.

*All I see is utter uselessness. I was a tool that was helpful for saving the world but now there is no place in that world for me. I am abominable, a freak show, a pained soul who needs relief from his suffering and whom everyone else wants to get rid of. Maybe the ending of the cogs would have been more impressive if everyone had died heroically. Good job for ruining everything once again, Evina. Do people really love me? No they don't. They love being famous and thinking they're related to someone famous. My chances of real love are zilch. Nobody cares for me, the genuine me. Wait a second, who even is the real me? Are these feelings me? Were my feelings as a 'toon' a different individual, of someone who kind of died in a way that day? Or have I yet to discover my real self? Only my*

*father tries to understand me and that doesn't count for much because he's in this same mess and has been in it longer than I have.*

He turned off the flashlight. Now it was absolute darkness, and almost completely silent except for an occasional drip of water. There were no more distractions and nobody around to see him, so this was the time that he needed to let his feelings work out. He didn't stop thinking about it. He let the anger, loneliness, and sadness crush him. He wanted all the emotions to come. He let them rip through his soul. He understood the feeling of complete isolation from others and the knowledge that he had never been free but controlled and emotionally drained by a strange thing his whole life. The horror burned his mind in ways that words couldn't describe. He begged for relief. He longed for understanding. He wanted others to understand even though he had no way to properly express it. Then he unexpectedly thought about his mother, the one he had never known. She must have been someone who could comfort him and give him advice but why did she have to just die? What kind of cruel, sick world would let that happen like it had no pity?

As this train of thought continued he felt increasingly unstable, and it was almost tangible. Inside his mind he felt like he was getting close to a precipice. Then he felt like he was only hanging by thread. It was uncomfortable, something he didn't understand, and it felt so real. *What's happening?* But then at that moment of panic, before he could know what was happening, his mind fell.

His memories flashed by violently as he plunged back and back in time. There was no control and no way

to stop it. He just sped backwards fearing there would be no end. But eventually he hit rock bottom. He couldn't fall further because there was nowhere else to go. He had reached the very beginning.

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The vision was blurry. Evina tried to focus his eyes to see where he was.

"Wow..." Gyro spoke softly. His clothes were cleaner, he looked younger, his eyes were normal, and his face was full of admiration. "I can't believe it. I have a son."

"Yes, and he's beautiful." An unfamiliar female spoke. It was Evina's mother. She gazed down at her newborn child covered in very thin fuzzy red feathers.

"We shall call him Springwidge after my great uncle's second cousin once removed."

The mother gave Gyro a cynical smile. "I'm not saying I don't respect your family and their traditions but I think he deserves something different."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, have you noticed how there are so many toons born with colors these days? It used to be a rarity and now there is hardly one that's not vividly bright."

"What about it?"

"It means something, Gyro. This world is changing. Things are going to happen, and I'm afraid it won't be good."

"Sorry if I don't understand you but what does this have to do with his name?"

"I want his name to be Evina. You know 'the hero' from the old toon language?"

“Yeah, I remember.”

“He is going to do great things. I can’t tell you how I know, but you must trust me. This kid is special. Do you promise you’re going to raise him well?”

Gyro gulped and stepped back. “Yeah, you know he’s my son. But darling, there’s nothing bad that’s going to happen. You need to learn how to relax.” The mother didn’t answer. She just stroked Evina’s tiny feathers on his head. He was sleeping calmly. The father bent over the duckling. “Hey, Evina. I’m your dad. And I hope you know how lucky you are to have the world’s best mother.” Evina continued sleeping peacefully. “Hmm, you probably already know that.” The inventor smiled. He walked away.

The mother went to the crib to set him down, but before she left the room she paused. “Evina... life may be tough.” She whispered. A tear formed in her eye. “You need to be brave. You can’t ever give up.” Evina was tucked into his bed and the light was turned off. “And always remember how much I love you.”

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Evina rushed back into his body in the present time. He was crying and couldn’t stop it. The emotions flowed freely for a couple minutes until he noticed something coming in through the corner of his eye. It was too hard to ignore. It appeared to be some sort of light.

He calmed down and opened his eyes. There really was some eerie silver light forming over the island in the pool of water in the cave. He checked and

confirmed that the flashlight wasn't turned on. This wasn't supposed to be possible, but yet it was.

The light was swirling softly and grew brighter. It pulled together into a form, a living form. It was a beautiful white duck who glowed in a mesmerizing and ghostly way.

"Mom?" Evina asked.

The figure spotted him and then smiled. "Hello, son."

Evina jumped to his feet and backed away slowly. He couldn't be sure it wasn't an illusion. "I... I saw you in the forest."

"Yes, that was me." She affirmed.

"How is that possible? Aren't you... dead?"

"There are some places where the connection is more sensitive. The forest was one and so is this cave. Let's not get into all of those details right now."

"Wow." The red duck gasped. He sat down slowly and put a hand to his head. No words were spoken. He just stared at the figure of his mother, trying to take in the realization that he was really talking with her. She too remained silent, sitting leisurely on the island with her eyes fixed lovingly on him. This lasted for a few minutes.

"So, is there anything you want to say?" she finally inquired.

"Yes! How did you die?"

Lowering her head she sighed. "I knew you were going to ask that. But is it really that important? Will the answer really help you at all or will it just give you something more to worry about?" Evina couldn't answer. She continued. "I'll only tell you this. It wasn't anyone's fault. There is not a single individual that can take



blame for it. Life just comes with problems, and one of them happened to me.”

“Ok...” Evina accepted her answer. “So then why have you been following me?”

She almost looked shocked. “Why wouldn’t I? I’m your mother! Someone needs to look after you. You’re father obviously didn’t take that chance.”

Evina suddenly felt a twinge of sadness for his father who had broken his promise to care for his son. “I know he is sorry.”

“Yes, I forgive him.” The mother said. “And I’m glad you have come to a resolution with him as well. He needs you just as much as you need him. Don’t lose your connection to your father or you will feel even more isolated and alone. But still remember that you aren’t really alone. I’ve seen all of the amazing things you have done and you are living up to your name.”

“Thanks.” He replied quietly. He knew that what he had been through and done was amazing, but this was no time to be boastful. He hadn’t done anything special to survive. It was the thing. “Oh, do you know about this thing that’s living inside of me?”

“I do.”

“What is it?”

She smiled apologetically. “I’m afraid you will have to figure that out for yourself.”

Evina was frustrated but it only lasted a moment. He couldn’t feel angry when looking into his mother’s face.

“But mom, it has ruined me. I got all these expectations now that I never asked for. I can’t get anyone to like me, let alone love me. I hate myself and feel so worthless inside. You can’t understand.”

"Well maybe I should give you something more to think about." she suggested. "If you never asked for it then how can you blame yourself for anything? You've never done a single thing in your life to hurt someone. You haven't fallen short of anything when you did the best you were capable of doing. That is considered winning in my book. How can you think you are worthless?"

"Hmm, I never thought about it in that way before." Evina admitted, scratching his head.

"That's why you need some motherly advice every once in a while." She teased. "Don't instantly believe everything you feel. Oh, and regarding love, you will eventually find what you desire so long as it is right."

"And it is right... right?"

"Yes." she confirmed. "You won't be as alone as you think you are. And those companions you have up there at the ship, you may not think much of them, but they can be some of your closest friends if you would let them be."

Evina considered this for a while. Every moment he listened to his mother was so liberating and comforting to his mind.

"Do you want to know anything else before I leave?" she asked.

"What? You have to go?"

"I'm so sorry, but all good things can't last forever."

Evina was shocked. He didn't want her to ever leave his sight again. "Then please... just tell me one more thing. How is it you are talking to me?"

She carefully stood up and stared into his face with her beautifully radiant eyes. "Isn't it obvious? Evina, I live within you. My love is what binds us together, and you will never be truly alone."

Evina watched in wonder and fright as the light started to dim and her image slowly faded into the empty darkness of the cave. He was physically left all alone, still questioning the reality of all that he had seen. The tears continued spilling from his eyes. There were so many questions that were still unanswered, and they might not ever be answered, but he didn't care about it anymore. He knew his mother loved him, and that's all that mattered.

## Chapter 10

# The Labyrinth

"Space... the final frontier. These are the adventures of the foolish passengers of a small unnamed ship. Their mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out the human civilization, to boldly save others as no toon has done before."

Kate groaned loudly.

"What?" Glue Stick protested. "It's from this show I've been watching today. I feel like we can compare our experiences to it. All we need to do now is get some more colorful shirts."

Evina tried to ignore him, but he wasn't frustrated any more, just bored. Ever since he returned from the cave he felt like a brand new individual. The thing living inside of him could still be felt, now more clearly than any other time before. It was like a strange, cold, weighty presence somewhere around the area of his stomach. But now that he was no longer fighting it, it was no longer hostile. Now he could relax properly. He was getting used to it.

"But just listen." Glue Stick pleaded. "Don't you think it would be cool to like... beam places? Just think about it. It's a shame this ship can't do stuff like that."

Gyro smirked but tried to conceal it.

The horse had still seen it. "What was that? Are you hiding something?"

"Maybe." Gyro grinned. Even he seemed to be in a better mood.

"Fine. If you are too busy to talk to me then... I can still have fun on my own. Yeah, I am just as busy as

you are. Actually, I'm even more so." He turned back to the monitor and started another episode.

Evina could tell that Glue Stick was also angry at Kate. Apparently he didn't like standing in a funny way and breathing slowly for hours as she did. As much as the idea of being a ninja was appealing, the horse still wasn't up to putting all that effort into it.

Then there was a small beep which interrupted everyone's activities. Gyro looked down at a small red light and then turned it off.

"What was that?" Evina asked his father.

"Oh, it's nothing."

Of course the duck didn't believe it, and surely enough the light turned on again.

"That's interesting..."

The son walked up to the control panel. "Does interesting mean good or bad?"

"Well, just look at our energy readings?" the pilot pointed to a dial with its needle jumping up and down. "Even though we're in hyperspace there is something out there that's strong enough to cause these fluctuations, no, we're actually *losing* energy. Without it we will be in serious trouble."

"Will we have to drop out?"

"I really don't want to, but now I don't think we have much of a choice. But there's nothing that's supposed to be out here in this region except the empty void of space." His hand moved out to the drop out lever and hovered there for a moment as he worried about whether he should, but the energy readings were too troublesome so he gave in.

After the ship's repairs the hyperspace transitions were smoother, but it was still shocking to

someone who wasn't expecting it. Glue Stick leapt out of his seat, slammed the headphones down, and stormed over the cockpit. "You scared me half to death! Why didn't you tell me we were dropping out?"

"It's because our energy is dropping out." Gyro angrily pointed to the dial again. "And if you don't want to miss your show then how would you feel if we got stranded out here literally in the middle of nowhere?"

The two of them argued while Evina watched. He was getting tired of seeing this kind of contention going on. It was too predictable, but what he didn't expect was what happened next.

"Hey guys. What's this?" It wasn't any of their voices but Kate in the back.

Evina turned to see that she was pointing to one of the monitors. "What is it?" He walked over to take a look. And even though he knew he wasn't an expert, it still alarmed him to see it.

"Is everything alright back there?" Gyro asked.

"Um, you might want to come here and look at this." Evina replied, his voice shaking a little.

The pilot rushed over to them and glared at the image. "Holy cog sprocket, what is *that*?"

Indeed, it was the question that was in all of their heads. Out here in the middle of space where there were no stars or planets around a world had been detected by the computer. It was very close to them. It was barren but there were huge waves of crazy magnetic pulses coming out of it. There was no way it could've been natural. This is what was draining their ship.

"We need to get out of here. Now!" Gyro was sweating and he jogged back to the controls.

But the thing inside Evina tightened painfully. This was the strongest thing he had ever felt from it before. The answer was so obvious and so clear. "We have to go down there."

"Are you out of your mind?" the father cried. "There's nothing there but certain death!"

"No, dad. There's something calling us. And the feeling is so strong that I know you can feel it too. Don't deny it."

Gyro was panting. He carefully withdrew his shaking hands from the controls and inhaled deeply. "Ok." He admitted quietly. "I can feel it too. But can you really trust it?"

Evina paused for a moment to think about it. All eyes were on him. The feeling inside was so intense that he couldn't ignore it. "I do trust it."

"You're going alone then?"

"Yes."

"No!" Kate cried. "I'm coming too!"

The inventor scratched his head, still trying to fully absorb this unexpected situation. "Well..." he started, "I guess that means we only have one option now." He turned to the tiny little robot. "Helper. Activate battle mode."

"What?" Glue Stick cried as the helper pressed a large red button. The images on the monitors changed and the lights in the ship turned red.

"Battle mode engaged." The ship computer responded.

"You two, into the back room now." Gyro ordered his son and Kate. Glue Stick stood in the main area with his mouth wide open. The helper made sure he didn't follow them.

In the back room Gyro hastily threw a drawer open and took out the briefcase he had received from Harry. He shoved it into Evina's hands. "Meet me in the main room when you're ready. Then I'll explain everything."

He ran off and the two of them were left in the room standing clueless. Evina carefully flipped the latch on the case and opened it. He couldn't believe what he saw inside. It was his black suit, the one from his last adventure, complete with the gloves. He turned to Kate. "Do you mind giving me a minute?"

She stepped outside but left the door a crack open to talk to him. "Would you kindly tell me what this is about?"

"Yeah, we went on another adventure before." Evina explained. "We explored a nation of robots called the cogs. And we fought them. The suits helped protect us against the laff drop, our energy draining. Oh, and it made us more stealthy."

"Ah, I can see now, with the black and all. With those cogs, did you win?"

"Yes... um actually, sort of. They're our allies now. It's complicated."

"And what about this thing you keep talking about? You're feeling something?"

The duck chuckled lightly. "Ironically, I found out towards the end that I'm part cog. Or the thing that makes them alive is inside me too. It's also in my dad."

"Nice to know. I usually like to learn all about the lives of the rookies I work with."

"Hey, about that, why are you coming anyway?"

"What? You think that because I'm a girl that I can't handle it?"



"No!"

"I know you men are all the same, and I don't listen to you."

"That's not what I--"

"So I'm coming with you and there's nothing you can say to stop me!"

Evina paused. "Um... ok." He slipped on the last glove and could feel a sensation of power wash over him like a warm wave. It was wonderful and he felt so excited again. There was one more item in the suitcase but it was unfamiliar to him, so he brought it with him to the main room. The girl followed right behind.

"Wow, you look... good." The horse remarked.

"Thanks. That's the best compliment I've heard from you so far. By the way, do you know where Gyro is?"

A door opened up and out of the pilot's bedroom came the man in white. It was that very odd technology-packed suit with the helmet that formed eyes out of tiny blue lights. Evina had once feared this appearance and it still surprised him even though he knew it was actually his father inside.

"Good." Gyro said. "I take it the suit still fits well?"

"Perfectly. But what's with this battle mode?"

"Oh, it's just precautionary. I don't want to be attacked out here, but I don't plan on doing any attacking either. With a place like this that could possibly be filled with all kinds of terrible things, we can never be too safe."

"Glad to hear it. So are we going now?"

"Wait a moment." The pilot went to his seat in front of the controls. This made Evina remember pieces

of his old visions. "When Harry gave me your suit I was overjoyed. He isn't that bad of an inventor. But I took the liberty of adding some more special features to it."

"Like what?"

"You'll see." He teased. Although Evina couldn't see his face, he could tell his father was grinning again. "Now step onto this circle both of you." He ordered. "I will beam you down there. And please remember that I can't help you at all once you're below. Evina, squeeze your left wrist to signal pickup. In your hand you have a mask that I made. It's not so much to protect your identity but it is armored and has inferred vision. Oh, and good luck to you two. Don't get yourselves killed." He sounded worried like he thought this was all a very bad idea.

