

CROWNING A WARRIOR KING

by

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Chapter One

Eglandor

Janel waited, still and silent in the near darkness of the gray predawn hours. Hidden in the depths of the forest's shadows, his sharp gaze swept constantly over the landscape watching for any sign of discovery. He wrapped his cloak a little closer, ignoring the chill of the early spring night. His horse stood solid, battle trained and steady under his hand, a mere flick of an ear alerting him to an approaching rider. Unexpectedly, an owl flew overhead to settle onto the warped branches of a nearby tree, quieting for the remainder of the nighttime hours. Janel dismissed the night raptor with hardly a thought, comforting his horse when he felt the impatient twitch of hardened muscles beneath him. Janel could sympathize. He was not feeling too patient himself.

Out of the darkness beyond the trees where he could see, a faint bird's call reached him, then sounded again. Janel answered in kind and felt a swell of relief to know their plans had been successful, or so he hoped.

He slid silently from his saddle to the forest floor, a thick carpeting of leaves of past autumns cushioning his booted step. Janel's hand poised naturally yet alert on the hilt of his sword until he could discern Quinn's form in the shadows for himself.

Janel was a warrior, a Captain of his King's favored guard and tonight, he, Quinn and Loden had undertaken a mission that the very Kingdom was dependent on. Janel had only mere hours to complete his task, once it was set into motion. He was proud he had been granted this opportunity to again prove himself worthy. He had the highest honor any guardsman could hope for—the chance to protect the King and the Kingdom.

Janel lifted a pensive hand to Quinn's horse's bridle and asked just one question. "Was Loden successful?"

Quinn, tall and dark, slid from his horse with the grace of his kind. With his answer, Janel felt a flare of hope. "He was. I have the box." Quinn produced a jeweled trinket box from within his cloak and addressed his co-conspirator. "You know who you must deliver this to?"

"I do. Will she accept?" Janel reverently tucked the box into the folds of his clothing for protection.

For the first time, a look of worry crossed Quinn's face, the only time Janel had seen a moment's hesitation during the week since the truth behind Rordan's disappearance had been discovered. "I cannot say, but she is our only hope. I see nothing but desolation if Lady Branwyn succeeds and is crowned Queen."

Janel nodded, well aware Quinn was as close as possible to the crown as the King's personal council. If he had worries, they should all be concerned. "It would have been far easier if this one had been in our time."

Quinn's face broke into a serious, if shallow, smile. "If I had a choice, she would already be here. This is Rordan's test and he must pass it to take the throne. What is more, he must trust her to do so. This will not be an easy lesson to learn or an easy journey for him. He has learned to abhor the magical arts because of Lady Branwyn's deceit." Quinn stared out into the growing morning haze of light, a faint vacillation in his gaze. It was not an easy decision, possibly condemning his brother to a life of servitude, if Rordan could not overcome his prejudices.

Quinn glanced at Janel, who was not fast enough to censure his own doubts from his expression. Quinn, however, only nodded once as if expecting the suspicions, not reproofing

Janel for them. With years of friendship between them, he understood the cause for Janel's reservations.

"No, I could not aid him in this, Janel. Some lessons must be lived to be learned," he explained. Quinn gave Janel a sardonic grin. "And yet, it was rather kind of him to so willingly fall into Lady Branwyn's own scheming and become trapped. He never could turn down a beautiful woman."

Janel heard the deep affection Quinn held for his older brother, even though Quinn was chastising his brother's actions.

"We have proof of her treachery. Could we confront Lady Branwyn?" Janel asked.

Quinn shook his head, a slow drop of his shoulders his only outward sign of his own turmoil. "I wish that it were so simple. I know she would never release him from his prison, and there is no one in our world that can. The spell she used is even beyond my knowledge. A deep magic that has not been seen in our lands since before my grandfather's writings." Sadness hung heavily around him. "She would be deposed, but Rordan would be doomed."

Janel understood the silent message. Quinn was not sure the Kingdom itself would not fall apart in greedy factions and pandemonium would not ensue when it was discovered Rordan had been cursed.

The weight of these doubts was not missed by Janel. Rordan was the future for the Kingdom. However, only Quinn, Loden and now himself, as the final stage of Rordan's escape was set underway, knew any of this. It was a heavy weight indeed, and Janel knew they all shared it.

