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Opening extract from

Crown of Dreams

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The Dragon's Lair



Mordred reined in his horse and eyed the cave behind the waterfall. A strange green glow came out of it, lighting up the valley. Water dripped from the trees, from his cloak and off the end of his nose. Why did dragons have to make their lairs in a land where it rained all the time?

"So what are you waiting for?" he snapped. "This must be it. Go in there and bring me King Arthur's crown."

His bloodbeards looked at each other uneasily. Seeing Mordred clench his fist, their captain drew his sword and rode

reluctantly towards the wall of green water. His horse rolled its eyes and dug in its hooves.

"I think the horses can smell the dr- dragon, Master," he stammered.

"Nonsense!" Mordred said. "The shadrake's forgotten we were supposed to be following it. You all saw it fly off. If it had stuck around, we might have found this godforsaken place sooner."

"Horses sense more than men, Master," the captain pointed out, glancing nervously at the sky.

"Go in on foot, then!" Mordred used his good leg to kick the bloodbeard off his horse. "You can still run if you need to, unlike me. We'll wait out here in case the shadrake comes back."

The captain shuddered. But he knew

better than to argue with his master. Gripping his sword, he vanished into the hillside. Shortly afterwards they heard a muffled yell, followed by the rattle of falling debris. The water glittered eerily green, spooking the horses again. The men paled and crossed themselves.

"Oh, for Annwn's sake!" Mordred snapped. "Do I have to do everything myself? Leave your horses out here and follow me."

His stallion snorted at the water, but stopped playing up when Mordred growled at it. He ducked over the horse's neck to avoid the spray. Its hooves echoed inside the rocky tunnel, which sloped downwards and burrowed deep into the hillside. At every turn, the eerie green glow brightened.

Sweat bathed Mordred as he remembered

his underground sickbed, where he'd almost died after his uncle Arthur wounded him with Excalibur during their final battle. But that had been a whole year ago. King Arthur was dead. The Sword of Light was in the hands of Arthur's daughter, who was afraid to blood the blade in case it stopped her taking the sword back to Avalon, where it would help bring her father back to life. Mordred had no such worries. As soon as he got hold of his uncle's crown, he'd ride to Camelot and blood his blade as many times as was necessary to claim the throne.

They emerged in a vast cavern, which stank of dragon. Jewelled daggers, rusty swords and dented shields were piled around the walls, along with what looked suspiciously like human bones. One of the piles had

avalanched, and his bloodbeard captain lay groaning underneath it. His men hurried over to help.

"Leave him," Mordred snapped, seeing that the man was still breathing. "Find the crown, you fools! Quickly, before the shadrake comes back."

While his men searched through the dragon's hoard, Mordred rode his horse slowly around the cavern, prodding at the treasure with his spear. "Where is it, Mother?" he whispered.

"Here, my son," whispered a woman's voice from the shadows.

Mordred froze. His mother's spirit lived in the underworld of Annwn now, and until today he'd always needed her dark mirror to speak to her. "Where?" he said warily.

"Right under your feet, you foolish boy," the witch hissed. "What do you think is making the light in here?"

Mordred's horse stopped dead and threw up its head, banging him on the nose. He looked down and sucked in his breath.

His mother's body lay half buried under the treasure, her dress torn and stained. A crown encircled her dark hair, glittering with coloured jewels. As his horse's hooves dislodged the pile, he saw that one of these – a large green stone at her forehead – was glowing eerily. There wasn't a mark on her, and for a wild moment he thought she wasn't dead.

Then he saw her spirit rippling in the green light. *Dark magic.*

His gaze fastened greedily on the crown.

He slid clumsily out of his saddle and fell to his knees beside her. He tugged at her dress with his left hand, pushing the dragon's treasure off her body with the stump of his right wrist. "Help me, then!" he yelled at his bloodbeards.

They came running.

"Morgan Le Fay!" the captain breathed, still looking a bit dazed. "So this is where she ended up. I always wondered how she died."

"That dragon must've killed her," said one of the others, looking nervously at the tunnel behind them.

"Don't be stupid," Mordred snapped. "My mother's a powerful enchantress. She controlled the shadrake. It led us here, didn't it?"

