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Excerpts from

# The Crystal Crown



by

Brenda W. Clough

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by Brenda W. Clough

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**Introduction and  
Chapter One  
of  
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by  
Brenda W. Clough  
available from  
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## Introduction

If you've never met her before, you're going to love Brenda Clough. If you are one of the lucky readers who have enjoyed her later, award-nominated works, such as *How Like a God*, or *The Doors of Life and Death*, this book will give you the chance to see how a really talented writer develops.

*The Crystal Crown* is the first book of Brenda's I read. I bought a copy when we met at a book signing in Washington, DC. We were both new writers (my first book was published in 1983, hers in 1984.) At that book signing, I recall some of us kidding Brenda about the cover of her book, which featured a magical-looking, scowling figure of a man looming over a woman with prominent buns who was wearing what appeared to be, in Brenda's own words, "wet Kleenex." She took the kidding with good grace, and her own inimitable droll wit. I liked her immediately.

When I got home and read the book, I liked her even more. I had gotten very tired of fantasy heroes who went around thwacking skulls like Conan, or making mysterious magical passes like Gandalf. Brenda's hero, Liras, was a gentle soul, rather befuddled and endearing, who is suddenly thrust into all the awesome responsibility of becoming both a powerful Mage *and* a King. In the course of the book he grows up... without losing his charm, or his sense of humor. One of the things I liked best about the Kingdom of Averidan is that it isn't your average fantasy pseudo-Celtic background. Instead it's truly exotic...refreshingly different. When I found out that Brenda has traveled all over the world, as the daughter of a diplomat, I realized how skillfully she used her travels to create her own unique fantasy world. *The Crystal Crown* spins along so vividly that the reader is transported into that world. When you put the book down, it takes a moment to come back to the here and now. This is the hallmark of a true storyteller.

In *The Crystal Crown*, Brenda explored for the first time a theme that she has touched upon since in books such as *How Life a God*, or *The Doors of Life and Death*—the theme of the "gift" that seems, on

the surface to be wonderful, highly desirable, but actually causes strife, anguish, and can even destroy. In *The Crystal Crown* the “gift” is the bestowal of both magical and royal power—and the responsibility that goes along with it.

Of course the book is also full of adventure, magic, battles, and all the other things readers of fantasy expect and want. The fact that the story is told so well, in such a truly unique setting, is more than frosting on the cake—it’s ice cream, too.

Reader, if this is book is your first exposure to Brenda Clough’s writing, I envy you. Check out her website, [www.sff.net/people/Brenda](http://www.sff.net/people/Brenda), for all of her titles, and know that you have further delights in store for you after you finish this volume... some of them set in the same Kingdom of Averidan, others in far-off lands, such as Antarctica, Uzbekistan, and even the Moon.

As for me, I’ll have to wait until Brenda finishes her next project. But, hey, since we’re friends, I get to nag her about writing faster!

—A.C. Crispin

Kings are not born; they are made by universal hallucination.  
George Bernard Shaw—*The Revolutionist's Handbook*

\* \* \*

“... the inhabitants of this otherwise charming land are afflicted with a unique custom for selecting their monarch. The Shan King (or Queen) must be pedigreed, as we could say, of the old royal blood. Very proper, you think? But this class is, due to the unregulated proliferation of semi-fictional genealogies, exactly congruent to almost the entire population of Averidan.

“The country is therefore of necessity subject to the most ludicrous monarchs, sometimes even one who has neither the wish nor the vocation for the august office. Chaos in domestic policy, in foreign relations, and in economic direction would be perpetual were it not for the structure that a tortuous bureaucratic system imposes, itself a source of much discontent. Thus we may draw this moral that in whatever idyllic situation God may place a nation, their natural folly will at whatever cost contrive endless unhappiness ...”

—from *Journals of a Scholar's Travels Over Sea*

**Part One**  
**Uphill**

## Chapter One

### Salad Days

The copper gong tolled when I was in the garden.

“Whoever it is, I’m not at home,” I ordered, for I had just finished the most difficult feature of klimflower vine pruning: untying dozens of thorny, sticky green stalks from their trellis and laying them out on the grass. “I’m just at the best part, if I can find my shears.”