Janel reassured Quinn, saying, "Barely a year had passed though when you discovered his real disappearance and Branwyn's secret of the box. She could have hidden the box for far longer." There was an immediate light of understanding in Quinn's gray gaze. It was no small relief that in a moment of spite Branwyn had not destroyed the little box, the brilliantly adorned prison now held carefully in Janel's possession, which would have killed Rordan.

Quinn nodded his head, a deep frown marring his elegant, refined features. Janel knew Quinn had feared every day that Rordan had truly been lost to them all. The brothers had been close their entire lives, and Quinn had suffered when Rordan had vanished without a trace. His instructive tones brought Janel back to the purpose at hand.

"Remember, the one you go to find can know nothing of who he is, of what he must do. She must make the discovery of his secrets on her own. My brother must learn to trust again. This much has been seen, and it will not be easy for him."

Quinn stepped forward from the trees, the first true rays of dawning light breaking the horizon. Janel knew Quinn was beginning to concentrate on the portal that would take him to his destination. Yet, Quinn paused and turned briefly, saying with a devilish grin that smoothed his worried countenance, "And it would probably be best to advise her to investigate the contents in private."

"I will succeed," Janel vowed, bowing his head toward Quinn. "All I ask is that you bring me home." Janel swept a furtive glance toward the distant horizon. "I am unsure about traveling to this strange land."

Quinn's look was reassuring and he smiled easily now. "I know you will succeed, Janel. You of all the guardsmen know Rordan the best. Once you meet this one, you will understand."

He snapped an arched look directly to Quinn. "She is that pretty?"

Quinn's mouth twitched, giving away little. "Janel," he scolded his friend. "Not all beauty is visible to the eyes, but yes, she is quite lovely."

“You have a great deal of faith, Quinn.” Janel stood shoulder to shoulder with the half-elf adviser. “Your brother is not known for allowing a woman to control him.”

“This one will not control him, but maybe, she will tame him a little,” he finished with a male chuckle. “That was Branwyn’s error. Control is not in Rordan’s vocabulary, unless it is he who is in command.”

Janel would have said more, stalling if he had been forced to admit it, but he held his tongue, accepting his mission as a glow began to build before himself and Quinn. Gradually, it opened, wider and taller until a space large enough for him to stride through shimmered before the two men.

“Good luck, Janel,” Quinn offered.

“Be here in one hour,” was Janel’s only request, and he bravely put a foot through to the unknown to begin his portion of his Kingdom’s future.

* * * *

Hattie Lyles rubbed her aching, swollen knuckles, moving slowly while she made her morning tea. After a bleak start to the morning, beautiful sunlight streamed through her kitchen window to fall on bright and cleaned linoleum and a muted yellow counter top. The lingering scent of lemon cleaners and home cooking permeated the air.

She cradled her hands and fingers, sore from a nagging bout of arthritis that was really bothering her this week. She craned her head to peer out the kitchen window but could see nothing in the sky that portended a storm now that the damp air had been blown away. If anything, it looked like another clear spring morning on the northern coastal edge of Virginia.

Banter was a sweet little stop of a town. She’d lived there most of her life. Her husband, Pete, still did his walking mail route through town, just like he had for the last forty years. He was an institution to Banter, if the town had been large enough to know how to use the word.

She jumped when the sharp whistle of her kettle split the air, then she shook her head, unable to place the sense of apprehension filling her this morning. Something was setting her off kilter.

She poured and let her teabag steep. She rubbed her knuckles absently, glancing at the calendar hanging on the wall. It was almost time for the Lady’s Auxiliary spring bake sale. The sale was one of the community get-togethers that she looked forward to every year.

For some reason, Aran came to mind. Hattie smiled as the young woman’s face appeared. She was a kind young woman and both Hattie and Pete liked her and looked out for her. She had moved to Banter some years before after a tragic auto accident had taken her parents from her. Aran had never mentioned the details, but it didn’t take much to see that the girl just wanted a place to belong again. Hattie had helped to smooth the way. Aran had a cute little shop in town now and had worked to make it and herself likeable to the town.

There was a certain secret that Hattie had never spoken of. She knew Aran respected her privacy and other’s, or she wouldn’t be as good as she was at what she did for the community, helping out in her little ways, but Hattie knew they were of the same cloth. Hattie was just a good half century older and not as strong as she used to be.

