

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.

The highest of these seven towers is called the Blackspike. Although it is dwarfed by the great mass of the Keep behind it, it is still taller than any tower in the lands of men. From its snow-flecked battlements to the ground at the crag's foot is a very long drop indeed . . .

And that was bad news for Skarper, because he had just been catapulted off the top of it.

“Aaaaaaah!” he screamed, rising up, up, up, pausing a moment, flailing for handholds on the empty air, and then beginning his long fall. “Aaaaaaaaa . . .” But after the first thousand feet or so he realized that he was just going “. . . aaaaaaaaaaaaa . . .” from force of habit, so he stopped, and from then on the only sounds were the whooshing of the cold air past his ears and the occasional cottony rustle as a cloud shot by.

Of course it's not so much the falling that bothers me, thought Skarper, as the ivied stones and mean little windows of the Blackspike rushed past him. It's the hitting the ground that's the trouble. . . .

Below him — now that he had got used to the feeling that the wind was pushing its thumbs into his eyes —

he could see plump white clouds dotting the middle air like sheep. Below *them* the bleak buttresses of Meneth Eskern spread out like the fingers of a splayed stone hand, with ruined buildings clustering between them. Weeds and little trees had rooted themselves in the rotting roofs and between the flagstones of the silent streets, and as the land sloped downward toward 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 toward 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.

