

MERLIN



BOOK 10

SHADOWS ON THE STARS

T. A. BARRON

Originally published as *The Great Tree of Avalon: Shadows on the Stars*

What are those stars?

Tamwyn peered at this star—and suddenly blinked in astonishment. The Heart of Pegasus seemed to be beating! He opened his eyes just a sliver more, as wide as he could stand, to look more closely. And yes, that star was indeed pulsing like the heart of a great steed.

A lizard scurried, just then, across his foot. Tamwyn flinched in surprise. In doing so, he lost sight of the pulsing star. He started to look for it again, but found himself gazing instead at a different constellation.

A darkened constellation.

The black hole that had once been the Wizard's Staff.

He stared hard at the spot where those seven stars had once burned so bright, hoping to find some clue about what had really happened to them. And what all this had to do with Rhita Gawr.

Something strange caught his attention. Peering closely, he could detect vague circles of light up there. Yes . . . seven of them. And the circles sat in precisely the same places as the lost stars!

Though his whole body shook with excitement, Tamwyn fought to keep himself steady. The stars, or some parts of them, were still there. And if they were still there . . . they could, perhaps, be lost again.

He swallowed. Could only Merlin himself do such a thing?

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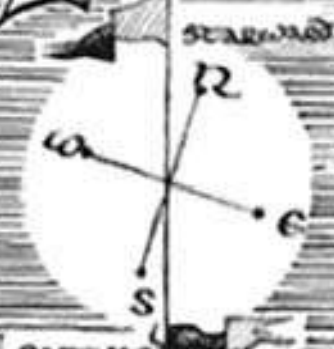
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*To Mother Earth,
beleaguered yet bountiful*

*With special thanks, once again, to
Denali Barron and Patricia Lee Gauch,
brave companions to Tamwyn, Elli, Scree . . . and myself.*

TO THE UNEXPLORED
REGIONS OF
Upper Avalon
TRUNK, BRANCHES,
THE STAGS BEYOND
KNOWS PORTALS—
EVER FLOWS ELAND



SWAYING SEA
(SITE OF THE GREAT
ENDING THE WAVE OF
STORMS)

Elurien
(WOODROOT)

HAUNTS OF
MARCH GHOULS

VILLAGE OF
PROSPERITY

DEEP FOREST
BEGINS

ROOTWARD
SHRINE OF
DAGON
ON
LIFE
SHIPPING
CLEAN

INTERMIXING OF ANIMAL MAGIC
CREATED HERE:
SIVER, GLENNLESS

WHITE CITY
OF
LITTLE
PLATE
CITY
GATE

HALLIA'S
POPE

AMELNY
STAGGIZING
SCENE

HIGH
DEALS

LEGENDARY
MAGIC RANCH
BE HERE!

THE SEVEN
RIVERS
OF COLOR

FOREST OF
THE GIANTS
LAKES

NEW TOWN
SNOWFIELD

HIGH BRYNCHILLA

ARMA
SPRINT

Olanabram
(STONEROOT)

VILLAGE
OF
BULLS

Brinchilla
(WATERROOT)