Without warning, the white tightly permed hair on the back of her head, all over her body, stood on end like she’d been hit with a lightning bolt. Only there wasn’t any pain, only power to the feeling. A lot of intense power.

Hattie gripped the counter with white hands, wavering slightly as her heart thudded erratically in her chest. A power surge! From where? Hattie managed several gulps of air. The

surge was making her feel lightheaded as it flowed over her, leaving her skin feeling hot as she fought to collect herself. After a few wrenching seconds, the blast subsided and she could breathe again.

“Oh my,” she stammered out. Hattie pressed a shaky hand to her chest. What was going on? Where on earth had that come from? Numbly, she shook her head to clear it. Her eyes fluttered in the aftermath and Aran’s face came to her again. Easily. Too easily.

“Aran?” Hattie almost choked on the possibility. No, no she wouldn’t have done something so obvious. Hattie continued to shake her head in rising dismay. Aran was as quiet as molasses syrup was slow. Hattie closed her eyes and concentrated.

A skitter of feeling flew over her skin, and her eyes snapped open once more. She realized the feeling was centered around Aran, not caused by her. Something big was about to happen, and it involved Aran.

Hattie stared into space for several seconds, waiting, listening, feeling, but found nothing else as the warmth of the surge ebbed completely away, and for the first time in years, she began to wonder if she was strong enough to help.

* * * *

“Aran! Mail’s here!” came the chortled call from the front of the shop.

“Coming!” she shouted back cheerily from the rear of the store where she had been rearranging boxes and orders. Aran pushed the delicate strands of clear crystal out of her way to find Pete Lyles, her mailman, at the counter. “Morning Pete.” She greeted him with a warm smile.

“Miss Aran,” he drawled with a deliberate wink. “How’s business?” He scooped out her day’s count and handed it to her over the counter top.

“Good, been real good this summer.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said even as his smile faltered. “Things have been rough this year. I’m glad you’re holding up.” There was a worried hint in his wise gaze hidden partially behind his standard, ‘couldn’t see the ends of my fingers without ’em’ bifocals.

Aran touched Pete with a sympathetic hand and found his dilemma. Hattie wasn’t feeling well again. Aran gave him a caring smile. “You know what? I have a small overstock on some of my tea. Would Hattie like it?”

“I bet she would,” he replied with a nod of thanks. “She loves your recipes.”

“Biggest fan syndrome,” Aran teased with a light laugh. “Wait right here.” She slipped into her backroom and rummaged through a box or two. Finding what she wanted, she whispered a few words over the box then returned, handing it to Pete. “Now make sure she drinks at least one a day for five days.”

“I will, and thank you Aran. You’re good to us.”

She blushed lightly from his appreciative praise. “Only trying to help. This is my town too.”

Pete dropped the box of tea into his delivery satchel. “You know, Aran,” he began in his father-knows-best voice. Aran bit back the smile as she absently thumbed through her mail. She adored the Lyles’ and knew he had her best interest at heart. They were the family she no longer had.

“You should be married by now. You’ve been here almost seven years and you’re still single.”

“Not trying,” she quipped back with an unconcerned roll of her shoulder. “Besides, I work six days a week. Unless they like aromatherapy, I’m not going to get that lucky.” She stretched

over the counter and smooched a kiss to his weathered cheek. “But thanks for thinking of me.”

“You remind me of my granddaughters. Just looking out for you.” He gave her a big wink and left her to finish his route.

She was still smiling as she sorted her mail, junk in the trash; bills, she only wished those could go in the trash. She sighed, setting those to the side. She hadn’t been perfectly honest with Pete. This spring had been slow. Very slow.

The little beach town store was in a good location, foot traffic was strong, but so many people weren’t spending. She couldn’t blame them. She only spent where she absolutely had to herself.

She sat back on her stool, gazing around her little haven, which to some probably looked like a knick-knack shop. It had taken her almost four years of hard work to get the store up and running with a profit. Now she was established and liked by many. She carried everything from teas to candles, charms and incense to a body care line the older crowd seemed to just eat up. She even sold stones and geodes for the tourist crowd. She loved what she did, and not many people could honestly say that about an occupation.

No one knew she made most of the mixtures and fragrances herself, but that didn’t stop them from going out the door, either. Or that the charms were enchanted to aid with anything from arthritis like Hattie’s, to stomach ailments like Mrs. Spencer’s. Although with that son of hers, Aran mused with a rueful shake of her head, she was coming by them naturally.

