

THE  
SEVENTH  
TOWER  
CASTLE

# 1

The Ruin Ship had rested in the foothills for many centuries. A vast hulk of bright metal that never rusted, it was the model that all the iceships of the Icecarls were patterned on, though theirs were made of Selski bone and hide.

Over time, luminous mosses and lichens had grown on the ship, so that its deck and sides glowed with soft light in many colours, rare in the eternal night of the Dark World. Even with its masts broken and its sails long gone, the Ruin Ship was enormous. It was easily five times the size of a typical clan ship, and they held a hundred Icecarls or more, with all their gear and cargo.

Tal, who until two weeks ago had thought there was nothing outside his home but ice, could not believe the strangely glowing shape ahead of him was a ship. He felt sure it was some freak of nature.

For all but fourteen days of his thirteen and three-quarter years, Tal had lived within the physical and social boundaries of the Castle. He had been raised to take his place among the Chosen, the masters of Light and Shadow. Like all Chosen, he had always been sure there was nothing beyond the light-filled halls and towers of the Castle. He had been taught that apart from the Chosen, there were only Underfolk, born to be servants.

No part of his life in the Castle had prepared him for the reality of the Ice, and the Icecarls who lived upon it. But the experience of surviving each day had chipped away his previously rock-solid beliefs. Tal was still a Chosen, as the shadowguard that stood at his side proclaimed. But his absolute belief in his natural superiority had been severely rattled.

He had even begun to accept that Icecarls were not Underfolk, even though they only had natural shadows. But he still held fast to the belief that

the Chosen alone could make things of beauty and power. The Ruin Ship, which was both strangely beautiful and powerful, had to be some sort of natural phenomenon.

As the sleigh crawled higher up the icy slope, the six Wreska that pulled it had to work harder, their hot breath forming a constant cloud above their antlered heads, while their sharp X-toed hooves sprayed ice chips everywhere behind them.

"That's got to be a freak of ..." Tal muttered as the sleigh grew closer and the Ruin Ship loomed higher. His voice trailed off as his mind registered that this was not just a giant lump of wind-carved stone.

"What?" asked Milla, the Icecarl girl he'd been forced to travel across the ice with. She was sitting back and could barely see over the side of the sleigh.

"Nothing," replied Tal, shaking his head. A row of small stalactites broke off his face mask and flew toward Milla. But before they could hit, her hand moved in a blur of motion, batting them away.

"Don't shake your head," Milla instructed. "It's rude to shower ice on your companions."

Tal started to shrug, and even more ice fell off

his shoulders, more than Milla could bat away. She sighed and pulled her face mask down, an obvious snub.

Tal didn't care. The Icecarls made a big thing about showing or hiding their faces, but he really wasn't interested in mask etiquette. The wind was so cold that it seemed to go straight through his flesh, chilling his bones. Tal knew from bitter experience that without the mask, his teeth and cheekbones would quickly pick up a deep, internal ache that would last for hours.

Ignoring Milla, Tal looked ahead again. He had to accept that the Ruin Ship was constructed by humans. Even so, he stubbornly resisted the idea that the Icecarls had built it.

At the top of the ridge, the Icecarl who had been leading the Wreska halted for a few moments and turned the leaders toward a winding trail that was marked by luminous rocks, following the contour line down into darkness.

The ship was in a valley, the top of its broken masts level with the foothills of the Mountain of Light, the mountain on which the Castle was built.

As the sleigh jerked into motion again, Tal looked away from the ship and into the dark sky. Disoriented by the glow of the ship, he had to look up much higher than he expected before he saw the distant lights of the Castle.

The Castle was far bigger than the Ruin Ship, and its lights were the only brightness in the sky. Its seven towers even pierced the Veil, which shrouded the whole world from the sun.

Tal was comforted by the sight of his distant home. All his life he had been taught that only the Chosen mattered, that only the Chosen ever did anything or created anything worthwhile. The Castle was still the greatest structure in existence and this Ruin Ship of the Icecarls paled in comparison.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Milla asked.

Tal looked back down. He'd never heard Milla say anything in such an awe-filled tone. For a moment he thought she'd finally accepted the importance of the Castle. Then he recognised that she had struggled up to look at the Ruin Ship.

"Shouldn't you be lying down?" he asked. Milla

had been badly wounded fighting a one-eyed Merwin, a vicious creature that from horn to tail had been longer than the sleigh and all six Wreska in front of it. Tal had managed to blind it with his Sunstone, but it was Milla who had killed the monster. Tal tried to remember that when she was being particularly obnoxious.

“It is the birthplace of our people,” said Milla. “There are many tales of the ship. Many of our greatest sagas begin and end here.”

