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The Tower

The tower has always been here.

And since I remember it was a forbidden area. Besides, not much of the once magnificent building was left. The walls reaching to the sky, but crumbling under the influence of wind did not encourage approach, hence nobody really knew what was inside. I did not try either. I liked to watch the tower from a distance, like all the kids in the tribe. It was a forbidden place!

None of us, however, dared to approach. We listened to too many stories circulating among Kuul and neighboring tribes, legends about times when people were powerful and united, and Moss was just starting its deadly journey. The Elders were telling by the fire how in those days the tower was surrounded by a city which ruins were now barely visible under the layer of vegetation, and in the tower itself people were meeting to talk to those who lived beyond the reach of mules.

No, they were not mules. It was something much bigger and faster. Elephants? No ... I do not quite understand this part of Elder's story. It does not matter. In any case, in those days the world seemed to be a much more populous and better communicated place, with people closer to each other. Even when they lived many days from each other, they could still communicate as if they stood side by side. Even when they spoke different languages... it was enough to use the tower to understand each other without a problem. The Elder swore that she had been talking to people from other distant tribes in such a way. She did not remember the splendor of the city or the tower itself, because she was barely a small girl when the city was deserted, but the tower was still in operation after that for some time. However, one could not find anyone to talk to very often. The world was becoming an empty place.

And then the Moss came.

Some say that Moss was first, that it was the reason for the people of the cities to get extinct and the towers to be forgotten. Still others blame the towers for the Moss. Popular amongst Kuul are stories about the gods not liking what people were doing, considering them too proud, too haughty and having too little faith. They decided to curse us by taking away the possibility of our communication. They decided that people should live in separate tribes, like at the beginning of time, and not gather in cities and communicate at a distance.

I did not quite believe in the Elders' stories about curses, but just in case, I stayed away from the tower. Mainly to avoid punishment. Today, however, I could not hesitate anymore. The tower was the only hope left for me to contact my mother. The hope that I had cultivated for years. A dream that I did not dare to fulfill. A dream that tomorrow will be out of reach. By morning, Moss will cover the only remaining entrance to the tower. Maybe I'm already late, maybe on the inside it has already taken over everything.

Slowly I climb towards the building, stepping carefully among the ruins of the city. It's easy to slip here.

As I walk, I try to overcome the fear of curses buried by the Elders. It is not easy as they were included in the majority of stories told around the fires since I was a child. I keep thinking back to the previous evening, when the Elder finally decided to give me a talisman from my mother. I did not know her. She went to fight the Moss, leaving me under the protection of the Kuul tribe when I barely started walking. I remember only a few detached images, a delicate fragrance of soap mixed with a natural scent of the skin, a slightly guttural voice always nicely whispering in my ear, the softness of light hair ...

There are many of us, orphans left to old women for care in times when everybody, both men and women in their prime, went to stop the Moss. We live a simple life, a nomadic life. We collect fruit, nuts and roots, we hunt animals, which are amazingly few. From the old messages, the Elders learned that it was also linked to the Moss. Few creatures can feed on it, and the not contaminated surface is forever decreasing.

I approach the entrance to the tower. I try to calm my breath and my fast beating heart. I'm slowly succeeding. Like during a hunt. I'm fifteen and I'm the best hunter of the tribe because I can calm down. Now, however, the game is higher stakes and much more dangerous than anything that happened to me. I am listening for a long moment, but there is complete silence inside. I am immersed in the darkness. I'm waiting for my eyes to get used to the change in the light.

I repeat once again to myself why I came here. I want to use the tower's power to talk to someone from afar to ask about my mother, if she will come back and when, maybe even see her. I know that it is probably impossible, that no one has been communicating with anyone from this tower for years. I remember when the Elders came here when I was a little toddler and they came back with worse and worse news. Moss could not be stopped, but only slowed down by burning it with some kind of substance. Later, they found out that a few years after the initial phase of development Moss begins to produce other vegetation and that this vegetation is edible for animals. A spark of hope flared again. But the burned-out zones remained sterile, we were still losing and the area occupied by the Moss was definitely bigger than the one we managed to destroy in the heat of battle. Tests were carried out on humans and it turned out that one in ten was able to eat both the new plants and animals that consumed them. The other nine died in agony. The pattern was not found. Anyway, how to look for a pattern when there is no material for testing? The Elders found this to be another curse, a punishment for not staying away from the towers and forbade us to approach them under the penalty of exile. They broke contact with neighboring tribes who did likewise to please the gods who wanted people to be scattered again.

