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Opening extract from

The Seventh Tower: The Fall

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Tal stretched out his hand and pulled himself up on to the next out-thrust spike of the Tower. He stopped there to get his breath and looked down the Red Tower, down to the twinkling lights that outlined the main buildings of the Castle. They were far below, a height that made Tal dizzy. He quickly looked back up.

The wind was much stronger than Tal had expected. It howled around the Red Tower and then spun through the other six Towers before coming back at him even stronger than before. It was also getting colder, making the climb even more difficult. Tal's Sunstone kept the worst of the chill at bay.

It had taken Tal two hours to climb to his current resting place – a hard climb, up through the spikes, gargoyles and encrustations that covered the Tower. Now he was only four stretches below the point where the Tower appeared to suddenly end, meeting the lid of total blackness that lay across the sky.

This was the Veil, the strange barrier that kept the whole world in darkness, turning back the light of the sun.

Not that it was completely dark around Tal. Like most of the Castle, the Red Tower was lit with small Sunstones fixed into the walls and ceilings. The light from those Sunstones spilled out of the windows, so Tal could see where to climb. The other six Towers blazed with light, too, brilliant shafts crisscrossing the sky.

The light made many shadows flicker outside. Every gargoyle and decorative flange cast a shadow, dark against the ochre red of the Tower. There was Tal's own shadow, too. Like all the Chosen of the Castle, Tal's shadow did not echo the shape of his body. The shadow that moved with him flowed and

changed. Sometimes it had the general shape of a thirteen-year-old boy; sometimes it looked like a cat, or a two-headed Corvile, or something so fluid it was indescribable.

For Tal's shadow was not the one he had been born with. It was a shadowguard, a magical being from the spirit realm of Aenir. It had been bound to Tal when he was born, replacing his natural shadow, and was commanded to guard and help him. This was just as well, Tal thought. It was bad enough seeing his gangly limbs and scraggly hair in the mirror; he was relieved not to have a shadow of them following him around.

The shadowguard didn't show that Tal was shorter than most of the other boys his age. Or his slightly crooked smile that he thought made him look a bit slow. No one else did, but it mattered to Tal. He'd practise smiling in the mirror for hours, trying to straighten that curl on the left-hand side.

He didn't mind that the shadowguard was only one of the weakest spirits from Aenir, a child's servant. When Tal turned thirteen and three-quarters in two months' time, he would enter Aenir

himself and bind a real Spiritshadow to serve him.

If he was able to enter Aenir. Tal clutched the small Sunstone on the silver chain around his neck, feeling its warmth enter his chilled hands. To enter Aenir he needed a Primary Sunstone. Not just for himself, but also for his mother and for his younger brother and sister.

Since his mother was very sick and his father and their family's Sunstone had disappeared mysteriously, it had suddenly become Tal's responsibility to look after the family. He wasn't prepared for this – but he didn't have a choice. He had to push his fear deep inside himself and keep it there. He had to be strong, even if he didn't know where to find that strength.

He wanted his father back. He wanted his mother well. But both would be lost to him forever if he failed now.

In order to save his family, he had to get a new Sunstone. A powerful one, not the child's stone he wore at his throat. Tal drew a deep breath and slipped the stone back under his shirt. He had to climb further. Past the Veil. Out into the full sunlight.

He'd seen sunlight before, of course. He'd seen it many times in Aenir, the spirit world. But it was softer there, less bright. Tal had only seen the true sun once. When he was ten, his class was taken up beyond the Veil and shown the Sunstones growing in silver nets that hung from the Towers. It had been overcast, but even then all the children had needed their shadowguards to cloak their eyes. Sunstones might capture the light of the sun, but even the most powerful could not compare to its strength and brilliance.

Back then, they'd climbed up the stairs inside the Orange Tower. Tal had never thought that one day he would be climbing the outside of one of the Towers… to *steal* a Sunstone.

"To steal a Sunstone," he repeated to himself. It was the last resort, the only thing he could think of that would save him and his family. He'd tried everything else.

It was also the riskiest thing he could imagine. It was a hard climb just to get where he was, but that was nothing. On the other side of the Veil, there would be guards and traps – powerful

Spiritshadows that could chew up his shadowguard in a second and capture Tal. There could even be other Chosen, members of the Red Order, who would be only too pleased to catch a boy of the rival Orange Order. It would be the Hall of Nightmares for him then, or worse, and disaster for the family…

Tal shook his head and started to climb again. He reached a gargoyle just below the Veil and almost against his will crouched down to delay reaching the darkness that brooded above his head. It was almost like being underwater and looking up, thought Tal, except into darkness rather than light. Finally, he stretched his hand up into the Veil and shivered as it disappeared. But he could still feel it. It was still there.

Tal stood up. Instantly, he was caught in total darkness. He started to breathe hard, his lungs seeming to shrivel. He couldn't get enough air! The darkness was sucking the air out of him.