GRAN
DANCE
OF
ONE
SOCIETY
OF
THE
WHALE

CAVE OF
THE
DIVER

WATERLAND
OF THE
WINDLASS
SPRING

TRAILBORN
BELLAGE

ALTHEA

The Seven Root-Realms
of the Great Tree of
AVALON

Roots of Merlin's MAGICAL SEED PLANTED IN THE FINEST YEAR



T.A.B. 40 2002

LOSE CITY OF LIGHT

PALACE OF THE FLAMELONTS

CRAFTED FROM THE BEST AVAILABLE SOURCE
YEAR OF AVALON
1002
BY THE
COPRA COLLEGE
OF MAPMAKERS

TO THE GREAT TREE'S
BRANCHES
& THE STARS BEYOND



TO THE SEVEN
ROOT-REALMS
of AVALON

LOST
REALM
of the
FIRE-
ANGELS

TRUNK-BELCH OF
THE EYERNS

The
Spiral
Cascades

Water flows
downward,
wicky flows
downward
while
music flows
ever
outward

THE GREAT TREE
Dead the
Foggy
Jagged
WOLF

Tunnels
within the trunk

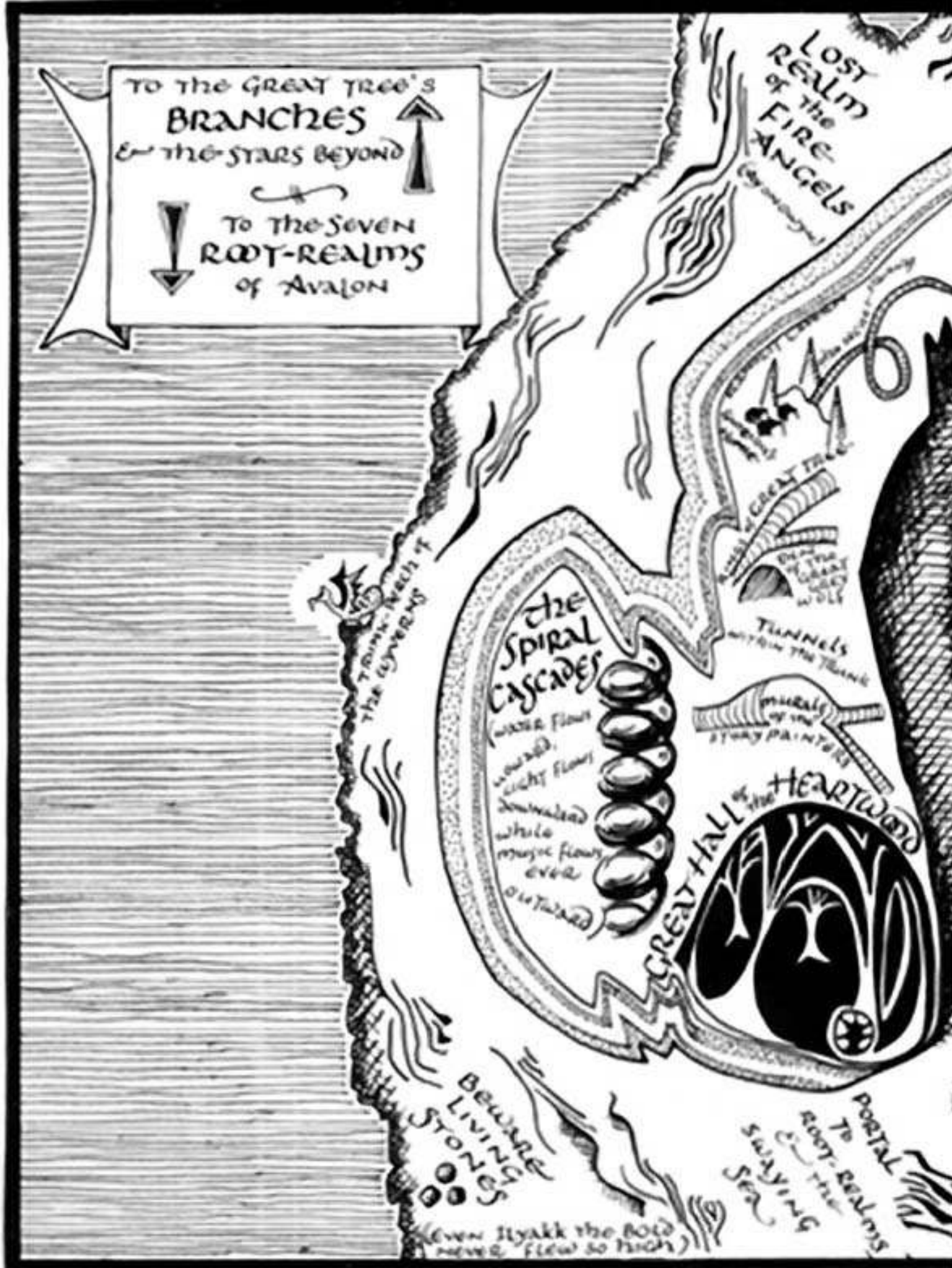
MURALS
of the
STORY PAINTERS

GREAT HALL of the
HEARTWOOD

Beware
LIVING
STONES

Portal
to
the
ROOT-REALMS
swaying
SEA

Even Ityakk the BOSS
never flew so high



LAST REFUGE
OF
ETHANIN

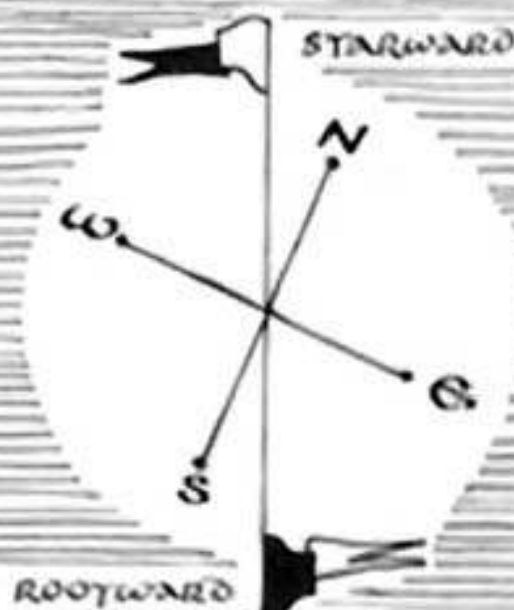
payments
to BIGBY
JACK
HERE

MERLIN'S
KNOTHOLE
NAMED BY THE
AYANOWYN AS
HUXDA-LEBANA -
WINDOW TO THE STARS

THE MIDDLE REALM OF
THE GREAT TREE OF

AVALON

BORN OF MERLIN'S MAGICAL SEED PLANTED IN LOST FINCAURA



WHERE IS THE
HIDDEN PASSAGE?
SMITHLEIGH
KASTILLUS?

CRAFTED BY THE
EOPHA COLLEGE
OF
MAPMAKERS
FROM THE
ANCIENT ANNALS
OF THE AYANOWYN
EXPLORERS

Seeking the Stars

In truth, I wonder just why I have chosen now to embark on this long and dangerous voyage to the stars. Surely not because my strength is at its peak; surely not because the timing is auspicious. Perhaps I am not seeking the stars after all, but merely fleeing my own past. The stars are bright and far away, but my wounds are dark and ever near.

—*Fragment from a letter, dated Year of Avalon 987, left by the explorer Krystall Eopia, son of the deer woman Hallia and the wizard Merl*

Sway, Broad Boughs

*Sway, broad boughs of Avalon
Shielding from the storm—
Bend so far, yet never break:
Ev'ry day newborn, Mystery's true form.*

*Rise, tall trunk of Middle Realm,
Stretching ever high—
each for misty, branching trails:
Stairway to the sky,
Stars are flaming nigh.*

*Sink, great roots of Seven Realms,
Plunging under sleep—
old the farthest, lowest lands:
Celebrate or weep,
Wonders ever deep.*

*—Ancient ballad of Avalon, believed to have been composed by High Priestess
Rhiannon*

Prologue: The Greatest Power

Deep underground, in a cavern of dark shadows, something even darker hovered in the air.

Slowly it spun—a venomous snake of smoke. As it twirled, the air around it crackled with black sparks. And wherever its tail brushed against the cavern floor, stones burst apart like trees shattered by lightning, leaving only heaps of smoldering ash.

The dark spiral floated menacingly toward a small, radiant crystal on a stone pedestal. The crystal glowed with light, frail but still defiant, glowed white with ribbons of blue and green. As the shadowy being approached, it swelled a bit brighter.

“Now observe,” hissed the smoky serpent. “I will demonstrate how to destroy this crystal of élan just as we will soon destroy our enemies.” The serpent laughed, its voice bubbling like molten rock. “But first, my pet, we will turn its power to our own purposes.”