When a person came in, she helped them choose what was appropriate for their visit, for their own needs. She could also feel their desires with a touch, but usually didn’t have to go that far. Most were only too willing to unburden themselves over this ailment or that distressing situation. Having a keen ear and patience had been a bonus when it came to making her store profitable, but she remained low key and polite to everyone. No one in the little town had guessed she was a witch.

Better not to either.

She helped those in need with her skills and talents. All her customers accounted it to natural healing, which Aran was a strong advocate of. She detested needles and only saw a doctor if absolutely necessary. Her little shop was the best idea she had ever come up with.

A quiet town, a single woman not causing too much fuss. It was just what she had always wanted. Just a quiet no-nothing life to be happy doing what she loved to do—tinker with her herbs and spells. How else does a witch stay in practice, she wondered with a quiet chuckle.

She brushed the pile of junk mail into the trash and slid from her stool to take the rest to her office. She needed to take the new invoices home to fill the candle orders but other than those, it had been too darned quiet all week. She dropped the invoices on her desk just as the outside bell on her door chimed. Business was good, any kind, she reminded herself.

“Hello. Can I help...you?” she faltered, stepping through the hanging crystal sheet once more, momentarily stunned by the man standing there. He was huge, her eyes growing wide as they took in his complete frame. Tall was a short word for him. He was looking around the store with interest but when he swung around to her, Aran swallowed, staring back into the most intense green eyes she had ever seen.

“My Lady,” he gallantly addressed her, bowing in an old world, elegant manner. “I have a special delivery.”

His accent was thick, and he looked absolutely solid. “A delivery?” she squeaked, clearing her throat when she finally got her tongue to work. Her legs as of yet, hadn’t.

“Yes, and I apologize, but I do not have a great deal of time.” A flash of indecision crossed

his brow, his green gaze homing in on her. His sweeping stare felt almost assessing to Aran, like he was passing judgment of some sort. “You are Aran Larson, correct?”

She mentally snapped fingers in front of her face. “Yes. Yes, I’m sorry. I’m Aran. What can I do for you?” She approached him, slapping on a smile of welcome, aware of the size disparity between her and the stranger as she cleared the counter to stand in front of it. Holy crap! Was that a sword against his leg? She blinked, focusing upward when he spoke again.

“I have this for you,” he stated, revealing a black jeweled box from his cloak—yes, a cloak. It went with the sword. It had to all be a costume. “I have traveled from a distant land to see you receive this.”

“What is it?” she asked tentatively. She kept a suspicious eye on the box. It appeared extremely expensive. She didn’t know anyone who would send her an expensive anything.

“It is a gift from those who wish to see your happiness complete.”

“Sorry, my parents are dead,” she told him, frowning at the little treasure chest in his hand. “Who sent it?”

His gaze shuttered, seemingly unprepared for her refusal, to not jump at the chance to have such a beautiful gift. Not that she blamed him. She had to admit, staring at it in his large palm, it was gorgeous. The lights of the store glimmered in a rainbow of colors from within the sparkling stones adorning the box.

“I am not at liberty to discuss the sender nor the purpose.”

Her gaze flicked up to him, his sharp green eyes not missing a thing. “I can tell it is an expensive gift. I think I have a right to know something about it, who sent it, what do they want, and why me.”

His lips quirked in silent amusement. “I wish I could tell you more. The only information I was given was to advise you to investigate the contents in private.” He rolled his head, casting a roving, meaningful glance around her shop. “I might recommend somewhere where you have room and few things of value.”

Aran gasped, leaping backward. “I don’t want it.” She raised a hand between them to fend him off. “Who sent you?” she demanded.

His words were decisive. “I assure you, on my honor, it is not harmful to you.” He frowned, a distraught flicker in his expression. “I fear I may have failed in my task. Please, Lady Aran. It is truly meant for you. I cannot return with it.”

“Where did you come from?”

He opened his mouth then snapped it closed, though it looked like it pained him to not answer her. “I cannot. I cannot interfere.”

“You are one weird guy,” she remarked. “Hold it up for me to see.” He did as she asked and turned it in his palm. “Open it.”

