The Tower

Short story · 30 min read

“My lord,” said the rider, “your men are restless. They do not want to go on.” Then he lowered his voice. “They think the witch has cursed the forest. They talk about eyes watching them from the shadows, and some of them swear the trees move.”

The Prince had not taken his eyes off the forest the whole time, as if he were looking for something he could never quite see. When the man finished, he turned to him.

“And what do you think?”

After a short silence the man spoke with certainty.

“My Prince, I have come here with you for two winters. I have never left you alone. But in all that time I have not heard so much as a bird sing. This is no longer the place where you lost her. Your men are right. The evil in the shadows grows by the day.”

The Prince nodded as if to agree. Then he turned his horse and called to his men. “Go back to the city. That is enough for today.”

“Take them home, Ropus,” he added.

“As you command, my lord. But will you not ride with us?”

“No. I have not found what I am looking for yet.”

“Prince Gamen, my friend...” said Ropus, holding out his hand, “...I am begging you. We have searched every inch of this forest a dozen times. You have to let go. Your people need you. This is not where you belong.” The Prince smiled, but it seemed to hurt him more. He shook his friend’s hand.

“Your men need you on the road home. We will meet in the city before the sun goes down.”

Ropus sighed in despair, called out to the soldiers waiting for him, and they set off toward the city.

When the noise of the men had faded, the silence of the forest settled heavily over the Prince. The shadows of the trees were longer and darker than ever. Hungry eyes among the yellowed leaves must have been waiting impatiently for the sun to set. Ropus was right. This was not the forest he had once walked with the woman he loved. The witch's curse had taken away everything good and beautiful in it. And that was exactly why he was here again. Nearly two winters ago his beloved had been carried off by this wicked witch, and soon after, the moon had vanished from the sky. Without her the evenings had faded, and the moonless nights had turned black. So every day Gamen came to this forest and searched for her.

He was making his way between the broad trunks, thinking of her, when something stepped into his path and stopped him. It was a stag with large black eyes fixed on him, its coat made of gold and its antlers of silver. It was bigger than any stag he had ever seen, and it shone as if it could drive the evil out of the forest all by itself. Gamen felt at once that he had to touch its coat. He had to be sure such beauty was real. But the moment he climbed down from his horse and took a few steps, the stag bolted into the forest. The Prince ran after it at once. Yet the plates of his heavy armour clattered against each other with every step, frightening the stag and driving it faster. He managed to follow it deep into the forest, but soon he could no longer make out its golden gleam. When he came to himself he saw that the trees had grown thick and the sun could barely reach the ground beneath its carpet of yellow leaves. His horse was far behind, and he was lost in a corner of the forest he did not know. As he looked carefully around for anything familiar, he saw a cave in the distance. A silver light poured from its mouth, bright even in the middle of the day.

With curiosity and fear taking hold of him, he stepped into the cave. Every breath filled his lungs with damp air. The same damp clung to his face like a cobweb he could not brush away. But what truly troubled him was the light that filled the cave.

The silver glow came from a grey, round body lying on the floor at the far end of the wide cave, like an enormous ball. Lying there it was at least twice as tall as Prince Gamen, and he guessed it was just as wide. From its round trunk came two legs as thin as branches and every

bit as crooked. Its arms, wrapped around that huge round body, were just as strange. It was making the sounds of something deep asleep, though there was no telling whether the creature slept at all. The Prince drew his sword and crept forward. But he was watching the strange creature so closely that he stepped on a branch on the floor, blown in perhaps by the wind, or perhaps by a trick of fate. The branch snapped, and the crack rose and echoed from the empty walls. At the sound the creature grumbled and turned over. It stretched its long arms wide, then opened the eyes the Prince had not seen until then. At first it must not have noticed the Prince standing there with his sword, for it closed its eyes again. But a moment later, realising someone was standing in front of it, it leapt to its feet with a shriek. In its fright it snatched a bone from the floor and pointed it at the Prince. It pressed itself against the wall of the cave and drew one leg up to its body. The bone between its huge fingers looked as clumsy and silly as a grown man holding a toy sword. In the silence of the cave they stared at each other in astonishment.