His back pressed against the cavern wall, Kulwych shifted nervously. The cloaked sorcerer chewed on his once perfectly clipped fingernails, then ran his hand across the scarred hollow of his empty eye socket. “M-m-mmyesss, my lord Rhita Gawr.”

“I have but one small regret,” hissed the spiral as it hardened, coalescing into darkness that was almost solid. “By now, no doubt, you have already dispatched the one who calls himself *the true heir of Merlin*. And I would have rather enjoyed making him my crystal’s first victim.”

Kulwych bit harder on his fingers. “Er, well, in that case, my lord . . . you’ll be pleased to learn that—”

“He *isn’t* dead?” spat the spiral. Instantly, it shot at the sorcerer’s face, stopping only a hair’s breadth away from his throat. “Have you failed me, my little magician, my plaything?”

Shivering, his head against the wall, Kulwych made a frightened gurgle.

The dark being swayed back and forth, sizzling like a tongue of lava. “You have seen my wrath before, haven’t you?”

Kulwych’s one eye darted to the headless corpse of the gobsken on the cavern floor. He tried to speak, but could only gurgle again.

For an endless moment, the smoky serpent hovered, crackling in the air by the sorcerer’s throat. Then, with a whiplike snap, it pulled away, floating back toward the crystal. Kulwych gasped and crumpled to the stone floor.

“You are fortunate, even if you are a simpleton.”

Kulwych’s lone eye narrowed at the insult, but as he stood again he said only, “Mmmyesss, my lord.”

“Fortunate indeed,” continued the spiraling coil. “You see, my pet, I still require your services, at least until I am strong enough to take solid form. One day soon, however, I shall assume my true shape—and my true role as conqueror.”

“Conqueror,” repeated Kulwych, bobbing his hideously scarred head.

“Yes!” cried the smoky spiral that was Rhita Gawr, with such force that black sparks exploded in the air, sizzling and steaming on the wet stone walls. “And not just of this puny little world, the hollow hull of a tree. Once I control Avalon, the very bridge between mortal and immortal, I will soon control everything else, as well! From the Otherworld of the Spirits to mortal Earth—all the worlds will be mine.”

In a quieter, almost pleasant tone, the dark being added, “And perhaps yours, too, my Kulwych. In that is, I choose to keep you at my side.”

Slowly, Kulwych straightened himself and brushed some dust off his cloak. His jaw quivered as he said, “Always your faithful servant, my lord.”

“Just be certain it is *always*,” hissed the shadow of Rhita Gawr, sounding more dangerous again. “Or I will do to you what I am about to do to this obstinate little crystal.”

Before Kulwych could even respond, the dark coil snarled viciously, then stretched all the way around the crystal’s pedestal. Circling slowly in the air, it bound itself end to end, like a noose, and began to tighten around its prey. At the same time, it grew flatter, widening so that it looked less like rope and more like a shroud—dark enough that it couldn’t be described as merely black. Rather, the shroud seemed like the essence of emptiness, so dark that nothing resembling light could even penetrate its depths, give it shape, or touch its bottomless void.

The crystal pulsed bravely, as relentlessly as a beating heart, even while the shroud closed over it. Tighter and tighter the darkness drew, enveloping the glowing object, squeezing ever closer. Although light still pulsed beneath the shadow, and a few white rays broke through to illuminate the cavern walls, the crystal grew dimmer by the second. The whole cavern darkened.

Standing by the wall, Kulwych watched in fascination. Delightedly, he rubbed his smooth hands together. Here was power, true power, at work! And yet . . . in the back of his mind, he remained uncertain. No one—not even Rhita Gawr—had ever before corrupted a pure crystal of élano. Was it truly possible? Or would the crystal’s stubborn magic prevail? After all, its magic ran deeper than anyone had been able to comprehend, flowing from the very resin of the Great Tree. Why, even Merlin, that sorry excuse for a wizard, had understood that his powers were nothing compared to élano.

The dark shroud continued to shrink, until at last it covered the crystal completely. No large openings were left, not on the top or bottom or any sides, for light to escape. And yet, even now, a faint glow still seeped through some cracks. The crystal continued to resist.

Kulwych leaned closer, his lone eye twitching anxiously. *Trolls’ teeth and ogres’ tongues*, he cursed to himself, *what is happening?*

Tighter the shroud squeezed, like a smothering blanket. But under its folds, the crystal glowed ever so slightly. The vaguest shimmer of light still radiated from beneath the layers of darkness.

Suddenly the shroud crackled with black fire. Heavy, rancid smoke rose from the pedestal. The darkness itself started to pulse, as if it were a fist squeezing the last spark of life out of its enemy.

The cavern’s air thickened, growing steadily more foul. Kulwych choked back a cough. He felt more and more nauseated, until it was all he could do not to retch. He leaned against the rock wall for support, as the sickening air burned his lungs. Near his feet, a stray mouse lost its way, groped wildly for some way to escape, then twitched one last time before it died.

Seconds passed, stretching into minutes. At long last, the shroud of darkness released its hold. It pulled gradually away from the crystal, forming itself again into a spiraling coil that hung in the air, slowly spinning. And on the pedestal, the crystal still glowed—but with a light far different than before.

Dark, smoky red it shone. Veins ran through it as if it were a diseased, bloodshot eye. And with every strangled pulse of its core came a repulsive odor like rotting flesh.

Kulwych took a cautious step nearer. “It is . . . done?”

“Oh yes, my pet magician, it is done.” The voice of the spiral sounded drained, much weaker than before. “You did not doubt my powers, did you?”

“No, no,” said Kulwych quickly. “I would never doubt you, just as I would never disobey you.”

“So then,” hissed the dark being, “you would obey my command to lay your hand upon the crystal?”

The sorcerer cringed in horror. He glanced at the dark red object, the color of dried blood. “Touch th-that?” he stammered.

“Yes, Kulwych. Touch it. I command you.”

Shivering uncontrollably, the sorcerer lifted up his arm. The sleeve of his cloak ruffled like a sail in a stiff wind. Then, ~~gritting his teeth, he reached his hand toward the dark crystal. Closer he came, and closer.~~ Meanwhile, the smoky spiral twirled in the air, sizzling softly.