Ferd bowed and went back into the house. Sap had run over my heavy gardening gloves, and I rubbed them on my breeches. With irritation I saw I had left the shears on the grass, where they were now cloaked by vines. Picking my way over the thorns, I teased the shears free. The sap was turning white and gluey in the late spring sunshine, and a thorn had caught me on the ankle. “Sir?”

“Yes, Ferd, what is it?” My mind was taken up less with the importance of proper pruning to future klimflower production than with the maddening tendency of my gloves to stick tightly to the shears.

“Sir, it’s the Collegium. They’re here.”

“What nonsense is this, Ferd?”

“The Collegium, sir, the Collegium of Counselors to his late Majesty.” Now I stared at Ferd, who jerked his head at the house. I turned and saw that the central court was seething with nobles in vivid ceremonial dress.

“The whole Collegium? They won’t fit into the house. They’ll step on the cat. What about refreshments?” An icy blast of impending doom chilled the sweat on my forehead, as if my cozy refuge had already been riven by the storm.

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that any more, sir.” Ferd grinned until his face was nearly circular, and then twitched it



swiftly into a solemn mask as the Counselors approached. They had rearranged their procession to get it up the narrow garden path. I could have looked more calmly at my own funeral cortege. First in rank was Xantallon, Master Magus of Averidan, in formal scarlet silk robes, followed by a page bearing his glass hydromantic wand. Chief priestesses followed, each preceded by the banner of her order, and commanders of various armed forces in parade armor. Those unable to approach in procession crowded the terrace. From every window and door, and even the roof, my servants, my relatives, the Counselors' friends and relatives, my neighbors, waited staring. My quiet walled garden shimmered with the crazy brilliance of a madman's mosaic floor.

I had been working in a corner beyond the prostrate vines, but no magus can be deterred by mere thorns. Xantallon simply walked a handspan above. Even his long trailing sleeves disdained the thorns and floated just above.

"We seek Shan Liras-ven Tsormelezok, son of Shan Torver-lis Lord Tsormelezok, son of Shan princess Siral-sei Mirtserelok, who was fourth daughter of Shan Norlen-yu Mirtserelok the 517th king. Are you he?" The Master Magus' voice was unexpectedly deep, and carried to every ear. It was impossible to more than glance at his deep black eyes. I stared instead at my vines, and his long braided white mustaches, which fell to his waist. A scalding-hot blush burned in my face, my neck, and even my hands. I would have given anything to be able to reply, "Sorry, he lives next door," but my tongue seemed stuck sideways in my mouth.

"Are you he?" the Magus repeated, stepping closer. Then he added, in an undertone, "Speak up! and say, 'I am.'" Startled, I glanced up. He gave an almost imperceptible nod. Behind him the page winked at me.

"Ah—I am," I said. After the Magus my voice sounded reedy.

"And you are so listed in the Genealogies of Averidan?"

"I am."

"Then our quest is at an end." He turned to the assembled company. "Brethren, I present to you Shan Liras-ven Tsormelezok, the king of the Children of the Sun." Instantly everyone bowed. Some signal must have passed through the courtyard and passageway, for from the street beyond the gate came the sound of musicians playing an anthem as loudly as possible. The procession broke up as everyone surged forward cheering. I grabbed the Magus' silk sleeve, pressing close enough to whisper, "But what if I don't want

to be king?"

"There's no provision in custom for that," he replied in a very low voice, and then more loudly, "Your Majesty recognizes me, I presume, but you may not have met my grand-nephew Xalan, apprentice to the art Magical." The page came forward and bowed. Close up he was older than I had thought, but still younger than I. As he straightened he muttered, "Relax and enjoy it." Then he added aloud, "My felicitations, Majesty, on your accession."

The rest of the day I do not clearly recall even now. The entire Collegium was presented to swear their allegiance to me. It took all afternoon, and every name and face had escaped me the next day. I do remember shivering in the sunshine, knowing that what every Viridese half fears had befallen me. I was being drawn into that other Averidan that so closely overlaps our own: the Averidan of history and plaiv-embodied legend. Those of that world are larger than life, brave heroes and bold villains and glorious queens. In their presence my orderly little world was fading and shrinking, like a cheap embroidered shirt after a wash. Soon it would quite burst at the seams, leaving me bare.

I came a little to myself when the procession re-formed to go back to the Upper City. My place was near the end, in the royal sedan chair that is so heavily gilded ten men must carry it. "Wait," I said. "Don't I get to change? wash my hands? pack a lunch?"

