

The Dark Tower

In the lands of the west, where men are few and some of the old magic lingers still, there stands the ancient fortress of Clovenstone. A wide wall rings it, tumbled now and overgrown with weeds. The trees and waters of the wild have crept inside and made their home again among its steep, deserted streets and crumbling buildings. At its heart a crag rises, Meneth Eskern, most westerly of the Bonehill Mountains, and on the summit stands a black Keep, tall as the sky, with sheer walls and horns of stone. Around this dark tower, like a stone crown on the crag's brow, there runs a lofty inner wall, guarded by seven lesser towers. All are in ruins now, the men who raised them long since gone. Crows caw about their sagging roofs, and gargoyles lurk in their ivy like lice in beggars' beards.

little trees had rooted themselves in the rotting roofs and between the flagstones of the silent streets, and as the land sloped downwards towards the Outer Wall, five miles away, the trees grew thicker and thicker, forming a dense wood, from whose canopy old bastions and outbuildings poked up like lonely islands.

This was Skarper's world, and as he looked down upon it he was interested to notice several details that *Stenoryon's Mappe of All Clovenstone* had got wrong. But not *that* interested, because the details were rushing towards him at great speed, and long before he could tell anyone of his discoveries he was going to be splattered all over them like a careless delivery of raspberry jam.

Indeed it was maps, and books, and things of that sort that were to blame for Skarper being in this sticky situation in the first place. He felt quite bitter when he thought about it, and glared fiercely at a passing crow.

Skarper was a goblin, as the crow guessed at once from his amber eyes, clawed paws, long flapping ears, and the tail that snapped behind him like a whip as he fell. There were goblins in all the seven towers of Clovenstone. They were born of the stone of the mountains, and they had a fierce greed for gold and silver and other shining things, which they spent most of their time searching for in the

ancient armouries and storerooms, or stealing from each other, and from the goblins of the other towers.

There had been a time when all goblins had been servants of the same great sorcerer, the Lych Lord, who had raised Clovenstone and ruled the whole world from his Stone Throne, high in the Keep. But years without number had passed since the Lych Lord's army was defeated at the battle of Dor Koth by the armies of the kings of men, and for as long as any living goblin could recall, each of the seven towers had been home to a separate goblin gang. Sometimes the gangs from two or three different towers would form an alliance and go roaring out of Clovenstone to raid the fisherfolk and miners of the little man-kingdoms on the Nibbled Coast, but they were untrusting, untrustworthy creatures and their alliances didn't last. It was never long before they were fighting each other over the loot, safe in their home towers again with the entrances blocked up by barricades of rubble and old furniture.

Blackspike Tower, where Skarper lived (or *had* lived, until he was catapulted off its roof that morning) was ruled by a large and dangerous goblin named King Knobbler, and the goblins who lived in it were called the Blackspike Boys. There were no crueller raiders, greedier hoarders or more ruthless robbers anywhere in Clovenstone. Fighting and loot was what they lived for;



fighting and loot and eating. Fighting and loot and eating and then more fighting.

Except for Skarper. Skarper was different.

Old Breslaw had seen it as soon as Skarper hatched. Breslaw was different too. He had lost an eye, an ear, a leg and most of his tail in a raid on the Nibbled Coast forty years before. He was only half the goblin he used to be, and since he could no longer go out raiding with the rest of the tribe, King Knobbler had made him hatchling master.

Once a year, on the night when the horns of the new moon seemed to rest on the summit of the Keep, Breslaw would descend into the Blackspike's deep cellars, unlock a heavy cobweb-covered door, and steer his squeaking wheelbarrow down steep and lonely tunnels which plunged beneath the roots of Clovenstone into the dark under the mountains where lay the lava lake.

There, in the cauldrons of the earth, the restless silvery-hot magma roiled and churned. The lake spat out little gobs of lava which hardened shiny black upon the walls and floors of its great cave. Once a year it spat out something else as well: eggstones.

Patiently, using a long-handled shovel, and wrapped in wet skins to save himself from being shrivelled by the heat, old Breslaw would hobble back and forth along the

hot shores collecting the eggstones. Sometimes, through the fumes that hung above the lake, he could see the hatchling masters from other towers patrolling their own stretches of shoreline, but he did not interfere with them, or try to stop them gathering up their own eggstones: *Each to his Beach*; that was one of the few scraps of the old law which all Clovenstone's goblins still obeyed.

Nor did he try to peer up the great chimney-holes which opened above the lake and were supposed to reach right up inside the Keep. When Breslaw was a younger goblin, the idea of getting inside the Keep had kept him awake at night, but he'd long since come to accept that there was no way in. Mad Manaccan's Lads from Slatetop Tower had tried it once, creeping out over the lake on scaffolding made from old floorboards. The scaffolding had fallen apart and dropped into the lava before the goblins climbing it got anywhere near those black openings.

