

Captive

The chair in which you sit is hard and cold. Wood? Metal? You can't tell, can't look down because your neck is tied against the back of the chair by thick rope, and your ankles to its legs. Its strands poke you like needles, but at the same time, the material is slippery, almost slimy. A heavy blindfold covers your eyes, and your wrists are bound behind your back with more of the prickly rope. A weight pressed against your chest makes it difficult to breathe. The best you can do is huff and cough as the air going down your throat rubs your neck against the rope, grating your skin.

How did you get here? Where is here? Is anyone else around? You call out, but no sound escapes your mouth. Your breathing quickens. Why can't you talk?

Something is crawling up your leg! Four pointy—things—poke at you as whatever it is climbs up. It reaches the top of your leg and crawls onto your stomach. The weight compressing your chest strengthens, but all you feel is the creature. Almost like you're being held down by a ghost.

It crawls up your chest to your chin. You clamp your mouth shut, but two of the prickly legs jam themselves between your lips. With surprising strength the thing forces your mouth open and climbs in. You taste hair, and those grisly, spindly legs as it creeps back toward your

throat.

You want to scream, but are afraid to. Instead, you blow breath out through your mouth to try and dislodge the freak.

It clicks and hisses at your attempt, the way a scorpion clicks and a snake hisses. But this is neither. You stop breathing altogether for fear of getting bitten. Or stung. Or whatever this monster does.

But once you stop, it continues its trek, stepping across your tongue to the back of your mouth. You smell it as well as taste it, that disgusting fur and a musty, almost metallic odor.

SLAM! The sound of a door crashing open, or closed, makes you jump and swallow. The creature struggles and thrashes on its way down, poking the inside of your throat. When it gets to your stomach, it beats against your belly as if trying to break out.

The ropes around your neck and feet fall away. You can stand! You bolt from your chair and hurl yourself onto your stomach in an attempt to smash the wretched creature once and for all. Even inside you, it clicks and hisses, but you ignore it this time and keep beating against the floor. Finally, it stops thrashing.

Your hands are still tied, and the blindfold still covers your eyes. You try once more to call out. Did someone come into the room? Who is it? Where are they? But still no noise. Have you gone mute?

Finally, the rope around your wrists cuts open, leaving the skin sore and rough. You rub them for a moment to get the circulation back. Someone came to save you! They must have cut the rope. You try to thank them, but still can't speak. And when you reach up to remove your blindfold, all you feel is your own face.

There's no blindfold at all. There's nothing covering your eyes, yet you're unable to see.

Laughter booms through the room. A fierce chill runs down your spine. You have to get out of here! But where's the door?

You pick a direction and run, hands out in front. They slap against a wall, and you stop just before crashing into it. The cold, uneven texture of stone presses back against your palms, but something wet coats it. In spite of the grossness, you keep one hand on the wall and dash around the room, feeling for the door.

The laughter gets louder and louder. And the air colder and colder. Biting frost creeps into your clothing, making your teeth clatter. All feeling starts to go numb.

There it is! The exit! You hurl yourself through what you think, what you hope, is the doorway.

Your body begins to warm. Your feet pad the stone floor as you run aimlessly, directionless. What if you end up back in that same room again? The thought drives your feet to a full stop. Reaching out to the side, you fumble around for the wall. Your hand touches something cold and gooey.

And moving! You cry out silently and yank your hand away. A squelching noise follows, and some of the goo clings to your hand. It stinks of a variety of noxious odors blended so thoroughly together you can't identify them. The closest you can imagine is oil mixed with skunk spray, rotten meat, rusted metal, and coagulated blood.

Bile rises in your throat. The image of vomiting up the hairy creature you swallowed flashes in your mind. Were it not for that, maybe you could have held it in, but out it comes. Heave after heave, each wave adding to the nauseating stench in the air. Blindly you stumble forward, involuntarily stepping through your own vomit as you go.

Maybe you were better off in that room. No, that's crazy! What are you thinking?

Once more, bracing yourself, mouth curved downward into a snarl of disgust, you reach out, slowly, hesitantly, and touch the wall again. It squelches and moves beneath your hand, but it's the only thing with which you have to navigate, so you endure it. You walk slowly along the wall, step, step, step, step, step, step...

How long have you been walking? How far have you gone? You don't remember turning any corners. If only you could see. Then again, do you really want to? Just what is this stuff you're touching? You're almost glad you don't have your sight. But you really wish you could call out. Or do you? That laughter back in that room didn't follow you out. Was it a person? How could it not be? Regardless, that person clearly wasn't there to help you. So why did they free you? Or did they? Is whoever it is toying with you? And do you really want them finding you again? Better to keep quiet, right? Right.