The Prince could not believe what he was seeing. With its long, long legs it stood as tall as the tallest tree he had ever seen, and its arms came straight out of its huge round head and reached all the way to the floor. Its face looked like someone had tried to make it human, carving it out of a single block of stone. But the sculptor could not have been very skilled, or very patient, for he seemed to have left the creature just like that, with its enormous nose and its oddly shaped mouth.

“What are you?” asked the Prince, taking a step. Seeing him come closer, the creature threw the bone it had been holding as delicately as a toothpick. It landed two or three steps away from the Prince and raised nothing but a little puff of dust.

“Tell me, is the curse on this enchanted forest your doing? Is it you who spreads this evil over the woods and the animals, from this den of wickedness?” At these words the creature, which had been pressed flat against the wall, straightened up, and its long silhouette looked longer still.

“First of all, my good sir,” said the creature. Its voice was deep but every bit as polite, and it struck the walls of the cave and echoed again and again. “Your words are most hurtful. Yes, it is true that lately I have not been able to sweep and tidy as much as I should. But ‘den of

wickedness' is a rather rude thing to call the humble home of yours truly."

"You will not talk your way out of this. I am the noble prince of these lands..."

"Before we get to who you are, sir, you owe me an apology."

"An apology? Do you know who I..."

"Apologise."

"But why?"

"You called my most distinguished and rare little home a den of wickedness." As it said 'den of wickedness' it screwed up its face as if it had eaten something very sour. Taken aback, the Prince looked around for a moment.

"Well, if you hung a few candlesticks, swept the floors and laid down some nice rugs, it really would be a lovely place... What am I saying? Who are you? Tell me now. I want to know who I am fighting."

"Oh dear, oh dear, fighting? Only the empty-headed ever get anywhere by fighting, sir. And before I answer your question, is there not something I should hear from you first?"

"By the gods, you are stubborn. Fine. I apologise."

"Because..." the creature went on, waiting.

The Prince's shoulders dropped in weariness. The plates of his armour touched, and the sound echoed off the bare walls and died away.

"I apologise for calling your lovely 'little home' a den of wickedness."

"Oh, there was no need to apologise, but since you insist, most worthy sir, I accept your apology," it said, lacing its long, pale grey, bony fingers right in front of its enormous mouth. "And if I may ask, would you put away your sword? It looks very sharp and pointy. You might hurt someone."

The Prince looked at his sword, and as he slid it back into its sheath he could make no sense of what was happening to him.

“How rude of me, I have not introduced myself. Sir, yours truly is Lunar, the spirit of the Moon. Some say I am the Moon itself, and they are not entirely wrong,” it said with a smile. As it introduced itself it gave a very relaxed bow. The Prince stood frozen, unable to believe his ears. The Moon itself? The very Moon that had stopped shining in the sky nearly two winters ago?

“Will the gentleman not grant me his name?”

Brought back to himself by the soft voice that filled the cave, the Prince at once tried to bow as Lunar had. But his armour did not allow him much.

“I am Prince Gamen, in the name of the king the rightful future ruler of these lands.”

“Delighted to meet you, Prince Gamen. Will you not sit down?” It pointed to a stone ledge just off the ground beside it. As the Prince went over, he asked:

“I confess I do not quite understand. Are you the Moon itself, the one that shines in the sky? Or that used to shine, at least.”

“As I said, some believe I am,” it said, sitting down across from the Prince.

A light breeze blew outside the cave, and passing through the leaves it made music that was very pleasant to listen to. The sound of a river flowing far away carried all the way to the cave where Lunar, glowing silver, sat talking with the Prince, who in his shining armour looked nearly as bright. The last light of the day left the forest under a crimson rain.

“I don’t understand. Then why are you here? In this cave, I mean, in your lovely little home. I would have thought your true place was in the sky.”

“Yes,” said Lunar after a deep sigh. “Yes, I should be there, singing and dancing with my friends the stars. But I am held prisoner here. I was taken from the sky exactly two cycles ago.”

“Two cycles? Two winters ago, that is exactly when the nights were buried in darkness. So that is why we cannot see the moonlight. But who could have such power...”

Just then a voice came from outside the cave, cracked, as hard and merciless as stone.

“LUNAR! Lunar, where are you, you sleepyhead?”

Lunar leapt up in a panic and pushed the Prince behind the rock.

“The witch is here. Don’t you move. Don’t come out until I tell you.”