A very grand somebody in a blue and gilt outfit (later I found he was Lord Director of Protocol) told me, "The custom is for the new king to be brought to his Palace as he is, since it will be the last time he wears common garb." I shuddered. "Your Majesty will find everything needful in readiness."

At the head of the parade someone began a traditional thanksgiving chant which was picked up by the musicians outside. With surprising speed the procession began to move through the courtyard and out the gate. I tried to hang back but the Magus, who was behind me, said, "You can't stop now." As we moved off I looked back. Through the golden lattices of the chair my garden seemed to be tiny but clear, like the engraving of a beautifully arranged landscape on the bezel of a ring. With a pang I glimpsed the shears forgotten on the trampled grass, with my gloves still stuck to their handles.



Averidan has been a nation for ten thousand years. So custom has near the force of law, and of these customs none is more rigid

than those decreeing the Shan King's activities from his selection to his coronation. Some previous kings-elect had died before ascending the throne. I was certain they had perished from boredom.

Most of a new king's schedule is common knowledge—a dreary mill of rehearsing coronation rites, customary words and behaviors for court occasions, and being measured for endless robes, tunics, sets of armor. Though much of the business of rule was closed to me until after coronation, I was not spared a sea of titles and names: diplomats, organizations, subjects, magi, all to be addressed correctly. The infinitely complex negotiations of a treaty with Cayd, our neighbor to the west, and the wars there, alone filled a dozen archival scrolls. Although I had lived all my life in the City I had never dealt in politics. Mother had handled family contacts with the court. I was only nineteen, a shy gardener and horseman. So all this new life came very hard, and to me was mostly obscured by pain for the loss of the old existence.

Slowly, over that miserable week, I groped to a decision. I should never be worth anything as a king. It was all a dreadful mistake. Once articulated, this idea begat a bright vision: I would step down and go home, lock the gate and stay there forever with my cat and horses and flowers, while the Collegium chose out some other unfortunate to be Shan King. The picture was so compelling I invited my only possible ally, my brother Zofal-ven, to dinner that evening. Zofal is the eldest of us, and in taking over my late sire's horse farm had nursed the enterprise from a rich man's hobby into a business that nearly paid for itself, if one was not too exacting about book-keeping. In my own diffident way I had assisted him. All decisions that Mother did not actually settle for me I was accustomed to consult Zofal upon. So in this pass I turned to him.

Whether in my inexperience I worded the order to my scrivener poorly, or whether my relatives had been itching for the opportunity, when the dinner hour came I found to my dismay my entire immediate family gathered in the small green-and-white salon. It was the first time we had assembled since my selection, and the two family factions, each headed by its strong-minded widow, grouped on opposite sides of the long green glass table. But since there is no contest between the two Viridese national preoccupations—food and argument—Mother did not open formal hostilities until the sumptuous meal was over.

“How greatly the loss of your brother must affect you,” Mother

began, "Yibor-soo, dear step-daughter-in-law!"

This barb—for the late Shan King Eisen never liked his sister—made Yibor smile toothily. She wore a particularly unfortunate ensemble of bright lime green that heightened her resemblance to a plump angry snake. "Ah! could my beloved brother only be assured of an illustrious successor," she said, "how sound he would sleep in the Deadlands!"

Mother glanced at me to be sure I had caught the innuendo. "Our side of the family has never lacked greatness," she retorted. "At least if, in the cause of family unity, one overlooks certain alliances." Mother turned to the head of the table, where I had been installed on a tall thronelike ebony chair thickly inlaid with curly patterns of silver wire. "Your revered father, Liras dear, was a man of *chun-hei*, of impractical honorableness. He made his mistakes, but how sad that he cannot see you now!" Taking the traditional silk handkerchief from her wide yellow silk sleeve she blotted imaginary tears, carefully, so as not to smudge her eye paint.

Now that the meal was over I was allowed to rise. Leaving Mother and Yibor to it I drew Zofal to the tall triple windows. But before I could pour out my troubles he took up the long trailing end of my white silk sleeve to examine the emerald-sewn hem. "Nice, little brother, very nice. Any you outgrow, be sure to hand down to me."

"To Ixfel with the robe, Zofal!" I said, jerking the hem away. "Tell me what's happening at home. Have you seen Sahai? Has the new mare foaled yet?"