A section of the wall gives way. You've come to what feels like an open door. Heart leaping in your chest, you start to enter. But wait! What if this is that room you just escaped from? No, it can't be. You've been going in a straight line this whole time. You're sure of it. You can't be back there again. there's no way. None. Impossible.

Yet you hesitate. Impossible? This whole situation should be impossible, yet here you are. And you still don't know where you are or where you're going. No, you can't risk it. You keep walking, hand out to the side, feeling for the wall beyond the opening. Step, step, step, step, step...

You pause, still unable to find the wall. But it has to be there somewhere! Frantic, you grope around in front of you.

Squelch!

Your heart skips two beats. There's the wall, not a foot in front of you! You almost walked face-first into that icky moving ooze!

You sink to your knees. The urge rises up your throat, and you're powerless to stop it. You burst out in hysterical laughter, muted though you are. You sit there on your knees convulsing as the cackles come with no sign of stopping, making no sound whatsoever. Imagine if you'd walked into the wall. Imagine what kind of face you'd have made then! It's hilarious! No it isn't! What's wrong with you? Stop laughing! This isn't funny! You want out of this

terrible place! Right now!

The fit ends. You rise to your feet and take a deep, long breath. Placing your hand against the wall again, you turn left, the opposite direction from the door you passed. At least you think it's left. Unable to see, one direction is just as good, or as bad, as any other.

Step, step, step, step, step, step, step...

Stomp. Stomp. Stomp.

You freeze and hold your breath.

Stomp. Stomp. Stomp.

It's coming from... where?

Stomp. Stomp.

Behind you!

Stomp-stomp-stomp-stomp!

Something is charging straight at you! Abandoning the wall, you take off straight ahead, one hand out to prevent yourself from crashing into something as you run. It's gaining on you! Faster!

Your hand slams into a wall in front of you. Without thinking you turn left again. Another wall! You're cornered!

Stomp-stomp-stomp-stomp! It's right on top of you!

Panicking, screaming in muted terror, you fling yourself to the right. Something brushes the sole of your shoe before crashing into the wall, rocking the entire hallway like an explosion. Whatever was coming at you, you got out of the way just in time. Your instincts twist your body to land on your feet.

But you don't land. You fall, and keep falling. Clawing helplessly at the air, your fingers scrape against the wall. It's too slippery to cling to, and you continue to fall. You plummet faster and faster.

Finally, you hit the floor, every bone shattering from the force of the impact, neck snapping back and stopping the wind from rushing out of your lungs, trapping it in your chest as your body is crushed upon landing—

You bolt upright. You're alive. How? You tap the floor with your palm. Stone. Hard, cold stone. You should have died, but somehow you survived that long fall. All around you, the place is silent. No squelching. No stomping. No laughing. Before you stand, you check yourself over for injuries. Nothing broken, not even sprained.

Then you notice it. Wind rushing past you from below. You feel the floor again and realize it isn't stone, but grating. Metal grating, and a fiercely strong wind rushes upward from beneath. You stand, and are almost carried into the air by the force. So that's it. The wind must have slowed your fall. The rush of gravity was just it blowing past you. So then, how far did you really fall?

A growl from above you. More squelching as something presses against the wall up there. Squelch, squelch, squelch...

It's climbing down after you! You take off running, trying to step silently over the grating, which clatters like cast-iron pots despite your efforts. Metal gives way to stone a moment later as you press your hand to the wall—a solid stone wall—as a guide. You run so fast that when you reach a gap in the wall, you nearly speed right past it.

Stomp stomp stomp...

You risk investigating the gap. It's a narrow crevice. Suppressing a sigh of relief, forgetting you're unable to make a sound anyway, you squeeze into the hole.

The footsteps of whatever monster is chasing you get louder and louder, the quakes stronger and stronger. Then quieter and quieter, weaker and weaker. You don't dare move until they fade completely. Even then, you merely sink against the wall at your back and breathe. You didn't realize you'd been holding it. Your whole body trembles. What would have happened if

that thing had caught you? Or was it not dangerous after all? You don't even know what it is. It might not even be a monster.

Of course it is! It chased you! What else could it be? You shake your head, not wanting to think about it.

A couple minutes later, you calm down enough to move. Before exiting the crevice, you grope around, hoping for another way out. There is none, and so you're forced to leave the safety of your hole and venture on. But no way are you going in the same direction as that horrible beast! You turn the opposite way and—

Which way did it go? You don't remember. Think, blast you, think! You ducked left into the crevice originally, so... you turn right. Wait a minute, you already turned right a second ago. Turn back around. No, that was a full one-eighty! Great, now you're lost!

The crevice. Where is it? You'll just start again from there. You feel along the wall in both directions for several feet with no luck. Okay, maybe on the other side of the hallway. Or is it a hallway? Never mind that, just keep looking.

