

The Prisoner

My soul has been left scarred and broken from the horrors I have endured. I have seen men, women and children die in the worst ways; some during war, others from the brutalities that our species inflict on one another. Each death I saw took its toll on me, each one seemed to peel away a layer of my sanity. Minutes turn to hours, days turn to months, and still I did not stop in my duties. I continued. I endured. After everything I went through, did anyone give me council? No. Did anyone offer me help? No. Instead, I was dragged here through the rusted iron gates, over the cracked limestone floors until I was thrown into a dark, cramped cell.

The mould clings to the corners and water drips through a crack in the ceiling, it is a miracle I haven't been driven insane already. The rags they gave me do nothing to shield me from the elements in this place. The icy winds keep me awake, sleep is becoming a distant memory. I do not know how long I have been in here and I do not know exactly where here is. I must outlast this place. I know I will be released. I may even escape. Until then though I will stay as strong as I can and live off the scraps thrown through my cell bars.

The faces of my Jailers have always alluded me. They walk with heavy foot steps and cover their faces with iron masks. They show me no compassion. They do not speak to me. It seems to me that they don't even breathe. They walk alone, always alone. I have never seen them open a cell. They haven't even looked in my direction. They leave me scraps of food; they're often mouldy but I must: eat, drink, sleep and live. I am so weak. Will no-one help me?

The others, I cannot see them in the dark but I know they are there. I hear them crying. I hear them screaming. The more fortunate of them are mumbling and laughing, ignorant in their madness to the horrors of this place. These sounds keep me up at night. The nights when I do sleep, my dreams become nightmares. They're so bad, that when I wake up in this desolate place, I am relieved.

I've heard the screams before, from the lower levels, blood curdling screams of horror.

Today I have seen what causes these screams. It walks like the other Jailers; yet it does not look like them. It wears a black cloak and carries a lantern of blue flame. It hauls a cage on its back, inside it is crammed a withering old man, dying from countless lacerations. The face of this Jailer is covered in a golden mask, carved into the likeness of a demon.

I woke up tonight to the sound of heavy footsteps, it was the one I now call the Warden, followed by two Jailers. They didn't come for me, they went to the cell opposite. The Warden's blue light shone in horrific glory and for the first time in a long time, I saw another human. It was a woman, she had black hair and wore rags like the rest of us. The blue light illuminated the horror on her face. I couldn't see what caused it, the two Jailers blocked my sight. I could only just see The Warden staring at her, and it did something I never thought I would see: it removed its mask. I could not see its face but it stared straight at the female and slowly approached her, the sounds of her screams were like nothing I have heard before.

Her screams went on for hours. I assume she passed out. After, fully masked, they left the cell. It was strange, I wasn't afraid that night and the prison didn't seem as dark. I found solace in seeing another human, even one as afraid as that woman. Tonight I felt at peace. Would I find sleeping easier? Why am I finding peace in another person's horror? Was this place getting to me? I was happy to see another human, yet that human was afraid and horrified. For me to be happy now, what does that make me?

The next morning I woke up to an unusual sound. Something was scraping across the hard, stone floors. At first I thought it was a Jailer. However, it was something else, I could barely make it out in the dark. I could hear metal scraping on metal, heavy footsteps against the limestone. This thing towered over the Jailers and the Warden. Whatever it was, it was covered in a heavy suit of armour. I could see its eyes through the slit in its helmet, they shone a deep yellow. Yet it does not look at me, its eyes were fixed ahead as it walked. The scraping noise came from the rusted giant sword it dragged alongside it. This large creature paced, restlessly, up and down the prison. I heard its footsteps getting quieter as it got further away, but it never stopped moving.

It was in the prison for what seemed like hours. The Jailers and the warden passed, acting as if this creature did not even exist. The footsteps got louder and louder as it came closer to my cell. I heard the sounds of screams getting louder as it came. As it passed, I could see it dragging a helpless prisoner. The prisoner looked old but they screamed and scrambled trying to grab onto anything they could. I could hear the scraping of their nails against stone as they went, but the armoured creature wouldn't stop. It dragged the prisoner away and his screams disappeared into the world beyond. After it was gone an eerie silence crept over the prison. Even the Jailers and The Warden stopped. They stood in place all day, even when I screamed and grabbed the bars they didn't react. Everything I thought I had learnt from this place had been taken from me. Yet another I have lost. The uneasy sight of the idle Jailers and an immobile Warden makes me shiver. It's like they are just the host for some dreaded force. The icy winds crept deeper into my cell tonight and all I could do was weep. I think I'm losing it. I won't sleep as easy today.

Over the next week The Warden and Jailers continued like normal and every day the armoured creature would return. It would walk to a different part of the prison and every day another prisoner would be dragged screaming from their cell into the world beyond.

