

The Hiding Place

A short story by Justin Newland

I track her footprints through the forbidding forest to a tunnel at the base of a mountain. The cliff face is sheer, the rock ... black-red volcanic. A pool of murky water to one side reflects the pale shimmer of a horned moon. I crouch in the undergrowth, watching, waiting. Dark blotches daubed around the tunnel entrance. Is that blood? To ward people away? Or keep them in?

There are no guards at the entrance. I'll walk right in and free her. Someone or something has ripped her from the sanctity of her life. But who or what? And why was she taken? What's she done? What's she not done?

I scuttle towards the tunnel, pause at the entrance. Gloomy in there. Fear grips my throat. Limbs, heavy as teak. Won't be stopped now. Water dripping. Slippery underfoot. Back hard against the walls, I creep along the tunnel.

Suddenly, there's movement - behind me. People, shouting, howling, screaming.

"Help!" , "Save me!" the cries as thick as night. They're bringing more prisoners.

I duck behind a rock, suck in my breath, clothes stick to me like leeches. Can they smell my fear? I hope it'll mingle with the terror of the captives. They're edging closer. I wait to hear the crack of a whip, the vicarious use of a club. Nothing.

They pass me by, shadows furtive on the wall. Their plaintive cries reverberate along the tunnel. I see no guards, but they must be there. I hear the chink of metal. They're chained together, one to another, a chain gang. I count fifteen.

I let the sounds of terror fade before I move a muscle. I slink out from behind the rock, and meet a wall of rancid fear. It's palpable. Like sulphur, overwhelming. I gag. I stagger on, bile sour in my throat. Ahead, a faint glimmer of light, the end of the tunnel.

I kneel, glance around the corner. It's an enormous cavern, lit by a dim, flickering torch light. I hear anguished cries. Chained to a huge circular rock in the middle of the cavern are legions of humans, young and old, male and female, rich and poor, vicious and virtuous, the do-gooders, the do-baders, and the do-nothings.

The Beast is there, sitting cross-legged atop the rock, oozing darkness from every pore. White goatee beard, horns jut from his forehead, long goat snout. Man body, tree-trunk thighs give way to hooved feet. Holds the torch. A yew green slime drips off his putrescent skin, gathers in a slough below him, and coagulates into the rock on which he sits, arrogant, imperious. Soul-less eyes look towards me. I dive for cover. Has he seen me? My stomach twists.

The Hiding Place

He crows, "I belong to you, I belong to you, I belong to you!" What's he talking about? He's demented. The new captives pull and yank on the chains that bind them to the face of the rock. "Escape is futile," he sneers.

They say the Beast's a behemoth, older than sin, his ways, more subtle than the moon. Beneath his ever-watchful gaze, she's there somewhere, trapped, helpless. And there's only me. How to rescue her? Does he sleep? Is he human? No, he's not. Can't let that stop me. Can't leave her. Not now. Come too far.

His litany continues, "You're here because you wanted to come. I didn't compel you." No. That's not true. That's another lie. He's born of lies. He lives in the unseen. He's cast a spell on them.

Darting through the shadows, I move from rock to rock. I catch sight of her. She's there. Relief! I try and catch her attention, but she doesn't see me. Instead, she gazes ... right through me. I sneak up to her. Hands held fast to the rock by round chains of dull grey iron. She's pained, tortured. Momentarily, I faint from the stench of the decaying slough.

I come round and whisper. "I can set you free, come with me." She ignores me. She doesn't even see me. She's in his spell, that's why, I convince myself.

I must help. I grab a rock from the ground, and smash it against the iron ring, it rebounds off it. The retort echoes around the cavern, slowly recedes. Sweaty hands gripping the rock, I aim again.

"Try!" I yell at her. "Pull the ring from the rock!"

Her lips move. She's saying something. I can't hear what.

"Loosen it," I cry. "Release yourself from this bondage!"

She frowns. "I can't."

"Why?"

I look again at the iron ring and the placement of her hands. Then I realise. She's not chained at all. She's hanging on OF HER OWN FREE WILL! That's why - no guards at the entrance, on the chain gang, nor any enforcers in the cave.

I'm bewildered. "You can leave at anytime. You're free. Just let go!" I urge her.

"I ... don't want to!" She yells. "Don't ever try and release me! I'm staying here." She kicks me in the stomach, winding me.

"I told you," the Beast growls. "I. Am. Their. Fear." He stubs out the torch, the light fades, shadows looming on the cavern walls.

She needs help. I can do something good here.

In the faint light, I grab her hand, pull her towards me, but she's holding on to the iron ring for dear life. She's got the strength of a man, a beast. She squeezes my hand, tearing the flesh. I yell.

I can barely see her now. The torch is nearly extinguished. I can get her to let go. One last attempt. With my free hand, I reach above her and grasp her hand that's clutching the iron ring. If I can get her to loosen her grip, I can pull her away from the clutches of the Beast.

The Hiding Place

In the murky darkness, I miss her hand, and inadvertently grab the iron ring. My fingers close around it. I try and loosen them. My fingers won't move. I'm ... clinging to the ring! No! I'm ... chained ... to my own fears. I can't give them up either, otherwise I'd be empty, nothing, no-one.