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It was dark. And it smelled bad. Those were the first things Alex noticed. And that her head felt foggy. She struggled to remember what happened. She saw the food truck in her mind with its bright colours and its flashing lights. She remembered the old lady and going towards her, placing her foot on the steps heading into the food truck, then... nothing.

And now she sat in the dark, in this scary place.

She couldn't tell how long she had been here, or what time of day it was because there were no windows, there was no clock that she could see. Just the bars of this cage she was in, a dirty blanket in the corner and a bucket the scary voice had said she needed to use for going toilet.

Alex had not wanted to go toilet in the bucket. That was gross, so she had held on for as long as she could, but eventually she couldn't hold it anymore. So, with shaking knees and eyes wide in the dim light, she had crouched over the foul smelling bucket and emptied her bladder.

Her cage was not very big. She could stand up and take four steps around each side, and that was it. The bars were dirty and old, and in the centre of one was a little door with a heavy lock on the outside. Alex had tried to squeeze herself through the bars, but she was too big. Maybe if it had been a year or two earlier she could have made it but not now. The cage was fastened into the concrete floor and there were dark smudges on the floor that scared Alex. She tried to avoid touching those spots, but it was hard in such a small space.

Beyond the bars of her cage, she could see other cages in the dim light that seeped down from the stairs at the end of the room. The

cages sat on either side of the room, creating a space in the middle for someone to walk down. And the other end of the room, there was a door. It looked old and had strange symbols carved around it that made Alex's tummy feel funny. She didn't like looking at that door.

Then there was the smell. It reminded Alex of the rubbish when it had been left too long and things were going rotten. Except this was worse. It wasn't strong, but it was there, sitting beneath anything and getting into her nostrils so that she found herself breathing through her mouth. But that made her feel even more ill as she imagined that smell on her tongue and tasting it. So back to her nostrils she went, cycling between the two. Alex was convinced the smell was coming from the door at the end of the room. She didn't know why, but she just knew that all kinds of bad things were on the opposite side of that little strange door.

As far as she could see the other cages were empty. There was no one in the ones next to her and none on the opposite side of the room. But, it was hard to tell in the dim light.

The room looked old, with dust on the floor, like it hadn't been used that much. Until recently. In the dust, down the centre of the room, she saw marks in the dust and grime, like something had been dragged towards that door. Something that hadn't wanted to go. Alex looked away.

Not for the first time Alex wished she had stayed home. Wished that she had never seen that bright pink food truck with its twinkling lights. She wished she was in her bedroom right now, listening to the TV downstairs and whatever show Jessica was watching. She wouldn't even care that she had her friend Adam over. Just hearing their voices she knew would make her feel so much better.

She had tried squeezing her eyes shut and imagining them there, pretending that this was just a dream that she needed to wake up from. But, that had done no good. When she opened her eyes she was still sitting in this dark basement, surrounded by bars. That's when she had started to cry. Her mum didn't like her crying, saying that was only for little girls and Alex wasn't a little girl anymore. She was seven, which still seemed quite little to Alex, but she had tried to listen to her mum and not cry. But, sometimes it was just too hard not to. And now was one of those times and she thought her mum might be okay if she cried now.

Thinking of her mum and dad made her cry some more. They would be wondering where she was. They might be getting mad

because she had gone out without telling anyone. Snuck out. But, Alex didn't mind, she would rather she was home with angry parents than in this dark, bad-smelling place. And, it *was* a bad place. Alex knew that. A very bad place.

Just then Alex heard the sound of a door opening and more light fell upon the stairs at the end of the room. This was followed by a heavy step upon the stairs. And then another one. Slow heavy steps descending the stairs to the cages where she was. The steps were accompanied by the sound of heavy breathing, as though the person coming down the stairs was struggling.

Alex crawled to the back of the cage and pulled the blanket up to her face and closed her eyes for as bad as the room and the cages were, she knew that whoever was behind those footsteps and whoever put little children in cages was much worse and she had a powerful need not to see who it was.

So she sat in the back corner, making herself as small as she could with the dirty blanket covering her and willing herself to be invisible. It was a silly baby thing to do, she knew, but at the moment it seemed the most appropriate thing to do also.

The heavy steps continued down, each one slow and the stairs creaked with the weight of whoever it was. Until finally they stopped and the only sound was slow and laboured heavy breathing.

Alex remained quiet, head turned away from the front of the cage so as not to see who it was.

A large shadow filled the room, blocking the light from the stairs.

Then the shadow moved, a slow swaying movement that inched forward.

There was a pause, and then something was put on the floor and scraped along it closer to the stairs and some quick shuffling.

Then the thing spoke.