"She did indeed—it was a little filly, too, gray as a storm cloud and with her dam's one white stocking. But how can you worry about things like that now? I've got something important to discuss."

"So do I."

But Zofal cut in. "I was thinking about the guardsmen," he said.

"What guardsmen?" I said, confused.

"The City guardsmen, you know, your Home Defense. You remember how they've always been infantry? Well, it's about time we had some cavalry too, don't you think? Just the act to start off your illustrious reign."

"And you would patriotically sell mounts to the City for that purpose," I finished. "Zofal, you make me tired. Here I've been abducted and forced into this ghastly role. Turning over a nimble coin should be the last thing on your mind."

"You've always been the stupid one," he snapped. "What are you fishing for, sympathy? Here you are, a reclusive nobody, now

Lord of the Shan, child of fire, king of Averidan.”

“Oh, Liras-ven, I’m so excited for you!” my sister broke in. “How dreadfully white you looked the other day—you’re much more impressive now.”

“Don’t tell me,” I sighed. “You have something important on your mind.”

“Oh, yes! how clever of you, Liras.”

“Such an unusual condition for you, Siril, that it doesn’t take much perception to see it,” Zofal said with fraternal malice.

She ignored him and went on, “Can we live in the Palace with you, Liras-ven? There must be plenty of room. I’ve always wanted to.”

“I don’t know the custom,” I said. “Yibor-soo never stayed here in King Eisen’s time.”

“Oh, but you know how he felt about her,” she said. “I’m sure my husband would be delighted. He’s always held you in such high regard.”

“Silly girl. Nothing’s settled until Coronation anyway.” Rosil-eir sauntered up and helped himself to a pear from the bowl on the windowsill. “I’ve heard stories about kings-elect that would make you think twice. You’d never get me on the throne.” The fruit was ripe and yellow, and he bit through the rind with a wet juicy sound.

I wanted to ask about the stories but Zofal cut in again. “Relax—now you never will.”

“And I’m sure young Liras here was a compromise candidate,” Rosil said to Zofal. “There are so many more obvious choices. You, for example.”

“Or yourself, you mean,” Siril said. “You envious pig! Liras will be a wonderful Shan King, you’ll see. And I hope he has you lapidated, for rudeness and spiteful remarks.”

“If those were capital offenses we’d all be flat and dry in the sun,” I said, wishing all my quarrelsome kin at the bottom of Averidan harbor. I would just have to confide in Rosil and Siril as well; they would have to know sooner or later and Rosil’s support especially would be invaluable.

But before I could say a word Mother swept up to me and cried, “Liras, I won’t have you listening to the poison of this son of a jealous viper!”

“Viper, am I?” Yibor’s silver filigree hair ornaments shook with her outrage. “Heaven alone knows by what error the son of a manipulative old hag was selected Shan King!”

I hissed in Zofal's ear, "We should have kept the conversation general. What can they have been saying to each other?"

"Do something," he whispered back. "You're the host."

I reached over and grabbed one of my half-sister-in-law's chubby hands. "Actually, Mother, I'm not sure that dear Yibor-soo isn't correct."

"Correct?" Mother's glare should have killed me on the spot. My sister rolled her eyes at me and began to giggle.

Like a fool I announced, "I'm sure my selection was a mistake, and I'm going to refuse to be Shan King. They can choose someone else."

Icy silence greeted this statement. Zofal stared at me with his mouth open, and Mother collapsed into a chair in shock. After a moment of astonishment Yibor pulled her hand away.

"You must be mad," she said to me. "Rosil, does the Collegium know about this?"

Rosil was silently laughing too hard to reply at first. "Oh, Liras, Zofal is right—you are a ninny. No, mother, I don't think he's told the Collegium yet. I can't wait to see their faces when he does. No one has ever declined the Shan kingship before. They'll have to spend all summer searching the chronicles for precedents."

"Don't you dare!" Yibor pointed at me, focusing the strength of will that makes her such a worthy opponent for Mother. "Don't you dare decline the throne! How can you even consider letting us all down!"

"But I don't want it," I argued. "Why should it be me?"

Mother leaped from her seat, throwing off the shocked expression like a worn-out garment. "Liras, you are the silliest of all my children. Where do you get these foolish notions? You've always been too shy and worrisome. The Collegium selected you, and you are going to rule unless you can offer a really substantial reason against it, substantial, do you hear me?"