Before his bloodbeards could point

out that the creature had abandoned them halfway to Dragonland, he reached for the crown. It was stuck, so he had to brace his good leg against the rock and pull. The crown came free with a sudden jerk, leaving a line of charred blisters across his mother's forehead, and rolled across the cave.

Mordred scrambled after it, picked it up and examined it carefully. Some of the jewels were missing, but it was definitely the same crown his uncle Arthur had worn in their final battle. Triumph filled him. He ran a finger over the dent his axe had made when he'd split the king's helmet from his head, and smiled at the memory.

"Behold the Crown of Dreams!" he announced, showing it to his men. "You see before you one of the four ancient Lights,

with more power than Excalibur, and twice as much magic as that useless Lance my cousin stupidly gave to her squire friend! This crown belonged to my uncle Arthur and gave him the power to command men and dragons, and now it's *mine*..." He lifted the glowing circlet above his head.

"Careful, my son!" said his mother in a tone that sent a chill down his spine. "Don't put it on yet."

Mordred scowled as his triumph evaporated. "Why not? I thought that was the whole idea. I've got Pendragon blood, so it won't harm me."

"I've got Pendragon blood too, foolish boy, and it *killed* me."

He lowered the crown and glanced uneasily at his mother's body, which had

begun to blacken and shrivel. "How?" he whispered. "How did it kill you?"

"I was careless. There's a jewel missing. I assumed it was a minor one, knocked out during the battle. But it's one of the magic stones, the one Arthur stored his secrets inside when he sat on the throne of Camelot. You've got to find that jewel and destroy it before the Crown of Dreams will accept you as the next Pendragon."

Mordred looked at the piles of treasure in despair. Find a single jewel among this lot? Worse, what if the stupid dragon had lost the stone on its way here, carrying the crown from the battlefield? It could be lying at the bottom of the Summer Sea.

"We'll be searching all year!"

"No you won't," the witch said. "Because

the stone's not lost. If my ex-maid's information is right, it's still at Camelot. Arthur must have taken it out before the battle as a precaution. He left it with Guinevere, and now your cousin has it."

"*Rhianna*!" Mordred clenched his fist in rage. He might have known King Arthur's daughter would stand in his way again. "We have to get it from her," he growled. "I need to raise another army."

"You don't need an army to catch a fly." His mother smiled. "Not even one that stings like your cousin. My ex-maid still has my mirror, so I can control her. This is what we'll do…"

1
Witch Maid

A year long in Avalon Arthur slept
While his queen in fair Camelot wept,
And a damsel with the Sword of Light
Fought shadows summoned by
the dark knight.

Rhianna fidgeted on the hard bench, fiddling with the ugly black pendant her mother had insisted she wear today in honour of her father's memory.

As princess of Camelot, she'd been given a seat at the front, below the round window with its dragon design where Queen Guinevere

had been kneeling for ages in a pool of red and gold autumn sunlight. The chapel was full, and in the hush she could hear people shifting their feet and coughing behind her.

She scowled at her mother's back, wishing she could go riding in the woods instead. It was exactly one year since her cousin Mordred had killed her father on the battlefield at Camlann and Merlin had brought the king's body through the mists to Avalon.

A *whole year* since she'd learned she was King Arthur's daughter, and she still hadn't completed her quest!

She swung her feet in their embroidered slippers in an effort to keep warm and wished she'd worn her boots instead. Her father wouldn't care if they looked silly with her dress.

The queen wore a simple blue gown with

no jewellery. Copper hair, the same colour as Rhianna's, flowed loose around her shoulders. She was sobbing softly, which did strange things to Rhianna's insides. She felt embarrassed that her mother could cry before all these people. Then she felt guilty because she couldn't find any tears herself.

"My father's *not* dead," she muttered, touching his sword, Excalibur, which was lying on the bench beside her. "I've told you a hundred times! He's going to return to Camelot, just as soon as you let me out of here so I can look for the last two Lights and complete my quest…"

A touch on her shoulder made her jump. At first she thought it was her father's ghost, since he often appeared when she got upset. But it was just her friend Elphin, who had ridden through the mists with her from Avalon last year.