A strange sound came with the footsteps that filled the cave. “Ah, at last it’s awake. Awake, and talking to itself now too. Haven’t the walls started talking back yet?”

The witch’s laugh was so unbearable that the Prince had to cover his ears in his hiding place. Even without seeing her, her presence squeezed his body inside his armour. After Lunar’s soft voice, her shapeless one was torture.

“Come on then, you sluggish thing. The sun has set and my children need feeding. Laze about any longer and I will give you a pair of ears as ugly as your nose. Don’t dawdle!”

When the voice fell silent, the cave wrapped itself in its comforting quiet again. When the witch left the cave their spirits were set free and they could breathe easily again. They waited where they were for a while. Once they were sure the witch was far away, they left the cave. The sun had long set, and the stars blinked lazily in the sky. But in the dark of the night Gamen was bathed in silver light. Now he was certain that the ‘thing’ standing beside him really was the Moon itself. Without the sun it was so beautiful. Apart from its nose, of course. And its mouth. Its light passed between the thick trunks and burned in the dark like a torch you could trust.

“Come,” it said, opening its palm. “I am glad to have someone with me tonight.”

* * *

"...And that, my dear Prince, is how I was taken from my place in the sky and made the prisoner of that creature who walks this earth. My light in the sky was not enough for the growth of the wicked things she calls her children. So every night I walk among them and water them with my light. At first I refused to be part of this evil, and she did this to me." With its long, shapeless fingers it pointed at its clumsily made face. "Because of the witch's spell I can never leave the forest. These wicked creatures will grow, and they will hand first this forest and then the whole world over to her rule. But she gave me her word. If I do as she says, when the creatures have grown enough, she will let me go back to my place in the sky."

Carried through the dark of the forest in Lunar's palm, Prince Gamen listened to the story with great curiosity. He saw plants grown and twisted from the seeds of evil, and animals spoiled by living in the dark. He understood then how deep the witch's evil had taken root.

But in the middle of all that darkness he also saw how kind-hearted this heavenly being was. Unlike this world, soiled by people's power and greed, it was clean beyond all of it. He saw how the evil it was forced to do settled on its shoulders with every step.

After that night Prince Gamen went to Lunar three more nights. Because he could not enter the forest after the sun had set, he always came just before sunset. They talked until the witch came, and then they wandered the whole forest together.

* * *

"I miss them so much," said Lunar, walking among the trees with its enormous strides. Gamen sat comfortably in its palm.

"Who?"

"Them. My one and only, my light and my soul."

"I don't follow you," said Prince Gamen, popping a piece of apple into his mouth.

Lunar stopped then and fixed its eyes on the starry night. Its undying eyes reached farther than any human could see. They were searching. As it stood there waiting, the trees bent their branches a little lower over them.

“Lunar?”

“Ah, forgive me, sir. Memories, that is all. I am speaking of Solar, the spirit of the Sun. I always follow in their path, in case one day they might notice me. But I have never caught up with them. Not once have they turned around and seen me.”

“What do you mean? You have never gone up to them and spoken?” said Gamen, still working on the apple.

“How could I? If I take one step closer I feel my whole soul go up in flames. If I take one step away I shiver like these leaves left out in the cold. I watch them in the void, in that lovely redness, giving life to so many beautiful things. Every marvellous piece of creation finds its place beside them, and I am no different. What I would give to see them one more time. But if I leave my place by day, this body cannot bear their light.”

“With that silver glow of yours, there is no way they have not noticed you. Maybe you should try talking to them. Tell them how you feel.”

A smile appeared on Lunar’s enormous mouth. Looking up at the sky, it said “maybe...” and it seemed to be talking more to itself, “...maybe.”

* * *

“Yes, here we are. This is the tower the witch sends me to. A woman lives there alone. Every week I take a lock of her hair. I don’t know why. I suppose the witch needs it for her spells.”

The stones of the tall tower sat strangely apart, as if joined together by magic. Near its pointed roof was the tower’s only window to the outside. It seemed placed on purpose, so that whoever lived inside could see that the world outside still existed, and never reach it. It was as cruel as only a wicked heart could make it. Every tree around the tower had been cut down, and stakes

made from their thick trunks were driven into the ground in neat rows to frighten anyone who came. The ground around it had been dug out so no one could get in or out. Not that anyone could have found a door into the tower if they tried.

