

Rusty Fears 5 - Tower

Content Warnings:

- Aliens & space exploration
- Physical violence & death
- Discussions of: medical checks, hallucinations
- Mentions of: ghosts & hauntings, blood, animal remains, food
- SFX: continuous droning notes, low and high pitched tones

[Show Theme – Intro]

Tower by Jennifer Hunt, read by Fay Roberts

We have all walked ghost towns before, so we do not speak of fear. Not when we first set foot on the site, or when a gust of wind leaves Rosa chasing after something that isn't there, or when we find deep scratches on the hard cases that hold our equipment. We are professionals in a field of death and resurrection, and it ill-becomes us to jump at shadows.

We still notice them, though. When I climb back into the shuttle on the second morning to carry out my own haunting protocols, I can see from the computer logs that I'm the last of us to do them. The first access – anonymous, for all the good it does in a team of three – had been barely after we'd landed. Tanner, I guess, simply because he's younger. More susceptible to atmosphere. The site has that in spades, had done even before we'd started digging, when it had just been a handful of anomalous spines, curving out of the earth like the discarded carcass of a beast. Revealed by the latest spate of storms, Rosa reckoned, after centuries below ground.

The computer takes its samples – blood, air, soil – and I remain still while it scans my brain. It considers for a while, and I do what I can to assure myself

that what had brought me there was nothing. Mirage is common in the wastes, after all. I've seen pools of water that shimmer off into heat-haze once the angle changes. A scrap of cloth wouldn't be so very different. Could even have been real, torn off something, except that the way it had billowed hadn't seemed to fit with the shape of the breeze. But easily imagined, surely.

A ping, and the computer decrees all to be well. I read slowly through the more detailed results, anticipating with each sentence a reassurance that doesn't come. Once the words run out, I spend a minute poking around the shuttle, but there's precious little to inventory with all our equipment at work, and the door of the cupboard where Rosa keeps her puzzle books is stuck.

There's no choice but to climb back outside, within sight of the tower.

According to the scans we had taken when we arrived, it goes deep. A great sea-urchin spire, the spikes jutting out and skyward out from its length as far down as we could detect. What we've been able to unearth so far is just a fraction, mud-encrusted and swarmed over by a static-haze of excavator bots. Maybe it's that movement, or the strange smoothness of the visible places where the uppermost spines connect to the tower, but the whole thing looks to be almost organic, and I can't force down a marrow-deep certainty that once we get down far enough to find an entrance, it won't be built for the kinds of physical forms that we would recognise.

The others are focussed on their tasks, shoulders hunched and jaws set.

Tanner watches the outputs from the camera drones flying overhead, jacket wrapped a little too closely around him. Rosa has the scanners set up again, studying them over a bowl of rehydrated soup that has long since ceased to steam.

I scuff my way over to Rosa, intentionally audible, and she makes a visible effort to relax, pointing to something on her screen. The display is pockmarked with errors, the result of trying to push the sensors to see deeper than they were meant to, but between the empty sections, I can make out the phantom shapes of other buildings, deep and distant and riddled with spines.

“Looks like there’s a whole city down there,” she tells me. The excitement in her voice feels carefully calibrated. “Intact, I think.”

That would make this the find of the decade. The century, maybe. Names-on-plaques significant, but more than that, the opportunity to learn more about those who had come before is invaluable.

Not something that we can afford to mess up.

I attempt an appropriate smile, and ignore the movement in my peripheral vision that is too far out from the tower to be one of the robots. An afterimage of the scanner screen, perhaps, one of those flickering glitches sticking over my retinas. I blink, and it goes.

I’m saved from having to respond properly by Tanner’s voice – he calls us, almost hoarse with excitement. I straighten up, but before I can move, there’s another flurry of wind, and from somewhere over our heads, there sounds a long note, shuddering and shifting into a low, sonorous tune.

It holds long enough and loud enough for me to know I’m not imagining it. Rosa goes still, and Tanner can’t quell a shiver. I rub a hand across the back of my neck as the noise fades, or perhaps just edges out of my hearing range, trying to flatten the hairs, and make myself stride over to him.

“What was that?”

“I think – I think it was the spines?” Tanner tears himself away from staring at them, his expression alight. “I wanted to show you – I found an opening with one of the drones. It seems like they’re hollow! Maybe the wind catches in them, like a flute?” He fidgets at his tablet, anxious to be accompanied in his theorising, but when he angles it towards me, the drone footage is pitching too much for me to make anything out of it. “Do you think this whole place could be an instrument?”

“Keep the speculation until we’ve uncovered more of the structure,” I tell him, and he swallows, pushes himself back towards the desperately professional man I’d met a few days previously. “For all we know, it could be accidental.”

“Of course,” he says, but he can’t stop the excitement seeping through the syllables. “Sorry – it was beautiful.”

Beautiful. Alien. Singing, in a language that no one remembers anymore.

“Keep working,” I tell him, shortly, and turn, pacing back towards Rosa. “What do you think?”

“Probably something *ritual*,” Rosa says, and raises an eyebrow at me. *We can’t hope to know*, that means, and she’s right, of course.