As his hand approached the crystal, Kulwych cast a final, pleading look toward his master. But the shadow of Rhita Gawr said nothing. Perspiration glistened on Kulwych's fingers as he lowered them toward this thing that looked less like a crystal than a pulsing clot of blood.

Just as his fingertips were about to touch it, the edge of his sleeve brushed against the crystal. Instantly the cloth burst into dark red flames. The sorcerer screeched in fright and drew back his arm, even as the flames went out. Only then did he notice that the flames hadn't really burned his sleeve—but had, instead, made the cloth disappear.

Kulwych shook his arm in surprise. Where the bottom of his sleeve had been, there were no fragments, no charred threads, not even any wisps of smoke. The entire section of cloth had simply vanished.

He looked over at the smoky serpent that had commanded him. "My lord . . . do you still wish—" "No," snarled the dark being. "You needn't touch it now. You have shown me your loyalty, such as it is."

Kulwych gulped. Then, turning back to his sleeve, he mumbled to himself, "Ironwool thread shouldn't have burned." Facing the serpent once more, he asked, "Tell me please, my lord, just what is this crystal's power?"

A low, sizzling laugh echoed in the walls of the cavern. "Behold, the utter opposite of *élan*—*Vengélano*, I hereby name it: the greatest power in all of Avalon."

Kulwych just stared at him, confused.

The spiral twirled, hissing with a mixture of impatience and triumph. "Do you not understand, my foolish minion? *Élano* holds the power to create—which is why that scoundrel Merlin used it to end my Blight centuries ago. Or to heal—which is why a filthy little spring in Malóch can work such strange wonders. Why, even the very dirt of that realm is so rich in *élan* that it can bring forth new life."

"But my sleeve just . . . disappeared."

"Have you no brains at all? That is the power I have unleashed! Where *élan* creates, *vengélan* destroys. Anything it touches, no matter how well made, will be instantly unmade."

Anxiously, the sorcerer squeezed his fingers—fingers that had nearly touched the corrupted crystal.

"Whatever flesh *vengélan* meets," crackled the voice, "will simply slice open, or vanish. Blood vessels will bleed without end. Healthy trees will wither, sturdy weapons will crumble, and freshwater streams will turn to poison."

Kulwych's lone eye widened in amazement. "So with this new power, we will seize control—" A sharp sizzling halted him mid-sentence. "Er, I mean, *you* will, my lord. Avalon will be yours at last."

The dark shape swirled around the bloodred crystal, circling it slowly, admiring it as a painter would admire the work of a lifetime, savoring its subtlest detail. "That is true, my pet. But first, before embarking on grander plans, I shall take care of one minor detail."

"Which is, my lord?"

"I shall destroy, once and for all, the true heir of Merlin."

The spiral continued to circle. "He is just seventeen years old by my count, barely a newborn to me. But his meager powers should soon start to emerge. And although the day of my triumph grows near, we have much to do before then. This young wizard could become a nuisance, a distraction. Besides, eliminating him will be easy enough, as well as entertaining. Fool that he is, I suspect that he fears his new powers almost as much as he fears me! And so, my Kulwych, I shall relieve him of his worries—along with his life."

PART I

Wind, colder than an ogre's breath, blasted over the mountaintop. Sharp bits of ice, hurled by the gusts, slapped at the broad, flat stone on the summit—and at the two people huddled there.

“So c-c-cold,” said Elli with a shiver. She slid closer to Tamwyn on the sitting stone, so that their shoulders barely touched. Her hair, frosted by the icy gusts, gleamed white under the nighttime stars, making her curls look like wintry waves.

He blew a cloudy breath, then winced as a chunk of ice bit into the back of his neck. “I know it's cold. But it'll be tolerable again, once this cursed wind settles down.”

Elli's teeth chattered. “Can't you just make the wind let up? With your new powers?”

He winced again, this time for another reason. His gaze strayed to the gnarled staff he'd set beside the stone—a staff that had been entrusted to him, though he really wasn't sure why. He thought about Elli's words, and frowned. *New powers? If only she knew the truth.*

Was it time, perhaps, to tell her what was really happening inside him? What it felt like to have these strange, often violent powers surging through his body—appearing when he least expected them, didn't want them, and couldn't even begin to control them?

Before he could speak, the wind suddenly died. Ice and snow ceased flying; the mountaintop fell silent. All around, the ghostly heads of nearby peaks glistened in the starlight, though none of those summits rose higher than Elli and Tamwyn. For they were sitting atop Hallia's Peak, the highest point in all seven rootrealms of Avalon, so high that it was the only place where the Great Tree's trunk could actually be seen.

Tamwyn studied the vista. There were the other peaks of Olanabram, and beyond, the starlit ridges rising steeply upward that he knew were the bottommost reaches of Avalon's trunk. As a wilderness guide, he'd always been struck by the stark contrasts of mountains—starting with their howling storms that could melt instantly into profound stillness, a quiet so deep you could almost feel its weight upon the air. He also loved how, by day, the ridges shone with light, sliced by the shadows of clouds. And how, on nights like this, they rippled like a glowing sea beneath the stars.

Turning back to their sitting stone, he gazed at the frosted rocks that surrounded them, looking like thousands of miniature snowcapped peaks. Only the sitting stone itself had no trace of snow. Tamwyn slid his feet, bare as always, over its smooth surface, feeling the strange warmth of this stone that no wind could ever chill.

For this was Merlin's Stargazing Stone, touched long ago by the magic of the great wizard himself. And its eternal warmth, strong enough that ice and snow never stayed on its surface, was but the least of its wonders. Even now, it gleamed mysteriously—as well as darkly, for it was nearly as black as the gaping hole in the starry sky above their heads.

The hole where, less than a month before, the seven stars of the Wizard's Staff constellation had abruptly disappeared.

The hole that had brought Elli and Tamwyn to this remote summit. And to the Stone itself.