"I promise you." Evina responded, although even he wasn't so sure about it. He only hoped that the thing inside him knew what it was doing.

"Ready?" the father asked.

Evina put on his mask. He took a deep breath and exhaled. "Yes, I'm ready."

"I hope to see you soon."

There was a blinding flash and Evina instantly saw himself standing in the frigid snow. The wind was howling and he was very nervous all of the sudden. But at least he was fully alert.

"You good?" he asked Kate.

"Yeah." she assured him, rubbing her head like she was disoriented. "We need to get out of the snow."

Though the visibility was low Evina could see a metal structure close by. "Over there. Quickly!"

It looked like a small station, probably just one of many leading to the real place underground.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, they found that it was locked with a keypad combination.

“Yeah, I don’t know what we’re going to do.” Evina confessed. Even though he was insulated with his special suit the bitter cold was starting to get through to him. Kate couldn’t even hide how she was freezing.

Then they both seemed to notice something at the same time. A security camera from the roof was looking down at them, and they knew they were being watched. Kate panicked and sliced it off the wall with a swing of her sword.

“What did you do? Now they’re really going to know we’re intruders!” Evina shouted. As he finished that sentence the ground opened up and they fell down a bottomless shaft.

It was pitch black as they fell with nothing else but the sound of the air rushing by. It was terrifying, but after a few seconds there was some kind of force that slowed their fall until their faces rested on the hard ground. The lights turned on and they jumped up to see where they were.

It was a small, simple, concrete room with no windows or doors. It was illuminated by eerie light coming in from the cracks along every corner. They were trapped.

Kate tried to kick one of the walls even though it appeared pointless. “Let us out of here you cowards!”

“Stop it. There’s no point.” Evina calmed her. “Our plan messed up big time. We shouldn’t have come in here following that stupid voice in my head.” He watched her keep on trying for a while. He was at least grateful that it was warmer in here. Then he got bored

and turned his head. In total shock he gasped. They were at the end of a long hallway now.

"What?" Kate marveled. "Wasn't there a wall there?"

"There was." Evina said. "But now it looks like the room has stretched itself."

"Why?"

He thought about it. "I have no idea. But it might mean we're meant to go over there."

They made their way to the other side of the mysterious hall which still gave the feeling of being unusually alien.

Then when they reached the end, Evina turned around again and jumped in fright to see he was inches from another wall. "What the heck! I wish it would stop scaring us." They were stuck in another box.

"But I think I saw it." Kate spoke.

"You did?"

"As a ninja you are trained to notice every little detail. It moves lightning fast, but this whole place seems to be made of tiles that silently rearrange themselves into different shapes."

Evina considered this. "But... why? What is this all for?"

Kate shrugged but pointed to the ceiling. "Maybe we should press that button and find out."

It was true. There was now a red button protruding from the ceiling and Evina jumped up to press it. When he fell, he didn't hit the floor but a padded area much further below.

"Very good." A robotic voice spoke, though it didn't sound very friendly. It came out of all the walls in each direction.

They were now in a larger room. There was a huge cube lying nearby with three large flat buttons on the floor.

"What is this? Are these supposed to be puzzles?" The duck contemplated.

"I believe so. Strange, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but at least they seem easy."

"Something tells me they will get much harder soon enough." Kate added.

Each of them stepped on a button and they used the big cube to hold down the third button.

"Very good." The voice repeated again in the exact same tone. "Now try this."

One of the walls opened up and the opposite wall began moving inward to force them to move into the new area. Then they were sealed in the new room, and for some reason, Evina had lost track of where Kate was. It was impossible.

"Hello? Where are you?" he called out and then started to panic again. Finally he spotted her. She was on the floor on the other side of the room and looked like she was injured. "What happened?" He ran over to her.

Then she faded away abruptly. Obviously it was some kind of cheap trick. Evina turned around to see he was trapped again. This time he was alone. "No!" He pounded his fists on the wall even though he knew it would do nothing.

"Evina?" a muffled voice sounded. It seemed she was on the other side of the wall. "Are you in there?"

The duck suddenly jumped in glee when he heard her voice. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." Kate assured him. "But I don't think it wants us working together anymore."

Evina growled in frustration. "What is the whole point of this anyway? What is this insane place?" He looked around the room and spotted an air vent on the ceiling. "I think I found a way out."

"What? Oh, that's great." she replied excitedly. "Go on without me and I will survive."

Evina imagined suction cups in his mind and then they popped up on his hands, elbows, and knees. It was just as he had done before. He jumped onto the wall and crawled up to the vent as fast as he could. He feared the room would change itself again.

"I promise I'll come back for you!" He shouted as he ripped the grate off and climbed inside. "Good luck!"

# Chapter 11

## Into the Dark

The eerie lights from the cracks in the concrete walls were gone and he was alone in the darkness of a dusty vent.

*Great. Now I have no idea where I'm going. Oh wait... the mask. How could I forget?*

He turned on the mask and a fuzzy gray image of the vent was projected to his eyes. It wasn't excellent, but it was enough to give him an idea where he was going.

Crawling on his elbows as quickly as he could, he made his way through the vent. He could hear the clank and echo of each step. Now that he was out of the puzzle area, the thing inside kept him calm and led the way. In fact, it almost felt exhilarating to be crawling through vents again. He felt like he was doing something heroic and meaningful again.

When he came to a junction he was instructed to go right and he obeyed. It was another minute of crawling before he heard the loud humming of machinery coming from below. Quickly he broke off the nearest vent cover and jumped out. He fell down farther than he expected. It hurt his legs to land that hard, but not too badly. He had just become too confident. Now he turned off the mask.

The room he was in now was filled with several giant engines with turbines, gears, and pistons. They were giving a ton of power to something; probably to whatever it was that moved the tiles to rearrange the puzzle. He still had no idea what that was all about.

The area was poorly lit, dirty, and there were exposed pipes seen on the blank walls so he figured this was a maintenance area, one that was not supposed to be visited. Luckily for him, there were no cameras spotted, but he still knew to be extra careful and look out for anything that might see him.

On his left was what seemed to be the only door to exit the room. There was a small window in it so he could see that the hallway was clear for him to use. As he swung it open he cringed at how loud it squeaked, but still no one was around.

He jogged as quietly as he could, using his night vision to navigate the darker areas where there were no harsh white light tubes shining from above. He was also listening to the thing inside of him to know if anything was coming in his direction. This place seemed huge, and he was starting to get lost. There were so many tunnels leading to so many rooms all full of different kinds of large industrial machinery. He tried to use the arrows painted on the cement walls but most of them were pointing to some sectors with long titles that didn't mean anything to him. The further he went, the more curious he was becoming.

Then he arrived at a freight elevator, and he was just about to get on before he noticed a camera. Jumping out of the way he managed to avoid it seeing him.

*That was close! How am I supposed to get past that thing?*

He waited for a few minutes, paying close attention to the movement of the camera. Eventually he concluded that it followed a predictable path back and forth across the hall. It reminded him of the searchlights



in the District Attorney's Office back in Lawbot HQ when the cogs were invading Toontown. But this was no time for nostalgia. Things were different now. His life was seriously in danger and things would be pretty awful if he got caught.

When the timing was right he silently leaped out of hiding and followed the path of the camera as it turned away. Then he flattened himself against the wall below it, hoping that this small spot would be out of its range. When that was over then he sprinted to the elevator and started it before the camera turned in his direction again.

The elevator rose up the shaft with increasing speed and noise. Evina was keenly aware of every sound now and afraid that one of them might give him away.

When it reached the top he stepped off in a small room and tried to open the door in front of him. It was locked, probably from the other side. So without any other choice he climbed into another air vent to find some way out of here.

All his instincts told him to go back, but the thing inside him was stronger and it forced him to move onward. He had no choice but to follow it although he continued to wonder if it was not just a figment of his wild imagination.

Only a short distance later he stopped at a vent cover looking down into a small, circular room. The only light in the room came from the dozens of monitors that surrounded the perimeter. Also there were countless buttons and other tools of so many colors, shapes, and sizes. The text and images shown on the screen made no sense to him, and neither did the room's inhabitants.

There were two robots or people seated motionlessly in front of the monitors, he didn't know which. They were in the shape of humans but covered entirely in shiny, dark gray, ominous-looking suits, and their heads were hidden inside simple blocky helmets. Their real form could not be seen. This sight scared him, but he was at least confident that they could not see him.

Then a voice spoke with a person's voice, sort of. It was strangely modified to sound muffled and machine generated. "918, have you seen this?"

"What?" the other inquired.

"It looks like there's been a slave breach in Sector C."

"I know a few of them complained before, and I thought I took care of it, but maybe it wasn't enough. Should I finish these troublemakers for good?"

Evina was suddenly feeling angry. He didn't care about who these slaves really were or what they were used for; now he knew these creatures were evil. The anger was greatly amplified by the thing inside him, just like it had been before. He now had a motivation to fight and defend himself, to save Kate, and to get what he needed.

"No, you fool!" One of them shouted and pointed to a screen. Evina was startled, and because they looked and sounded identical, he couldn't tell which one had spoken. "It wasn't from the slaves; it was a high security breach from the test chambers! Activate the red alert!"

This was the moment to do something and so he reacted instantly. Evina jumped down out of the vent and knocked out both the security men with ease. It

didn't look like either of them had a chance to activate an alarm.

Then he turned his attention to the screens. It was hard to read through all the complex information, most of which still made no sense to him, but the notification of him escaping the test chambers was still there. He wanted to clear it somehow, but couldn't figure out the controls. Also, anything he touched might only made things worse.

Just as he was about to leave, a scary thing happened. He had a sudden compulsion to press a button, and when he did there was a detailed map that appeared on the largest monitor. It was the floor plan of this level of the sector and it was humongous. However, a certain spot caught his eye. Whatever he was looking for had to be there.

He went to the door and opened it a tiny bit to peek outside. It was a huge hall stretching left to right with bright lights lining the black walls in each direction. In fact, the hall was more cylindrical like a tunnel, and it was designed in a creepy futuristic way. It gave the impression of being clean yet dangerous. A few more of those strange men marched by in a very unnatural way. Evina suspected there would be more. This place was probably full of them.

*I need some more power.* He thought. Then his wish came true and he felt energy flowing to his right hand. It looked like a small laser device had popped up on the back of his glove. This was going to be useful.

He breathed deeply, trying to gain his focus and listen to the thing that was guiding him to his destination. The slightest mistake could be the end of him.

Then when he was ready he sprinted out into the hall. His footsteps were silent as he jogged down the corridor heading right. He listened for any sign of movement.

“Warning: High security breach in this sector!” A speaker announced. Evina knew there was no point trying to hide now; he had to run. Still, they didn’t have to know which direction he was going. So when he found another security camera in his path, a light squeeze of his fist triggered the laser and disabled it.

Yet no matter how hard he tried to remain focused, he couldn’t ignore the fact that an army of alien guards was now chasing him; he could hear them clearly.

At an intersection he darted around a corner and hoped desperately that Gyro had put some kind of wire in the suit. As it turned out, there was a grapple hook launcher under and behind his left elbow. He shot it across the hall from about a foot off the ground and it hooked onto a doorstep. The timing was well enough that all the men tripped over it and crashed on the ground. Rapidly he made it recoil and then darted through the door closest to him. It was a heavy one that was security protected. One laser burst shattered the controls and he rested knowing it would take them a while to get through it.

The thing urged him to keep moving but he had to stop and catch his breath. As exciting as it was to feel like a hero again, there was no shortage of anxiety either. Also, even though he had escaped death so often, it didn’t mean he had unlimited strength.

When he heard the noise of them trying to break the door then he ran again, this time down a long ramp.

An arrow on the wall told him that he was heading towards some kind of dock. The thing was leading him this way. He was getting close to where he was supposed to be.

*That's kind of odd. I thought a dock would be closer to the surface instead of...*

He stopped dead in his tracks only inches from an edge. It first looked like the whole interior of this planet was hollowed out and he almost fell into a pit that had no end. This place he appeared to be an area protruding from a ceiling that stretched on and on in every direction, yet no other walls were visible. There were some lights shining around the dock, but nothing could pierce the infinite gloom that lay below.

Confusion overwhelmed him for a brief moment but was soon replaced with a twinge of horror. He heard the footsteps of angry guards storming down the ramp towards him. There was no place he could flee to.

The thing inside him told him to jump.

"No." He answered aloud. He only saw empty darkness below which could hold nothing but certain death, but the army was charging towards him at full speed.

Evina was a duck who had experienced many miracles. Maybe it was because of the thing living inside him, or maybe it was because he was chosen for some greater purpose, but whatever the reality of the situation was, he expected a miracle to happen again. He leapt into the abyss and was swallowed by the darkness, plummeting deep into the belly of the beast.

## Chapter 12

# Gray Rising

The wind blew the droplets of sweat off his face as he tumbled. He was trying to have faith that this wouldn't be the end of him, or anyone else he cared about.

On and on he fell and it seemed like forever. Even the thing couldn't do enough to calm him. Finally, he thought he noticed something. He saw a beautiful light coming into view. It wasn't his mother, and he knew he wasn't dead yet. He seemed to be approaching a ground. Yes, it was amazing to discover that a ground existed down here, like a world inside a world. And it was covered in little buildings with lights that broke through the vast darkness. It momentarily made him feel like he was flying up towards the stars, even though it was quite the opposite. He closed his eyes and braced for impact. If this was the end then he would take it with dignity.

A kind of static field formed around him and braced his fall. He hit the concrete ground and it felt like the softest of all mattresses. As he stood up, he couldn't help but laugh. He was overjoyed to still be alive, and not even the least bit hurt.

Yet the momentary bliss only lasted until someone shouted at him. "Stop!" One of the aliens had landed some kind of ship nearby and looked confused as to who had fallen from the sky. Evina was dizzy from the fall and it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the image. Unlike the guards Evina had seen, this guy was wearing armor that looked stronger. It was shiny and

decorated with spikes. This was most likely a soldier. He carefully approached Evina with a fist in an iron glove. There were electric sparks jumping off of it.

The duck fired his laser and then jumped into the soldier's ship. The controls seemed simple enough. They were much more familiar than the buttons at the security room. The engines roared to life and he lifted off the ground. The thing inside him was like a compass and he went speeding in the direction that it was leading him.

A few minutes passed before he arrived at the right place. It was a small building much like the myriad others all around this place, except it had no windows. Evina landed the ship in a hurry which caused it to hit the ground with a bang. He cringed and hoped it wouldn't be suspicious and draw attention to him.

As he found the entrance, a locked door, he realized that the handle was strong and wouldn't break so easily, so he had to do it the hard way. He sustained the beam of laser to cut away around the handle. The metal began to glow orange and there was sizzling heard.

He found it hard to control his breathing, and every few seconds he jerked his head around to see if anyone was coming, but for the moment it looked like they had stopped pursuing him.

*Come on... why is this taking so long?*

Eventually he finished and the red hot door handle fell out and clanked on the ground. He had essentially bypassed any lock on it, and he swung the door open.

It appeared like a normal library, with the exception of the futuristic art design and the cold lights

that weren't present back in Toontown. There were full shelves everywhere, and the whole situation began to make sense to him now.

*This is their vault. It's what they value the most, the things they want to hide and preserve. Anything that they find interesting they bring here. Each shelf is labeled with the name of a planet which its contents have been stolen from. This planet... is a war machine! It is generating countless clones to conquer and enslave as many toon worlds as it can!* It made Evina nauseous to think about it.

The thing was creating a lot of internal noise trying to get Evina where it wanted him to go, but the duck still wanted to learn more about this place, even if it did make him angrier. It wasn't long though before he gave in and followed the directions to the place he was looking for.

This shelf was marked only with a mysterious question mark, and somehow the peculiarity of it frightened him more than anything else in the room.