"There aren't any reasons," Zofal said in disgust. "Just the usual woolly-mindedness."

"There are, too," I protested. "I'll have to live here instead of in my own home. I'll have to do things that bore me, see people I dislike, and learn things no one wants to know. And worst of all," I continued, losing my temper, "I'll be so important all my friends and relatives will be around my neck for the rest of my life!"

"Liras!"

"What an awful thing to say!"

Whenever foreign sages comment on our love of division they tell us nations need unity. The Viridese always reply that we do join to face real trouble—that is, when the hearers do not split into two parties to debate the assertion. That night I learned it was true. Faced with my lack of nerve the fractured Tsormelezoks united to scold me back into line. Zofal and Siril were genuinely hurt by my assertions and said so at great length, while Yibor and Rosil agreed loudly that though our side of the family was weak no one had actually gone insane before.

I might have weathered their wrath but could not stand against Mother. She had held us all in the rigid yet remote grasp Viridese women wield—for we were a matriarchy once, and will be again.

Now she solemnly told me, “We are all counting on you, Liras-ven. You must be responsible not only for us, your family, but for the Shan. I’m sure the Collegium chose you for the family qualities you aren’t even aware you possess. You must simply *learn* to be Shan King.”

It was as though she lay crushing stone weights on me, a lapidation under the loads of kingship and responsibility. As usual I bolted, turning and racing for the green-paneled door. My relatives were taken by surprise and I had just grasped the brass door-ring when the door swung in of its own accord, tumbling me flat.

With cries of apology and horror the Chamberlain helped me to my feet again, and when I had been dusted off he said, “The Master Magus is here, Your Majesty.”

“Is he outside?” I gasped, weak with relief. “Show him in. Mother, you must excuse me—I have business.”

Balked victory gleamed in Mother’s eye, and I quailed at the sight. “We haven’t finished discussing this by any means, Liras. Come, children, come, dear step-daughter-in-law.”

The Magus had brought Xalan with him, and an incredibly old, white-clad Sun Priestess—Arixhel, Guardian of the Crown. The three, ushered in and announced by the Chamberlain, bowed low before me. I nodded, as I had been taught, but did not sit again. Instead I paced, hampered by my long silk robe. “You should have told the Collegium this before,” I said. “I do not want to be Shan King. I want to raise my horses, tend my garden, and go home. I don’t want to be King.”

“And what of Averidan?” the Magus asked.

“Well, let them find another monarch. There are enough of us to search among. Plenty of the Shan want the job.” I caught the glance



exchanged between the Master Magus and the old priestess.

The old lady poked a skinny yellow finger at me. "The blood runs thin in your veins, boy, does it?"

"It does not!" I had the feeling of being manipulated by these two old adepts.

"No time like the present to prove it," the Magus said. "Come with us."

"Let's not get drawn into proofs and such," I said with as much dignity as I could muster. "I've had a trying day. Besides, the chamberlains will be along soon to help put me to bed."

"I think not," said the Magus. "All this—" he gestured around the room—"All this is the trappings of power. It is time you saw the source."

"That's not quite right, Magister," the old priestess said. "You will find, child, that all these rites and courtesies are necessary. They give both support and restraint, help and hindrance." Her bright black eyes were unwinking on mine, birdlike, as if to search out some flaw in me. Then in a much less kind tone she added, "And then of course you might not."

"We ought not to speak of this here," the Magus said. "Let us go." He turned and led the way without waiting to see if I followed.

"Where are we going?" I asked Xalan.

"The room is called Navel, since it's reputed to be the center of the realm," he replied. "It's above the dome in the Temple of the Sun."

"I've never heard of it."

"Oh, lots of people know of it. But no one but the king goes in, after the coronation. We'll just show you the way of it."

The Magus turned in a swirl of wide red sleeves. "Do not speak of this here," he repeated.

In silence we passed east through the Palace. Although the hour was late, the wide marble halls were all brightly lit—white porcelain lamps glowed from the ceilings, and white candles were supported high on the walls in continuous glass holders cast in the shape of an endless line of torchbearers. In happier times I had seen the Palace at the top of its hill at night, outshining even the zenith moon, staining the sky above it with a smear of diluted night. At the time I had thought it very pretty.