For this was not only the best spot in Avalon to view the stars—or a gap between the stars. More important, it was the one spot where anyone from any realm could come and ask for a vision. Such was the lasting gift: of Merlin.

And so they had trekked all the way here, joined by their closest companions, who were now exploring the summit to pick a suitable place to camp (or, like the shrunken giant Shim, already sleeping soundly by a nearby hot spring). Elli and Tamwyn's goal was simple: to call for a vision that would reveal the truth of what had happened to the vanished stars. Elli had insisted that Tamwyn, with his emerging powers, should be the one to ask for it. And while he'd at first resisted, he had finally

agreed.

~~“So are you ever going to do it?” Elli turned from the starry sky and nudged Tamwyn impatiently. “Or are you just going to sit here like a mindless lump of snow?”~~

He shook his long black hair, irked at her tone. Even though he guessed that her impatience was really masking her worries about the hole—and what it meant for Avalon—she had about as much patience as a hungry raccoon.

“Well?” she demanded. “What are you waiting for?”

“You know, Elli, you are the single most impatient, stubborn, thick-headed, exasperating . . .”

She cut him off with a fetching grin. “We’re so much alike, aren’t we?”

Despite himself, he almost grinned back. For he knew she was right. And, to his surprise, he wasn’t angry anymore. Right now, instead of berating her, he mainly wanted to hug her. Just how did she do that—changing his feelings as fast as a mountain storm? On top of that, she could somehow see right into him, as if he were a clear alpine pool—even when he himself felt hopelessly murky.

He blew a long sigh. Although he had no idea where their relationship might go, it had definitely come a long way from the pair of black eyes she’d given him when they first met.

He reached over and lightly touched the simple yellow band she was wearing around her wrist, a sturdy bracelet of astral flower stems that he’d woven for her last week. But when their eyes met, he could see that she had other things on her mind. Worrisome things.

“Tamwyn,” she whispered, “I’m scared. What if you ask for a vision—and nothing happens?”

He ran a hand through his locks. “I’m more scared of what *could* happen.”

Lifting his face, he gazed up at the stars—masses and masses of them, more than he could possibly count. There, flanking the black hole of the Wizard’s Staff, were other constellations he knew well: the Golden Bough, that lovely ring of light; Pegasus, soaring high over starry fields; and Twisted Tree, which tonight seemed as large as the Great Tree of Avalon itself.

Though dawn was drawing near, the stars still blazed with the sharp clarity of night. Often, as a guide, he had set his course by them. So often, in fact, that they had long since become his companions, as much as Elli, Scree, and the others. Yet in all his years of camping, they’d never looked so bright as they did right now, in the clear, cold air of Hallia’s Peak.

Stars, he said to himself. *What are you, really?* Dimming at the end of every day after the golden flash of starset, and swelling bright again every morning at dawn, they were Avalon’s ultimate mystery. And, for Tamwyn, its ultimate beauty.

He clenched his fists. For he knew that the stars had also called to his father, the famed explorer Krystallus Eopia. So much that they had lured him to make the expedition that would be his greatest—and his last. Somewhere up there, climbing the trunk and branches of the Great Tree on the way to the stars, Krystallus had perished.

Or had he? Over the past few weeks, that question had clung like a burr to Tamwyn’s thoughts. After all, no one knew for certain what had really happened to that expedition . . . or to Krystallus himself.

Struck by a new idea, Tamwyn caught his breath. After calling for a vision about the vanished stars, why not call for one about his father?

The very thought made his heart pound as fast as a wood elf’s drum. For more than he’d been willing to admit, Tamwyn longed to find his father. To know him, as he never had, as a son. Even for just a moment. And to learn what his father had discovered about the stars. And maybe also, since Krystallus had seen up close the wizardry of Merlin, to learn what was needed to control the growing magical powers—powers that had caused Tamwyn to freeze a ripe melon in his hand, to confuse some flying moon geese with a simple whistle, and knock over an old elm tree with a single breath, when he hadn’t intended any such things to happen.

All right, he told himself. I'll do it. Right after—

~~Elli squeezed his forearm, still impatient. This time she didn't speak, but merely raised a eyebrow.~~

Tamwyn nodded. Drawing a deep breath, he gazed up at the black hole that seemed like a gash in the night sky. He focused his thoughts on just one question: *What does the hole mean—for Avalon and for us?* And then, thinking of the young woman by his side, he added: *And are we safe?*

At last, remembering the words that the old sprite Nuic had taught him, he started to chant:

*Great starscape on high, deliver me thy
Vision of truth, as in Merlin's youth;
Use all heaven's light to answer tonight
This question my own, by Stargazing Stone.*

As his words melted into the air, a slight gust of wind blew over the mountaintop. Elli shifted a bit closer on the Stone, peering up at the stars. Anxiously, she muttered, "Nuic said it might take a minute or two before anything magical happens."

Tamwyn didn't answer. He was watching the sky and listening to the buffeting breeze with the keen attention of a wilderness guide. Suddenly he heard a voice—no, two. He stiffened, listening intently as did Elli beside him.

Then, as one, they breathed a disappointed sigh. They faced each other, knowing that those voices hadn't come from any magic.

"It's only Scree," grumbled Tamwyn. "And Brionna. Somewhere over there, behind those boulders."

"Sounds like they're having another argument," added Elli.

"Or they never finished their last one." He shook his head. "That brother of mine, stubborn as a headless troll! Why can't he just realize that he doesn't really like Brionna? All they ever do is argue."

Elli looked surprised, then gave her frosted curls a shake. "You really think that? He argues with her *because* he likes her. A lot, in fact."

"Really? Are you sure? Well, Brionna certainly doesn't feel the same way about him."

"Oh, yes she does. Just the same." Elli peered at him thoughtfully. "Your brother's not the only man around here who's clueless when it comes to women."

Tamwyn returned her gaze, then gave a reluctant nod. "You might have a point there. He's about as awkward with her as I am with . . ."

He stopped, realizing what he was about to say. Sheepishly, he averted his eyes.