So Breslaw just kept his eye on the basalt beach, and scooped up the dully glowing eggstones as they landed, and when they were all safely in his barrow he trundled them back up the steep miles to his chamber high in Blackspike Tower, which was called the hatchery. There he kept them warm beside his fire until they began to jiggle, and to crack. . .

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The goblins who had hatched from the same batch of eggstones as Skarper did not look alike. Earth-born creatures do not resemble each other in the way that members of a human family or a human race do. The sizes and shapes of Skarper and his batch-brothers had been decided by some strange whim of the earth itself. Some had scales and some had fur; some had squashed-in snouts like pigs, others long pointed noses and trailing ears. Most had fangs, and claws, and beady black eyes in which a little gleam of vicious glee appeared when they kicked aside the fragments of their eggstones and saw the mini-mallets and little training cudgels which Breslaw left leaning against the hatchery walls. With scratchy cries they snatched the tiny weapons up and began belting each other over the head. Breslaw watched them, and nodded in satisfaction. More good, brutish Blackspike Boys, who would be a credit to the tribe of King Knobbler.

Then he spotted Skarper. He was smaller than the other hatchlings, with long ears, a mat of reddish hair, a ginger tuft at the end of his tail and an odd light in his yellow eyes. Breslaw saw the way he hung back unnoticed in the corners of the cavern, as if he thought it might not be such a good idea to let other goblins swing huge lumps of timber at his newly hatched skull.

Breslaw rummaged through the heap of eggstone shards, and picked up the still-warm fragments of the



stone which Skarper had emerged from. Sure enough, thick veins of slowsilver ran this way and that across its surface. Slowsilver: the strangest and most magical of all metals. It shone like real silver, but you could knead it like putty, and when exposed to certain types of flame it would burn with a strange fire. In olden times great sorcerers like the Lych Lord had used it in their spells. These days it did not seem much use for anything, but it was rare and valuable and shiny, and goblins loved rare, valuable, shiny things. Breslaw stuffed Skarper's egg-shards away inside his clothes before the hatchlings saw them. Later, he would prise out the slowsilver and add it to the little ball of the stuff he kept in a secret place in one of his hiding holes in the walls of the hatchery.

It was years since he'd found an eggstone with that much slowsilver in it. From such a stone, long years before, Breslaw had hatched, and now he saw in young Skarper another like himself; a goblin wiser and more cunning than the rest. "I must keep an eye on this youngling," he told himself.

Sure enough, Skarper learned to talk much more quickly than his batch-brothers, whom Breslaw had named Yabber, Gutgust, Bootle, Wrench and Libnog. He was the only one who paid attention when Breslaw tried to teach them the goblin-lore. And while



the others fought over food at mealtimes in the big, busy chamber called the scoffery, Skarper always found some way to spirit hunks of meat and cavemould cheese out from under their squabbling snouts and carry it away through Blackspike's maze of passages and wobbly wooden ladders to some dark little disused room where he could eat alone, undisturbed and unobserved – except by Breslaw, whose beady eye was on him always.

Breslaw watched the clever way young Skarper sneaked little shining trinkets from the other goblins and hid them away in his own secret places, where he could fetch them out and gloat over them when he thought no one was watching.

"He reminds me of me, when I was new," the cunning old hatchling master chuckled.

One day, when a storm was racketing its way through the Bonehills and the rest of the tribe were all outside on the battlements, netting crows or hurling boulders and rude words at Mad Manaccan's Lads, Breslaw found young Skarper lounging in the scoffery. He was sitting in King Knobbler's own chair, and nibbling leftovers from King Knobbler's own dinner.

"What are you doing here?" the hatchling master demanded. "You should be out with the others! Boulders don't throw themselves, you know!"



Skarper shrugged and popped a plump cave spider into his mouth. "It's raining up, down and sideways out there," he said. "Hailing, too. It's warmer and dryer in here, and while those idiots are busy, I can get close to the fire and eat."

Breslaw drew himself to his full height (he stood about five foot six, which was tall for a goblin) and his eyes glittered. No hatchling had spoken to a hatchling master like that since . . . well, he thought, not since *he* had spoken like it to *his* hatchling master, old Wheezingbottom, more years ago than he cared to recall.

So instead of screeching at the impudent young sprout and giving him a clout with his teaching mallet, he said, "Come with me, young Skarper," and led him down the Blackspike's winding, wormy stairways to a half-forgotten chamber near the tower's foot. Thick skeins of cobweb stretched and tore as Breslaw heaved the door open. "Behold," he said. "The Bumwipe Heaps!"