*I wonder if this means the aliens don't know where these items are from. Could they really be that unusual?*

He stretched out his hand and it was guided to a dusty rectangular item which he picked up.

All that he had done to get down here, everything that he had risked, was for this reason. This had to be the answer to everything. This was the key to the success of their adventure and the future of the tooniverse. He blew the dust off lightly and stared at it.

"It's... a book?"

"I don't know. What did you think it was?"



Evina spun around at record speed and he couldn't believe who he saw. "Kate?"

"Yeah, it's me." She smiled lightly. "I figured I could save myself in order to save you the trouble of saving me."

"But... how did you find me? You're not possessed with that thing!"

"Oh it's pretty easy. I just followed all of that 'red alert' shouting and the fleet of ships flying off into the dark."

"What?"

"Seriously, dude, there's like a million weirdo soldiers looking for you right now. I'm surprised I got here before them. Now do you want a ride out of this place or what?"

"Let's go!" The duck exclaimed, running to the door without hesitation. They got in the ship and were in the air within seconds.

"Oh, and about that energy disturbance..." she said, "It is caused by this huge amount of energy they are hoarding below us in the core. I have no idea what they plan on using all that for."

"How do you know this? Um, alright, let's not talk about it now. We need to focus on escaping in one piece."

Kate was nearing the dock now and her landing of the ship was no better than Evina's attempt. They hopped out. Evina had his laser ready and Kate had her sword.

"Don't stop. Show no fear. Trust me." She ordered. They ran into the main hanger where alien soldiers already blocked every exit. There was a deafening noise as dozens of lasers were fired at them.

Evina realized his special power was now useless compared to theirs. But then he saw what Kate was doing and he was astonished.

She spun the sword in circles and it absorbed all of the laser beams shot at them. It began to glow a very bright white which soon became overwhelming. The aliens ceased their shooting to stare at it.

"Now let the fun begin." She grinned.

The sword emitted an intensely hot stream of white fire that destroyed any obstacle in their way and made all the soldiers flee in fear. Windows shattered and doors were blasted off their hinges until the blade stopped glowing.

"Ahhhhhhh...!" He was speechless.

"I know, right? But it does require a lot of power. I only discovered this trick before picking you up when I destroyed the main power converter coming from the core. Oh, did I mention this place is going to explode in a few minutes?"

"WHAT!?"

They did not stop running. Evina and Kate were quick and they managed to avoid all the soldiers and their deadly beams. They followed the signs to the exit of this evil place.

Finally, they saw it. It was the final staircase to the surface. The door burst open and literally hundreds of soldiers came out and surrounded the area. Even Kate looked scared now. She couldn't block all of them. This was too much to escape from.

Then it happened. Time seemed to slow down. The sounds of the laser blasts faded. Evina's fear vanished and the thing took over every cell in his body. He had become something else. His eyes opened again.

They were pure dark grey and full of incredible power. They were the eyes of some other being. It had happened once before, but now the hero was reborn, and stronger than ever before.

He seized the sword out of Kate's hand and sprinted into the madness. He could see every individual beam of laser in motion but he didn't care. He embraced the power. He conducted it like metal. He soared through it like a storm of warm rain. The less he resisted the less it hurt. He let the heat flow through him and he was unstoppable, and all the excess energy was shifted into his hand and into the sword. It began to glow immediately.

"You better use it now!" Kate screamed, but Evina didn't listen. He knew exactly what to do, and there was nothing that could stop him. He was titanium. The soldiers were knocked off the stairs left and right like they were only annoying mosquitoes. With the girl right behind him they soon emerged from the ground into the frigid snowy wind. Fortunately, the book was still strapped inside the pocket on his waist.

Evina squeezed his left wrist lightly to signal his father, but then he saw it wasn't needed.

"I won't leave you again, Evina!" Gyro shouted through the voice of his white battle armor. He charged full speed towards them.

This wasn't something Evina had been expecting at all and for a moment he lost his focus. His father was shooting a laser at the soldiers still coming up the stairs. "Dad, this place is going to explode!"

"Then you better get to the ship!"

Kate was staring at the sword which was glowing so bright now it was almost blinding. "I don't think you should do that!"

Evina grabbed the book and tossed it to her. "Get to the ship! We'll be right there!"

She didn't look like she was going to cooperate, but then a sudden earthquake caused her to change her mind.

A colossal hole had suddenly opened in the planet and countless ships flew out to space like a swarm of insects. Lastly, a gigantic battle ship emerged from the ground. It was pure black and one the scariest things Evina had witnessed in a long time. The aliens were trying to escape the explosion, but it was obvious that they were livid as well. They turned towards Gyro's tiny ship and began preparing to attack.

Evina returned to full focus and the thing regained control of his senses. He remembered Kate's words and tried to be a ninja. He looked for every little detail. It seemed like there was a piece of a lower wing that looked thinner than any other part of the ship, and it was probably close to the ship's energy reserve.

Evina focused all of the energy, including the energy of his suit and the energy of his whole body. All of it went into the sword which was brighter than anything he had ever seen before.

With pinpoint accuracy he aimed for the weak part of the wing and unleashed every bit of the energy all at once. Of all the lasers seen that day, there was none brighter or more spectacular than the pure white beam which shot from the blade. The whole sky was lit up and felt hot even in the snow. There was no way the ship's shields could've stopped it. The fuel tank exploded

in a ball of fire and the giant metal monster dropped to the ground. The ground shook violently and billows of smoke poured out in every direction.

With his eyes softening the thing's influence went away. All the energy had been used up and the duck collapsed in the snow.

Gyro scooped his son off the ground, whose hand was still clenched to the sword, and he ran with him to his ship. Their work there was finished. They rose above the cursed planet and rocketed away into space just before the explosion came, the energy core collapsed, and everything vanished in a burning flash.

## Chapter 13

# The Book

Everyone was seated in a circle in the main room. All that was heard was the hum of the ship's engine. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved much. They only stared blankly with mouths slightly open, the mysterious book sitting on a table in the middle.

"So..." Glue Stick finally got the courage to speak. "What was all of that about?"

Evina turned to him and had to think of what to say. "I really don't know... to be honest. So much of it doesn't make sense. I don't know who those creatures were or how this thing inside of me made me indestructible."

"Yeah, only a few feathers are singed." Kate remarked. "And you absorbed like a thousand beams of laser? What the heck?"

Gyro spoke now. "I think we can all agree that there are a lot of questions we can't answer. Until then, we have to be patient and focus on the things that we *can* do. If you don't mind, I want to take some time now to explain myself." He sighed and everyone gave their attention to him.

"I've been a lousy father. It's true. All I've been doing is running from my past. I've been running for so many years that I've forgotten everything else that was important to me. I forgot my responsibility as a father. I forgot all the wonderful things I did for Toontown before. I forgot all about my friends, and the excitement I felt when I invented something brilliant like the portable hole."

"You invented the hole!?" Evina interrupted.

"Yeah, I did. You really don't know what things were like before. And even until this day I couldn't adjust my life to having my son with me. I mean he can do incredible things! He has such courage and integrity that I never imagined I would see. But over time I began to be reminded of the things I lost. Today I decided I was going to set things right. Evina is the true leader here, and I will support him. I will never abandon him again." A tear came to his eye.

"Dad... wow." Evina was amazed. "I never really knew how you felt all this time."

"It's alright."

"Yeah, but you do realize I'm not the hero, right? It's the thing inside of me. I'm actually starting to get scared of it. It's becoming stronger every day and I can't seem to control it. Is it dangerous?"

Gyro shrugged sheepishly. "I wish I knew."

"And what about all those slaves on the planet? I guess the thing didn't really consider saving them, did it?"

Kate cleared her throat and they shifted attention to her. "Actually, I have something to say about those slaves you mentioned. Um, when I went to the computer room to locate you and the energy core, I saw the slave chambers. I figured out the controls pretty easily and set up their release to the escape pods."

"Seriously?" Evina cried. "How were you able to do so much in so little time?"

"I'm a ninja." She grinned. "I was the one doing all that work while you were busy running for your life."

Evina groaned and covered his face. Glue Stick seemed amused though. "But do you think they'll be safe?"

"It's a long way to the nearest planet." Gyro reasoned. "But there is a chance they'll be ok. It's a lot better than getting blown up."

There was a squeaking noise as Gyro's helper pointed to the book in front of them.

"Oh yeah, um, has anyone really looked at this thing yet?" Gyro asked. Evina and Kate turned to each other.

"Not really." The duck admitted. "I think we were focusing more on saving ourselves. But now is a better time than any."

He picked up the book and wiped it clean. Now they could see its true color, a kind of faded dark bluish silver that shined, and it was surprisingly thin. He wondered how many pages were actually in it.

"Ok, it's called... *The Book of Toon*. Rather uncreative name, don't you think? It was written by... the Confederation of Gearloose."

The chicken's beak dropped open. "What!?"

"Yeah."

"They never told me about a secret book!"

"But it says right here: C.O.G. That's what the acronym is, right?"

"Let me see." Gyro took the book from his hand and examined it carefully. After a minute he sighed and shook his head lightly. "No, it's not from the cogs. Did you notice this symbol here?"

He showed them the book's cover, and underneath the C.O.G. there was a triangular symbol made of three pencils with an eye in the middle. "It is



referring to someone, or something else." This confused everyone even more.

"We need to see what this is all about." Glue Stick took the book and tried to open it, but it didn't budge. "What...?"

Gyro, annoyed by the horse's impatience and lack of effort, took the book back and used all his strength to pry it open, but he failed as well. "I don't understand."

Now Evina grabbed the book and pulled as hard as he could, but it felt like it was resisting him, like it was alive and didn't want to be opened. "Come on!"

"No!" Kate snatched the book. "All of you are doing it wrong. I'll come back later." She marched to her room and slammed the door.

The three guys and the little robot sat silently in embarrassment. Gyro was the first of them to stand up. "I suppose we'll just have to hope she has better luck."

~~~~~

It was already an hour since Kate locked herself away in her room. They were too anxious to be able to do anything else. Each of them was growing impatient. Then when they least expected it she rushed back to the room.

"Watch." She said.

They gathered around her as she sat on the floor with her eyes shut. She set a hand down gently on the book and breathed deeply. After a minute of doing this she moved a finger to the edge and pulled up very slowly. It obeyed and opened.

"How did you do that?" Glue Stick demanded.

"Well for starters, Evina and his dad have this... thing. The book doesn't like it. And for anyone else, including you, it won't open to someone with a disorganized mind."

"What do you mean disorganized?" The horse protested.

"You have to be mature and open minded. You can't be selfish or have any bad motives."

Glue Stick groaned and turned his seat away from her.

"Thank you Kate. Um, do you mind if I read now?"

"Sure, as long as you don't make it angry. I think it's sensitive."

"It's still hard to believe that a book is alive." He insisted, although he still handled it delicately. His heart sunk when he saw the inside. There were no pages. It was just a blank white surface. "Oh no."

"Exciting, isn't it?" Kate smirked.

Evina wasn't about to give up now. He tapped the book angrily like he was trying to get it to wake up. But he didn't expect it to actually work.

There were some flickers and then the white surface lit up. It was a computer screen.

"Whoa..." Everyone spoke at once.

Text appeared and Evina immediately began to read it.

*Woe to the forces of darkness. They never cease but must be fought. Abusers of the truth will perish. The Graphite will live.*

"So what is that supposed to mean?" Kate interrupted.

"How would I know? Judging by the table of contents, this book must be huge! I don't even understand any of these topics."

"I would look through the topics carefully." Gyro suggested. "Search for the ones that seem the most applicable to us, or the ones that the thing wants you to read. Maybe then it will let us rest."

Evina took his turn sitting down in the middle. He read each chapter title and listened for any response from the thing. He discovered that moving a finger across the screen made a page turn. "Wait? The pencil?"

"Go ahead and read it." His dad said.

Evina was excited to know what this was about.

*The Pencil, a term used in the formal sense of a single entity, is a legendary ancient artifact originating from the human world. Although there have been many accounts of its sighting and use, little is known about its origin.*

*Generations of power seeking individuals have stolen it, hidden it, and utilized its supposed magical powers. The oldest record of its existence started with Gerald the Dishonorable who claimed he used it to create new toon life. However, it is not believed that he created it. After his defeat the pencil moved hand to hand through many generations on many worlds until, some say, it was taken by a mysterious man of bitterness. After that time, any legends of its existence ceased. It is assumed to be lost forever.*

"Apparently not." Gyro mumbled. "That is fascinating. I wonder who could've collected this information. Keep searching."

Evina flipped through the pages which seemed to have no end. They covered hundreds of topics that were

mostly foreign to him. "Oh..." he noticed the thing had selected the right chapter. "This has to be it!"

*One of the most unusual and dangerous aspects of toonology is the concept of masking. A mask is an artificial form used to conceal the identity of a toon passing to another universe (especially the human world).*

*Perhaps the most well known example of its use was in the early to mid twentieth century on Earth during a time when toons were given open access to certain cities for the purpose of film production. In 1947, one by the name of 'Doom' was found responsible for violent crimes in the human and toon world, hidden through the use of elaborate masking which was not well understood at the time. (See chapter on Dip.)*

*Although Doom was destroyed the toons still suffered many losses thereafter. The ACME corporation, which provided many jobs and resources to the toon film industry, declared bankruptcy. Soon after that time the law decided that for the good of the humans they should deport all toons from Earth. They were permanently sealed off in their world now known as Toontown. More recent data confirms that all the memories of the toons and their incidents were erased from the human citizens' minds.*

*It is for this reason that we recommend against the use of masking. It requires careful skill and is a technique that must not be disclosed to any irresponsible or malicious beings. This chapter will explain the fundamental concepts regarding masks.*

Evina continued to read it for a while the others listened intently. Gyro had taken a notepad and scribbled down as many notes about the masking as he

could. When the chapter was finally finished Evina closed the book and they all rested.

"Now that's what we were looking for!" The chicken exclaimed. Evina hadn't seen him so happy in a long time.

"We're going to mask ourselves?" Glue Stick inquired.

"We would be risking a whole lot if we didn't try." Gyro replied. "Until we get to Earth we must focus all our attentions on masking."

Evina smiled. He was glad to have a goal that everyone could finally agree on. He was also grateful that the thing living inside of him was still useful, although obtaining that information put them all in grave danger. But as pleased as he felt, he couldn't ignore some little annoyance. There was still something missing, something that he needed to know but hadn't found yet.

"Um, I want to go do some more reading. I think there's something else I need to see."

His father smiled. "Now I know I said I would trust you, but you be careful, alright? I don't know where that book came from, but it could either be completely crazy or dangerous when dropped into the wrong hands."

Evina ran back to his room and dropped onto the bed. He knew his father was right. Knowing how powerful the pencil could be, he felt guilty for allowing it to be stolen back on Kate's planet. It was good that they managed to bring it back.

He tried to relax as best as he could and allow the book to be responsive to him. It was skeptical at first but decided in the end to allow Evina to read it

again. Because the book was a computer screen he didn't need to turn on the reading light above his bed for illumination.

Now he was more aware of the fever building up inside of him. There was something else in that book and he felt like he had wanted to read it forever. Scrolling through the chapters he searched vigilantly for any familiar sign. He was not consciously aware of exactly what it was.

The thing inside of him suddenly became quiet. It was like it felt nervous but wouldn't stop Evina this time from searching for the truth. So instead it went away to hide.

Then near the end of the list Evina found the chapter he was looking for.

*The Gray Shadow is a powerful force living throughout the tooniverse, yet it often hides its actions and tries to be elusive. Therefore it is difficult to study. Some of our scholars still debate whether it should be classified as a fundamental component of the toon reality model.*

*The Shadow seems to be sentient and has been known for many peculiar behaviors. Although it is thought to be one omnipresent force, it manifests itself in singular ways. It can easily possess metal and give individual and intelligent life to any machine it wants. While it is dormant and harmless in many cases it can also become agitated and dangerous. Nearly always it refuses to compromise on its goals.*

*Most strange of all, however, is the very rare occurrence where a toon may be possessed with it. Ink and lead may somehow, through unknown means,*

*become stained with its even darker influence until the full scope of its power is eventually realized.*

*Signs that a toon is possessed with the Shadow include gray eyes (the most obvious symptom which may change in shade), incredible strength, increased emotional intensity, expanded knowledge and sensory power, unconscious behavior, and many other things.*

*The Shadow may present a solution for almost any undesirable scenario it encounters; nonetheless, there is a much more ominous side that is seldom foreseen. Every toon that has become a victim of the Shadow has been destroyed, either by its creator or from a collapse of its life sustaining story due to the chaotic and unpredictable nature of the entity. (See chapter on toon life cycle.) As the Shadow grows in its power and influence over the host, the risk always rises for creating a tangled web of plot points which will almost certainly lead to a painful end for the toon. There is no known cure.*

Evina slammed the book shut and was suddenly left in the darkness. His mind was full of horror and he didn't have a clue of what to say or do next. *My days are numbered. I'm doomed.*

## Chapter 14

# Off the Page

"Oh..." Gyro fell into a chair and looked sick. He rubbed his face and moaned in a way that frightened Evina.

"Dad, are you alright?"

"Um, yeah." He answered although it didn't sound convincing. "But you just told me we might die soon."

"Do you think the book lied?"

"No, I've checked the logic and it makes sense, but this is much more dangerous than I had imagined. I mean, do you know what could've happened during that incident on the planet? That moment I saw you like that, like some... immortal monster of unstoppable destruction, I knew there was something really bad about this. But I didn't consider if it could cause your existence to be torn apart! We need to get this under control!"

"Dad, it controls itself. Like I said, it has all the intelligence, it won't compromise. There is no cure for it."

"Well I think we've heard plenty of information now. Glue Stick, take the book and put it in the locker. And make sure that it's locked securely!"

"Uh, I was the one who didn't lock it before." Evina admitted, not sure if this was the best time to confess it.

"It's alright. Now as I was going to say, there is nothing that can take complete control of us. We must



prevent it from getting stronger. We must ignore anything it tells us. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. We don't have too much time left to waste. Toontown is depending on us to fix this mess on Earth."