Since Temple and Palace share the scarp of the Upper City we used the Shan King's private connecting door. The sanctuary was empty when we arrived. Worshipers favor the daylight hours, when



the visible disc of the Sun can regard their sacrifices and hear their wishes. I looked across the enormous circular mosaic floor to the fire that always burns on the central altar. Then I stared up at the golden dome above. All I could see was the opening that lets smoke out.

"There's a room up there?" I asked. "How does it fit round the chimney?"

"The flues bend so as not to let rain in," Xalan whispered. "So there's enough space for a room." We did not cross but went around near the wall to a brass-bound door. The Magus unlocked it with a key from the bunch at his waist. We passed through into a narrow stone corridor, and then through another locked door on our right which led to a dim stone staircase.

"Don't climb too fast," the Magus warned.

We scaled three short straight flights and then started up a long narrow flight without landings that curved ever so slightly to the right. My legs got heavier as we ascended. I used to ride every day, and had felt complacent about my physique. Now I was forced to slow my pace and gasp for air as the stair curved on into eternity. It was discouraging to hear old Arixhel pattering close behind me. "Keep up, kinklet, don't lag," she urged. The magus had disappeared around the curve above me. Xalan was not so far ahead, and looked back. In the dimness I could not see whether he was laughing or sympathetic.

We caught up to the Magus at a place where the darkness seemed thinner and the air cooler. There were still no landings, but a wider place had been laid on either side of the steps where we could sit. I collapsed, and listened to my own panting breath and the thump of blood in my ears for a while. Then I realized I was the only one so distressed. The magi weren't winded at all. "That's unfair," I said, sitting up. "Using magic to lift while I use muscles."

"You won't have to come up here often, I hope," the Magus said. "But we aren't waiting for you to catch your breath. Look!"

I saw that a low opening on the left wall was a deep-set window. Looking out I could see south to the sleeping city below. Pin pricks of light shone from scattered windows, and a redder glow marked a party's bonfire to the east. Beyond, the dark sea curved around the headland and into the many canals of the harbor, quiet now as it never is during the day. Directly below me, the glazed tiles of the Palace wall wore a nimbus of light, shining from windows I was too high to see. And above, the sky-dome enfolded us round in starry

hands.

We were far higher than the tallest Palace spires. For a moment I could not think where we were. "Ah, I see," I exclaimed. "We're climbing in the Temple dome itself."

"Yes. The stair is built between the outer and inner dome. We have ascended more than halfway, and circled three-quarters of the way around. From here the ascent is easier."

When we started again I noticed the stairway curving in slightly more. The steps became shallower, and the ceiling, which had been too high to see, dropped gradually until I could brush it with an outstretched hand. There were sections now of landings, or perhaps the stair had changed into a corridor with occasional steps sloping inward and up.

Suddenly we came to the end. The corridor took a sharp turn, went up a few more steps, and stopped at a plain stone door. There was no handle. The Magus laid a hand on the stone and muttered some formula under his breath. Then he lifted his hand away slowly, and the door followed, swinging outward.

The Navel of Averidan is a small room hollowed out in the dome's keystone, with no floor to speak of. The walls form a cup shape, and since the room is open to the sky the whole effect is that of sitting at the bottom of a giant's wine cup. A stone ledge runs around the room just wide enough to sit on with care. I edged around to give the Magus space to shut the door. The room was so small I would have been able to lean across and touch him, if there was anything to hold onto for balance. Rain water hid the bottom of the room.

"Aptly named," I said. "It's very like an enormous navel. And certainly no one can overhear us here on the City's highest dome. So tell me about kings and their power."

"No," the Magus said. "It would be more instructive to know of your views. What does a king do?"

Together the official history in chronicles and traditional folklore of plaiv painted quite a clear picture of the Shan King: "He wards his people," I said slowly. "Sees clearly, rules justly, chooses rightly. A hero." Before this mighty golden image, potent yet calm, taller than life, my own self seemed feeble and ridiculous. "Me, I can stay on a horse's back," I burst out. "Dose them when they eat too much, raise fancy peonies, prune klimflowers. I ride in my garden with my animals. I'm sure you made a mistake, you meant to pick a hero. Why don't you choose someone with some special gift—" I was thinking of Norlen-yu, my great-grandfather, the best swordsman

of his time—"someone who does something useful, and let me go?"

"Nonsense," Arixhel said.