Lunar, the spirit of the Moon, set Prince Gamen carefully on the branch of one of the trees still standing.

“I must ask the good sir to wait here a while. It may be dangerous down there. You will be able to see me easily until I reach the tower. Do not step out of my light,” it said, and approached the tower with long strides. It stepped carefully over the stakes, then knocked on the window, which it could only reach with its arms stretched as far as they would go. The rustle of shifting trees broke the silence that filled the forest. Just outside Lunar’s light, evil prowled without rest, and the wicked plants drank the pale light of the moon and grew a little more.

When the window opened, a candle flame slowly spread its light between the stones. Beside the Moon’s glow it was very faint, yet in some unknown way it warmed Gamen inside. A moment later he realised that what stirred him was not the flame but the hand that held it. The figure now standing at the window belonged to the one and only love he had lost in this forest two winters ago. He narrowed his eyes and looked carefully. It had to be her. The way she stood, the way she tossed her hair, but above all the thrill he felt even looking at her from so far away. Gamen knew he could not wait any longer, and he climbed quickly down from the tree. Running toward the tower, he could no longer hold in the joy overflowing inside him, and he shouted:

“Elfida! Elfida, my love!”

Lunar, who was just then holding a lock of the woman’s hair, turned around in horror. The whole forest had heard Gamen’s cry, and the animals and plants had all become aware of the guest who should not be there. In this forest, where people were afraid to set foot even by day, in the darkest hour of the night, a man was running toward the tower, shouting. The witch’s children bared their teeth at the intruder, and hostile growls rose from among the trees. The

spirit of the Moon moved faster than the wicked creatures around them, snatched up the Prince and began to run toward the cave. There, at least, it could protect him. But all the while Gamen kept shouting his beloved's name and swearing he would save her.

When they got back to the cave, strangely, the witch's creatures had not followed them. It was as if the uproar a moment ago had never happened, as if the forest had always been this quiet. As it set the Prince down, Lunar spoke in anger.

"What do you think you are doing? Do you want to get yourself killed? Now everyone knows you are here."

"I have never been further from death than I am now, Lunar. I was not living until I saw her. But when I saw my Elfida there, I felt life sprout inside me again."

"The woman in the tower? You mean you are her...?"

"Yes. She is the reason I have come to this cursed forest for two winters. I searched every inch of it for a trace of her and never found one. Not until that window opened. I have found her, Lunar, and I cannot lose her again. Let me go. Nothing in my way can stop me. I will free Elfida from the tower where she is trapped."

"You can't. You won't get two steps from this cave. They will kill you."

"No one can stand in my way. No evil can keep me from the one I love."

The sound of the sword leaving its sheath echoed through the cave. The flames of anger burning in his eyes looked ready to burn to ashes whatever came before them. This young man truly would jump into the heart of the darkness to save his Elfida. The weight of his love would drive him to something foolish.

"Do you really love her that much?" asked the spirit of the Moon.

"I do. I love her the way light loves the dark, the way brightness loves the shadow, the way you love the sun. Until I am with her, I am never whole. You must understand. I need to be whole again." There was a tremor in his voice he could not stop. The tears gathering under his eyes shone like pearls in Lunar's light.

Lunar saw something in this young man it had not noticed before. Something it had never dared, something it could never reach... It could never be with the one it loved now. This spoiled body, smeared with evil, was far too dark for the spirit of the Sun. But the human standing before it deserved to reach his love. While it raised so much of the witch's evil, it could bring these two lovers together. That much good, at least, it could do.

"Then do not throw your life away like this," said Lunar. "I have a plan. Come here tomorrow when the sun is at its highest. We will save her."

"I can't wait until tomorrow. I can't walk free while she is trapped in that tower."

"You must be patient, young Prince, or Elfida will stay in that tower forever."

Unwillingly, the Prince agreed with what Lunar said. He had to wait until tomorrow. Just before sunrise, Lunar brought the Prince to the edge of the forest. They parted, agreeing to meet at the cave when the sun was high.

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When Prince Gamen came to the cave at noon, he saw chains running from one of the trees into the cave, each link at least as thick as his own body. No human being could have made a chain that looked so heavy. The witch's evil really must be lying in wait in the dark of the forest. When he went into the cave, full of curiosity, he saw that the chains were bound to Lunar's feet.