~~~~~

Gyro sat at his messy desk covered in dozens of quickly scribbled notes. He was deep in thought and was startled to hear the sound of loud knocking at the door. His helper was busy doing some calculations so he knew he had to stand up and answer it himself.

As he opened the door he was met by a short orange duck with thick square glasses.

"Hello, sir. I am Doctor Featherworth from the Duckburg Institute of Science."

"Ok." Gyro mumbled. He didn't know what else to say. He wondered if they had come to finally revoke his membership. After all, his science had always been considered by others to be rather unusual. "How may I help you?"

The duck presented a lump covered in a towel which he held delicately with red rubber gloves. "We have been perplexed with this certain meteorite. It was found a couple months ago in the northern wilderness. Its properties are unlike anything we have seen before. We cannot trace the source of its fluctuating magnetic field. That is why we have come to ask for your opinion."

"My opinion? Wow." The chicken rubbed his forehead in awe. "If you're coming to me then you must really be out of options."

"Please, sir, would you mind examining it? If you happen to notice anything we may have overlooked then contact us at once. Just be careful though. We can never be certain if it is harmless."

"Ok, I'll do it." Gyro took the meteorite in his gloves and immediately noticed how heavy it was for its small size.

"I hope to hear from you soon." The doctor concluded before leaving.

"Look what we got here!" The inventor said to his helper. The little robot paused its work and jogged over to him.

Gyro lifted the towel off which revealed a pure black rock about the size of his palm, filled with holes like swiss cheese, but glimmering beautifully under the light.

The helper's light bulb head lit up and Gyro leaned closer to examine the details. "Weird. I wonder where this came from."

He picked up the rock but had forgotten how heavy it was. It slipped a few inches from his grip and barely made contact with his wrist, unprotected from the glove.

He felt a cold chill and a sensation like lightning travelled up his arm. It became numb. It was unnatural and unsettling. He didn't know what to say, but after a few moments he noticed feeling coming back.

The helper seemed to have detected it and jumped up and down in fear.

“Relax.” The inventor assured him. “It was nothing. I just need to be more careful with it.” He set it down and was determined to not let that happen again. Although he did suspect something was wrong, he tried to ignore it.

Little did he know, however, that he had been possessed with something, a shadow that had been living within the rock. It would lie dormant inside him, undetectable, until the right moment when it would take control. The day of the gray would come and the cogs, its children, would rise. It would also be passed on to Gyro’s only future child.

Evina, who was seeing all this in the memories of his father, now witnessed the whole scene fade away.

There was something up ahead. It was somewhere in the future. He saw it looming like a terrible and unstoppable force of darkness, driven by anger. It was not the cogs, no, that was in the past. This was much stronger, much more determined, and it could not be avoided. It was completely foreign to him. He was certain he had never seen nor learned of this before, but all his courage and strength instantly vanished at the thought of this invisible beast. It was a silhouette of death, an omen of his doom.

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Evina woke in the morning with all his limbs feeling weak. He had had a bad dream, and from his experiences he learned that bad dreams were never good for him.

A week had passed since they read the mysterious book. They visited a few more worlds to

recharge their power, but they were also a lot more cautious than before. Each day Gyro turned the engines to max, telling everyone that they were getting close to Earth. Indeed, as patient as they tried to be, the question on everyone's mind was when they were finally going to get to their destination.

Usually when he woke in the morning there wasn't enough light to see his hand in front of his face, but today was different. There was something outside his window. He bent down to get a better look and he saw an incredibly huge white blur. It was like a galaxy. The ship was heading straight towards it.

He scrambled out of bed and ran to the main room. "Do you see that?"

"It is magnificent, isn't it?" Gyro agreed.

"Why are we going in there? I thought we were going to Earth?"

"What? Oh, you think it's a galaxy. No, it's a portal."

"A portal?"

"Yes, and we are drifting towards it, closer and closer. So many of them were closed, but in my travels during the cogs' reign I found this one, maybe the only one left."

"The size of it... I can't even imagine!"

"I hope Kate and Glue Stick are waking up. We only have a couple hours before we go into it."

"Into what?" The horse asked, sticking his head out of his room.

"Into that portal." Evina pointed to the front window which was filled with bright white light.

The horse's eyes grew wide with wonder.

"Yeah, I know."

"Hey, what's all the commotion about?" Kate demanded, also emerging from her room.

"The portal!" The other three excitedly shouted at once.

"Oh, is that what it is?"

"Enough talking! Get yourselves ready." Gyro ordered.

Everyone rushed to clean up, get dressed, and eat breakfast. Then they checked to make sure they didn't forget anything else. Evina was pretty sure he didn't have to bring anything with him, but then he remembered the strange red vial that was given to him. He picked it up just before he left his room for the final time. With only fifteen minutes left until Earth all of them lined up in the main room to prepare to leave.

"Gentlemen, and Kate, I hope you all understand the significance of what we are about to do."

"Yes." They all answered. Gyro's helper only squeaked.

"Our mission is serious. There is no room for error, and absolutely no slacking. That means you..." Gyro glared at Glue Stick who gulped. "We must search diligently for any hostility towards toonkind, and any found threats must be neutralized. Is everyone ready?" They all nodded. "Good. Glue Stick, the pencil please."

The horse reached under the dining table and picked up the magnificent object. He handed it to Evina. Kate held several papers which she threw down on the ground. Each page had a sketch of a person that they had created to take the form of.

Evina studied Glue's Stick's mask carefully, examining all the details. When he was ready he looked up and saw the horse shaking with fear. "Please don't

move, unless of course you want me to mess up your real form.”

Glue Stick shut his eyes tightly and tried his best to breathe calmly and stay still. Evina worked slowly and carefully, placing an intricate layer over his body which colored itself to the desired appearance. When he was finished he examined his work. Glue stick was a young man with spiky blonde hair, freckles, and an overall appearance of being fun-loving but immature. When he opened his eyes they were emerald green. He wore faded holey jeans and a red t-shirt.

“I need a mirror!” Glue Stick shouted and he ran into the bathroom. The others heard a scream almost immediately.

“Kate next.” Evina said.

“Yes, you better hurry.” Gyro insisted.

“And why do I need to do this again?” she complained. “Don’t I already look human enough?”

“We’ve been through this a million times!” The duck said heatedly. “Humans are complex, very complex. They have a lot of details that toons don’t have. You still need a lot of work.”

“You know, some girls can get insulted if you say their appearance needs a lot of work. Fortunately for you, I don’t care about that stuff.”

Gyro groaned while Evina worked. “And I don’t even think we’re doing this very well. It’s not going to look perfectly human, but I hope it will fool everyone long enough to get our work done.”

When Kate was finished she looked similar to her previous self except much more human. She appeared to be a young Asian woman with long, black, shiny hair. She had a beautiful glow and a perfectly calm

expression on her face. Her clothes were changed to a simple white top and skirt with floral patterns on it. She had previously insisted on keeping her ninja clothes but they convinced her that she couldn't wear them out in public.

"I guess I'll have to examine the wonderful work." She said sarcastically, heading to the bathroom to meet Glue Stick. They hadn't heard from him and thought that maybe he passed out.

"Son, please hurry!" The chicken pleaded.

Evina went hard to work on his father and then passed the pencil to Gyro to work on him.

After some quick work Gyro became a tall but bulky man about age fifty. He had amber eyes, a round nose, and lines in his aging face. His brown hair had some grey in it as he was starting to bald. His clothes were a simple plaid shirt and brown pants.

Evina was taller than the others, a bit older than Kate and Glue Stick, with dark brown hair trimmed in a professional way. He wore a casual blue t-shirt shirt buttoned at the top and clean black pants. His irises were dark grey. They reflected the strong influence that the shadow still held on him. Fortunately, though, he looked pretty normal from a distance.

"Don't forget to smile, Evina." Gyro reminded.

Evina had always kept a stern expression but tried his best to loosen it and be optimistic.

The ship began to vibrate slightly as their speed increased, gravitating towards the gigantic portal. The white light outside the windows grew brighter. Glue Stick and Kate came back to the main room.

"Ok, everyone, we only have seconds left! From now on Evina will be known as Aaron, I will be Jack,

Glue Stick will be Nick, and Kate will be... Kate. Is everyone ready? When we get there you must remain calm and follow my lead!"

The light was getting very bright now and the ship was creaking as it fell.

"Oh, and I must warn you, this will feel really, really weird!"

"What do you mean by weird?" Glue stick asked.

With the sound of a page being torn the ship shattered to pieces. All of them screamed as they were stretched out like spaghetti and twisted around in a pearly white vortex swirling violently. It was like water and they were funneled up to the surface, to another universe.

There was a loud pop and they fell onto a hard floor, piled on top of each other.

"WOW!" Glue Stick shouted. They all jumped up to their feet.

"Shh!" Gyro whispered furiously. "We don't want to draw attention to ourselves."

As they looked around they noticed they were in a dark room. There were printing machines lined along the walls, covered in dust. It was an abandoned printing shop. On the floor between them was a crinkled sheet of paper.

Gyro bent down and grabbed the paper. "This is our portal." He told them quietly. "We have to make sure that nothing bad happens to it." He took a step forward and slipped on some oily substance spilled long ago on the grimy floor. The paper fell and was soaked in it, completely useless. "No!"



"Dad, I mean Jack, are you alright?" Evina gave his father a hand to lift him off the floor. He looked unharmed, just a little dirty now.

"All I want to know is if you still have the pencil."

"It's right here." Evina reached in his pocket and lifted up the item. It was tiny now, as small as a regular pencil, but it still seemed to glow lightly with some magical power.

"Good." Gyro sighed, rubbing his balding scalp. "I was afraid that... never mind. Now we can hopefully draw ourselves another portal when we need to. Never take it out of your pocket in public. It must be kept hidden!"

Evina placed it securely in his pocket. "Ok, and what about the ship?"

Gyro had a keychain with him and on it was a tiny model of the ship. "It's right here. Cool, huh?"

At least they turned around to see where the only light in the room was coming from. There was a boarded-up window next to the door.

"I am ready." Kate said, and she held Glue Stick's arm so he wouldn't run away.

Together they marched to the door and swung it open. The sound of cars speeding by blared in their ears, a whiff of gasoline fumes met their noses, and hundreds of humans were walking in each direction. Compared to the quiet confines of the ship this place was completely chaotic.

Gyro remembered this place well, and he was becoming nervous. "Welcome to Earth..."

## Chapter 15

# New Friend

Suddenly they were here, the place they had been trying to reach for weeks. And they felt so weak, small, and exposed. Even with the graphite masks they felt out of place.

"Act natural and look for clues." Gyro instructed through his teeth.

"Yeah, I got it." Glue Stick said. His eyes scanned the surrounding area carefully. "I think I see something suspicious over there.

"Really?" Evina teased.

"Yeah, don't you think it's weird for so many people to be staring at the ground like that?"

Kate considered it. "Yeah, I suppose it is. We should go take a look."

When they arrived they saw that the people were looking at stars in the sidewalk. "See, like I told you, totally not natural."

"Nick," Gyro sighed, "this is Hollywood."

"WHERE? DON'T LET HIM TAKE ME AGAIN!"

"Whoa! No! Not a Mr. Hollywood. I meant... uh, how do I explain this? This is the place where a lot of Toons and their movies were made. There were once plenty of portals here so it makes perfect sense that one was still left... until we arrived."

"Alright then, I'll try to be quiet and not blow our cover."

It was too late, though; there were already plenty of people throwing funny glances at them. This

wasn't helped by the fact that the four of them didn't look like they belonged together for any realistic reason.

"Uh, maybe we should have thought our designs through a little more." Evina whispered anxiously. "Like, do we even have a story to explain why we're traveling like this? We don't have much of a cover at all!"

"But we should get out of this place." Gyro insisted. "We need to stay somewhere safe to get some time to figure out our plan."

"How do we get away?" Kate asked.

"I don't know! But something tells me the enemy is nearby. I remember it being close to the printing shop."

"How about we steal a kart?" Glue Stick suggested.

"It's a car, actually, and how do you think we can do that will all these people around?"

"There are cars everywhere! I'm sure nobody will notice if we just take one. Like, look at this one over here, I think the door is unlocked."

"No, I don't think we're doing that." Gyro ran over to the horse and dragged him away from the car. It was embarrassing how little each of them actually knew, how feeble their plans were. At this rate they wouldn't get anything done.

Kate came forward and cleared her throat to get their attention. "I don't know about you boys but we have to act more mature than this if we're going to survive. I'm going to walk into this place here and ask for some directions."

"To where?" Evina asked.

"Does it really matter?" She walked to the door while rolling her eyes at them.

But then someone opened the door and it hit her head while she wasn't looking.

"Oh, are you alright?" A man asked, coming out from the store.

Kate rubbed the side of her head. "Yeah, it's really nothing."

"Oh, well, if you need anything I'll be glad to help you."

"That's very kind of you. It just so happens we need a ride out of here."

"To where?"

"Um, we don't exactly have a place to stay for the night."

"Aw, I understand." The man smiled strangely. He was skinny and very well dressed, but his skin was unusually pale, and his face was long and tight.

"Do you think you could help us?" Kate asked, not sure if it was a silly question to ask in this situation.

The man just stared back into her eyes and sniffed loudly. A moment later he replied. "Hmm, okay, maybe I can give you a ride. You can stay at my apartment tonight."