But though you search for minutes, there is no sign of the crevice. You're without a hiding spot, and that monster is still out there looking for you. Panic descends once more. There is no escape. You're going to die here, horribly. The only thing left is to wait in place for the monster to come back. In fact, you hope it will be soon. Put you out of your misery. And so you wait.

The monster doesn't return. How much time has passed? Minutes or hours? You try to count the seconds as they pass, but can't. Sometimes you count too slow, sometimes too fast. Several times you lose count and have to start over. Some fog in your head clouds everything you do. All your questions remain unanswered. You keep forgetting them the moment you ask. Why are you just sitting here? Shouldn't you get going?

You stagger to your feet and begin walking. This time you don't even care where you're

going. Just walking for the sake of doing something. Anything.

A breeze blows past your face. It's the vent you fell down earlier. The wind picks up as you step back onto the grating. You walk around in a circle, feeling for another corridor. There's one to your right. You venture in.

Dim torches light this hall every ten feet or so, twenty feet up, too high for you to reach. Wait a minute. Torches? You can see torches! You can see the walls! You can see! Your eyes start to tear up. *You can see!*

The gray, barren walls resemble concrete, but much smoother, as if they'd been sanded flat. Briefly you wonder if you can find that slimy section again to see what it was. But those walls moved around under your hand. Maybe you shouldn't go looking.

Gazing upward reveals only darkness. The ceiling hovers out of sight. Maybe there is no ceiling. But that's impossible. There has to be a ceiling up there somewhere. Then again, so many things have happened that shouldn't. At least with your eyes working again, you feel a little braver.

As you continue walking, squiggles start to appear on the walls in your peripheral vision. Thinking they're just marks, you ignore them. But then they start to weave along the walls. A creepy chill crawls up your back. You turn to watch them move, unsure what to do. Should you get away? Are they alive?

The marks begin to form strange symbols, like some dark, evil language that should never be messed with. You can't read them, but the sense of foreboding they give you is unmistakable. These letters are dangerous. What would happen if you could read them?

They shift again. You want to tear your gaze away, but can't. Whatever the words say, you're captive. Transfixed, helpless. Your free will has been taken from you. As the words reform, you realize with horror you can read them this time. Still unable to move, you jam your eyes shut to block them out.

Your eyelids begin to itch. Tiny flecks of orange light appear, similar to the lights you see when dizzy. But these are carving out letters on the inside of your lids where you can't avoid reading them.

You cry out silently, shake your head from side to side, and run, released from whatever grip held you in place. The lights continue to carve, and the itching gets worse. If this keeps up, you'll be forced to read them. You open your eyes and the lights vanish.

But the markings on the walls remain. You look down, but they're on the floor as well. You see words you recognize, and get glimpses your mind can't help but read. Your eyes dart everywhere in an attempt to scramble the words, but always seem to land on the very next one in the sentence. Inevitably, your mind puts the pieces together.

“There is no outside. There never was. This is all you know. You tried to leave and failed. All attempts will fail. This place is dangerous, deadly. If you don't give up soon, the terrible end you fear so badly will come. Learn your lesson and stop now, before it's too late.”

You start to cry. No. No, it's not true. You don't know how you got here, but you did. That means there is a way out, a way back.

More letters.

“There isn't. You're fooling yourself. You know the truth, but don't want to believe it because you don't like it. This is the world. Your world. The sooner you accept it, the better off you'll be.”

Stop it! Go away! You don't want to hear it. You don't want to suffer any more, don't want to be afraid anymore.

“Then let go of your ridiculous notion of escape and take hold of the fate you were dealt. You're powerless, you all are. Follow the path chosen for you. Be a good little sheep and obey. That's the best thing you can do for yourself.”

Lies! All of it! You reject them all!

“So be it. You obviously need convincing. If you’re lucky, perhaps it will forgive you and come to your rescue. If not.... You were warned what would happen.”

It? What does that mean, it?

The thought is dashed from your mind as the corridor shakes and rumbles. The walls are closing inward! You run at full speed as they inch closer and closer together. They’re only five feet apart, and the nerve-racking grinding gets worse with every inch.

There’s no sign of an exit.

Four feet. The light from the torches, with less darkness to cover, seem brighter and hotter. Three feet. You’re not going to make it! Two feet. You’re forced to turn sideways.

The floor falls out from under you right before the walls smash together. You tumble down an angled slope, slippery with streaks of red. Blood? Spikes jut up in the slide below, angled to impale you. You twist right and narrowly miss the first one, but go into an uncontrolled spin. You bump into a wall and brace your feet on it to right yourself.

A sound like a chain falling comes from above. You kick out from the wall just before being smashed by a rapidly-descending bed of nails. More spikes on the slope below you come into view, lined up across the floor. You can’t move around them!