"What are these chains?" he asked in sorrow.

"Her wicked creatures told the witch what happened last night. She came this morning and bound me here with enchanted chains. She said I would not walk freely at night any longer. Like this, there is no way we can get to the tower. I am so sorry, Gamen. I thought we could save her. I thought we could change something." Then it wrapped its long arms around its body and slumped down at the edge of the cave. It no longer shone as it used to. Its body had faded, and its silver light had nearly gone dark.

“First my love, and now my friend. I will not stand and wait while that cursed witch tears the ones I love from me one by one,” he said, and drawing his sword he began to bring it down on the chains. The sound of metal on metal mixed with the curses Gamen hurled at the witch. When he was out of breath, there was not a single scratch on the chains.

“You cannot break the chains,” said Lunar. “They were made by the witch’s magic. Go home, Prince. It is all over.”

When Gamen fell to his knees, despair had wrapped itself around his whole body. The chains stretched out before him, link through link, all of a piece, ending at Lunar’s feet and looking almost flawless. But when Gamen looked closely, he saw a small crack in the last link. A line as fine as a hair ran from one end of the link to the other. He went over to Lunar.

“Don’t move your foot,” he said. Lunar did not understand why, but it nodded. The Prince gathered all his strength and drove his sword into the chain. After a great spark, the link shattered. The two of them stared at each other in shock and wonder.

“It seems even the witch’s evil has its limits,” said Lunar. “But your love is still in that tower. We have to save her.”

“But how? You can’t go out while the sun is up.”

“Oh, I can. Yes, it will hurt a little. But after all the evil I have been part of, that is the price I have to pay.”

“You can’t do this, Lunar. I can’t ask this of you. Let’s wait for night to fall. We will find a way.”

“There is no other way. If we wait for night, the witch will take the tower somewhere we do not know. We have to go now.”

“But...”

“Gamen, you must let me do this. I will never be with the spirit of the Sun, my one and only love. But you can be with yours. Your love is worth no less than mine. Let me die whole rather than live by halves. Let me be part of this.”

The Prince nodded in sorrow. Lunar was not really asking his permission. It would leave this cave no matter what. It wanted its leaving to mean something. “The nights will be darker than they have ever been,” he said.

“Then, my dear friend,” said Lunar, kneeling, “may the light of love always keep you in the bright.” A smile spread across its strange mouth.

When they stepped out of the cave together, Lunar’s body began to hiss and smoke the moment it touched the Sun. Before its love, Lunar was slowly burning, every part of it slowly turning to dust and falling away. Yet for all its pain, by bringing these two lovers together it could ease its own longing a little. So, holding Gamen tight in its palm, it ran toward the tower.

When they reached the tower, Lunar set the Prince down. The forest shone under the noon sun. Without the shadows of the trees around it, the tower stood alone like a spear. But something was wrong. The window where they had seen Elfida last night had become a wall of stone. They walked all the way around, but found neither door nor window to the outside. With Lunar’s body smoking, they stood there not knowing what to do. Just then growls rose from deep in the forest. A pack of wolves twisted by the witch’s magic was moving through the shadows. Their red eyes were fixed on their prey, and their sharp teeth were set in their jaws in the deadliest way.

Lunar did not seem to see the wolves. All its attention was on pulling up one of the stakes set around the tower. By the time it managed to drag one out of the ground where it was driven deep, the wolves had come closer and tightened their circle. Just as one leapt at Lunar’s smoking body, Gamen’s sword flashed like lightning and cut it in two. They had no time even to feel sorry for the creature on the ground. Lunar had begun to strike the stones of the tower with the stake, but the hard wood bounced back from the witch’s spell that held the stones together. It struck again, and again... but every time the magic stopped it. Gamen, meanwhile, dodged the wolves’ sharp teeth, cutting some down and trying to keep others away from Lunar. But he was surrounded, and he could not turn aside every merciless swipe of claw that came at him. His clothes were torn in places, and red blood ran from his wounds.

To break the witch's magic, Lunar rolled the stake in the dust on the ground that had once been part of its body. It hoped the magic in its body would stand against this evil of the witch. With the last of its strength it drove the pointed end of the stake between the stones, and it truly did pierce the witch's spell. Then, when it pried the stones apart, the tower slowly came undone. With nothing left to hold them together, the shapeless stones began to slide and roll lazily over one another. In that brief moment Lunar saw Elfida in the corner of the room, pressed against the crumbling wall.