His hesitation was even more obvious, his voice torn. “I apologize, but I cannot. The contents are for you only.”

“How am I supposed to accept a gift I know nothing about when you won’t even open the lid?” she demanded, her fists rising to her hips.

He did the most unexpected thing. He lowered himself to a knee, beseeching her with his eyes. “Please, Lady Aran. I beg of you. I cannot return with this. I mean you no harm, nor with the box. I truly wish I could tell you more, but I cannot.”

“Oh, for... Stand up already.” She waved a hand at him but didn’t touch him, letting him rise to steady feet. Studying him with a cautious gaze, he wasn’t avoiding her stares. In fact, he seemed to be studying her in turn. “I’m not in danger from it?”

“No, My Lady. Your happiness is intended through this gift.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “Why me?”

“There is no one else.”

“Well, that makes me feel, oh, so darn special.”

His lips twitched at her grouched tone and she relaxed, forcing the worry away. Really, who would have done this?

“You really can’t tell me anything about it?”

“I cannot by order. But there is little that I do know. I know the contents are for you specifically. The rest, as I know it, is up to you.”

“You’re kidding? Up to me?”

“Yes, My Lady.”

She raked her teeth over her bottom lip in indecision, unable to look away from the beautiful black jeweled box. “Is there anything you can tell me, anything at all?”

“No.” It was blunt.

“You must be a riot on a date,” she muttered. An arched dark brow was his only answer.

“Do you accept your gift?”

She tilted her chin up to see him better. “Just one last thing. You keep calling this a gift with a huge mystery over the contents. What is in it for you that you’re so protective about it? A curse maybe?” It was the only other thing she could think of, and it wasn’t like she’d ever see this man again in Banter. From his accent he didn’t live anywhere near there.

His shoulders rolled then shook. A bark of laughter was caught in his throat. He swept his free hand across his face in surrender. “I was warned you would be different,” he stated to himself. When he spoke to her, his face was again even, his features giving away nothing of his internal thoughts. But his eyes still held a glow of humor. “No, My Lady, no curse. Not to you. And none I know of would dare. I receive nothing for your acceptance.”

Her eyes widened at his statements but with one step for him he closed the gap between them. Sincerity filled his words but he was no less serious than when he had first entered her store. “My Lady, I must go. Please accept this. Wait until you are alone to seek the contents. The truth will come to pass. No matter it makes no sense at this moment, it involves you and all will, in time, be explained.”

Her hands lifted before she could send the command to stop them. “I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?” She was getting a real bad feeling about what was going to happen if she did accept her ‘gift’, but seemed unable to turn it away. Remember what curiosity did to the cat, she reminded herself.

He bowed in farewell, saying, “With all my heart, and on my life, I pray not.” Standing erect, he towered over her. A genuine smile warmed his rugged features. “If all comes to pass, I will look forward to seeing you again.”

Her attention was locked on the many stones of the box. “Huh? What?” She looked up in time to follow the tail of his cloak whipping out behind him as he slipped through her door.

Numbly, she stared at the box held in her hands, confused about what had just happened. Aran crawled back to her stool in stunned silence, setting the ornate black stone box on the counter. It was veined like marble, but it weighed little for stone. The carved designs were accented with several stones that appeared to be emeralds, rubies and diamonds. It wasn’t a stretch to bet they were some of the best quality gems she’d ever seen. If they were fake, they were believable.

The hinges and clasp were gold, delicate and feminine in nature with scalloped edges. The

unique detail suggested it was all handmade. She rubbed at the flat of one hinge with a thumb, gasping with disbelief at the shock of power that filled her hand.

“What the...?” She yanked her hand away from the hinge, rubbing tingling fingers across her jeans. She narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing the gold of the clasp and hinges closely. Even on those flat pieces, there were symbols and characters.

“Static electricity,” she denied, and dared to touch it again. Another jolt of pure power surged up her hand.

Was it? Could it be? She bit her lip, hard. That presented a whole new can of worms. That meant someone knew she was a witch. She’d been discovered. *Oh crap.*

She closed her eyes and steeled herself, caressing the lid with a light touch, searching for the energy. “Oh, boy,” she choked out weakly, lifting her hand from the box. It was shaking. *An enchanted box.*

“But how?” Who knew? She felt queasy at the possibility. Maybe it was a mistake and someone, maybe even Theo, had just sent her a beautiful trinket sized box not knowing it was enchanted in some way. “Yeah, and I’m the queen of England,” she grumbled sarcastically.