I should keep working, too. Find something to do with my hands and use that to forget that this sounds like exactly the kind of thing that we’ve all heard stories about. Slots in neatly alongside tombs that should have stayed closed, angry and unquiet spirits, expedition members who had turned on their fellows and torn them to pieces. Curses trailing, inexorable and lethal in the shuttle vapours, following their marked back to civilisation.

Stories that are, I remind myself, as patchwork and distant as the ramshackle explanations we construct for the remnants of peoples we have never met. No one in them ever has names. They always happen to someone five steps removed, untraceable and mythic.

They, and the idea of fleeing that I feel in my chest like a second heartbeat, are nothing but superstition and disquiet in a strange setting.

I watch my feet all the way over to the edge of the spoil heap, and begin to sift through the mound of earth, a little at a time, in case of artefacts. When the wind picks up and up, I dull the melody of the spines with the sensation of dirt beneath my fingernails, weighing rocks in my hands to stop myself from following any of the tattered motions at the edges of my vision. It's good work, clean work, and I can keep at it until the low music of the breeze across the tower is cut by a thud and a wheeze of machinery that forces me to look up.

One of the camera drones is spiralling, careening far too close to the nearest of the spines, a scar marked into the earth still clinging to the structure that corresponds to the size of its rotor blades. The autopilot kicks in a moment later, levelling it out, and then it buzzes up to join its fellows in slow, documenting orbit around the tower, the hand at its controls gone.

I hold a blink longer than I need to, and then stand, letting my tray spill back into the heap. I collect Rosa from the scanners with a touch at her shoulder, and the two of us circle around the edge of the slowly deepening pit that holds the tower, until she shouts for us to stop.

Tanner is halfway down the slope. The wound in his throat has left dark smears across the earth, marking out where he had fallen from. His eyes are blank, holding only the jagged reflections of the spines, and his mouth is wide, as if he

were trying to call out. His tablet has been caught by one of the excavators, which carries it away towards the spoil heap.

Rosa says something, but I can't hear it over the lilting, still-rising song of the tower.

By the time that we've managed to get Tanner out of the pit and into the shuttle's cold storage, the wind has grown sharp enough to cut at our skin, more of a gale than a breeze, and the music has risen into a wild, howling symphony that rings almost painful in my head.

The message that I try to send back to the company finds nothing but snow and the occasional shuddering ghosts of a menu screen that won't hold long enough to properly interface, no matter how many times I deliver percussive maintenance. Tanner would have known how to boost the signal – Rosa might, but I find her still and staring at the tower, even as the wind drags her clothes this way and that, her expression empty, and I cannot ask her.

"Maybe," she says, so quiet amidst the raging of the weather that I would not have heard her if I hadn't been within inches. "We should rebury it."

I can't stop a startled glance, and she rushes on before I can say anything.

"The storm is only going to get worse," she says, justifications and excuses tumbling out of her. "It could damage the structures. We should rebury the tower until we can come back with more people, more equipment, set up proper protections from the weather."

It's not honest, or logical. The tower was built to stand in storms – to sing in them. There's nothing in wind or rain that it shouldn't be able to withstand.

“Of course,” I say.

It’s not the tower that she wants to bury. It’s the sightings. Those thoughts we tried so hard to believe irrational. Tanner’s death, and whatever had killed him. As if those metres of soil could be enough to content what we have disturbed.

The excavators are not built to turn around and undo all their work so abruptly. I have to type in my admin password so many times that my fingers start to ache, but we get there. We watch them work, a slow trail between the spoil heap and the site, until we’re bent double against each other, having to take adjusting steps to avoid being hurled into the slowly diminishing pit ourselves by the lash of wind and rain.

Eventually, we retreat to the shuttle, lock the doors behind us, and try not to hear the storm outside. The hours pass, and we huddle apart, listening to the excavators work and work until the spines finally stop screaming.

Rosa lets out a long breath, and slumps into one of the walls. She sleeps, not long after – I can’t. Every now and again, the wind catches at our windows in such a way that it sounds almost like that same unnatural screeching, and I have to smooth over again the jagged belief that the tower had woken again and clawed itself out of the earth to come for us.

I again begin to take pitiful inventory, and then still, as the storm lulls for just long enough for me to hear a faint tapping from my left.

The cupboard door, where Rosa’s puzzles live, isn’t stuck anymore. Instead, it flaps loose and gentle in the draught.

I crouch there, and when I open it, threads of fabric spin away from my fingers almost faster than I can flinch away from them. They settle again, inanimate,

but the metal walls of the space are deeply gouged, the tattered remnants of books fluttering about the bottom.

It had been in there. What I had glimpsed, tried so hard to ignore. The thing that had killed Tanner. Never in the tower, never in the buried city. It must know as little of all that as we do. Not some ancient thing to be appeased; we had brought it with us. We were not saved.

Something tattered and billowing moves past the viewport, wind-whipped and sharp, and the thin walls of the shuttle begin to scream.

[Show Theme – Outro]

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