"Oh, that's great! We would be so grateful. I'm Kate, by the way. And over there is Aaron, Jack, and Nick." She now realized how odd they all looked together and didn't think the stranger would believe the outrageous story, but to her surprise, there didn't seem to be any negative reaction.

"Pleased to meet you, Kate." He shook her hand and she noticed it felt cold. "I am Harold Johnson. My car's just around the corner."

He led them to his vehicle while they followed, thinking about this new plan. It was great to find

someone to help them, but there were some things about him that they weren't too comfortable with.

Evina and Gyro lagged behind a short distance to avoid being heard. "Didn't you say you could feel people's emotions?" The son asked.

"I did, but this guy doesn't have his mind opened. It's shut tight. I can't pretend to know any more about him than the rest of you."

At the car the younger three crammed themselves into the dusty back seat of the old beige sedan and Gyro was brave enough to take the front seat with their new friend.

As the doors shut and he turned the ignition, Mr. Johnson sniffed deeply again. The car drove away down the street and Evina could see the man's eyes looking at him through the reflection of the rear-view mirror. They were unnatural. They were piercing him. He was feeling uneasy.

"So, what are you guys doing in Hollywood?" he asked them as if to start a conversation.

They froze, not knowing what to say. Gyro finally uttered. "Tourism."

"A lot of people come here in the summer. There is plenty to do for the fun-loving type. But you couldn't find a motel to stay at?"

They all remained silent again.

"Eh, it's alright, I won't ask."

The city seemed to go on forever with so many buildings, so many highways, and so many cars, but they eventually arrived at Mr. Johnson's apartment. As Evina stepped out he could see the ocean in the distance down below the hill. There were some human

children playing on the beach. The waves looked shiny in the mid-day sunlight.

They walked up to a simple looking building and took the elevator to the fifth level where the man lived. As they followed him into his apartment they noticed it was kept very clean, but there was little to no decoration. Most of the walls were blank and the furniture was old and simple. It was like his entire life and interests were as hard to decipher as his closed mind. It wasn't likely he had many friends.

The lights were not turned on and so the only illumination in the room came from the windows. The air conditioner was also turned off so it felt unusually warm.

"Please make yourselves at home." Johnson said with another lopsided grin. "Forgive me, I have some work I need to get done. I'll be in my room. Please don't disturb me."

"Alright. Thank you once again." Gyro said.

Their new friend disappeared behind the bedroom door, shut it loudly, and locked it.

Kate stepped closer to them with her arms crossed. "So... what do we do now?" She inquired quietly. "Do you think all people act like that?"

"I doubt it, but I never really studied what humans have done in the last few decades. I don't know what is considered normal."

They heard the sound of a TV being turned on. Glue Stick was already in the armchair with his eyes focused on the screen.

"What are you doing?" Evina demanded.

"Hey, he told us to make ourselves at home. That's what I'm doing."

"Oh, why did I expect something else from you?" Evina covered his face.

The current channel had a weather report on showing a map of the area, a large area that was called Southern California. The four of them watched it with interest.

The image zoomed into an area not far south of where they were and the weather woman briefly mentioned the word 'Disneyland'.

"Disney?" Evina asked. "That's the name on the pencil!" But he tried to contain his excitement, cautious as to not make too much noise.

"And look at this." Glue Stick interrupted. He had noticed something lying on the ground next to the chair. It was a crinkled map of Disneyland. He unfolded it as the others bent over him to examine it. The first thing that caught their eyes was 'Toontown'.

Kate considered it. "Wait, does that mean there's a portal left?"

Gyro's eyes grew wide. "If there is a threat nearby then we'll have to destroy that portal." He backed away from them and looked around the room. "And there is something about this place that I just can't put my finger on. Something... familiar."

The rest of them shrugged.

"Not a single word." Gyro told them. He crept very quietly to the bedroom door and put his ear against it. Evina and Kate couldn't resist the temptation to do the same and soon they were all listening. Glue Stick was still watching the TV, though.

"I told you already..." Johnson complained through the muffled sound of the door. "I got them this time. We have to act now!"

Some voice on a phone spoke for a few seconds.

"Yes, I know they will be there. Trust me. Just make sure it's evacuated!"

The indiscernible voice continued for a few more moments.

"It's now or never! We must go now. And make sure you're prepared!"

Gyro motioned for them to move away. They crawled back to the main area. "I think... this is the threat I've seen before."

"Are you kidding?" Evina cried.

"I don't know what is going on but we have to get to that portal and destroy it before he can use it to hurt anyone."

"Are you sure?" Glue Stick asked, not wanting to get off his comfy chair.

"Trust me on this one. Guys, this is it."

They ran out of the apartment as quickly and quietly as they could.

"How are we going to get there? We'll need his car!" Kate asked between breaths.

"I found this in the kitchen." Evina answered, holding up the key.

His father gasped. "Amazing..."

Glue Stick didn't know what to say and he only looked more terrified with each passing second.

"But do you really know how to drive, dad? With a car, I mean. In Cog Nation Harry said he could but--"

"Evina, I'll be fine." He interrupted, forgetting to use the fake name. It probably didn't matter anymore.

They hopped inside as swiftly as they could and sped away from the apartment, pushing the old car to its limits. It rumbled and vibrated.



Gyro turned a corner and the tires screeched and cars honked at them, swerving to get out of the way.

"Won't we draw attention to ourselves this way?" Kate asked. "I'm just trying to be logical."

It didn't matter for very long, though. They soon saw hundreds of people spilling out in droves from the entrance to Disneyland. Police cars with flashing lights were starting to surround the area.

The four of them abandoned the car and jogged to the park entrance on foot. They had to push people out of their way, going angrily in the other direction.

But when the police spotted them they blocked their path.

"We have to get through." Glue Stick insisted.

"Nope."

"Please?"

"There has been a massive outbreak of some disease. Don't ask me what it's all about. Our job is to keep the park clear until the decontamination people come."

There was no way to fight it. They couldn't run past all the cops, so they walked away looking sad, even though they were not really deterred at all. When nobody was looking they jumped into a patch of trees and followed a concealed fence going around the park. A minute of walking passed and then each of them took their turn standing on Gyro's broad shoulders to get over the fence. Then they helped him up and over. Despite his larger size with the mask, he didn't weight quite so much.

"Great. Now where do we go?" Evina wondered.

"It's at the north side." The horse said. "We just have to get out of this jungle first, wherever it is."

They ran through the trees as fast as they could, but weren't paying attention to where they were going. At last they tripped and crashed into a river.

The water turned black and they rose to the surface sputtering. "Why didn't you tell us this was here?" Kate shouted.

Glue Stick shrugged, and then he gasped as he saw Kate in her normal form again. "Look!"

"You mean the mask isn't waterproof?" Evina exclaimed.

"Aren't you the one who did it?" Gyro shot back.

"But you only gave me one week to figure it out. It's not like you did any better."

There were voices, and the sounds of footsteps marching nearby. Gyro shushed them and they waded quietly to the back of the waterfall to hide.

"Cool," Glue Stick smiled, "I always wanted to see the back side of water."

Kate covered the horse's mouth with her hand.

Indeed, it sounded like a lot of people had entered the park. Also they heard something like heavy vehicles driving around. They wondered if it was the decontamination team that the cop mentioned.

Johnson was spotted standing on the roof of a building. He was far away, but his dark suit and pale skin were unmistakable. He looked out around the entire park and then yelled out as loudly as he could. "You stupid toons, you fell so quickly into my trap! I was barely able to keep up with you! Yeah, I know you can hear me; you can't be too far. And believe me when I say we *will* find you. There is no place to hide. You better get ready to die!"

## Chapter 16

# War in the Park

"A trap?" Kate said as they carefully walked out of the waterfall and onto the shore. "Something tells me that the Toontown here isn't the same one we're looking for."

"Yeah, I don't think we're getting out of here very easily." Gyro mumbled. "And those vehicles are carrying soldiers no doubt." He squinted through the distant images behind the trees. Shadowy figures were marching. "Yep, I see them."

There was a really sad sounding squeak. Gyro's helper crawled out of the murky water and onto the soil.

Gyro's beak opened in shock. "I thought I left you back in the ship! Did you... use an invisible mask?"

"What?" Evina asked.

"He erased himself. He's not a toon. That's rather clever, but foolish of him to come anyway. If Johnson got his hands on him he could extract information about our world."

"But why does he want to kill us?" The horse demanded. "Who is this guy?"

"None of that matters now." Gyro said. "All we can do now is stay alive, and stop him if we can."

"How?" they asked.

"Remember our food storage? I learned how different our physics are compared to the humans'. We can use that to our advantage. The pencil can be our ally."

"So what are we going to do?" Evina asked.

"We have to stop Doom, and with your strength from the shadow, you will have to do a lot of the work."

"What about me?" Glue Stick asked.

"Don't ruin our chances of surviving." Kate shot back coldly, but she noticed her tone of voice and changed it immediately. "Um, why don't you erase little light head guy again?"

Evina tossed the horse the pencil and then turned to the others. "Ok, this is the plan. You two will go distract that group of soldiers headed to Tomorrowland. Meanwhile, Glue Stick and the helper will distract the group in Frontierland. I can use that time to take on Johnson alone in Main Street. Got that?"

"It's the best plan we got." Gyro admitted.

"I will succeed or die trying." Kate assured him.

"I won't let anyone die." Evina protested.

"We'll see about that..."

Everyone took off through the forest of trees in their designated directions.

Glue Stick followed the helper out of Adventureland, or at least he thought he was following him. He couldn't see him. He was sweating and looking around frantically. Never before had he been so nervous.

A squeak directed his attention to Frontierland and the horse followed it. It wasn't long before he saw an armored truck parked outside a funny shaped rock formation.

"Ok, I need to distract them somehow." He whispered. "How about something like this?" He stepped forward. The helper tried to stop him but he didn't listen.

"Hey guys, what are you all doing?"

The soldiers turned to look at him.

"Dang, I never thought I would see one. It's true after all!" one of them gasped.

Another one didn't look so amused. "Follow your orders. Don't let it escape alive."

The first soldier pointed his rifle at Glue Stick and with a loud bang a window shattered behind him.

"Ok, well, um... bye!" Glue Stick turned the other way and ran as fast as he could, screaming as the bullets whizzed by him and the soldiers followed in hot pursuit. He broke the window to the Golden Horseshoe and climbed inside, thinking that for a moment he had thrown them off his track. "That was close!"

The helper squeaked in agreement. The horse had almost forgotten it was with him.

"Well do you have any bright ideas?" The helper's lightbulb head flickered on and off. "Ha ha that's very funny." He replied sarcastically. "There has to be a back door we can sneak through or something." He sprinted to the stage and accidentally knocked an oddly positioned can of gold paint off of a nearby table, getting it all over his foot.

"Hey, now I have the golden horseshoe- no wait. Have you ever wondered why I have these paw things instead?"

The helper jumped on his other foot, causing pain and convincing him to keep moving. Glue Stick ran through the curtain, followed some halls, and found an exit door where he could escape.

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"Where are we going?" Kate demanded.

Gyro was nearly out of breath. "I don't know! This is all Evina's plan!"

"Because I understand how we're toons and all, but my sword can't deflect all those bullets."

"Why don't you do that white fire thing again? I saw it back on that planet-"

"And cause a blackout for the entire metropolis? I think we are already in enough trouble as it is!"

"Over here." Gyro said. He darted into a random building and Kate followed.

"What are we doing?"

"I'm not sure yet."

After they made their way out of the long zigzag halls, they came across the ride. It looked kind of cartoonish. There was an image of a man in a bizarre spacesuit pasted on the opposite wall and the ride vehicles were all lined up on a track, not moving.

"Do you really think we can hide from them in here?" Kate asked incredulously.

"Who knows." Gyro muttered. Then they both heard the same noise at the same time. It was the voice of soldiers.

"I think they went this way." One soldier spoke. His voice was clearly audible even though it was from somewhere back in the queue hallway.

"I refuse to believe what I saw. I mean, I didn't see what I thought I saw, and we will not let these illusions interfere with our orders, will we?"

"No sir."

Gyro hopped over to a control panel and pressed every button he could see. "It won't work." He whispered with intense frustration.

The girl rolled her eyes. "No key. No problem." She sliced off the security key mechanism and all the lights flickered on. The ride began to move.

"Wow, this is slower than I thought." The old chicken remarked.

"You really should've done more research before you choose random rides to hide in."

"Well I'm sorry." Gyro said through his teeth with frustration. "I didn't have time to read up on the latest attractions when there were men with heavy weapons swarming this park trying to kill us."

He took a plastic laser gun from its holster to defend himself. The trigger caused the gun to vibrate and create an annoying sound.

"Did you hear that?" the first soldier said. "I think they're on the ride!"

"Duck!" Kate warned.

They crouched down low enough so that the soldiers could not see them just by scanning the tops of each ride vehicle.

"Get in, private."

"Sir?"

"Yes, we're going to follow the target like we're ordered to. What do I always tell you? This isn't Disneyland, kid. This is... oh wait."

"I'll try to distract them." Gyro suggested. He aimed at a target and fired, causing a prop to light up and create more noise.

Kate was actually impressed. "You're not all that bad, old man."

Both soldiers jumped in fear but the officer glared down at the private, pretending like he hadn't been frightened. "You scared of a cardboard cutout? Don't let

them distract you. Watch out for them when they come out to take another shot.”

“Try the robot.” Kate suggested. “Gyro took aim but a bullet sailed past his head and caused a prop of a three-eyed green alien to explode.”

“That’ll be us next.” Gyro cried.

“Don’t be so glum. Have you really thought this through? Since when have human weapons caused toons any damage?”

Gyro didn’t answer. He almost looked surprised that he hadn’t considered that idea so far. “With the power of those weapons, I’d rather not find out. Even if we survive it would give any toon a world of pain.”

“But only one of them is shooting, right? That rifle doesn’t have rapid fire.”

“We really don’t know for sure.”

“Cover me.”

“What?”

Kate leapt up from the floor and landed in a perfect battle stance on the vehicle’s edge. Her glimmering sword was in hand and her hair was flowing in the wind that didn’t really exist. “I’m gonna to send you to infinity and beyond!”

The private took a shot and it was easily deflected. Then he tried again and with another spark and another clang it was bounced somewhere else.

“Are you using armor piercing rounds?” The officer asked.

“That thing must be made of something crazy strong!”

With a deep sigh the older one took out his pistol and helped with the fight. Even together they were still no match for Kate. Despite the faster rate of fire she



flinched faster than any move they could make, and it looked so effortless. Props exploded left and right, and even a few lights as bullets ricocheted off to all the surrounding room. The sound was deafening.

"This is what I've been waiting for!" Kate exclaimed, laughing in the face of death. "And what do you know, this is actually working better than planned!" the blade began to glow. It was collecting a lot of energy from those bullets.

"Please don't hurt them badly." Gyro insisted. "We have to be better than that."

"Alright," Kate agreed, "but it's not going to be fun for them."

The soldiers stopped firing as Kate's sword glowed brighter and she focused the energy in their direction, ready to fire. The officer cowered behind the private and screamed.

She grinned. "Welcome to Disneyland, boys."

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Glue Stick couldn't keep up with the helper. He was running out of breath. "I've seen so many westerns but I never wanted to be in one. You never really think about how scary it is to have guns aimed at you."

There was a squeak. The horse followed in that direction.

"Why go to New Orleans Square? It's not like they won't eventually find us." He looked behind and saw that his foot had been tracking golden footprints the whole time. "Oh great."

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Evina did not hide. He walked straight down the center of the street, watching intently for any movement, listening for any sound. It was unfortunate that he didn't have that ability to smell toons, though.

"So are you going to come out and fight me or what?" the duck shouted. "I don't see you trying to destroy me. Who do you think you..."

"Quiet." A silky smooth voice spoke. Evina could not trace down where it came from. He had to stop and listen.