"Only a Child of the Sun can be selected, but not every royal kinsman can wear the Crystal Crown," the Magus said. "The Collegium selected you, but this is the final test, the touchstone."

"Some of the mistakes the Collegium has made, too!" Arixhel said cheerfully. "Embarrasses everybody. But we'll soon see if you're one of them."

I was given no time to ponder the implications of this. The Magus said, "Now, Xalan, the lantern." Xalan passed over a small copper lamp of the sort sold to sailors or travellers, that holds a flame safely. The Magus slid the flap aside, releasing flickering light and a smell of heated metal. The night's darkness became suddenly much more noticeable. He directed the beam down past our feet. "Look!"

Thus I first saw the Crystal Crown. It glowed hotly under the water at our feet, throwing back the lantern light tenfold. The motion of the water, and the lamp moving in the Magus' hand, made the Crown seem to throb with its own life. "It's yours," the Magus said. "Pick it up."

The water was not deep. I almost expected the Crown to be white-hot as well as glowing-bright. But it was cool as its surrounding water. When I raised it dripping to my knees it flared almost too bright to look at.

"I don't remember the Shan King wearing this," I said, awed.

"He did—that light refraction will pass," the Magus said. "You see why we brought you here at night. Imagine what the Crown would be like at noon." I winced at the idea. "The Crown is the source of the Shan King's power. Your predecessors applied it to different things, as the needs of the kingdom dictated and their own talents took them. There are limits, of course—the Crown confers no omnipotence. You will have to concentrate on a few things. Other realms have charters or commandments, to keep continuity with their past. The Shan have the Crystal Crown."

I didn't really listen, as I turned the Crown on my lap. It was of an attractive substance, neither metal nor glass, white yet transparent, faceted like a gemstone. It was shaped to cover the head from brow to nape like a helmet. Its glow was entirely reflection, and also seemed linked to its warmth—when I cupped one of the angles in my hands that portion dimmed as it took heat from me.

"Power," the Magus was lecturing, "is a heavy responsibility. We magi wield similar talents, but we are many, and can support

each other. The Shan King is alone. We direct our powers to goals fixed by custom time out of mind, but each monarch must find his own path. In a culture bound by adamantine tradition, you shall be the most and the least free. We will instruct you, Shan Liras, as best we may, but in the end the King and the Crown must reach an understanding.”

I interrupted. “How does it work?”

The Magus sighed. “You simply put it on,” he replied.

Without a thought for all the hints I had been given I set the Crown on my head. At first I felt nothing. The Crown had been heavy in my hands, but rested light on my head. Gradually a mood of detachment overtook me. I relaxed, aware of every drop of blood flowing through my veins. The Crown seemed to pulse, in time with my heart. Every muscle loosened, but my mind was alert. I could imagine how I must look to my companions: my jaw slackening foolishly, my body slipping off the ledge into the water. From a great distance I heard the Magus snap, “Grab him, Xalan! You’re closest!”

The apprentice took hold of the slack of my robe, but it was so loose he shifted the grip to my elbow where the wide sleeve had fallen back. His hand touched my skin, and with a sudden shock, a sensation of bursting, I was actually looking at my own face. It looked as if I had been drinking—flushed and slack. My eyes were glazing and didn’t focus. With interest I noticed that the royal barber had cut my dark hair shorter than I used to wear it.

With a cry of surprise Xalan released my arm, slipped, and fell into the water. When I heard his exclamation twice I knew I heard once through my ears and once through Xalan’s. I seemed to be thinking two sets of thoughts at once. One set clamored that I was losing balance, slipping off my seat, and might either crack my skull on the stone ledge or break a leg bone falling into the water on top of Xalan.

The other set was trying to get me to stand up on the floor of the pool. The walls sloped down so sharply there was room to stand only on one foot, the stone ledge got in the way of my knees, and Arixhel was screeching in my ear, “You’re not supposed to do that, you wicked boy! Magister, make him stop!” The long sleeves of my red apprentice robe were soaked, dragging at my arms, and I was terrified the king would fall on me before I got my balance.

Above all this the detached bit of myself seemed to float. It had been not exactly conversing, but rather listening to and occasionally commenting on the discourse of someone sitting behind and above the bridge of my nose.