According to a rough estimate, we still have enough unpolluted land for a few years, later we will have to fight for territory or risk eating food created by Moss. Maybe the young generation will be more resistant, more adapted to new foods. We had a few kids among us, the oldest of

whom, Lin, is five years old. They, our children, have a chance to survive and continue the human race, not us.

I hear a rustling and turn towards the entrance, but I do not look at it, to keep my eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness. I do not see any animal, neither do I smell any. Probably the wind. I became oversensitive. I look around inside the tower, it's tall and narrow. I stand in one large room, more than half of which is covered by Moss. So it got here. It's really the last day. The Moss is poisonous. It is not allowed to walk on it, because it secretes spores, which when inhaled lead to painful illness and death. After a few months, it stops producing them and then it probably partly dies to make room for new plants, sometimes edible ones.

I cover my nose and mouth with a shawl, although I know it does not help for long. I look up. The tower has no floors, not any more. I can see the stairs running around, spiraling along the walls, a few windows and a rotten roof. The stones are crumbled and threaten to collapse at any moment. I go to the stairs and begin to climb. I reach the first window and look outside. I see movement. I remind myself to watch out for small predators on the way back. I go further and hope dies slowly in me. There is nothing here. Nothing that could be useful for anything. I reach half the height. There is no passage farther, the stairs have disintegrated in too long a stretch. I look down and only now I begin to understand. I recall the stories of the Elders about the world from before Moss, about a substance called plastic, which was easy to melt, and which was ubiquitous, about frequent use of metals. Moss covers most of the floor of the tower, but what is beneath it is irregular, like molten lava, and what protrudes looks like metal plates. I feel a squeeze of my heart, tears come to my eyes, I want to scream, but I can not.

The Elders destroyed it.

It was not enough for them to threaten us with curses.

They destroyed everything.

Why?!

After all, Moss would take it anyway.

Stupid, damned, all-fearing old men! They took the only hope, the only rescue we might have had. In the name of what? Because the gods were offended?

I'm sitting here, on these steps, turning the talisman from my mother in my hand, a small piece of plastic with a button. I got it yesterday, but I was so scared to push this button. I wanted to be alone, here. Now I press it again and again, listening to her voice, tears streaming down my face. Why did I not come here when contact was still possible? Or maybe it was never possible to me? When did they destroy the device? Was it when they forbade going to the tower under threat of banishment? It must have been at the same time. I'm trying to remember. I was seven then ... no ... six years old. I could do nothing, nothing.

The rustling that I heard earlier comes closer. Slowly transforms into the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Small steps. I raise my head and see Lin. He came here after me. He sits next to me, takes my hand.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"I'm waiting for the Moss."

I can see on his face that he does not understand. I take my hand away from him. Instinctively I press the button again. Recording, that's what my mother called it, was longer, she explained in it that she had to go to chase away the Moss, but will return to her princess and we will always be together, and if I miss her, I have to ask the Elders, and they will lead me to the tower and let me talk to her, although not too often. I managed to hear the whole thing only once, then something happened and I have only two sentences left.

"What is it?" Lin asks again.

"This is my mother's voice," I do not know why I answer.

"Where is she?"

I look at him, a being in which there is nothing but curiosity at the moment.

"I do not know. Maybe nowhere."

We are sitting in silence. The little one is trying to understand what I told him. I am turning the talisman slowly in my hand. How long will it last? When will I lose even her voice? Before or after the Moss reaches this side of the tower?

Lin pulls my sleeve.

"I am hungry," he announces.

What do I care?, I think with anger, no one invited you here.

I pull my sleeve from his hand and start moving up the stairs. The kid is staggering, trying to catch his balance, waving his hands chaotically, and horror is painted on his face. Instinctively I throw myself in his direction and at the last moment I grab his leg. I carefully pull the little one back in, hold him in my arms. He clings to me. I whisper some comforting folly and go downstairs. Moss almost reaches the exit, but somehow we squeeze in the hope that the spores do not rise too high.

From the distance, out of Moss, I hear the other two sentences left to me by my mother, now repeated constantly: "I love you, daughter, please come to talk to me often."