He ducked back into the comfortable twilight and the bright beams from the Towers, his hand clutched around his now blazing Sunstone. Tal quickly focused upon it and the light dimmed. He

didn't want to attract attention. Only a moment after his Sunstone dimmed, a faint cry echoed up from below. For a second Tal, thought he'd been discovered and he shrank back against the Tower wall. Then he realised that it hadn't been the shout of a guard, or the high-pitched, inhuman scream of a Spiritshadow. It sounded more like a cry for help.

It came again, and Tal felt his stomach go hollow and strange. He knew that voice! Quickly, he looked down. There, a good two hundred stretches below, was the flicker of a white shirt touched with orange. It was the same sort of shirt that Tal wore, a child's uniform of white, the collar and cuffs bearing the colour of his Order. Someone had followed him.

It had to be his younger brother, Gref, a nine-year-old desperado who tried to do everything his older brother did. Tal recognised the voice and the small, feeble Sunstone.

"If you touch me, Tal will blast you into bits! Get away! Get—"

Gref's voice was suddenly cut off. For an

instant, Tal thought his brother had fallen and his own heart seemed to stop.

But Gref hadn't fallen. He had been picked up by a huge Spiritshadow, one with the flickering shape of a Borzog, a creature long extinct in the flesh. It was easily four stretches tall and enormously broad-shouldered. Its arms trailed below its knees and the two tusks in its lower jaw were the size of Tal's hands. In the light from the Tower, it rippled in shades of darkness, a thing of soft edges and blurred lines.

It had Gref under one arm and had pulled Gref's shadowguard over his face like a gag. There was no sign of the Chosen the Spiritshadow was bound to. But whoever it served, it was taking Gref back down the Tower, probably to the balcony far below, where Tal had started his climb.

Tal hesitated. He wanted to rescue Gref, but he knew he'd just get caught as well. That wouldn't help either of them, or the family. As before, his only chance lay upwards, with the Sunstones.

Tal faced the Veil once more. He'd made a mistake going into it slowly before. This time the

thing to do was to reach up, get a handhold and climb through as quickly as possible.

He took several deep breaths and stood up fast, with his hands outstretched above his head. His knuckles grazed stone, and then he felt something he could hold on to. A moment later, his head entered the Veil.

Once again, there was total darkness. But now, Tal was prepared for it. He pulled himself up on to the next gargoyle and thrust his hand up for another handhold. He found one, climbed again and then repeated the process.

He still hadn't come out of the Veil and his breath was going. Hesitantly, he took a small breath. It worked, but his fear of not being able to breathe was soon replaced by another terror. What if he was lost in the Veil? Maybe it was impossible to climb through it, except inside one of the towers. Maybe he was trapped inside the Veil forever!

He climbed faster, not caring that his hands were scratched and his knees bruised. Several times he almost fell, but even that didn't scare him as much as staying inside the Veil. He had to get out.

Suddenly, he broke out into the exact opposite of darkness. Tal screamed as the searing light of the sun hit his eyes. Again, he almost fell, but his shadowguard was already weaving itself across his head, shading his eyes with its strange substance that could be as light as air, as flowing as water or as solid as human flesh.

Tal hung on, half in the Veil, half out, as the burning slowly disappeared from his eyes. He could feel his shadowguard on his forehead and the unfamiliar heat of the sun on his cheeks.

Slowly, Tal opened his eyes and looked around. There was a patch of blue sky directly above him, strange and unfriendly compared to the soft darkness of the sky under the Veil. Around this patch of blue there were puffy grey clouds, some already drifting down through the Veil, bringing a promise of snow. Right in the centre of the blue was the sun, so bright he could not look directly at it. It felt dangerous, giving off so much light and heat that Tal felt as if he might suddenly burst into flame.

The Red Tower, like all the others, continued to soar up into the sky. But now, instead of gargoyles

and spikes and carvings, the Tower walls were covered in long, protruding bronze rods as thick around as Tal's middle. Most of the rods had nets of silver mesh hanging from them.

And in those nets there were Sunstones. Tal knew that Sunstones grew from small jewels brought back from Aenir, the spirit realm, but he had not yet been taught how they were prepared.

Tal didn't want to know either. Not now. All he wanted to do was climb up further, because the most powerful stones would be higher up.

Slowly, he eased himself out of the Veil and crouched on the stone ledge, staying as close to the wall as possible. He couldn't see any Spiritshadows or other Chosen. There was a half balcony further up, though, and someone could easily be standing there, or on the walkway that went right around the top of the Tower, a hundred stretches above him.

"Shadowguard, shadowguard, weave me a cloak as red as the Tower," Tal whispered. At the same time, he concentrated on his Sunstone so it shone with the same red colour as the Tower walls. He felt the shadowguard moving and saw a long, thin

finger of darkness stretch across and touch the stone. Instantly, the colour of the stone bled into the shadow, until it was red as well. Then Tal felt the shadowguard spreading itself across his back and down to his ankles.

In a few seconds, Tal was covered in a hooded cloak exactly the same red as the Tower walls. As long as he climbed up slowly and didn't make too much noise, he would be almost invisible.