"Elfida, get out of there, the tower is falling! Jump, I'll catch you."

The woman behind the falling stones was looking for an opening. The moment she found the chance she had been waiting for, she leapt like an arrow from the floor that could no longer hold her. Her graceful body glided through the air and landed softly on the grass. Before she could breathe clean air for the first time in years, she saw that Gamen was in trouble. The Prince's sword strokes had lost all their strength, and he could no longer defend himself. The thin tunic he wore was soaked red with his blood. Around him lay a small hill of the creatures he had killed. Elfida ran to the Prince at once and deftly took the sword he could no longer hold. Then she began to swing it at the merciless creatures around them. Her movements were so flawless and sharp that in the blink of an eye most of the creatures lay lifeless on the ground. The rest, seized with fear, bared their teeth and backed away. Just then they heard Lunar's voice. "We have to go!"

Then it took hold of them both and ran into the depths of the forest. As they passed between the broad trunks, the howls of the wolves rose behind them. Behind them came the evil sound of claws pounding the earth, and a thick hatred that filled the forest. Each of them could feel it in every breath they drew.

Lunar ran until the sounds were left behind. They could breathe more easily now, but Lunar had no strength left to go on. It was in pain as it set Elfida and Gamen down. Its body was full of deep hollows, pits and black scorches. Wherever the sun leaking through the leaves touched it, thick grey smoke rose, and the parts left in shadow smouldered like embers. When it sank to its knees, it could barely speak.

“You are together now. You are whole. Go now, go. I have done what I had to do. I can fade away in peace.”

“We can’t leave you like this, Lunar,” said the Prince. “Come on, just a little more, please. Once we are out of the forest we can easily reach the city.”

“There is nowhere left for me to go, good sir. My body is ruined. The only thing you can do for me is to live your love.”

“But...”

“Go now. Leave this cursed forest behind you. Without me, evil cannot grow in this forest.”

As he rose with tears in his eyes, the Prince looked one last time at the friend who had sacrificed itself for them. Inside its ruined, spoiled body he saw its true heart. It was cleaner than anything he had ever witnessed. Even in its last moment it was full of love. Still, there was nothing they could do for it. Simple mortal medicine could not heal this heavenly being. With heavy hearts they made ready to leave. But the witch’s evil had not yet been wiped from the forest. As long as she lived, the things her hatred had made would live too. They noticed the trees around them stirring with life. The twisted branches that should have reached for the sky had bent over them with wicked intent and were already wrapped around their ankles. Every part that grew from the thick trunks stretched and curled, slowly winding around their frail bodies of flesh and bone. In the blink of an eye all three were stuck fast to the trunk of a tree. Their limbs were bound so tightly by the branches that they could not move. Lunar could only look around weakly now, its arms and legs hanging almost lifeless at its sides.

A laugh that grated on the ears broke the silence of the moment. It was the same unbearable voice Gamen had heard in the cave. But this time it sounded happier, and fuller of hatred. When the witch stepped out from among the trees, the body they saw was at least as ugly as her voice. Her hunched back made her lean forward as she walked, and the cane in her hand glowed with a strange light. The great hooked nose in the middle of her face drew the eye before her eyes did. Her tangled white hair, thin and plainly unwashed for years, spilled over her sunken shoulders. Her wrinkled old skin made deep furrows in her face, and the shadows

in those furrows spread like ink that would never wash out. The moment she struck the ground with her cane, the creatures took their places beside each of them and bared their sharp teeth, and the trees rearranged their branches to cast shade over the witch.

“I am hurt, Lunar. After I gave you that body and that face, it was too much to have you make a fool of me. Or did you think I would not notice our unexpected visitor coming into my forest every day before sunset? Or did you expect the plans you made with those little brains of yours to come to anything? You came this far because I wanted you to.” It was impossible not to see the glow in the witch’s eyes, shining with the embers of hate. She limped over to Lunar. She seemed to struggle to walk, leaning on her cane. She ran her bony, wrinkled hand over the body of the spirit of the Moon. Smeared with white dust, her hand gave off a silver but feeble light. When she shook off the dust, her hand had suddenly become young and smooth. “When I sent you to the tower that night, I knew Prince Gamen would want to save his precious Elfida. And of course, that you would want to help him. That way I could carry out my real plan. I was a little worried you would not find the crack I put in the chains.”