Elli laughed, a sound as lilting as a lark's morning song. "You know," she said gently, "Scree being an eagleman, may look a lot older than you. But he's still just a boy when it comes to women. A lot like you."

Slowly, he turned back to her. "And is that, um, all right with you? My being awkward around a woman?"

Her eyes sparkled. "That depends," she answered, "on what woman you're thinking about."

Feeling suddenly warmer than even the magic of the Stone could explain, Tamwyn shifted uncomfortably. He decided to try to turn the conversation back to Scree. "You're right about my brother, that's for sure. Remember that big mistake he sometimes mentions, without ever telling us what it was? Something that happened years ago when he was living alone, guarding the staff. Well, I'd bet my beard that it had something to do with a woman."

Elli grinned mischievously. "You don't have a beard, Tamwyn." Then, with her fingertips, she brushed the stubble on his chin. "But it won't be long now."

As she touched him, he felt an unexpected prickling. His heartbeat quickened; he leaned a little closer. He could almost imagine bringing his face to hers, and . . .

He suddenly pulled back as a bitter blast of wind raked across the summit. Chunks of ice stung their cheeks, necks, hands—anything exposed. The cold pierced Tamwyn’s old tunic and Elli’s tattered robe, and drove down deep into their bones.

“Owww,” she cried, hunching her shoulders and putting her hands on the sides of her head. “That hurts my ears!” She shivered as another frosty gust whipped them.

“Here, let me help.” Though shivering himself, he reached up and pushed her hands aside, replacing them with his own. Very gently, he cupped his palms over her ears, trying to hold back the wind.

As the last gust subsided, taking the edge off the cold, Tamwyn also felt his inner warmth grow again. Here she was, her face so close, looking at him gratefully. He studied her hazel green eyes, her lips that seemed so soft . . . and slowly drew her nearer. A new, dizzying feeling surged through him.

Without warning, an image flashed through his mind. An image from just a few days before, when he had held something utterly different in his hands. It was nothing remarkable, just a simple melon—but he’d held it in exactly this way, his hands cupped against its sides. The melon had been the gift of a friend, the farmer Abelawn, whose fields Tamwyn had often helped to harvest: the very last one from his vegetable garden. Tamwyn had hefted the fruit, thinking playfully how good a snowball would make if only it were frozen. Then, all of a sudden, the melon turned to ice! In the blink of an eye, it froze between his hands—turning completely white before it shattered, exploding into a thousand icy shards.

Could the same thing happen now to Elli? Was this feeling rising inside him really just another violent, misdirected burst of power?

“No!” he shouted, roughly shoving her head away. Elli shrieked and tumbled backward off the Stone. But he could only stare down at his hands, aghast at what he’d almost done.

Elli slowly picked herself up, brushed the snow off her shoulders, and sat again at the far edge of the Stone. She glared at Tamwyn, rubbing her sore neck. Anger showed in her eyes, but there was also a hint of tears.

Just as she opened her mouth to speak, the night sky abruptly flashed with light. So much light that the whole sky seemed to be swallowed by flames. Then, just as swiftly, the light vanished, and was replaced by another night sky—one with only seven stars, grouped in an unmistakable constellation.

“The Wizard’s Staff,” whispered Tamwyn, blinking in astonishment.

Elli stopped rubbing her neck and just gaped at the sight.

As they watched, awestruck, the seven bright stars of the Wizard’s Staff flickered, as if some bitter winds on high had made them shiver. Then, one by one, they faded, pulsed with a final gleam of light, and disappeared—just as they had actually done less than a month before. But now, in this vision, when the last star went dark, nothing else remained in the sky.

All at once, something moved. Both Tamwyn and Elli sensed somehow that what they were about to see had not yet happened—but would very soon. As they watched, strange shapes, even darker than the sky itself, began to flow outward from the vanished constellation. The young viewers squinted, trying to see just what those shapes could be. But it was impossible to tell. They looked misty and undefined, and yet undoubtedly evil, like plumes of noxious gas. Combined, they resembled a vast hand of darkness, stretching deadly fingers toward Avalon.

Another flash! The evil shapes abruptly disappeared. Yet Tamwyn and Elli couldn’t stop seeing them in their minds, just as they couldn’t stop wondering what they really were.

Suddenly the sky filled with a procession of scenes, drawn darkly upon the night. Unlike the vision of the shadowy shapes, which belonged to the future, these scenes seemed more present—as if they had recently happened, or were happening right now. Each one came from somewhere in the Seven

Realms. And each one spelled some new disaster.

Elli gasped as she watched a towering stone pillar topple and smash to the ground. Surely this couldn't be one of the pillars of the Great Temple in the Drumadian compound? Then the scene shifted to an angry mob of people, shouting and hurling stones. Next came a band of eaglefolk, flying out of the smoking cliffs of Fireroot—and straight into battle. But they weren't fighting the traditional enemies, the flamelons, or even humans: Rather, they were battling *other* eaglefolk.

From behind the nearby boulders, Tamwyn and Elli heard a shout of disbelief. Evidently Scree, too, could see the vision. And didn't like at all what it showed.

Next came a series of scenes that moved by so rapidly they blurred together. There was a gobske warrior forging a broadsword; a water dragon's tail rising out of the waves; and an ancient harp grasping desperately for something, clutching at the air, before it finally fell still.

And then those images melted into another scene, one that made Tamwyn stiffen. For staring down at him from the darkened sky was the brutally scarred face of White Hands, the wicked sorcerer who had enslaved hundreds of creatures and killed more, all in his quest to gain a powerful crystal of pure élano. Tamwyn, helped by his companions as well as his staff, had done his best to stop White Hands. Yet there was a satisfied gleam in the sorcerer's only eye that made Tamwyn feel sure that he was still alive. And that he possessed the crystal.

Suddenly the scarred visage moved—and spoke. The sound of the sorcerer's hoarse voice bubbled out of the air. “So what lies ahead, my lord?”