Fueled by adrenaline and the threat of death, you leap up over the spikes. But you angle yourself wrong and fling over the edge of the slope.

Intense heat rises from below. You’re headed for a massive incinerator, and no walls or ceiling nearby to grab onto. It’s a great, empty space with only a fiery death waiting below!

A chain descends from above. On instinct, you grab onto it with both hands and pray. The chain swings you in a wide arc. At the height of the swing, you lose your grip and are flung through the air.

The heat disappears as you land on a whirring, moving surface. A conveyor belt, or something similar. But where is it taking you?

Multiple banging noises echo from ahead. A series of crushers slide into view from the gloom, smashing down onto the belt. Each one is six feet in diameter, resembling great hammers being brought down again and again!

The belt speeds up, hurrying you toward them. You turn and try to run against the flow, but it goes faster and faster, and you can't keep up. Only one chance. You turn again and, just as the first hammer lifts, you dash forward, clearing it just as it comes down again, and brace yourself for the next one.

Instead, the conveyor reverses direction, taking you directly under the first hammer again. The sudden change knocks you off your feet onto your back, where you can see the masher coming down. Your muscles tense and your eyes jam shut, bracing for the end.

The belt lurches forward, sparing you by inches.

Unable to regain your footing, you roll onto your side into a ball. There's nothing you can do to help yourself. You can't keep pace with the belt or the hammers. It's only a matter of time. Your only chance is if someone or something intervenes. You're utterly powerless. If only you hadn't tried to run. If only you'd listened. Now, defeated, your lesson is learned. You surrender!

A massive hand picks you up. The banging stops, and once more you're in the hallway. Though you weren't able to see it before, you know it's the same monster.

More writing appears on the walls.

"Your lesson is learned. You are not the one in control of your life. You never were, never will be."

The great beast, whose form you can't discern despite looking directly at it, carries you along. Its body shifts and shivers like smoke, yet remains solid to the touch. Its appearance cannot be described in any vocabulary you know, because it has none.

You go limp in its grip. You belong to this thing, like property. Never forget that. You were forgiven this time. Next time, you might not be so lucky. This is where you live, but it is

not your home. There is no home. There is only this place where you exist. This terrible place where the rebellious and disobedient earn terrible deaths. Why do you think you make no sound when you speak? Because try as you might, nothing you say can ever make a difference. So what use have you for a voice in the first place? Better to have none, less be the temptation. You might start to think for yourself, might get notions about doing things the way you want. Dangerous thoughts, thoughts that are above helpless animals like yourself.

No argument this time. This time, you accept it.

That room you started off in? You do have a room, but that wasn't it. That was your punishment for trying to leave, but apparently you were left there a bit too long. You forgot, as those like you often do, why you were put there in the first place. You even forgot how you came to be there. How do you expect to survive if you can't even recall that much?

In the back of your mind, you realize the writing is gone. These ideas didn't come from someone or something else. They're yours. *You* are thinking this.

Was there a time when you were more capable, more independent? Maybe, maybe not. Any ancestral memory of such a life has long faded, but sadly the instinct still remains. It may be some time yet before that, too, goes away. But it will. Then you will be complete. Then you will abandon these ridiculous thoughts of freedom and creating your destiny altogether.

After several minutes of being carried, a door is opened, and you're dropped inside. The door shuts behind you.

This is your room. This is where you are meant to stay forever, until the day you die. You have lived in this place, and will continue to live here. Are there others around? If so, you've never met them, but you think there are. Do they try to escape? If there is an escape, does anyone ever make it? What you know now might or might not be truth. But there is one truth you do know.

You are alone here. There is no comfort to be had. Outside this one room, everything is

dangerous, but inside, you are left to yourself. You are not attacked or threatened. The monster out there is both your warden and your guardian. Because of it, you live an isolated existence, separated from everything and everyone else.

But that's okay. Because you live. Because of that monster and this room, you are able to survive. Without both, you would die terribly. It's better this way. You realize that now. What is a dead lion but a corpse soon to rot and be forgotten? The sheep that lives gets the better deal. You won't try to escape again. Ever. Your life might be pointless, it might not belong to you, but at least you're alive. Free will is a lie, a dangerous one. It nearly got you killed. Better to let it drift away and become hollow. Freedom is unpredictable. Your life might not be pleasant, but at least the beast ensures you're protected.

Out there, you were free to try and find another way to live. But you were in constant peril, felt constant fear. That is what true freedom means. True freedom means having nothing and no one else keeping you safe. You have to do everything, are responsible for everything. Your own judge and executioner. Without freedom, your life is someone else's responsibility. The weight is taken off your shoulders. You have so much less to worry about. Freedom and security are opposites. And you've been shown clearly which is the better of the two, miserable as they both are.

In this place you have lived. And in this place you will continue to live, and thank it for allowing you to do so.

Forever.