She paused and took a breath that must have pained her, but she gave no sign of it before she declaimed:

*“Green the ice glow, high on mast-head  
Black the blood, caked and ash-cold  
Red the ribbon, bound through beard  
White the Wreska, hauling him home  
Returns does Ragnar, dead many days.”*

Tal didn't say anything. All of the Icecarls' poetry – or whatever it was – seemed to be about people who got themselves killed heroically on the Ice.

“The Ruin Ship is the chief place of the Shield Maidens,” added Milla.

Now Tal understood why Milla had clawed herself up the side of the sleigh. The Shield Maidens roamed the Ice and settled disputes among the different clans, hunted down outlaws and killed dangerous creatures. As far as Tal could tell, the only people allowed to join were very scary women warriors with absolutely no sense of humour.

Milla kept staring at the Ruin Ship, ignoring the pain in her side. She had devoted her life to preparing herself to be a Shield Maiden. Icecarls measured their age in circlings, the time it took an iceship to complete one full circumnavigation of the world, following the continuous migration of the Selski.

From her fourth circling, as a small but ferocious child, Milla had worked unceasingly to be the best skater, to excel in the use of all weapons, to dare the most dangerous hunts.

Now, though she had only seen fourteen circlings, Milla was an exceptional fighter, even by the standards of her warrior race. She had proved it in her battle with the one-eyed Merwin.

There were few Icecarls who could have defeated the creature, even considering that Tal had blinded it with his Sunstone. This particular Merwin had been renowned for its viciousness and a full Hand of twelve Shield Maidens had been tracking it for many sleeps. They had come too late to fight the Merwin, but just in time to rescue Tal and the grievously wounded Milla.

Reluctantly, Milla looked down at the shadow that lay at Tal's feet. It looked normal enough now – but only because Tal had been warned that he would be killed if it behaved other than as an ordinary shadow. But she had seen it move by itself and take different shapes. Tal called it his shadowguard. Because Milla had shared Tal's blood in an oath-taking ritual, it had been able to take her shape and staunch her wounds until the Shield Maidens came.

She almost wished that it hadn't, for free-willed shadows were things of evil in Icecarl legend. Milla only hoped she would not be considered tainted by the shadow's touch, and so unfit to join the Shield Maidens.

As Milla was thinking of the Shield Maidens, Arla, the Shield Mother of the Hand, suddenly appeared out of the darkness. Without stopping to take off the thin, flat lengths of bone that she used to glide across the ice, she jumped on to the sleigh.

Tal flinched as she appeared. Arla was a stretch taller than him and the way she moved hinted at imminent violence. Her eyes were blue and as cold as the ice, and she never blinked when Tal was looking at her. She had horrific scars on her right arm that Milla said were from reaching into the gullet of an armour-skinned Krall to cut its throat from the inside.

Apart from the cold eyes, Arla was very beautiful behind her mask, with short golden hair that framed her oval face. Tal found the combination very disturbing.

"Only Shield Maidens may see the entrance to the Ruin Ship," Arla announced, pulling two long strips of soft Wreska skin out of one of the many pockets of her outer coat. "Tie these round your eyes as tight as you can. If you try to remove them, the punishment is death."

"Must I wear one, Shield Mother?" asked Milla. She had already taken the first step to being a novice Shield Maiden. In fact, the Quest that would make her a full Shield Maiden was to help Tal get back to the Castle – and find a new Sunstone for her clan ship.

"You are not yet a Shield Maiden," Arla observed. "Here we deal with what *is*, not with what *might* be."

Milla frowned, but didn't say anything. She took the blindfold and put it on. Tal put his on too. For a moment, he thought of slipping it up a bit so he could see. After all, he was a Chosen of the Castle and should not have to obey anyone here. But something about the way Arla had said "the punishment is death" encouraged him not to peek.

It was strange travelling on without being able to see anything, but Tal didn't mind being blindfolded as long as he knew there would be light when he took it off.

Even in the worst moments he'd spent outside the Castle, there had always been some light around Tal. Like his own Sunstone – now just a

dead piece of rock since he'd used all its power to blind the Merwin. Milla's huge extended family, the clan of the Far Raiders, had had a Sunstone on its iceship, though it was fading. He'd even become used to the pallid green light of the Icecarls' moth-lanterns, like the ones on the sleigh.

Despite the fact that he was a prisoner of the Shield Maidens, Tal felt surprisingly secure. At least they would protect him from Merwin and rogue Selski and whatever other awful Ice creatures they might come across. Then, once he made it to the Ruin Ship, he was fairly sure that the Mother Crone of the Mountain of Light would believe his story and let him go home.