The Avalonian prince's eyes glowed violet as he leaned forward to whisper in her ear. "Let your mother pray for him if it makes her feel better," he said. "Then she'll be all the happier when we wake King Arthur and bring him back from Avalon, won't she?"

"*If* we ever manage to wake him! It's been a year, Elphin… a whole year!"

"A year in which you've won the Sword of Light from the Lady of the Lake, fought off a shadrake from Annwn, mended the Lance of Truth, rescued your mother from Mordred's dark tower, and been named heiress of Camelot." Elphin's lips twitched. "Father's right, you humans are much too impatient sometimes."

"That's because we haven't got as long to live as you Avalonians," Rhianna said. But she smiled, too. Her friend was right. Though

things at Camelot weren't as good as they might have been if Mordred hadn't killed her father, they were a lot better now than before she and Elphin had ridden through the mists.

"Don't worry," Elphin whispered, still teasing her. "I won't let Mordred kill you before you finish your quest."

"*I* won't let him kill me, you mean," Rhianna said. "I've got Excalibur, remember? But it'll be winter again soon, and the knights are hardly going to let us ride out on a quest to Dragonland in the middle of a snowstorm, are they? You saw how much snow there was last year. I think they're delaying so they'll have an excuse to stop me going."

Her voice had risen. "Shh!" Elphin said, giving her shoulder a warning squeeze. "Your mother's looking at us."

The queen had finally stopped praying and turned to face the congregation. She frowned as she waited for Rhianna and Elphin to stop talking.

She cleared her throat and said, "Today we remember my lord Arthur Pendragon, who was slain by the traitor Prince Mordred on this day one year ago. Since the king cannot be with us in body, we'll honour his spirit, which still lives in his sword, Excalibur." She beckoned to Rhianna.

"Here we go," Rhianna muttered.

With a resigned sigh, she drew the Sword of Light from its red scabbard, which she wore at her left hip these days so she could draw the sword right-handed according to knightly code. Feeling a bit self conscious, she went to stand beside her mother. She rested the point of the

blade in the circle on the floor, where the squires would kneel to do their vigil before they became knights, and laid her hands on the white jewel set into Excalibur's hilt. The jewel warmed under her touch and began to shine faintly.

One by one, the knights walked up the aisle to kneel before Excalibur and renew their vows to their Pendragon. Sir Lancelot led them, his silver hair splashed with colour from the dragon window. He glanced up at the queen as he kissed the sword's hilt, and Rhianna saw her mother blush. "May King Arthur's spirit live forever!" he said loudly, before returning to his seat.

Sir Bors and Sir Agravaine were next, followed by the young knight Sir Bedivere, who everyone called 'Soft Hands'. Sir Bedivere winked at her and smiled in sympathy.

"Soon be over, Damsel Rhianna," he whispered.

The ceremony went on and on. Rhianna's feet turned into little blocks of ice, and her arms ached with holding the blade still so that it wouldn't cut anyone. In battle, Excalibur's magic always made her feel stronger. But today, she could feel something working against the power of the sword.

She remembered feeling like this when she'd held its blade to Mordred's throat in the summer, and had a sudden sense of being watched. She peered suspiciously into the shadows at the back of the chapel and thought she saw a dark figure standing by the door.

"Come on, child," the priest said gently. "There are still a lot of people waiting."

Rhianna blinked and the figure vanished. She was being silly. Mordred would not dare

come into Camelot's chapel alone, not after being captured and thrown into the dungeon the last time he was here.

Cai, the squire who had been with the knights sent to meet her when she rode through the mists from Avalon, was next in line. He had grown taller over the past few months, which made him seem less plump. Since she'd knighted him in the summer so he could be her champion and carry the Lance of Truth, Cai should really have come up first with Sir Lancelot, not last with the squires. But she was glad to see her friend's cheeky grin.

As the boy knelt, a draught flattened the candle flames and the air chilled. Before he could kiss Excalibur's jewel, the doors of the chapel suddenly blew open with a crash, making everyone jump.

Some of the damsels sitting at the back screamed. As people looked round to see who had interrupted the service, a girl with wild black hair covering her face came running up the aisle and launched herself at Rhianna.