My lord? wondered Tamwyn. *Who could he mean?*

Something shifted behind the image of White Hands. It was hard to make out, barely more than a thin trail of smoke. Or a gaseous sort of serpent. Then the smoky form itself spoke, in a voice that crackled across the sky like a bolt of black lightning. And in that moment Tamwyn knew exactly what this was. For though he'd never heard the voice before, somewhere deep within himself he recognized it instantly.

Rhita Gawr. Wicked warlord of the Otherworld, where he'd been banished long ago by the great spirit Dagda and the wizard Merlin.

Rhita Gawr—here in Avalon.

“My ultimate triumph,” crackled the voice, “is but a few weeks away! First will fall Avalon, this miserable world in between. And then more worlds will follow.”

White Hands, rubbing his palms, nodded vigorously. “And the sign, my lord? What will be the sign?”

The snakelike form coiled slowly. “When the great horse dies, the storm will come.” A harsh hissing laughter filled the air. “Ah yes, my pet, it will come.”

The sky flashed again, so bright that it took Tamwyn and Elli several seconds before they could see anything. When at last they gazed skyward, they saw no more visions. Only stars. And one dark, gaping hole where a certain constellation had once shone.

Tamwyn recalled the vision of those strange, shadowy shapes emerging from the void of the missing stars. Shapes that would, he felt sure, soon appear in reality. What were they? What did they mean? And what in the name of Avalon had Rhita Gawr meant about his triumph just a few weeks away—and by those words *when the great horse dies*?

He grimaced. This vision had raised more questions than it had answered!

He turned to Elli, and saw the same questions on her face. As well as all the anger and hurt that he himself had caused. His heart seemed to wither in his chest.

“Listen,” he started. “I can explain.”

She shook her head, jostling her curls in every direction. “Don't explain. Just go.”

“But Elli—”

Her eyes seemed to sizzle. “Just *go*”

~~He stooped to retrieve his staff as well as his pack, wanting to say more but certain now that~~
would take some time before he could even hope to speak with her. All the things he’d like to tell her
would simply have to wait. Just as his plan to ask for a vision about his missing father would have
wait. How long, he couldn’t even guess.

He turned and trudged off through the snow, troubled by the demons he’d seen on high—and, even
more, by the demons he’d seen in himself.

2 • Magical Wood

The man, tall and rugged, stood alone on a mountain ridge. Wind blew his long gray locks across his face, barely lit by the flickering light of his torch. Dark shreds of mist swirled about him, wrapping him in shadow.

But Tamwyn recognized him instantly. “Father!” he cried, though he wasn’t sure whether the man was on the same mountain as himself, or somewhere far distant. “Father, I’m here!”

The man suddenly started. His coal black eyes, bright in the torchlight, opened wide. And in that instant Tamwyn knew beyond doubt that this was indeed his father.

Slowly, the man turned toward the voice. His weathered, hawklike face seemed exactly right for Krystallus Eopia—voyager to Avalon’s farthest reaches, born of the wizard Merlin and the death woman Hallia. Right now he looked both surprised and puzzled, as if he couldn’t tell whether the voice he’d heard was very near or very far away. But he seemed to sense, somehow, that it came from his son—his only child, whom he’d never had the chance to know. His face creased in the very first hint of a smile.

“It’s me,” cried Tamwyn, his throat suddenly tight. “It’s me, your—”

Just then Krystallus faltered. He clutched his chest, as though he’d been pierced by an arrow, and fell to his knees on the rocky ridge. The half-smile vanished, replaced by an agonizing look of pain. And something more, as well: a look of having found something precious, at last, before losing it forever all time.

“Father!” screamed Tamwyn, trying to stretch out his arms. But his arms couldn’t reach far enough. He could only watch helplessly as his father crumpled. The torch, still blazing despite the fierce wind, dropped to the ground beside him—then went out.

• • •

“Don’t die!” shouted Tamwyn, sitting up. “Don’t—”

Someone shook him by the shoulders, while a pair of pink eyes stared down at his face. “The man is now, Tamwyn me laddy. Wakes up! Even with me oldsy ears, I’d have heard you ten leagues away.”

Tamwyn wiped his brow, wet with perspiration, then blinked his eyes. They felt strangely swollen. “I’m fine, Shim, just fine.”

“Must dine? You is waking up hungrily?”

The young man grimaced. And then, to make sure that Shim heard him clearly, he shouted, “Just fine!”

Shim frowned, adding several more wrinkles to a face that was more than a thousand years old. “No, no, you isn’t. I is maybily just a smallsy and midgetly giant, but I knows a bad dream when I hears one.”

Tamwyn simply shook his head, making his hair swish against his shoulders.

The pink eyes narrowed. “Nobody who dreams so shoutingly is just fine! I is surely of that, surely as I am of me own little sniffer.” For emphasis, he patted the tip of his large, potato-shaped nose.

Because it was so difficult to talk with his hard-of-hearing companion, Tamwyn just waved his hands away. He looked around, trying to remember exactly where he was. But his dream was still so vividly so real, he felt disoriented. His father—and that torch—had seemed almost near enough to touch.

He gazed above his head at an overhanging slab of rock, coated so thickly with mosses and dwarf ferns that almost none of the rock itself could be seen. More moss lay beneath him, thicker than a black bear’s fur. Steam, rising from the hot spring that bubbled near his feet, made the air moist and

warm—much warmer, he felt sure, than out there beyond the overhang, on that snow-covered summit

Hallia's Peak! All at once, he remembered where he was. And everything that had happened to him before he trudged over here to the hot spring, where he'd fallen asleep. He remembered the Stargazing Stone. The terrifying vision of dark shapes in the sky, White Hands, and Rhita Gawr. And, on top of that, what he'd done to Elli.

Now she hates me, he thought angrily. What an ogre's lair he'd made of everything! At least none of their companions on the summit—especially Henni, that crazy hoolah who just loved to ridicule him—had seen what he'd done.

But his problems with Elli, painful as they were, didn't compare to the problems facing Avalon. Across his mind flashed the images of that vision—images of such peril and terror that he couldn't even fully comprehend them, let alone hope to prevent them from coming true.

