

The Sand Stone Keep

A short story by Justin Newland

This was a keep. He should know. He'd been here long enough. Long enough, to be at one with the cold. Long enough, for the dampness to seep right through him. Long enough, for the darkness to enshroud him.

Once, this place had been his dream. So when they told him that he was to 'keep' here, he was excited. Ecstatic. His own keep. He was young, innocent, and aspiring for the future. He'd dreamt of all the things he could achieve, he'd dreamt of all the hurdles he'd cross, he'd dreamt of fulfilling his promise.

When he'd first arrived, he'd walked every step of the caves. Today, they were as familiar with him as he was with them. It was a symbiosis. At least he liked to think so. They provided him with a home; he provided them with their own chthonic spirit. Over the years, he'd moved through the caverns and tunnels many times, by this crag, past the spiky knoll, ducking under this lintel. He was familiar with the chill, the wet and the dry, the shades of darkness, the smells and odours, the pitch and the dark and the sounds of silence. Above all else, he knew the silence. He liked it best when it was heavy, turgid and suffocating.

Today, his dreams were far away. He began to think that this was a tomb for them, and some day would be a tomb for him. He didn't want that – not yet. It wasn't all over. There was always some hope. There was always a part of his dream that had survived the rigours of life. There was always the belief that someday, someone would call him. Call his name. That's all they had to do.

There was the stumbling block.

No-one seemed to know his name.

If they didn't know his name, how could they call him?

If they couldn't call him, how could he answer?

If he couldn't answer, how could he help? That was his purpose, to help.

He felt useless, forlorn.

Like a rose bud always in the shade.

At first he'd expected answers. You do, don't you? You want to hear a voice. You want to see a sign. You want to believe a mentor. You want to believe that something guides you and your decisions, towards providence, towards your destiny, towards fulfilment. He'd looked for these signs in the shades of moss on the walls. He'd listened to the sound of the dripping water.

There were no signs, none that he could discern anyway.

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He was alone.

He didn't like the solitude. He'd got used to that as well now: the long, days and nights: just him and the eternal rhythmic beat of the earth. He didn't like being one of a kind. He couldn't go back to his kind, they wouldn't have him. He was stuck here. This was his 'keep'. This was what he said he wanted: a keep, and they'd given him one. You can't go back on your word, they'd told him. Once is forever. He was stuck with the caves, and they were stuck with him.

Today he knew there'd never be an answer. Yet still he hoped someone would find him down here, at best find a use for him, and give him the opportunity to extend himself. He didn't feel needed anymore. Life just passed him by, like a moth caught in the cave's thick strands of darkness.

For the moment, there was closeness, all around him. He liked it that way. He could breathe. He could touch what was left of his destiny. It was here, right in front of him, but whenever he reached out for it, it receded from his grasp. It made him ache, an ache he'd lived with for years. It was that awkward feeling of never quite being able to reach what you wanted, what you next needed in your life, of always being left short.

He'd used to imagine what it would be like to do join up fully with his destiny: a powerful sense of serendipity, of always being in the right place at the right time, the free-fall, the sense of wind behind, of being driven, headlong, towards your purpose.

It came rarely, and when it did, it fluttered away into the secret darkness.

Today, he could barely conjure the memory.

Everything was dark. He could just see ahead of him. He reached out, and his hand went right through the air, and then right through the rock. He walked off into the solid rock. He was of the rock. No-one could see him in there. Actually, no one could see him anyway, so what was the difference? Sometimes, when he was in the caves, passers-by brushed past him and then stopped in their tracks, sensing a presence.

"Yes, I'm here," he'd cry.

They couldn't hear him, or didn't want to. They'd sniff the stale air. Did he smell? What did he smell of? Sandstone probably. They'd glance around, as if looking for some lost member of their party. They'd even reach a hand out in front of them, or to their side, trying to feel their way. Sometimes they'd walk right through him, as if he wasn't there. He'd concluded that he was invisible to them. Why couldn't they see him? Why couldn't they hear him? Why couldn't they call his name?

He could have flown with the sylphs in the wind; he could have inhabited the fiery deserts with the salamanders, or swum with the undines in the great oceans. He was an earth-dweller – he liked rock, all rock, from the hard volcanic to the softest dirt, any kind would do. He preferred the stone of sand. That was why he was here, in these caves: full of sandstone, red sandstone. That was him.

The fact no-one knew he was there, well, what could he do about it now?

He was old. He'd waited. He'd been vigilant. He'd stuck like a limpet to his purpose. That much

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was true. Now he just waited. Not expecting, not wanting. Just being a sandstone gnome in a sandstone cave.