"You don't fear me, but that isn't courage like you think. It's just the foolishness of a clueless young kid who thinks he's special. You don't know me. Not one little bit."

Evina's heartrate went a little faster. The way Johnson spoke so calmly was unnaturally scary.

"But soon, very soon, you will learn to fear me. I will knock that disrespecting gloat off your face, and then you will know what true terror feels like."

Evina could not see him, but he could feel his evil grin. He just knew it. He followed where his instincts led him. The evil was moving and he knew where it was headed.

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Kate and Gyro each hauled a semi-burned unconscious soldier outside.

"I'm so glad I have you." Gyro said.

"Happy you didn't jettison me, eh? Well you're not half bad yourself."

"I could do with a little less sarcasm, though."

“What’s that? I can’t hear you. You need to keep up with me so we can find the others and get out of here.”

Gyro followed her and rolled his eyes.

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“Ok so what do we do now?” Glue Stick demanded. “Hey, where are you?”

He heard a squeak right behind him.

“Stop scaring me!”

The helper sounded angry. It jumped up and down and squeaked in a familiar pattern over and over again. “Pencil! Pencil! Pencil!”

“Wait, I can understand you? I just decoded it somehow in my mind. That’s odd.”

“PENCIL!”

“What do you mean? I... AH I STILL HAVE IT! Why didn’t Evina take it back? Um ok, I have to stay calm now. Remember your breathing exercises. Find your happy place. Um, alright, I’m ready now. What do I do with it?”

“Anvil.”

“Did I hear that correctly? Anvil?”

“ANVIL!”

Glue Stick doodled a very simple anvil and the image popped up out of the ground. The helper scooted it to a conveniently located pulley system and it gestured Glue Stick to hoist it up.

“I really don’t know what you’re doing, but because you’re a robot who probably has some valuable data to keep us alive, I’ll do it for you.”

“Run!”

Glue Stick didn't have time to react. The soldiers spotted him.

"Did you hear a squeaking sound?" One of them asked.

"Who cares? The target is right there!"

Glue Stick screamed and ran away but he heard a sudden bang, some shouting, and had to turn around to see what had happened.

The helper, using its invisibility has an advantage, had dropped the anvil off of a building. It hit a barrel of oil which burst open and caused all the soldiers to slip. They were unable to get to their feet, slipping no matter how hard they tried to stand.

"Fire you idiots!"

The soldiers, although stuck on the ground, continued to shoot at the horse as he fled down the narrow street. Plenty of props, doors, and windows were destroyed but he managed to narrowly escape them once again. He ran straight into Evina and it startled both of them.

"I thought you were in Main Street!" Glue Stick gasped.

"There's no time to explain. I think Johnson is coming this way!"

"And you would be correct." The sinister voice sneered. The man had jumped from a roof and landed gracefully only feet away from them.

Just then Kate and Glue Stick appeared behind Johnson and tried to attack him. He was very agile and defended himself. Everyone was distracted by them for a moment.

Glue Stick had an expression on his face that Evina had never seen before. It was a mixture of deep contemplation and fear.

"What are you doing? We have to help them!" Evina cried.

"I know what I must do." The horse spoke, with more determination than any other sentence he had ever uttered.

"What?"

"Evina, this is what I was destined to do. If I don't come back, please remember me at least."

"What are you talking about..."

Glue Stick dropped the pencil and sprinted swiftly to the curved slope leading to the entrance of the Pirates of the Caribbean ride. "Hey you!" he bellowed as loud as he could.

Johnson's eyes briefly switched focus to the horse on the balcony.

"Uh yeah..." he seemed to have lost his words for a moment. "Ugly... pale creepy face. Yes you! Think you can catch me? Then come and get it!"

Johnson growled with rage. He chased Glue Stick into the building as fast as he could.

Even the soldiers were fazed. They stopped and watched with their mouths open as the two disappeared out of sight.

"Glue Stick," Evina murmured quietly, "you finally earned the title of hero. Though I doubt I'll be able to give you that honor alive."

## Chapter 17

# On Stranger Rides

Johnson arrived at the entrance to the pirates ride and examined the large dock. The place was very detailed and complicated, the ideal place to hide. "Ok, now where did he go to?"

A parrot squawked. "He's over there! He's over there!"

Glue Stick was lying flat on the bottom of a boat floating out to the swamp. "Stupid animatronic bird." He grunted quietly. "And who even programs AI like that?"

Just as the sounds of crickets and banjo music were starting, Glue Stick could hear the splashing of Johnson wading in the water, approaching closer and closer to his boat. He needed to wait until the right moment in order to act.

Then the boat entered the dark tunnel with the talking skull on the wall. Glue Stick rose up and slid into the water as quietly as he could, hoping that his toon scent would wash away and conceal him from Johnson. It seemed to work for a minute, and he followed alongside the boat, floating silently in the darkness and then down the waterfall.

His body was thrown under the murky waters and all he could hear was the sounds of the waves underwater. His head kept hitting things, whether it was the ground or the boat or something else, he didn't know. There wasn't enough light to see which direction was up. But finally he found the surface and gasped for air. He hoped Johnson still didn't see or hear him. The tunnel was pretty loud and still in the dark.

At the second waterfall Glue Stick knew that there was going to be some light and he wouldn't be able to hide.

"Just wait until I find you." The cold voice echoed through the caves, sending shivers up the horse's spine. "A little freak needs to be taught some manners."

Glue Stick clung tightly to left side of the boat as it plunged down the second drop. He was now in the large cavern. The sounds of the waterfall faded away and the cave shimmered beautifully with the refraction of the water under the dim blue light. Listening carefully he could notice the simulated thunderstorm and the low hum of the pirate's theme song further away. It was calming and for a second he almost forgot about Johnson, but that was soon to change.

Johnson was moving again and didn't even try to hide the noise caused by his breathing and splashing.

Glue Stick considered his options and decided that the best way to continue surviving (and giving the others enough time to fight the soldiers) was not to keep running but confront Johnson. His boat drifted over to the small cave with the gold coins spilled all over and he had the perfect plan.

Johnson saw Glue Stick hop off the boat and lurch towards the treasure room. The toon took the sword from the skeleton prop but he arrived there only seconds later.

"Stand back." The horse warned, holding the blade up to his enemy dangerously.

Johnson managed to grab another sword from behind his back without turning around, and now he was also armed. An evil grin stretched across his pale face. "You have no idea who you're messing with, boy."

"Maybe so, but neither do you."

The creepy man looked confused. His opponent didn't look very threatening.

"I've memorized all the movies." Glue Stick said. Suddenly he swung the sword and Johnson blocked it.

"You do have spirit." Johnson agreed. "But I'm still going to destroy you."

Glue Stick struck again, swinging from different sides and stepping carefully, ready to dodge any counterattack.

Johnson jumped to the side with sudden movement, and his skill surprised Glue Stick as well.

The horse lost his balance trying to avoid the blade. He toppled over a heap of gold coins and rolled out of the way from the coming attacks. But once on his feet again he fought ferociously. The air was filled with the sounds of the swords clashing.

Glue Stick hopped onto the captain's bed to gain the advantage of the higher position. He jumped and narrowly missed the swing aimed at his feet.

Johnson fought well and was growing more impatient with each passing minute. Glue Stick was tired but he did not show his weakness. He never rested from his swinging.

Johnson was driven back and fell back into the water, sputtering.

Glue Stick took this opportunity to change plans. He bounced off Johnson's head and dived headfirst into the water, following the tunnel to the cloud of mist up ahead. It looked like he was getting ahead.

With an angry shout Johnson threw his sword forward. Glue Stick dodged but he didn't miss the edge which cut his arm. It wasn't too much of a wound, but it



did sting. He swam quickly to the big room where the two pirate ships were having a battle. A myriad of props and animatronics provided plenty of places to hide.

The man arrived a minute later to see that the horse was nowhere to be found. He never imagined it would take this long to eliminate one annoying toon. "Alright, if you want to play like a coward then I'll find you another way." He jogged over to a flaming torch on a wall and raised it proudly. "Let's see if you can take the heat!"

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Evina was running. Gyro and Kate were not far behind. They were heading north along the river and the soldiers were in hot pursuit.

"Where are we going?" The girl asked him.

"Anywhere." Evina said. "We have to get away from them."

"And what about Glue Stick?" Gyro asked the best he could through his lack of breath.

"That's his problem." Evina insisted. "The best we can do is get rid of these guys."

"We need somewhere to hide." Kate continued.

The duck pointed to another large ride ahead. "You mean like that?"

It was the best option available to them so they ran into the queue as fast as their legs could move, jumping over any ropes in their way. It was pretty long and they weren't sure how far the soldiers were behind them.

Evina read a sign hanging on a wall.

*You can't run from trouble. Ain't no place that far.*

"Very helpful." Evina grunted sarcastically.

Some cave-like area they entered seemed to be near the entrance to the ride. It was set up as a river with logs in it. Each log had seats to sit on. The shouting of soldiers echoed through the caves behind them so they hurried to get on the ride.

Gyro found a key and tossed it to Kate. She put it in, turned it, and pressed the button in only a moment's time. All the equipment began to whirl to life as the three of them hopped into a log. The safety gates shut and it was launched forward into the water. The soldiers were seen getting into a log behind them.

They wished it would go faster. The log floated along rather peacefully as the safety announcement was spoken. Eventually they came to the first conveyor belt which lifted them up a hill. From the log behind them a shot was fired and it chipped off the back part of one of the seats as they ducked.

"Ok, I hate these guys." Kate said.

"You're telling me." Gyro rolled his eyes. "I don't see how we'll ever get away from them."

Evina pointed ahead. "Hey, what's this?"

They had arrived at the first drop. Their log fell down a waterfall and sprayed them with water as they went into a tunnel full of singing animatronics.

"It's dark. Do you think they can see us?" The chicken whispered. A bullet whizzed by his head which answered that question. They tried to keep their heads low. Their log weaved in and out of complicated areas full of props and they were clueless as to where they were going. They didn't know if the ride's noise was

helpful or simply annoying. From what they could tell the soldiers were whispering now.

Evina was confused. "I wonder what they're up to..." The sound of rushing water interrupted that thought and he lifted his head to see that they were approaching a really dark waterfall. "Oh no..."

They went down the hill and it felt more like a rollercoaster than a river. They were launched over another hill and a wave of cold water washed over them. They were soaked and floating through another dark tunnel with air conditioning blowing.

"They don't call it Splash Mountain for nothing." Gyro moaned.

"It's times like this that I wish I had my black suit. That thing is at least waterproof."

"So why didn't you wear it?" Kate said coldly.

"It was full of magical radiation that couldn't be masked! Seriously, didn't you read the book?"

"Whatever." She said. "But where did those guys go to?"

They listened carefully for the soldiers, trying to drown out the musical noise of bees buzzing, but it didn't sound like the soldiers were behind them anymore.

"That's odd." Gyro remarked.

The music suddenly changed tone. It was eerie and suspenseful. Up ahead they thought they could see another conveyor to lift their log somewhere.

Above their heads an animatronic vulture sneered down at them. "You won't be laughing much longer."

There was a bit more light available now. Turning around the toons could see that the log behind them was empty.

"This isn't right, guys." Gyro said, and he looked very scared.

Evina was genuinely worried now as the ominous music continued and the log was hoisted up a high hill, much higher than all the previous ones. He was shivering from the cold as well. It wasn't just the ride that he was worried about, but more importantly, why the soldiers had suddenly disappeared.

"What do they have planned?" He whispered through his teeth, trying to reason his way through this. In his mind there was a silent plea for help. He didn't know for sure if he was as invincible as he thought.

At the top of the hill they saw the props of the rabbit about to be eaten by the fox. Evina imagined himself as the rabbit and the fox as Johnson, ready to destroy him. Their log emerged from the dark and into the light of day. They were above the park, about to fall down a very tall waterfall. And below them there was something blocking the river. It was a huge pile of explosives.

The log tipped downwards, the toons opened their mouths to scream, and the camera flashed.

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Glue Stick was getting very hot. All the props surrounding him were engulfed in bright orange flames and he didn't know a way to escape without being caught by Johnson.

The man in black stood in the water and watched the flames. He waited for his prey to come out. He was growing ever more impatient and wondered how long it would take before he could continue with his plans.

Just then Glue Stick dived from a bridge and landed in the water. The man waded to that spot and searched furiously but he couldn't find him. Before he knew it he was hit in the head and fell down.

Glue Stick dropped a bottle he had taken from one of the pirates. This solution wouldn't last long but he hoped it would provide enough time to get out. He fled to the exit tunnel to escape the ride. By the time he reached the dungeon room he found Gyro's helper in the cell with the other pirates.

"Hey, what are you doing here?!" He shouted.

"Rescue." The helper squeaked.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm doing just fine on my own."

There was a terrible scream of rage from the previous room. Johnson was out of the water and wouldn't be stopped so easily anymore. Besides that, there wasn't much time left for any of them. The heat was rising, the water was boiling, and the building was going to collapse soon.

"Alright then, rescue me!" Glue Stick begged.

The last room showed pirates shooting at one another. The people on the boat would feel jets of air with each shot. The helper had brought a cork. It hopped onto the horse's shoulder and shoved it into one of the pirate's guns. Then it squeaked "RUN!"

Glue Stick picked up the helper and jogged up the hill to the dock area. Johnson wandered into the room behind them when the pressure in the gun caused

it to explode. The room filled with smoke which allowed the two to escape.

They had scarcely stepped outside when they heard a low rumble from behind them. The underground building collapsed from the fire. It didn't seem likely that Johnson survived, or at least they knew he wouldn't escape for a very long time.

"I suppose we have to find the others now."

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The blast knocked out their vision and hearing. It took a moment for their senses to return. They felt pain everywhere on their bodies and then they saw that the tunnel at the bottom of the waterfall had been completely destroyed. Their log had also been blown to smithereens, yet they were still alive and floating with debris in the remaining water. Ahead of them was the ferris wheel with all the animals singing Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah.

When they finally reached the ride's exit gate Kate warily climbed out of the water to lie down on the ground. "Wow, you're right. We are pretty tough in this world."

"Yep," Gyro agreed, "but let's not let that happen again. I don't know how long this luck will last."

"I wonder where Glue Stick is." Evina wondered.

"Right here." the horse answered. The other three were stunned to see him there. They had feared he was gone forever. A paper was in his hand. He held it up to show them. "Ok, it's actually a pretty decent one."

The photograph showed their terrified faces when they saw the explosives from the top of the waterfall. It

was very detailed and extremely humiliating. Evina dropped his head in shame. "How did you get out of there? Where did Johnson go? How did you find us?"

"Whoa, slow down, one question at a time!" The horse insisted, not thinking that there might still be soldiers nearby. "I was rescued by the helper, Johnson is gone now, and I found you because that explosion could be heard from miles away."

"What do you mean he's *gone*?" Kate demanded.

"He was nuts! He burned the pirates ride to the ground and got trapped inside. Anyway, I expected you would be thanking me now considering I had him distracted for you. Why did you get yourselves blown up?"

"Look out!" Gyro shouted.

An angry soldier, maybe the one who had set the explosives, ran out towards them from a hiding place and prepared to attack. But then something unexpected happened. He was knocked to the ground by a large gear that seemed to be flung out of nowhere. Evina turned around to see hundreds of cogs standing in a nearby tunnel. He wasn't sure if it was real because it looked impossible.

A Glad Hander was grinning at him. "I heard you needed a hand."

## Chapter 18

# Man vs. Metal

Evina was speechless. His bill was open but no words came out.

"Are you alright?" The Glad Handed asked.

"How did you all get here?" He demanded.

"Shouldn't it be obvious?" A deep voice answered. The crowd of cogs parted and the chairman stepped forward. "Remember we have the connection in our minds. We heard your cry for help and came to assist you. That was our promise."