He felt a familiar anxiety as he thought of home. Anything could have happened to his family while he was gone. His father, Rerem, had disappeared. His mother, Graile, was very ill. His younger brother, Gref, had been captured by a Spiritshadow while following Tal as he climbed the outside of the Red Tower. And to make everything even more troubling, there were powerful Chosen in the Castle who were definitely Tal's enemies, though the boy didn't know why.

He had tried to tell himself that they weren't really enemies, just Chosen indulging bad temper or boredom. But deep down, he knew that wasn't so. He couldn't stop thinking about it, even though it made him feel slightly sick. He kept trying to think of reasons why someone would want him to dim down to the Red or make him an Underfolk. He deliberately avoided taking the consequences of that thought further.

After all, it was simply impossible that any Chosen would want his father never to return and his mother to die.

"I have to get back," he whispered to himself. Milla rustled at his side and he knew that she must have heard him. Tal bit his lip, wishing he hadn't spoken. Milla would just think he was being weak.

"Quiet," snapped Arla. Tal flinched. He hadn't realised the Shield Mother was still in the sleigh with them. She was so quiet. All of them were.

They travelled in silence for some time, the sleigh going down into the valley. Finally, it stopped. Tal could hear the Wreska being unharnessed and led away, their sharp X-toed hooves distinctive on the ice.

"Take my hand," instructed Arla, pushing her hand around Tal's. "Milla, you will be carried."

"I can walk!" Milla protested, though Tal knew she could barely sit up. The Merwin horn had cut her whole side open, and though the Shield Maidens had healed the actual wound very rapidly – with a treatment of foul-smelling ointment and weird, rhythmic chanting – Milla had still lost an awful lot of blood and was very weak.

Tal closed his hand, clumsy in its thick fur glove, around Arla's and let her lead him out of the sleigh. At first they walked on ice, with Tal slipping and sliding, and Arla completely balanced.

Then Arla said, "Ware steps!" and Tal's bone-nailed boots were no longer crunching on ice, but on something else. His footsteps let out a deep hollow clang, as if he trod on a metal plate. Tal was surprised – he hadn't seen the Icecarls use metal like this before. Everything they had was made of stone or bone, skin, gut, teeth, and other bits and pieces of animals.

Still, the sound continued. The wind that had blown around them suddenly cut off too – they

must have entered some sort of shelter. Perhaps they were already inside the ship... .

Tal put out his free hand and touched an entirely smooth surface, too smooth to be anything but highly worked stone or wood... or metal. He tapped it and heard another dull ringing sound. He would have done the same on the other side, but Arla still held his hand in a grip he could not evade.

The noise changed again and the ground felt softer under Tal's feet. Almost like the grass that grew in the garden caverns of the Chosen. But surely it was too cold for anything to grow here, even out of the wind?

They kept walking, with sudden changes of direction that totally confused Tal. Every now and then he was spun around several times, and made to climb up and down steps.

Tal desperately wanted to see, but he made no move towards his blindfold. It wasn't worth the risk.

Finally, they stopped. Arla let go of his hand and then Tal felt fingers at the back of his head, undoing the blindfold. Light streamed in and he blinked.

He was in a large, perfectly rectangular room. The walls and ceiling were a deep golden metal, polished enough so that he could see his own reflection. The floor was covered in a thick carpet of stitched-together squares of fur.

There was a Merwin horn in each corner of the room. Each horn had a Sunstone set on its tip, filling the room with bright, even light. In such light, there could be no shadows – save for Tal's shadowguard, which was doing its best to be small and stay close to its master's heels.

A long table of yellow bone stood in the middle of the room, loaded with knives, pots, a pile of wet and rubbery vegetable roots, and a large chunk of pale pink meat. A very old woman was cutting the meat into paper-thin slices with a sharp knife made of the same golden metal as the walls. It was the first metal knife Tal had seen since leaving the Castle.

It wasn't until he looked up from the hypnotic rise and fall of the knife that Tal noticed the old woman had the same milky eyes as the Mother Crone on the Far Raiders' ship. She had to be blind, though she didn't wield the knife as if she were.

It chopped up and down with the rhythm of Tal's own heart, cutting perfect slices of almost see-through meat without endangering her fingers.

There was only one other person in the room. A younger Crone, sitting on a stool in the corner. She looked at Tal and he saw the liquid silver flash of her eyes. All the Crones were very creepy. If they didn't have milky eyes, they had these unnaturally bright ones, which seemed to look right inside him.

As well as cutting the meat without difficulty, the milky-eyed Crone also seemed to know who was there. Without stopping her cutting, she looked across and said, "Arla. You have brought our visitors. Welcome to the Ruin Ship, Milla and Tal."

She raised her blade and the metal flashed in the light.

"I've been expecting you," added the Crone, bringing the knife slashing back down.