Someone had figured her out. She stood and paced in front of the counter, raking agitated fingers through her short hair. Why would someone send her a jeweled box? An enchanted box?

She massaged behind her ear with a finger, soothing the pressure she felt building. What had he said, ‘seek the contents in private’? Great. So what could a box that size hold?

She stared at it, sitting innocently on her counter. Not much by the size of it. Maybe it had a rubber snake in it?

A nervous giggle escaped at the picture. Someone was pranking her now, that was all, but that didn’t explain the magic energy if it was enchanted. Oh, boy, she swore silently once more.

Taking a calming breath, she wrapped a hand around the box, hiding it purposely under the counter to worry about later. She wanted to examine it closer, see what was in it, but it would have to wait until she got home that night. Especially if she was right about the magic. She was not going to let any magic loose where there could be witnesses. Period.

Chapter Two

All right, she conceded hours later. Someone knew what Aran was and had sent her an enchanted box. Why? Better yet, who? Could it have been Theo, unknowingly? She shook her head. Doubtful. She'd been tossing that possibility around all day. She was the equivalent of a sister to him, she was pretty sure of it, and that had been a very elaborate delivery, even for him. And that didn't even take into account the cost of the box itself.

She'd been on a couple dates with Theo, Karen's older brother, but he hadn't seemed the kind to do something like this. Was he? Was he stepping up the relationship? She couldn't see it. He'd hardly even kissed her. He'd treated her more like a buddy than a girl on a date.

Which truth be told, had been fine with Aran. She liked Theo, and Karen was probably her closest friend but Theo, well, just didn't do anything for her. He was tall, which was an asset when you're five-nine next to a man, and good looking with wonderful brown hair and dreamy eyes. The package made little difference. He just wasn't...the one. And Pete was just dying to see her married and happy. Neither of his daughters or his son lived in Banter, so Aran guessed she was an extended granddaughter since he and Hattie didn't get to see their grand-kids that often. Aran could go with single and happy for a while longer, but Pete was right. She shouldn't be single for the rest of her life. Even though she knew it was the safest route to go. Being a witch just wasn't a healthy *public* occupation.

At six o'clock, Aran flipped her closed sign and locked the front door. She carefully folded the jeweled box into tissue paper, unconsciously treating it with a reverent air. The alarm was the last thing she activated, closing and locking the rear door solidly behind her, the wrapped box tucked safely into one of her store bags to carry. Scurrying the short distance to the rear street, it only took a few minutes until she hopped in her car to drive home. She lived a few blocks from the store and had walked on more than on occasion, but that morning had been damp and overcast. Now she was glad she had the car and was already home. Her curious gift continued to distract her attention.

She let herself in, setting her purse on the table in the small dining nook that sat off her kitchen. There were still pots on the stove from the simmer and pour session she'd slaved through that week. Even if she wasn't at the shop, she was invariably working on something at home. Finished candles were hard-set and ready to be boxed and shipped for special orders. They were lined up along the kitchen counters in an assortment of scented and colorful rainbows. In other words, the kitchen was a wreck, but she didn't even think about cleaning it with the mystery box in her hands.

She jostled a few empty boxes out of her way, ignoring it when one fell on the floor, making space to sit down and study the ornate box. She yanked a high backed chair beneath her, crossing her ankles underneath it. Just to make sure she hadn't imagined it, she rubbed the gold hinge one more time and felt a surge of energy fly up her body.

"Nope, no mistake there," she allowed shaking. She stood from her perch, too restless and antsy to stay sitting, placing the box a few inches in front of her.

She wrapped an arm around her middle, seeking the black box looking so innocuous on her table, only to dart away again. What if there was something in it? Something bad? Something good? Maybe someone had tucked a gift inside of it? A note? It was a trinket box after all. There was just as good a chance that it was empty. She preferred that it was.

She groaned. She hated mysteries! Especially when they involved her. She had been quiet,

not stirring up trouble. Why did someone have to go and drop this in her lap? What kind of magic did the box hold? What if there was a monster inside?

This time her laugh was weak at best. The monster idea didn't exactly thrill her. Maybe a genie? While a better option, it was just as unlikely.