“... and the people wept aloud and cried, ‘How shall we then know the next king, if you indeed perish and leave us? And Shan Vir-yan replied, ‘You shall always choose among those of my get, one of the Children of the Sun. Yet though I have many sons and daughters, as my father does also, only one may rule. Today I declare to you my heir: after me shall my granddaughter, the warrior Shan Mir-hel, rule. For I foresee the need of a mighty defender in Averidan. And against the day of her accession, I and my sons among the Magi have prepared a Crown.’ For in the days of Shan Vir-yan he wore no diadem or crown, but carried with him instead the fiery corona of the One his sire—”

“I recognize that,” I said. “It’s a plaiv, a version of the Passing of Shan Vir-yan. But I never heard the part about the Crown.”

The cool beautiful voice ignored me and continued, “And so even from a distance the king was always known. But the Shan, his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, had no such glory.”

“Just as well,” I said. “Otherwise by now we would none of us be able to sleep at night.”

“So it came to pass that the monarch is chosen by the Crown, and not otherwise, since the magics laid on the Crown by its maker Shan Xao-lan at the command of their father the king were such that the unworthy, or the evil, or those not born Shan are slain by the Crown when they first wear it. And thus the custom arose—”

“Wait a minute,” I interrupted. “Did you say *slain*?”

The voice paused for a moment and then went on, “The custom arose that after a monarch was agreed upon by the Shan he would be brought to a private place to be assayed by the Crown, so that if he failed—”

“If he failed they could discreetly dispose of the body, is that the idea? How many failures have there been? Why didn’t anybody tell me how dangerous this is? And why didn’t anybody tell *you*—” Suddenly I realized why the beautiful voice hadn’t known of my refusal. I had been listening all this while to the voice of the Crown itself.

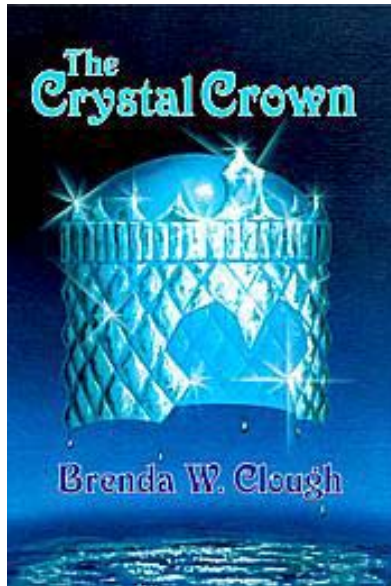
My nerve shattered. “I told them, I told them,” I gabbled. “I never wanted to be king, they just chose me and dragged me away to try you on. It wasn’t my idea at all. I don’t want any part of it, and now I know all this I absolutely decline. I will not be Shan King!”

For the first time the voice addressed me directly. “Is this your final decision?”

"Yes," I said, and then realized I might have just cut my own throat. "No! wait a minute!" I had to get the Crown off my head, but my arms refused to obey me. With an immense mental effort I dragged my perception back to the Navel Room.

The whole exchange had apparently taken no time at all. My body had shut its eyes and seemed about to faint. Xalan had floundered out of the knee-deep water while the Magus sensibly kept clear of the confusion by levitating up to the dome proper. I turned to him for help, and vertigo swept over me. I became acutely conscious of perching on the top of the highest roof in Averidan. I realized that the earth spun madly on its axis, that the world raced round and round the Sun, and the Sun executed who knew what appalling motion. I wondered how exactly the Crown rid itself of an unworthy wearer. The idea made everything whirl past my eyes, and as my levitation faltered I fell.

Something hard hit me behind, and suddenly I was on my hands and knees. The Crown had been knocked from my head and spun with a musical clink off the ledge into the water. My head was in one piece, whole again. Uncontrollable panic took charge of my limbs and like a scalded cat I threw myself against the stone door. It gave way and I ran down the corridor as fast as I could. My robe was not made for races, and I trod on my own hem. The stair was too slick for me to save myself. I rolled head over heels down into the darkness.



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**Brenda W. Clough** does far too many things, like journalism, the fiber arts, and accounting. In her spare time she nurtures a rotating menu of obsessions, including cats, World War I, and the exploration of Antarctica. Her childhood was spent on the lam in Southeast Asia and Europe. She has lived for years now in the guise of a soccer mommy, in a quiet village by a forest near Washington DC. Her web page is at [www.sff.net/people/Brenda](http://www.sff.net/people/Brenda).