I watched and heard women, men and children being dragged into the world beyond and I could do nothing to stop it. Yet, in this horror, I find some peace. I have not been visited by The Warden or taken by the armoured creature. It helps me to sleep, as does the image of the female, even though her face was obscured with terror.

The screams at night grew worse, worse and louder. I couldn't sleep and whenever I drifted off the nightmares began. Then tonight I woke early. The cell seemed even darker, if that was at all possible. There they were. Standing at my cell door. Watching me. Two Jailers in their Iron masks and behind them, illuminated in that glorious blue light, was The Warden. My time had finally come. My cell door creaked open on rusty iron hinges, and slammed against the wall. The Jailers parted and allowed The Warden into my cell. My heart was pumping and the adrenaline filled my veins. I could not distinguish the fear from the excitement.

Was it strange that I was excited to see what horrified that woman? Yet I was afraid. The Warden removed its mask and revealed its face to me. The face had no features, like they had been cut off and replaced with just skin, the same with their hair. The Warden's entire head was a scarred surface. The worst part was: the muscles under The Warden's skin still worked. It turned its head in curiosity as I drank in its features. The cell shone in blue light. It smiled at me. Under its skin I could make out its cheek muscles, and see where its mouth should be. I could feel its gaze fixed upon me even though it had no eyes to see me. My skin began to crawl. As it neared mine, I could feel its breath slowly escaping through the stitches that held everything together.

The fear had me stuck in place. I could not move. I could not talk. I was just fixed upon this creature's featureless face. It withdrew a small blade and pushed it, lightly at first, into my skin. It began carving into me, creating a masterpiece in my flesh. The air filled with the smell of my blood. All the while the creature was smiling. Smiling as it mutilated me. Then I took control of my senses. My nerves were screaming. My brain was overwhelmed with pain and all I could manage to do was scream. I screamed for the pain to stop. I screamed for my mother. I screamed for God to save me. Nothing came and the pain did not stop. It continued for what felt like hours, all the while this monster smiled at me. The blue flame of its lantern flickered in the icy winds and darkness engulfed me. The last thing I felt was the limestone floor rushing up to meet me.

I push the floor away from me. I am slick with blood. A terrible pain pulsates through my chest. My arms and legs shake as I steady myself on the cell bars. The mutilation has left me weak. The wounds on my chest burn. They are hot to the touch. A smell of rot clings to me. The lacerations must be infected, I know it. In a place like this, the infection is a death sentence. I do not think I will survive this place anymore. The agony to breathe and eat, I want it to stop. Please someone, anyone, make it stop.

I often find myself praying. I pray, for the blue light to return, for The Warden to come back and finish the job. I pray, for the creature to drag me away. None of my prayers are answered. They've never been answered. Not in my entire life. Divinity has always eluded me. Somebody just kill me. Please.

I slip in and out of consciousness. One moment I'm being sick, the next I am sitting in the corner laughing to myself. What is happening to me? What has The Warden done to me? I curse it, the wretched monster, The Jailers too. All of them. I curse them. My thoughts race, The female, it was her fault. I found solace and peace in seeing her. They noticed my peace and so they took it from me. I blame her for this. I wish. I wish, I could carve her myself. Then my mind returns to normal. I know it isn't her fault. I just still can't help but blame her, if I hadn't seen her. If I hadn't found that tiny slither of happiness. They might not have come to my cell and carved me. I cough and fall. When will I die?

"Wake up". I slowly open my eyes, once again I didn't die in my sleep. What was that? Was it actually a voice? Did I really hear someone speak? No, I couldn't have. It must be this place. Its finally happened, I must be insane. No-one in this place speaks. "Can you hear me?". There it is again, I don't understand. "Please, can you hear me?". Its real, a real voice.

"Please, if you can hear me, answer". It wasn't a whisper, I could tell it was an echo. Where was it coming from? I open my mouth to speak but, the words stop in my throat. I haven't spoke in a long time, maybe I had forgotten? I try again, again the words catch in my throat. "Please, anyone?". The voice, it is begging. I need to reply, I can't let that voice go. It needs to know I am here, that we are together.

"I'm here", my voice, it cracks, it struggles but it's mine. It is not how I remember it. My eyes start to water, my own voice, even that hurts me. "My God, please tell me you're real?". The voice, it sounds like a mans. He sounds afraid, like me. "I'm real, I'm really here!" It becomes easier to talk the longer I do it. "Have they come for you yet?", The voice grows quieter, "Have you seen its face?".

The pain shoots through my chest, In the excitement I had forgotten the pain. I fall to my knees and let out a cry of pain. "I guess they have." the voice says. "Listen, the pain, it goes away. It doesn't ever kill you. You must endure it, you must survive". The words do nothing to comfort me. All they tell me is that my wish to die, will go unanswered.