Carefully, he started to climb. The bronze rods were slippery, not as easy to grasp as the stone outcrops below, but they were closer together. Tal could use them like steps, moving around the Tower as he climbed.

He was almost to the balcony, when he looked up and saw a hideous head staring over the railing, directly at him. It was a Spiritshadow head, grotesque and scary, with multiple eyes and a mouth that stretched the full width of its face, lined with endless rows of small but very sharp teeth. It was one of the largest Spiritshadows Tal had ever seen. This meant it was one of the most powerful. Far too powerful to be in

the service of one of the Red, for they were the weakest of the Orders.

Tal froze, hoping it hadn't seen him.

He stayed frozen for what seemed like minutes. Clouds crossed the sun overhead and suddenly it was much darker, making the Spiritshadow harder to see. Tal kept absolutely still, hardly breathing. His heart sounded loud, so loud he was sure the Spiritshadow could hear it.

Then it started to snow. Snowflakes began to drift down, only to be caught by the wind around the Towers and whipped sideways in sudden flurries.

Tal knew what snow was. He'd seen it many times through the triple-glazed windows of the Outer Walk. But he'd never been outside the Castle before. He'd never felt snow.

A snowflake landed on Tal's nose, cold and then suddenly wet.

He sneezed.

The Spiritshadow up above hissed and leaned over the rail. Tal held his breath, but it was too late. It had seen him. It leaned over still further,

revealing a body like a snake's, all long, smooth and twisting. For a second, Tal thought it was going to fall over, but the Spiritshadow slowly uncoiled down towards him. Its eyes, black points darker than the rest of its Shadowflesh, were firmly fixed on him.

Tal fought the feeling that it would capture him and he would be taken before the Lumenor of the Red and then to the Hall of Nightmares. He would never gain a Primary Sunstone and would all too soon be cast down to join the ranks of the Underfolk. From there, he would be unable to help his mother, or Gref, or Kusi.

The Spiritshadow didn't try to grab him, though. It suddenly shot forwards, and its toothy maw opened large enough to take Tal's head off in a single bite.

Tal's shadowguard pushed him over as the Spiritshadow struck. Despite his shock, Tal instinctively grabbed a rod and locked his legs around it.

Upside down, Tal stared up as the creature pulled itself back for another strike. His own

shadowguard was letting out a shrill whistle, its warning sign, as it turned itself into a boy-sized shadow and pushed Tal away.

Tal pulled himself out along the bronze rod towards the Sunstone nets. He couldn't believe what was happening. Spiritshadows couldn't hurt one of the Chosen!

The Spiritshadow laughed, a horrible, high-pitched cackle that cut through Tal's shock and made him swing himself upright and move further along the rod. Then the Spiritshadow spoke, scaring Tal even more. Spiritshadows could speak, unlike the shadowguards, but they never did so in public. They only spoke to their Masters, in private.

"Seek not the treasures of the sun," said the Spiritshadow, its voice like fingernails dragged down stone. "I am the Keeper and none may pass here, save those who know the Words."

"Words?" muttered Tal as he frantically tried to get further away. He didn't know any Words, not ones that might work here. He'd never heard of the Keeper. Surely its Master would look over the balcony soon and stop it!

The Spiritshadow coiled itself completely around the other end of the bronze rod that Tal was sliding on. Tal's shadowguard balanced behind him, in the shape of a four-legged creature with claws and lots of teeth. It would try to guard him, but Tal knew it was too small and weak to slow the Spiritshadow for more than a few seconds.

Tal looked back at it and felt the panic rise in him again.

The snake Spiritshadow shrieked and slowly wound itself forwards another stretch. It seemed in no hurry to get to Tal, though its mouth was working backwards and forwards, almost as if it were chewing.

"Help!" screamed Tal, his open mouth collecting a few snowflakes. He didn't care who came now, or how long he might be sentenced to spend in the Hall of Nightmares, or if he would be instantly demoted to the Underfolk. Anything would be better than facing the creature that was inching towards him.

"Help!"

"The Towers are silent, save for thee and me," said

the Spiritshadow. It arched its long body forwards in a sudden movement that sent Tal leaping into one of the nets. Frantically, he tried to stand up, but all he could do was roll around.

One of his feet broke through the mesh and caught fast, sending a small shower of Sunstones falling through the hole. Tal bent forwards and tried to free his foot, ignoring the Sunstones that were everywhere around him.

He'd just got it free when the Spiritshadow struck. Tal flinched and gasped, but he was not the target. His shadowguard squealed as the thing's mouth closed on it. Instantly, it lost its cat shape and began to change shape so quickly that Tal couldn't keep track. It was a Morlyx, a boy, a Toppet, a bird-headed monster, all sorts of shapes and sizes. No matter what it changed into it couldn't get free of those terrible teeth and the grinding jaws. Finally, the Spiritshadow tossed it aside and it hung off the net, a formless lump of shadow.

Tal bit back a sob. His shadowguard had always been with him, always at his heels. It had saved