"Hmmm... yes eat up dearie. That's right. As much as you want. Looking plumper now."

If voices could be described as grotesque, this voice was it. It was a husky low voice and had a bubbly quality to it, and Alex struggled to tell if it was male or female. Or neither. But, Alex wasn't willing to look to find out.

The thing began to walk towards the end of the room to where Alex was. Alex remained frozen, holding her breath as the thing got closer.

Then it was there. Darkness descended on her cage as the thing blocked all the light.

Again something was placed on the floor and there was a scraping noise. Then silence. Alex didn't move.

"Pretend all you want child, you can't hide from Yona."

Alex's skin crawled at the voice, and her skin goose-pimpled. The voice sounded familiar, but different.

"Eat up, eat up. Take all you want. I've got plenty where that came from." Then there was a low throaty laugh and the creature was shuffling away, a slow swaying shadow that got to the end of the room and began its slow laboured ascent up the stairs. Eventually Alex heard the sound of the door and a key in a lock, and things were quiet again.

But, Alex remained where she was, unable to quite open her eyes just yet.

Which was when she heard some other noises coming from the other end of the room, nearer the stairs, about where thing had first stopped and spoken.

Alex cracked open an eye and peered to her right, through the bars of her cage and the next and the next. In the dim light she thought she could see something moving, but it was hard to tell, and it sounded like... eating?

Her curiosity won out in the end, and Alex shuffled around to get a better look. Was that someone in another cage. There was a faint outline of a figure crouched over something and moving with furtive little gestures.

"Hello?" Alex whispered.

The figure froze for a second, then started again.

"Can you hear me?" Alex tried again.

"Shhhh," the figure said. She sounded like another little girl.

Excitedly Alex asked, "What's your name? I'm Alex."

The figure stopped. "Shhhh... she'll come back if you make too much noise."

This was enough to shut Alex up. She definitely didn't want that thing coming back. But, she was also too curious and this place was too dark and too quiet not to talk to someone. "Who's she?"

Again the figure froze, and was silent for so long that Alex thought the girl wouldn't answer her.

Then, even more quietly before, the girl spoke one word that made Alex want to cry.

"Witch."

And that made a terrifying sense to Alex, for who else but a witch

would lock up little children. It was a truth that children all over the world understood and passed down for centuries.

“You’d better eat. She gets mad if you don’t eat.” The other girl whispered again.

Alex wiped her eyes, which had started crying again. Eat?

She turned and noticed a tray that had been slid into her cage through a narrow slot at the bottom of the door. That must have been what the scraping sound was. Alex’s eyes widened when she saw what was on the tray.

It was covered in pastries and cakes and even had a bowl of ice-cream where a pirate ship floated as on a green sea. A plastic bottle of raspberry soda was placed next to it all. Which was when Alex realised why the creature’s voice sounded familiar. It sounded like the woman in the food truck, except different. Huskier. Lower. Scarier.

Alex stared at the food. Her tummy grumbled and her mouth started watering as she realised she was actually quite hungry. And thirsty.

She crawled quietly to the tray with its treasure of treats. Her mouth watered and before she knew it she was reaching for a cupcake with icing that held a little castle. She raised it to her mouth and took a tentative bite.

It was everything she had imagined it to be. The icing was light and sweet, the cake airy and like eating a cloud. She thought it was the best thing she had ever tasted.

Alex began shovelling everything into her mouth and it wasn’t long before she realised she finished everything, including the bottle of soda.

For a moment she was content, having just eaten the most amazing food she had ever eaten.

Then she remembered where she was and all the joy was sucked out of her and the lingering sweetness on her tongue became bitter.

She wanted to go home. It was an ache that settled deep into her stomach. She didn’t want to be here anymore.

She tried talking to the other girl again but she got no response this time, which made her feel worse. She might as well have been alone.

Alex went back to the sad little blanket and pulled it over herself, curling herself into a ball, trying not to cry but not succeeding. She stuck out her hand and looked at the faint light coming from the stairwell. Then she opened the place in her mind and connected it to the light and her hand began to warm and warm until out of nowhere

a small flame appeared dancing on her palm.

It was her secret trick that no one knew about. She hadn't ever shown her parents, and definitely not Jessica, because she knew they wouldn't understand it. It was something she had been able to do ever since she could remember, and she did it when she was feeling particularly lonely or sad. But, only when there was no one else around.

Right now felt the perfect time to do it. As she watched the little flame dancing on her palm, and felt its warmth, her tears slowed down a little and the dark cage didn't seem as scary as it had before.

Eventually Alex's eyes grew heavy watching the flame, and slowly closed as she drifted off to sleep. When she was gone, the flame winked out, and the cage descended into darkness once more.