Evina was still frozen but he finally managed to laugh. "Wow, that's great! We are in serious trouble with these soldiers."

"That'll be no problem." A Big Wig assured him, cracking his knuckles. "We'll bring justice to those fiends."

The soldier who had just been knocked out was starting to stir. He looked shocked to see he was surrounded by robots now. "How weird can this get?"

The Big Wig walked up to the soldier and slapped him in the face. "Shame on you for such behavior."

The man raised a shotgun and blasted the cog to pieces. That was when the chaos continued again.

The other members of the squad had heard the shot and ran back through the exit of Splash Mountain to face the cogs.

"We'll distract them." The chairman said to Evina. "All you can do is get out of here as fast as you can."

"What? That's the same plan as before!" The duck exclaimed.



"Let those boys fight." Kate said. "As for me, I'm getting tired of all this." While the soldiers began firing at the cogs and bullets ricocheted noisily off the metal plates all over the room, she sneaked behind them to escape the ride. Gyro, Glue Stick, and Evina followed.

"And where is my helper, anyway?" Gyro wondered. "I'm worried about him and I last time I checked he was with *you!*"

Glue Stick was nervous again. "I don't know! I lost track of him for a while and then he showed up at the end of the pirate's ride."

"Did he escape?!"

"I swear he did! I was sure he was following me but now he disappeared again and it wasn't my fault!"

"Well I'm going to help Kate and Evina get someplace safe. You should go back and find him."

"Are you kidding? I barely got out of there alive!"

"Well you aren't getting any medal of honor until we all get out of here alive, and that means the helper too. Besides, you have a way of being really lucky in these situations for some reason."

"What! I- I- uh... fine."

Glue Stick jogged back to New Orleans Square. It seemed to be quieter there now. He only heard the crackling of the fire from the pirate's ride. The smoldering remains of the building glowed where it stood.

The helper was standing still, looking out into the ash and smoke with determination.

"What are you doing now?" The horse demanded. "Gyro is mad at me now because you..."

A squeak interrupted him. The helper pointed to the glowing embers.

"Look. You and I both saw what happened in there. He's dead."

The helper shook its head.

"Oh really? Then what are you going to do when he rises out of that pit of fire? You think you can stop him then? What's the plan?"

"Hide." It squeaked.

"You're pathetic." The horse said, crossing his arms and turning around in rebellion, but the helper wouldn't move, and he was certain it would not like to be picked up from that spot. So with a sigh he turned around again. "Ok. Have it your way. Where do you want me to hide?"

It pointed to what looked like an old mansion not too far away. The building was mostly white, artistic in an old way, and different from anything else in the area.

"Fine. See you around then."

It didn't appear that there was anything special about that place but he didn't argue with Gyro's helper. As he arrived at the building's doors he opened them with a creak and walked inside.

It was darker than he expected. The lights were off. But then his eyes adjusted and he saw that the lights were actually on; they were just very dim. They were candles hanging on the walls and a chandelier on the ceiling. He thought he saw spider webs. This was unexpected.

"I think they call this the Haunted Mansion or something." Glue Stick said to himself. "It's not really all that impressive." He walked onward into a large circular room which was lit similarly and was oddly empty.

"What is this all about?"

He looked up to the ceiling and then turned around to see everything. There were four paintings on the wall. Then he realized something was wrong. "Hey! Wasn't there a door just there?"

A creepy voice suddenly spoke and it frightened Glue Stick enough to yelp. "Our tour begins here in this gallery where you see paintings of some of our guests as they appeared in their corruptible, mortal state."

He didn't know if he was hallucinating but the paintings seemed to be growing, showing detail that wasn't there before.

"Your cadaverous pallor portrays an aura of foreboding, almost as though you sense a disquieting metamorphosis."

"You're t-telling me." The horse stammered.

"Is this haunted room actually stretching? Or is it your imagination? Hmm? And consider this dismaying observation. This chamber has *no* windows and *no* doors." His ghostly laugh echoed around the room.

Glue Stick was sweating now. He could now see that the people in the portraits were facing imminent death. He didn't know how this was possible.

"Which offers you this chilling challenge: To find a way out! HAHAAHAHA! ... Of course they're always my way."

Glue Stick gulped. "And what's that?"

There was a clap of thunder, sudden darkness, and a brief flash of lightning which showed a skeleton hung from the ceiling. Glue Stick's popped out from his head. He screamed louder than he ever had before.

Fortunately the lights returned and an opening had appeared in the wall. There was a way to escape.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to frighten you prematurely.” The voice sounded amused. “The real chills come later. Now, as they say, ‘look alive’ and we’ll continue our little tour.”

Glue Stick took tiny steps into the next room. He was shaking nonstop. “What if I don’t want to continue the tour?”

He was in a long hallway with windows. There was a storm outside which created lots of noise. He thought he saw something unusual in every portrait in the hall whenever the lightning flashed.

“I’m sorry I offended you or something. Okay, I get it now, this place *is* scary.”

“We have 999 happy haunts here but there’s room for 1000. Any volunteers? If you insist on lagging behind, you may not need to volunteer.”

The horse whimpered and started walking faster. He had the feeling he was being watched. Now the real ride was in sight. Some mysterious black vehicles were moving in a line down a track. He didn’t know what to do but entered one of them anyway. The safety bar lowered itself.

He buried his face in his gloves. “Oh, please let this be over. Please. Why did the helper send me in here? I bet it’s laughing its little light bulb head off. Son of a weasel...” The ride was unusually creepy. He wasn’t sure how any of this was possible to simulate.

Then at one point when he was starting to feel a little safer, a different voice spoke out of the darkness.

“Just you wait. I’ll teach you the real meaning of fear.”

It was Johnson, but Glue Stick knew it had to be an illusion. That guy was gone and he knew it. Still his heart kept beating faster.

He went deeper into the mansion for several more minutes. He went into a graveyard with lots of singing ghosts. The ride had to be over soon, he thought. Just then the ride announcer came back to speak. "Beware of hitchhiking ghosts!"

The vehicle moved into a room full of mirrors. Johnson appeared as a ghostly figure sitting beside Glue Stick. His clothes were burnt and he looked angry. Still, the face briefly grinned in a sickeningly sinister smile like he knew a secret.

Glue Stick was panting. As soon as the safety bar lifted he darted away to the exit as fast as he could. He could see the light of day up ahead but it was only a minor comfort. Now all he could do was run to the helper who was still staring at the ashes of the pirates ride. "What was that all about?!"

The helper did not reply.

"Because of you I'm being haunted by Johnson's ghost!"

It hesitated before replying. It raised a finger and pointed behind him. "No. Alive!"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Glue Stick demanded.

"It means I'm still alive, you idiot. But very soon you won't be." The horse spun around and to his horror he saw that Johnson was indeed alive. The man looked tired and beaten but still able to fight.

"New plan." The horse said to the helper. "Let's not hide but RUN!"

Johnson did not let them out of his sight. He was determined to finish this.

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Evina had barely reached Fantasyland before he ran out of breath and had to stop. Gyro and Kate looked similar. It was only a matter of time before the soldiers would catch up with him. Then the worst possible thing happened. A military truck carrying reinforcements arrived at the park. It skidded to a halt in front of them. They couldn't afford to rest anymore.

"Are you kidding me?" Kate cried out.

Evina ran to the nearest visible ride, a snowy mountain.

"I hope this is fast." Gyro remarked.

"Me too." The Duck agreed. They hopped inside and Kate pressed the button. Together as a team they were getting faster at doing this thing.

In the noisy pitch-black tunnel going up the hill he spoke again. "Man, they sure do have a lot of mountains around here. At least it seems fast, though."

There was a pause. "Do you think they're behind us now?" Kate asked.

Evina tried to find out. "I can't see or hear anything."

There was a roar and they were faced with a ferocious yeti. It surprised them but they were not too scared. They were at the top of the hill now and starting to roll down. A few seconds later they were scared by something else. Soldiers were both in the bobsled behind them and the one to their side. They were using the other track as well.

The ride was old and shaky. As they accelerated the bumps became harder. It would be very difficult to fight from here.

Kate still managed to maneuver her sword to deflect the bullets shot from both sides. Sometimes the other track would take a different turn and leave them as they went through a tunnel but often there would be a moment when they saw each other and were shot at. They had to do something more.

Evina tried to stand up even though it was foolish to try. They were moving fast, zig-zagging through icy tunnels and sometimes the clearance was dangerously low. "I'll take it from here."

"You sure?" the girl asked.

"Yeah." Evina took her sword and deflected the bullets until the blade began to glow. He didn't notice until they shot through another dark tunnel how bright it had become.

"Duck!" Gyro shouted.

Evina turned around and saw that he was about to slam into a stone arch. The bobsled would make a quick dive underneath but he wouldn't make it.

It was extremely dangerous but he decided to make a sudden move. He jumped to do a front flip and his body barely cleared the arch, slicing it apart with the sword, causing it to fall apart into many pieces behind him. He landed with his feet on his seat down below. It has worked flawlessly.

The soldiers behind them had their bobsled derailed by the rocks and they were launched out of their seats, landing in the down water below.

Now Evina could see the other track. The sword was still glowing and he now tried something new. He

threw it onto the other track and it stuck in the ground. When the bobsled hit it there was a shockwave of energy released and it was flipped over. The soldiers were catapulted into the water with the others.

The three heroes arrived back at the entrance with amazement.

"That was close." Evina said, wiping the sweat from his face.

"That was amazing!" Gyro beamed. "Did you see that blast of energy?"

"All I saw was Evina being stupid with my sword." Kate mumbled. "It's not replaceable, you know."

Some of the soldiers were crawling out of the water slowly, groaning with pain. "I can't believe it!" One of them shouted. "How are we going to explain this?"

The girl ran to the sword, picked it up from the ground, and returned to the soldiers. "Ok, drop your weapons!"

The same man put his hands up and replied. "We lost them."

"Oh... I see. Then everyone follow me. And don't try any funny business!" She led them to what looked like storage room concealed behind bushes nearby, made them go inside, and then locked the door. Immediately afterwards she dropped to the ground looking exhausted. "Ok, now we're safe."

"WAIT!" a metallic voice shouted. A Pencil Pusher was running down the street towards them, his feet clanking on the ground with every step. "I have to talk to you!"

"What is it?" Evina asked. "Is everything alright?"



The cog looked very scared. "No. We are losing. We can't hold them back forever. That man, Johnson if I heard correctly, he has returned and we can't stop him."

"Great. That's exactly what we need." But right in the middle of Evina's sarcasm he saw something out of the corner of his eye. The cogs were swarming through the streets like they were fleeing something terrifying. Glue Stick and the helper were in that group with them. Their shouts were heard louder and louder as they passed by the Matterhorn. Not far behind them were the soldiers with the man in black at the front of the group. He looked infuriated, but when he spotted Evina his rage looked like it was boiling over.

"Dang!" Evina spat. "I wish I had something else that could help!" Then he remembered it, and it had been with him for such a long time that he wasn't sure if this was even the right time. He took the vial of red liquid from his pocket, given to him by his friend Rocky. It was only to be used in an emergency, and this was one. He popped off the cork and held it up to his mouth. "Um, he it goes..." Then he swallowed it all in one gulp.

The effects were immediate. His mouth was burning. The heat rose higher and higher and it never stopped. Something had gone wrong. This was unbearable.

"AHHHHH!" Evina screamed and the pain gave him sudden energy and reflexes. He began to glow and emit steam. It wasn't the power of the shadow, but it was still very useful.

A soldier ran up to him and Evina disarmed him with ease, moving out of the way from any incoming attack. This went on and on and soon the troops were dumbfounded at how they were losing. He fought

alongside the cogs until he was exhausted. The soldiers were knocked out left and right until they were each disarmed. They were escorted away to the storage room that Kate had found. It must've been really crowded in there.

"NO!" Johnson cried. He was pinned to the wall of the castle; the cogs had stapled his clothes.

The chaos was dying down. All of the soldiers were locked up, the toons were on the ground resting and exhausted, and the remaining cogs were down for repairs. The entire park was a mess scattered with broken pieces of rides, buildings, and cog parts. The head of the Walt Disney statue was missing. But despite all the destruction Evina was glad that they had finally won the battle.

"I think we really did it, Evina." Gyro smiled at his son. "We saved Toontown."

"Yeah, you did an okay job." Kate admitted. "But I was doing a lot of the work too."

"I appreciate your help." Evina told her. He then went over to check on Glue Stick and the helper. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm ok." The horse mumbled.

"You really did save us, Glue Stick." The duck told him.

"Really?"

"Yep." Evina grinned. "So um... thanks."

"No problem."

The helper squeaked.

"Oh, and thank you too." Evina added.

With nothing else to fight, Evina knew that the last key to this mystery lied in that man in black stapled to the wall. Johnson had a lot to explain. So Evina wiped

the dust off his shirt, put on a bold face, and marched confidently up to the enemy to stare him in the face. "Alright, you're going to tell me everything!"

The pale face didn't change. His eyes looked up into Evina's eyes with unnatural coldness, almost unreal. "As you wish," he agreed, "but you may not like what you hear."

## Chapter 19

# Doomed

Evina didn't know where to begin. There were so many questions to ask. "Ok, why do you want to destroy Toontown?"

Johnson hesitated before answering; his pale face stared unmoving like a statue. "It's not just your world."

"You mean..."

"Yes, your entire universe, and all creative life imaginable. And the reason is simple. Do you know what would happen if all source of creativity stopped?"

Evina didn't know what to say. He took a step back from the man out of disgust and thought about it.

"You can't figure it out? I'm disappointed. You see, without creativity there is no innovation. Without innovation there is no progress. Without progress there is no hope. Without hope there is no way to survive. This planet and its people will fall without any support, and it doesn't require a complicated scheme or a backup plan to work. It's foolproof."

"So let me get this straight. You want to destroy Earth?"

"Yes."

"Why?!"

Johnson was a statue once more. The pause was so long that Evina was tempted to ask him again. "Wow. Do you really think I'm the one who could answer that question?"

Evina was confused, and while he was figuring out what to say next, he didn't notice the man in black pulling out the staples from his clothes with ease.

"If you think about it, one has to wonder, what meaningless idea do you represent? If you can't answer that question then what are you worth?" Now he was free. He didn't look that strong, but clearly he was.

Nobody moved, neither toon nor cog. All of them watched with confusion as the man strolled over to one of the military trucks and opened the back door. It was empty inside.

"Looking for something?" Evina asked.

"They confiscated it." Johnson said through clenched teeth.

"What?"

The man turned around and the sickening grin stretched across his face once again. "Tell me, have you ever heard of dip before?"

Evina was about to scream, but he couldn't react in time. Johnson threw something at him. It was a small glass tube of dip which shattered when it hit his body.

The man's grin vanished. "Why doesn't it work?!"

"I'm immune to dip! And you listen to me; I won't let anyone get hurt by you!" Evina was angry now and the other toons stood up to stand by his side.

"Oh, is that so?" Johnson took a deep breath and sighed loudly. "I'm really sorry about this. Truly I am. This wasn't part of the plan, but sadly you have forced my hand..."

There was a bang in the distance. The soldiers broke out of the storage room and dozens of them came running straight to Johnson. They didn't even seem to care about the toons anymore.

One officer looked fatigued and annoyed. "Sir, this operation is a failure! We must retreat immediately!"

The pale man didn't budge. "No. You're not getting out of here that easy." Then something started to happen. He was changing.

Evina's mouth dropped open in horror. Glue Stick shut his eyes and squealed. Even Kate was frozen in utter disbelief. Now they realized what was going on.

Johnson was growing, and soon he was bigger than the truck, twice as big, and still growing. He became even paler and no longer looked human. His clothes morphed into something like a black liquid that coated his deformed body. Soon a terrible monster stood before them with bulging wild-looking eyes and hatred etched into every line on his twisted face.