Startled, Rhianna took a step back and lifted Excalibur. Then she recognised her maid Arianrhod and quickly lowered the sword, confused.

"Oi, witch's maid, watch it!" Before Arianrhod could attack Rhianna again, an older squire called Gareth grabbed the girl's hair and pushed her into the crowd. Arianrhod stumbled over a bench and fell to the floor beneath it, writhing and whimpering.

People crossed themselves. Cai tried to help the girl. But everyone had crowded round to see what was wrong, and he couldn't get through.

The knights pushed through the crowd and picked the fallen bench off Arianrhod. "Get back!" Sir Bors bellowed. "Give the poor girl some air."

"Never mind air," a woman muttered. "It's fire that one wants. I always said you can't trust an ex-maid of Morgan Le Fay's. Keep her away from our princess, that's what I say!"

"Yeah," another agreed. "She just tried to kill Princess Rhianna."

"Nonsense," Sir Bedivere said, kneeling beside Arianrhod and catching her flailing wrists. "The noise scared her and she tripped, that's all. I think she's ill. Someone fetch Lady Isabel from the Damsel Tower."

"She was perfectly all right this morning," the first woman pointed out. "That wind wasn't natural, if you ask me – did you see

that shadow flee out the door?"

People nodded and began to mutter about witchcraft.

Rhianna had heard enough.

She jumped on to the front bench. "Don't be so STUPID!" she shouted. Her voice, loud enough to be heard across a battlefield, echoed around the chapel. Excalibur's white jewel blazed in response.

Everyone stared at her, startled into silence.

"Arianrhod won't hurt me," Rhianna continued. "She's my friend! Let me through."

The queen frowned at her. "Get down from there, darling. This isn't the time or the place for battle stunts…"

Seeing that it would be the fastest way through the crowd, Rhianna had already kicked off her slippers and was leaping barefoot

from bench to bench. She dropped beside Sir Bedivere, laid Excalibur down and knelt to comfort her friend.

Arianrhod clutched at Rhianna's dress, struggling to free herself from Sir Bedivere's grip.

The knight gave her a worried smile. "I daren't let go of her while she's like this, or she'll hurt herself," he said softly. "I think she might have hit her head when she tripped. We have to get her out of the chapel. There are too many people here."

"Maybe the priest can calm her down?" Sir Agravaine suggested.

Rhianna tried to catch Arianrhod's ankles, but her friend's foot thumped into her cheek.

"Leave her to the knights, darling!" called the queen. "You'll get hurt."

Just as Rhianna wondered if she would get more bruises from her maid than she'd had from her enemies, otherworldly music tinkled around the chapel, making everyone smile. Elphin stood in the doorway, haloed by golden autumn sunshine. He had fetched his Avalonian harp, which he continued to play as he clambered over the benches to join them.

He looked down at Arianrhod. "*Sleep now*," he sang, magic in his voice. "*Sleep*."

The girl's eyes closed, and she sank back to the floor. Sir Bedivere picked her up. The crowd sighed in relief.

Rhianna smoothed her dress and retrieved Excalibur. "Take her up to my room," she ordered in a shaky voice.

Sir Bors shook his head. "I'm not sure that's the best idea, Damsel Rhianna."

"What's wrong? She's my maid. She's always in there, anyway. What's she going to do? Put a spell on me?"

The knights looked doubtfully at Arianrhod, who hung limply now in Sir Bedivere's arms, her dark hair trailing to the floor. The squires and damsels whispered uneasily. The priest looked uneasy, too. The queen didn't seem to know what to do.

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" Rhianna said. "Sir Bedivere can carry her up there. I give him permission. You're not going to attack any of the damsels, are you Sir Bedivere?"

The girls giggled as 'Soft Hands' blushed. "No, Princess Rhianna," he said.

"Well then, that's settled. Put her in my bed. I'll be up to check on her as soon as we've finished my father's prayers."

This seemed to do the trick. People stopped muttering about witchcraft and remembered they were supposed to be praying for their king's soul.

