

EXCERPT from
The Great Tree of Avalon:
Child of the Dark Prophecy
by T. A. Barron
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Chapter 8: Out of the Shadows

With surprising speed for such a bulky warrior, Harlech took a step backward. He moved away from the base of the stone tower that rose from the rim of Waterroot's deepest canyon, the Canyon of Crystillia. Away from the shadows that were darker than the darkest pit. And away from the cloaked figure skulking there.

"Merlin hisself?" he sputtered. "Yer goin' to steal somethin' from the wizard Merlin?"

"No, you fool. Merlin is gone, long gone! I shall take it from the person the prophecies call *the true heir of Merlin*. But the effect, my Harlech, will be the same. Mmmyesss." He gave a low, throaty laugh. "You see, he carries with him a staff—the staff of his master! It looks like just a simple walking stick, my Harlech, which is why I've had to search so many years to find it. But this walking stick has great powers, mmmyesss. Powers I shall soon possess."

The white hand of the cloaked figure stabbed at the air, pointing to the great stone dam that spanned the canyon below them, to the enormous white lake it contained, and to the teams of enslaved horses, deer, mules, dwarves, wolves, and oxen. They were dragging new stones from the open-pit mines, hauling more freshly-cut trees for scaffolding, pulling heavy barges across the lake, and making repairs to the narrow road that ran across the top of the dam—all at the insistent cracking of men's whips. In the distance, the White Geyser of Crystillia rumbled and threw its water high into the air, just as it had done since the birth of Avalon from Merlin's magical seed.

Only now the geyser's white water did not flow down into Waterroot and its neighboring realms—but stopped here, trapped behind the dam. To the very few explorers who had ever reached this remote place, the sight of the dam, the lake, and the dry canyons below Prism Gorge, would have been shocking. And the sight of slaves—even more so.

"I shall use that staff, mmmyesss, my Harlech. For something most special. Most special, indeed. And then . . . I shall destroy it! And at the same time, I shall destroy forever Merlin's hold on this world."

Harlech tilted his head and scratched the jagged scar that ran across his jaw.

"The wizard ain't goin' to like that, Master. Nor, I 'spect, his true heir."

"You think that matters?" The sorcerer released a high, whistling laugh, like the hiss of a satisfied snake. "The lost staff will soon be the least of their problems. For I will use it, my Harlech, to gain something far greater: the control of Avalon."

"Jest how, Master?" Harlech edged closer to the shadows. "Can ye tell me?"

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The white hands rubbed together. "This much I will say, all your feeble mind can hold. With the help of that staff, I will make something powerful—so powerful that, before long, I will control all Seven Realms, the very roots of the Great Tree . . . roots that support the entire Tree, give it strength, and produce the élan that runs through its veins. And as the roots go, my Harlech, so shall the Tree. All of Avalon, to its remotest branches, will then be in my grasp! Mmmmyesss, as surely as the spirit lord Rhita Gawr rules on high."

Harlech brushed a bead of sweat off his temple. "But Master, won't yer enemies try some tricks to stop ye?"

"Tricks, mmmmyesss. But I have something better than tricks. I have knowledge! Just as no one else in Avalon knows what I have built here, at the wellspring of High Brynchilla, no one else knows that Merlin's staff is still in Avalon."

"The true heir—"

"All right, he himself probably knows! But no one else. Not even the child of the Dark Prophecy, whose help I have long awaited . . . not even he knows about the staff. Unless, of course, he can read entrails as well as I can."

The mirthless laugh came again. "For you see, my Harlech, I have learned something just this morning, from a wild boar that one of my ghoulacas found in Fireroot. A boar whose bloody entrails told me what I have been seeking to learn for seventeen years."

He cracked his white knuckles in delight. "I know where it is, my Harlech. *I know where the staff is hidden.*"

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