"What are you?!" Gyro screamed.

"My name is not Johnson!" The monster bellowed with a voice so deep and thunderous that it shook the ground. "I am the successor of that great toon who changed the city, who drove out you scum from this world, and I come back now to finish that work! I am the next generation! I am Doom!"

Johnson's arms retracted and were replaced by hundreds of black tentacles that looked like living worms of death. They reached out in all directions and stretched continuously.

The soldiers fled in terror, shooting every weapon they had back at the monster with no success. Each one of them were eventually picked up by a tentacle and tossed hundreds of feet out of its way.

"RUN!" Evina told his father. Gyro led the others away to find someplace safe. The cogs were no match and the remaining few of them disappeared as well. The duck was alone. There was nothing he could do. But yet, he knew of at least one thing that could.

“RUN AWAY YOU COWARD! I KNOW YOU’RE CHICKEN!”

Evina didn’t run; he stood perfectly still. “Actually just half, on my father’s side.” This was the moment he had been waiting for. A cold chill filled his body, the shadow seized him. He shut his eyes while time slowed down, the noise of the chaos drowned out, and all fears and doubts were washed away. This was full control, more than Evina had ever felt before. He was immortal, unstoppable, the chosen hero to save the world. The eyes opened and were nothing but dark holes.

He leaned back and then jumped forward with all his strength. There was a sonic boom. His body was lightning in the air, knocking the monster back over the water and smashing into the wall of the castle.

Doom was surprised. He couldn’t imagine the power contained within this toon. “WHY DON’T YOU GIVE UP?”

“Never.” The shadow spoke. It picked up Doom’s monstrous body like it was only a baseball and threw it back into the castle, causing the entire structure to collapse in a cloud of stone, wood, and dust.

“Ok, have it your way!” Doom was livid. His tentacles grabbed anything it could reach, the stone bricks, chairs, trash cans, even the huge carousel ride, throwing it all at the duck.

Evina’s body became rigid. It wasn’t scratched by anything that hit him. Metal and stone were reduced to fragments that flew through the air and accumulated in piles of rubble all around him.

“How is this possible?” The monster screamed.

The shadow was equally frustrated. Doom was extremely resilient as well. There was a chance that

neither of them might win even if they turned the entire park into dust.

Evina sprinted forward again, and Doom was smarter this time. It caught the duck with a tentacle and removed the legendary pencil from his pocket. It was tiny but still emitted magical energy.

“Wow, would you look at this?” The horrible voice gloated. This discovery had changed his mood. “I know of someone who will be thrilled to have it back.” He began to swing Evina around and around. Then it slammed him into the ground and a crater was formed.

It didn’t hurt but it was disorienting, and it was hard to see with all the dust in the air. He jumped to his feet and ran to find anything else that could help. He couldn’t understand why Doom wanted that pencil so badly but there was no way he could be allowed to escape with it.

In Tomorrowland there was nothing to be found. No soldiers, toons, or cogs. Doom caught up to him within seconds. He tore the spire off of Space Mountain and hurled it at Evina like a giant arrow.

The shadow slowed down time even further. It grabbed the giant metal spike in mid air and swung it around to go the other way. It blasted into splinters when it hit Doom straight in the chest. The monster wasn’t injured but he was stunned for a brief moment. The shadow didn’t wait for him to recover. Evina ran forward and took as many tentacles as he could find, tying them in a knot. Then he took the pencil back. Doom screamed in rage.

Now Evina ran to someplace else. He had a feeling there was something missing that he needed to find. Also, he needed to hide the pencil somewhere safe.



He went back to Fantasyland then headed north and arrived at Toontown, the fake Toontown they had been looking for when they fell into this trap. There was a larger-than-normal military truck parked there. Evina opened the doors and saw what was inside. There were dozens of dip barrels within.

A scream was heard, louder than any other before. Doom had torn himself free and was coming to find Evina. There was madness in his eyes. "You can't stop me you abominable freak! Give me that pencil NOW!"

Evina didn't know what else to do. "Oh, you mean this?" He snapped the pencil in half, not knowing what would happen. There was a flash. The pieces disintegrated into wooden shards that fell to the ground. There was a glimmer of magical light that lingered for a moment, and then it was over.

"NO! Do you have any idea what you've done? I'll make you wish you were never born!"

"This is your last warning." The shadow announced. Evina had just enough power to give the monster a second chance. He didn't want it to end this way. "Surrender now and leave the toons and humans alone."

Doom looked even more infuriated than before. "I would rather die first!"

"Then so be it." Evina was slightly disappointed even though he knew this had to happen. He picked up the truck and launched it at the monster. Upon impact there was a fiery explosion of diesel and dip. A loud sizzling noise was heard.

Doom's body shook and he screamed in pain. He was melting. Within seconds his body began collapsing.

The pale face turned to liquid. The maniacal eyes sunk inwards. The last scream was heard just before he flattened into a pool of black slime.

The shadow instantly withdrew its power and Evina fell. He was overcome with sudden terror. This was much worse than before. He felt paralyzed. He couldn't see.

There was the quiet sound of feet running on the ground. The toons clearly saw what happened and were coming to find him. They saw him on the ground with the shreds of his clothes barely hanging from his body.

"Son, are you alright?" Gyro cried out.

Evina couldn't answer. He could only gasp for air.

"Oh no. Oh please no. This isn't good."

There were flashes in Evina's vision. Bits and pieces of his history were popping in and out of his mind. It was already starting to happen. The shadow had twisted his story and it was tearing him apart.

He saw the library at that weird planet where he found the book. He was on the beach at Harry's island. He was battling the chairman on the roof of the Cogs Inc. tower. He was stapling papers in the office. He was bored and lying down in Toontown Central. It was rewinding astonishingly fast, but with all of his remaining strength he managed to hold onto the present. He was still alive.

"I can hear him breathing." Kate said. She sounded so worn out from the excitement. "I've never seen anything like that before! He was moving faster than the eye could see. Even I couldn't do that."

"Is it true that Johnson was a toon all this time?" Glue Stick asked.

"Yes," Gyro responded gravely, "and the book makes reference to it. This isn't the first time the name of Doom was heard around here."

"Wow." The horse muttered. "And is the shadow doing this to him?"

"I think so. I was afraid it would happen." The old chicken looked like he was going to say more but decided against it.

"I'm fine." Evina mumbled weakly. He didn't know if they heard him because it sounded so weak and so awful but he could now make out a blurry picture of the toons standing above him.

"Hellooooo..." Kate waved. "Earth to Evina. Are you there?"

"Hi." Evina said with a quiet, raspy voice.

"Oh, Evina, are you alright?" Gyro still wasn't satisfied.

"Yes." The duck answered.

"Because I promised I would never abandon you again."

"It's fine." The son insisted.

"And I was afraid I had lost you again." Gyro's eyes began to tear up. Evina thought he could see the grey in them. Clearly his father had felt the strength of the shadow as well.

Even though it had defeated the monster Doom, there was no denying that the shadow was a monster too, and it couldn't be controlled. Their struggles weren't over yet.

"Hey, is he doing alright?" A metallic voice asked with worry. Evina could see something triangular and yellow. It was The Big Cheese.

"We think so," Glue Stick answered, "but it looks pretty bad."

"Really guys, I'm fine." Evina wheezed, and he tried to sit up but failed.

"Don't overexert yourself!" The father cautioned.

The duck didn't listen. "Please, I want to get up." He finally succeeded in sitting up and the others lifted his arms to help him stand. The ground looked like it was moving. He was so dizzy. "I'll be better in no time."

"I'm sorry we couldn't help you, master." The cog apologized sincerely as the other toons helped Evina to walk.

"It's not your fault." Evina assured him. "There was nothing you could do, nothing *anyone* could do. The shadow did all the work in the end."

Another cog walked beside the group. The telemarketer carried a few wooden fragments in its hands. "I'm afraid to say the pencil is gone forever."

"I know." Gyro replied somberly. "It's probably better this way. Sure, we'll never know what it was all about but now it won't fall into wrong hands."

"But what if we need it again?" The Big Cheese wondered.

"Explain." Kate said.

"I mean, we managed to find just one last portal to this world. What if we need to draw another?"

"Oh, so that's how you did it." Evina mumbled. "Yeah, I never thought about that."

Gyro was growing more nervous with each moment. "It's still open, right?"

"Last time I checked it was." The cog said.

"Well we need to get out of here as soon as possible." The worried father insisted. "I'll take Evina

somewhere safe and get him what he needs. As for the rest of you, we need to figure out a plan to clean up this mess."

"The boss is already working on it." The cog said.

"That's correct." The chairman walked up to them with perfect timing. "Don't worry, master, we'll make it look like none of this ever happened?"

"But the destruction..." Gyro protested.

"Didn't I tell you before? Our constructionbots work extremely fast. By tomorrow the humans will never know that anything happened."

"And what about the soldiers?"

"We'll take care of that too." The chairman smiled. He turned around and yelled at another cog. "Bring out the drive wiper!"

A Yesman arrived with a mysterious energy gun which it handed to its leader.

The cog walked up to the soldiers all tied up with rope around a tree. "Gentlemen, what happened today was only a bad dream."

"You must be kidding..." One man said before there was a flash and they all fell asleep.

Gyro cleared some rubble away from a shaded area and set his son down. "I want you to know how proud of you I am."

"But the shadow-"

"I'm not talking about the shadow." The father told him. "I'm talking about your courage and your integrity. You never gave up doing what's right, even in the middle of madness like this. You are still the hero, and a great inspiration to all of us."

Evina smiled. "Thanks, dad."

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Kate was becoming impatient. "So are we going or aren't we?"

"Just hang on!" Glue Stick said heatedly. "Can't you see they're busy? There's a big mess to clean up and you're not helping!"

"Well you running away like a coward didn't help too much either." She said.

"Admit it. You needed Doom out of the way so you could take on the soldiers." The horse continued. "There's no way you could've fought them all at once."

"I think both of you should shut up." Evina interrupted. He could stand on his own now, even though he remained feeling very tired.

Gyro let out a sigh and returned to the group. "Ok, I think we can leave now."

"Is it safe?" Evina inquired, staring down at the portal. The paper was wrinkled and torn in places. The hole in it was small and disfigured.

"Yes, and it's the best we can do." The older one admitted. "The cogs won't be long and then they'll leave as well. After that the portal will be too unstable and it'll have to be closed."

"Wait!" Glue Stick cried. "Isn't this the last portal left? What happens if it's closed?"

"It means no toon will ever come to Earth again." Gyro finished with a sad tone. "But at least the Tooniverse will be safer from threats that way." He took the tiny ship statue off his keychain and dropped it in the hole. They heard a pop. "After you."

Kate leaped inside followed by Glue Stick, the helper, Evina, and Gyro went in last.

They were in the ship once more and there was nothing but darkness out the windows. The helper hopped from one computer to another, turning on lots of switches. Multicolored lights appeared on the panels and the engine came to life with its familiar low humming sound.

Gyro dropped into the pilot seat and Evina took the co-pilot seat.

The inventor turned to his son and smiled. "You know what this means?"

Evina beamed. "We're finally going home."

\* Follow the notes to add all the crucial details! \*

# Epilogue

Even Kate had to remember she was still a princess with responsibilities. She couldn't leave her home forever. So they took her back to her world and said goodbye. They knew they would miss her. They had done so much together. She pretended like she didn't feel anything but Evina could see the truth in her eyes. She would miss them too.

The cogs' portal was closer to home than the other one they had used before so it didn't take too long to reach Toontown.

As Evina saw his world approaching, he had the same concern arise in his head as before. He wondered what he was going to do with his life now that the adventure was over.

The ship landed in Toontown Central. There weren't many toons around. The sky was cloudy. It was never cloudy like this before. Flippy noticed their arrival and promptly rushed out from Toon Hall to meet them.

"I sure hope you have some good news." The dog grumbled.

"The threat was neutralized." Gyro assured him.

Flippy was overcome with relief. "Oh, finally there's some good news!"

"Is everything alright?" Evina asked him.

"You'll have to talk to Mickey about that. He can explain it better than I can." Then the dog turned and walked back into Toon Hall.

"What was all that about?" Glue Stick wondered.

"I have no idea." The duck answered honestly, jumping out of the spaceship. His feet touched the



ground. It had been a long time since he touched his home world and it felt somewhat comforting, even after the shadow had tainted him so much. He stretched and walked through the grass. He couldn't stop thinking about how wrong the sky looked.

"Oh, there you are!" Mickey sighed. He was walking up to them now.

"We did it, sir."

"Yeah, we'll have to talk about that. Um, who is this?" As Mickey approached Evina he saw the unfamiliar horse standing by his side.

"Oh, this is my friend Glue Stick." Evina explained.

"Nice to meet you." The mouse greeted. "That's an... interesting name."

"Well you see, sir, he was a slave of the cogs in Cog Nation for many years."

"Oh... then I'm glad you were finally rescued!"

"Yeah." Glue Stick didn't seem too interested in what was being said. "Do you know where the nearest TV is? I am months behind on my shows now."

Mickey rolled his eyes. "You can use the one in the Toon Hall lobby. And as for you, Evina, I would like to speak to you in private."

"Uh sure." The duck agreed. He left his father and followed the mouse to a hidden area between the shrubs where a few chairs were sitting. It was nice to be away from any curious onlookers.

Evina sat down and looked up into the sky again. It scared him how still it appeared. There was no thunder or rain at all. "What is that all about?"

"It's been like that for a couple days now."  
Mickey said gravely. "Every hour it grows darker. We don't know what caused it but there is a theory."

"What?" Evina inquired.

"Tell me, did you close the last portal to Earth?"

Evina hesitated before answering. "Yes."

The mouse buried his face in his hands. "I was afraid of that. It's a good thing that you did. I'm glad you stopped the threat, but there will be consequences for this separation. Our connection to the human world is limited by thought energy alone now. The tooniverse is changing."

"What can we do?"

"Nothing." Mickey replied. "Except... adapt."

Evina was trying to adapt but it was hard to accept so many changes at once. "Well, we have dealt with things like this before and we survived until everything returned to normal."

Mickey was staring at Evina. "And you are losing your color."

"Wait, what?!"

"I'm certain of it. Your red isn't as bright as it was before."

Evina hadn't noticed the change. He didn't want to think about it. One of his biggest wishes was to fit in with other toons, but now he was starting to wonder if it would be better to just give up that desire. "Sir, I assure you we are completely safe. Now if I remember correctly, I have a kart to fix." He stood up. "I'll see you later."

Just before he left the area Mickey stopped him. "Wait a minute. What exactly was that threat that you stopped?"

Evina turned around. "It was someone, a toon, a wild monster who was called Doom."

Mickey was silent and deep in thought. Clearly he had been around to see the previous incident and the memories were not pleasant. "I'm sorry that you had to get stuck in this mess, Evina."

The duck shrugged. "It's not your fault. I'm getting used to it. Everything's fine."

"I know you don't like to see things change, Evina, but I'm sorry. We're not safe at all."

There was no response. Evina stood still, looking back at the president of Toontown. "But, we have to be."

"You should think about it some more. If Doom was a toon then where did he come from? They don't appear out of nowhere, you know."

Evina remembered the dream he had experienced before he went to Earth. There was darkness ahead. It was unimaginably powerful. He didn't understand it. He couldn't escape it. It was very close and nobody even noticed it coming. This wasn't Doom, no, this was something else. This was the reason for everything. He had been born in its shadow. The worst was yet to come.

The duck couldn't speak. He left the shrubs and walked away slowly, not knowing or caring where he was going. This was his dominion, a land of fears, of dark swirling clouds, of graphite stained with a black ink of evil.

THE END

Graphite: The Legend of Toontown. First edition.

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