Why had such a vision, concerning the very survival of Avalon, come to him of all people? He was still, at heart, just a bumbling wilderness guide—as far away from being the true heir of Merlin as Shim was from being a true giant.

Sure, he'd shown some flashes of magical power in the past few weeks, but most of that had been unintended—as well as destructive. What little good he'd done had been the work of the staff, not himself. And no matter how hard he'd tried to direct his growing powers with his thoughts, he always failed. The only power he could rely on was his ability to understand the languages of non-human creatures. But that wasn't true magic; it was really just another kind of listening.

He sliced a hand through the rising steam, as if he were cutting to the unavoidable truth: The vision *had* come to him. Avalon was in grave danger.

But what could he possibly do about it?

Pondering that question, he pulled his dagger from the sheath on his belt. Slowly, he twirled it in the dim light from the stars beyond the overhang, light that constantly wavered in the misty air. The dagger's blade and hilt were so old and battered that rust covered everything, even the random scuff marks. With a nod, he recalled the day, years before, when he'd plowed it up in a field. The old farmer he'd been helping had given it to him, calling it “a gift from the land.” And for Tamwyn it soon became his favorite tool, useful for everything from slicing fruit to carving wood.

Carving wood . . .

Suddenly an idea burst into his mind. Whether or not he could find a way to save Avalon—maybe he could, at least, find a way to save his relationship with Elli. If only he could just explain to her what had really happened there on the Stone, she'd understand about his fears. And also, perhaps, about his feelings.

Reaching for his pack, he pulled out a triangular slab of wood. He turned it over, watching its dark brown grains, streaked with orange, gleam in the misty light. As always, he was amazed at the lightness of this wood, called *harmóna* by the elves. It seemed more the stuff of clouds than of trees.

And lightness wasn't its only special quality. Tamwyn gently tapped its side and listened to the reverberating echoes that rumbled within, like a clinking chorus of wooden chimes. They took more than a minute to fade away. For *harmóna* was the fabled wood, found only in the westernmost forests of Woodroot, that elves had used for centuries to carve magical musical instruments: flutes so soft and gentle that their voices could calm a rushing river; drums so soulful that they could make the heart of any listener beat as fast as a hummingbird's wings; lutes that could play a lilting, sensuous song after only the slightest pluck.

Tamwyn had earned this slab of *harmóna*, in the days following Tressimir's funeral, by working as a woodcarver in Brionna's home village, while Elli went to visit her old friend High Priestess Coerri. He had stayed there for five days, carving furniture and waterwheel gears during the mornings, exploring deer trails and faerie glens in the afternoons, and joining elven songfests in the evenings.

He'd been offered other forms of pay for his work, including a length of elven rope far more sturdy than the twine he wore around his waist, but he'd said no. For he'd needed this wood.

He stroked its edge, visualizing the contours of the harp that he was going to carve for Elli. It would play wondrously, as only this magical wood could do. And it would replace Elli's first harp, made by her beloved father—which Tamwyn had managed to crush within seconds of first meeting her. She had, it seemed, almost forgiven him for that, until he'd ruined things all over again last night. Now this new, magical harp was his best—maybe his only—hope.

He looked at the slab of wood. *Yes, by the bark of the Great Tree.* This new harp would be both an apology for the past . . . and maybe, as well, an invitation for the future.

He swallowed. What future could they have, though, if Avalon was conquered by Rhita Gawr? The warlord from the spirit realm won what he'd called his *ultimate triumph*.

Even through the rising mist, the lines of Tamwyn's jaw and brow looked suddenly hard-edged. *Must do something. What, I don't know. But I still have to try.* He nodded at the slab, as if he were speaking to it. *By morning, I need to have a plan. Or at least the beginning of one.*

Yet morning was just an hour or two away.

Chewing his lip thoughtfully, he took up his dagger again. Then, with considerable care, he made his first slice in the wood. It cut as easily as the froth on a mug of Stoneroot ale, seeming to sense the movement of his blade even before he did. He began to work on what would eventually become the instrument's soundbox, not yet daring to carve on its delicately curved neck. The slab trembled ever so slightly in his fingers. All of a sudden, he realized that it was *asking* him something—a question that lay between wood and hand.

A harp, he answered in the same silent language that helped him speak with creatures of any kind. *Become a harp. One that is light to hold and lovely to play. One that will give endless joy to Elli.*

The wood made an airy, sighing sound. The dark brown grains seemed to realign, shaping themselves magically in Tamwyn's hand. And he knew beyond doubt that this would be the most beautiful thing he had ever carved.

Just right for her, he told himself. Then he blew a sigh, scattering the steam from the hot spring. For he knew that if the harp turned out well, it would be less because of his own skill than because of the wood. Once again, he needed a magical object *to do* something right. Not his own magic, his own power.

His gaze shifted to the ancient staff that lay on the moss beside him. Wisps of steam curled around its shaft, partly covering the green runes that stood for Merlin's Seven Songs, giving the staff an eerie, mysterious look. As if it belonged more to the Otherworld than this one. And perhaps it did. For this was Merlin's own staff, the legendary Ohnyalei, whose name meant *spirit of grace* in the Fincayr Old Tongue.

Tamwyn frowned. How he longed to truly deserve that staff] To be a real wizard—someone who had fully mastered his powers, who could wield magic just as confidently as he could now wield his whittler's knife. Someone who could rise to the crisis that his world would soon confront—in just a few more weeks, as Rhita Gawr had boasted.

Trolls' tongues! he cursed to himself. *Quit dreaming, will you? You're the last person who could possibly help.*

Perhaps, he thought grimly, he really had no choice but to accept his fate as the child of the Dark Prophecy . . . whose destiny was to bring about the very end of Avalon. No matter what the Lady of the Lake had told him about choosing his own fate, more and more the Prophecy seemed inescapable.

A frosty gust of wind tore across the mountaintop, hurling snow and ice over the rocks outside the overhang. Even under the shelter, some snow blew into the hot spring, making the water hiss angrily. Steam scattered, Shim's white hair stood on end, and all the tiny ferns on the overhang shivered.

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