“You cursed creature! Can’t you see it is suffering enough already? What more do you want from it?” shouted Gamen.

“For it to die,” said the witch, the pleasure in her voice plain now. “This dust melting from Lunar’s body will give me the key to the whole world. The magic in its body is beyond price, and thanks to you I do not have to wait for my children to grow. If I had dragged you out into the sun by force, all the magic in your soul would have gone out. You had to want it. You had to burn yourself in your lover’s flame, knowing what you were doing.” At that she turned to Gamen. “And thank you too, my Prince. Without you I could never have done this. Now that I have all three of you, no one can stop me.”

Then, with a single movement of her finger, the branches wound around their throats and wrists began to tighten. As the air they could not draw into their lungs spun around them like a whirlpool, they slowly began to choke.

“The forest is mine,” the witch thundered. “I am the one who pulled the Moon from the sky, and I am the one who will bring this spoiled world under my rule. Simple creatures like you can never measure up to my power.”

Gamen knew he was living his last moments. The world around him was slowly blurring. His love was struggling right beside him, and his friend hung motionless, wrapped in branches. He had never imagined death would come at a moment like this. Just when he had everything, when after so long he had found his love and could be happy, now he was losing his life.

But then something no one expected happened. With the last drop of its strength, Lunar tore apart the branches that held it. The witch stood frozen in surprise. It would have been nothing for this heavenly being to strike her down and be rid of her. But the spirit of the Moon stepped out of the shade of the trees around it and turned its face to the sun. As it burned in flames on its knees, its voice echoed through the whole forest.

“My sun and my soul, my other half. Now free me from all the evil I have done. Wash this wrongly made body of mine with your purity. When my body is gone, do not let it feed the evils of this world. Free my soul from the prison of my body, for only you can make death beautiful, and again only you can give meaning to the nothing of my soul.”

With every word Lunar spoke, its body was wrapped in brighter flames. Its voice, which at first came out in pain, rose higher and higher, as if it had become the very air around them. As its brightness grew, so did the witch’s fear. This unexpected act had turned all her plans upside down. The branches of the trees brought to life by evil began to loosen, and her creatures tried to hide in whatever shadows they could find. The witch, bewildered, tried to gather up the dust scattered on the ground, but the brightness had wrapped around her so completely that she was slowly vanishing.

When the brightness died away, Elfida and Gamen were free. The witch was gone, and so was the spirit of the Moon, and the grass where it had shone like the sun a moment ago was scorched. But the rest of the forest had become safer than it had ever been. The witch and her

deep-rooted evil had been washed out of the forest completely by the brightness of goodness. Far away, a bird's cheerful song was heard. Like new shoots binding the two lovers' hearts to each other, the loveliest flowers were opening all over the forest.

* * *

When the envoys had left the room, King Gamen took off his crown and set it on the table. The people he tried to rule with justice were waiting for his word. He drew a deep breath and looked out through the glass that covered the wall of the throne room. Right in front of him stretched his garden. Beyond it began the stone houses of the city, and beyond those, the city walls. But what King Gamen was trying to see was the forest, far beyond the hills and the rivers. Just then he started at a hand on his shoulder. His wife Elfida stood right beside him, looking at him with a warm smile on her face.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"A place I will never see," answered the King. He ran a hand through his hair and drew a deep breath. "Sometimes I think about that day. I try to remember what it said to me. With every step I take, I let the light of love light my way. But sometimes I miss its goodness and the purity of its heart so much."

Elfida took her love's hand between her palms.

"Then don't look for it where you cannot see. Look to its true home, among the sun and the stars."

In the blue sky, broken here and there by clouds, the sun shone with all its strength. But for eyes that look carefully, the Sun is not alone up there. Right beside it stands the silhouette of the Moon. With its oddly shaped nose and its large eyes, it looks at the Sun without blinking. And its enormous mouth smiles without ever tiring, in the happiness of being with the one it loves.

Oğuzhan Açıkalın. Turkish original: *Kule*

Translated from my Turkish original for this site.