There was only one way she was going to find out what was going on with the box, and for some reason she was scared spitless to do it. That feeling of wary foreboding hit her again. Something was going on with the box, and that guy had said it involved her. Great.

She couldn't stop the tremor as she reached for the black stone box, cautiously opening the carved lid to peer inside without lifting it from the table. She almost collapsed with relief, sagging when she found it empty. She had really been worried about the alternative. A draft from a window somewhere downstairs sent a gentle reminder through the room and over her ankles.

It was an empty box after all, with a plush bed of midnight black velvet at the bottom. No mirror, nothing on the inside. Not even a ring shelf. She flipped it over once or twice to see if it had a hidden compartment. When the box gave up no more secrets, she clipped the lid closed, repinning the shield.

She barely caught the flicker of movement behind her out of the corner of her eye as she set the box back on the table. She spun and screamed. The sound was cut off when a huge hand grabbed her throat.

"Where is she?"

Her hands flew up to steel-hard arms, clawing desperately, but her strength against his was an impossibility. A kitten fighting a tiger. She couldn't even wrap her fingers around his wrist.

She tried to talk, but her voice had left her. Her eyes rounded under the constriction of his strong fingers. They would have fallen out if she had let them. Spots were already forming in her vision and a harsh roaring began to pound against her ears. She realized with a sinking feeling it was her racing heart.

The man holding her captive looked just like the one who had given her the box. He was as huge, with incensed black eyes, and a snarling rage in his voice.

He shook her once. "Where is she?" he shouted.

"Who?" Aran managed on a gasped gulp of air.

"Lady Branwyn," he said bending her backward over the table's edge, his hand punishing in its strength.

"I don't know," was as much as he allowed, his fingers curling tighter, digging into tender flesh. She blinked, fighting rising nausea and spots.

A hissing sound echoed in the room, grating through her mind. The long glinting blade of a sword filled her vision. His furious gaze drew to slits. "I said, where is she?" Aran tried to swallow. Another sword? Just who were these guys?

His snarled demand was malice wrapped in hate. Aran shook her head, trembling and unable to stop. She thought she might even have the first fainting episode of her life. "I don't know," she repeated through a throat that was hot and dry. "I don't know her."

She sucked air greedily when his fingers flexed and loosened. She wasn't free, but it was a start. He let her stand straight, his hand holding her in place as easily as a collar.

"Who are you? You are not one of her maids." His gaze burned, raking over her, really seeing her for the first time. She shivered at the contempt sparking from those black depths.

"I'm no one's maid," she spat, daring to breathe deeper. His fingers felt like hot iron where they wrapped around her throat. She was still tugging and pulling ineffectively at the arm that held her so easily. She had yet to do anything to affect his position or his hold.

“Let me go.” His gaze narrowed at her attempt to sound brave. She repeated it, adding, “Then get the hell out of my house!”

His fingers circled her neck once more, briefly, almost casually. “No.”

“No?” The nausea reared up and threatened again.

“No.” He straightened before her taking a single step back, finally releasing his unyielding hold. Shaking fingers automatically rose to the tightness of her neck. “First you must tell me how I came to be here.”

He slid his sword back through its ring then crossed his arms, as if expecting an answer. He still crowded her, limiting her movements. At least she didn’t feel like she was going to be a human ka-bob any longer.

“I’m guessing the front door.” When she tried to step away, his eyes flashed like a mercury nova and she froze in place. She fought the hysterical laughter threatening to bubble up, though in her mind she was screaming for help. She thought about doing it for real, but the heat of her searing throat kept her from attempting it.

“How did you get the jeweled box?”

“How did you get in my house?” she shot back. He shook his head.

“How did you get the box?” he demanded with a steeled edge to his words.

It didn’t take her two seconds to consider what she would tell him. She didn’t trust anyone that looked like this or the one who had given it to her. Not now. “It was delivered this morning.”

“By who?”

“Well, if I knew, I could tell you.” What he didn’t know was a lie, wouldn’t hurt her. She tried to escape again but he managed to effortlessly block her path.

A single look was enough warning for her to stay still. “Are you of King Tah-lel’s castle?” She kept the bark of laughter locked behind tight lips. The man was deranged.

“No, and before you ask, I don’t know who he is. Now, would you please leave?” *So I can call the cops.* His answer was a sharp shake of his dark head. He stood in angry silence, glowering at her. At least she’d quit trembling to fall apart at the joints.