The queen pulled herself together. "Rhianna's right. We can't let an attention-seeking maid disrupt my husband's service. Let's put this unfortunate interruption behind us. Who's next?"

The knights righted the benches, and everyone returned to their seats so the priest could bless them. Rhianna barely heard a word he said. She kept thinking of that dark figure she'd seen, before the doors had crashed open and Arianrhod attacked her.

Behind her, Elphin cradled his harp in his lap, a six-fingered hand resting across the strings to keep them quiet. He touched

her shoulder. "Are you all right, Rhia?"

She nodded. "I think so." She raised a hand to feel her cheek where Arianrhod had kicked her, and realised that sometime during the struggle she'd lost her father's black pendant.

After the service, people gathered in the courtyard. Stalls had been set up serving roast boar and mead to those who couldn't fit inside the dining hall. Squires and servants hung about in groups in the autumn sunshine, discussing Arianrhod's strange behaviour and whether the maid could really be a witch like her first mistress. One of the older knights muttered about a trial by fire. The squires, overhearing this, began to gather sticks and bits of straw to build a bonfire so they could 'test' the other damsels, who screamed and fled

towards the dining hall with the laughing boys in pursuit.

Rhianna elbowed through them all, chilled by their teasing. "Grow up!" she snapped at Gareth as she passed the squire. "How can you joke about burning someone? You know it's not Arianrhod's fault she had to serve Morgan Le Fay while the witch lived at Camelot."

She hadn't found her pendant in the short time she'd stayed behind in the chapel to look for it. One of the knights must have picked it up. She'd get it back later. Her friend was more important. She hurried to the Damsel Tower with Elphin at her heels.

Lady Isabel, the tall golden-haired woman who looked after the damsels, tried to stop the Avalonian boy at the door. But Rhianna seized his hand and pulled him inside. "I need him

to play his harp to help Arianrhod get better," she explained breathlessly.

Lady Isabel shook her head. "First Sir Bedivere, and now a fairy prince! I don't know what Camelot is coming to since you arrived, Damsel Rhianna." She grabbed the back of Cai's tunic as the boy tried to follow them in. "Not you as well, young squire! I draw the line at two boys in Rhianna's room at once."

"But she needs my help, too," Cai protested. "I'm the Pendragon's champion. *And* I'm a knight now."

"All the more reason why I'm not letting you up there." She turned the boy around and marched him firmly back into the courtyard. "You go off to lunch, young knight. It's not like you to miss the chance of a good meal."

Cai pulled a face and looked up at the high

windows of the tower in frustration. "Elphin's a lot more dangerous than me," he grumbled. "He might charm all the girls away to Avalon with his harp."

Rhianna smiled as she led the way up the stairs. "Just don't charm Arianrhod away until we find out what's wrong with her, will you?" she told her friend, pausing at the door to her chambers.

Elphin did not reply. He was looking past her, his eyes whirling purple. "That explains what happened to your father's pendant," he said in a wary tone.

She stared at her sleeping maid. Sir Bedivere had put her on the bed and pulled a cover over her, but Arianrhod was trying to kick it off. She seemed to be having some kind of nightmare. Rhianna's missing pendant dangled

from her hand, its chain wrapped about one slender wrist.

"It must have got tangled round her arm when I tried to help her in the chapel," she said in relief, rescuing the pendant. "She's having another bad dream, poor thing. Can you play your harp for her again?"

Ever since the guards had found the maid unconscious in the dungeon after Mordred's escape during the midsummer feast, Arianrhod had suffered from nightmares. No one knew exactly how she'd come to be down there. She claimed not to remember a thing.

Elphin ran his fingers over the strings, and Arianrhod's back arched. She cried out in her sleep and mumbled something. They caught the words "crown" and "jewel" and "Annwn".

He lowered his harp and shook his head.

"Sorry, Rhia. Something's working against my magic. I think she's under a spell."

"Morgan Le Fay again?" Mordred's mother had used the poor girl for a spell once before, cutting her cheek with a dagger and leaving a pentacle scar. Lady Morgan's spirit was in Annwn now, but the witch could still use her magic to reach the world of men.

"I don't know," Elphin said, still wary. "But your pendant's not black any more. Something's happening to the stone, look."