He had to be at least six and half feet tall, dark and deadly came to mind too easily. Coal black hair draped past his shoulders, a wave of thick hair, tied to his nape with a leather strap. She’d never seen piercing black eyes like his. And if there had been a sale on muscles, he had them all. The man was built like a rock. Air became difficult to find again.

Those intense black eyes missed nothing, every movement noted. Aran clenched her hand to still her remaining shakes. Her heart was pounding wildly and she was sure she was as pale as a ghost. She must have been; she knew she didn’t have enough blood in her head to think straight with this strange man in her home.

“You have to leave, right now,” she informed him icily. “If you don’t get out of my house, I’m going to call the police!” She shouted it in a fit of bravado.

Taking in his clothes, it was apparent this man had obviously been to one too many Renaissance Faires. His off-white shirt was loose, tucked into dark britches of some sort that shaped him, tucked into leather boots. None of it was what she would expect a guy to be wearing, but he didn’t even seem aware of the incongruity. He was too far gone.

Instead, he appeared puzzled by her answers. “Yet you seem to now own the box. You were holding my prison.” His voice had dropped, a sheet of ice enveloping her with the meaning of his words. She looked over her shoulder and found the box where she had left it. Unfortunately in plain sight of this crazed lunatic.

She turned to him, trying to block it. “I don’t know anything about a prison. Can’t you just

go?"

He ignored her protestations to get him to leave. His tone held the raw steel of someone used to getting answers to his demands. "No one else has been here? Spoken to you? Paid you to keep the box? Why was it given to you?" His stare never left her face, as if he were assessing her worthiness. She felt like he was finding her lacking for some reason.

Her hand jumped to her hip in irritation. "I told you. I got it this morning. And no one paid me to do anything." She drew a deep breath, steadying her fluttering nerves. "Obviously there has been a huge misunderstanding."

His expression said otherwise. "There has been no misunderstanding. You were holding the box. You summoned me. You are my new master. I am yours to command." He explained this with a definite cold distaste, as if he were facing a torture worse than death.

"I would if I could," she snapped, incredulous. "In fact, get out of my house! Just get out!" He towered over her, his massive shoulders blocking her view and his incredible strength making her feel very vulnerable. And no matter how hard she tried, she was having a hard time controlling the shakes he'd scared into her.

"I cannot. I cannot be separated from my prison." Another bland, matter-of-fact explanation. "If you wish, return me to my jail, and we will both be happier," he said with cold smile.

She was busy envisioning a padded room and lots of medication for her strange man. And cops. Lots of cops. Provided she got that far. "Look, I don't know anything about a prison, or a jail, or summoning you. I thought the box was a gift from a friend. I thought the stones even looked real."

"They are," he informed her distantly. He was glaring at the box over her shoulder, anger seething once more just beneath his otherwise dismissive exterior.

Now she was convinced he was insane. With that many stones, the box was worth a fortune. A small country at least. "They can't be."

"I assure you, they are. I knew the craftsman. It had been a gift from one of the council members to Lady Branwyn upon her appointment."

She moved carefully to not set him off to attack her again. "Wait. Are you from some other country? Are you lost? You do have an odd accent." And he sounded just like the ass that had dropped this in her lap that morning.

"I am from the Kingdom of Eglador, west of the great sea and between the mountains that border Laneai." The way the sounds rolled off his tongue made her want to turn to hear more. She slapped her inner voice. Definitely not from around there, but from the sounds of it, even he didn't know where he was from.

"Oo-kay. Look, you just stay right there. I'm going to call someone and have them come and help you find your kingdom and maybe a room for the night." She slid a single step when the snap of his voice stopped her cold.

"No."

She dug deep for a calm that was anything but real. She just tried for reasonable instead. "It's the best thing for now. Really. You are far from home and you need help."

He negated her with a crisp head shake, his icy eyes emphasizing the negative movement. "You were given the box. I cannot be separated from it." He crossed his arms over his chest, immovable and unbending.

She scrubbed her hands over her face. "Look," she started cautiously, as if explaining it to a young child. "I don't know anything about what you are describing. This is the twenty-first century." She enunciated it. "Does that sound familiar at all? You are in a small tourist town in

Northern Virginia, as in the United States of America.” She felt at a loss when his expression didn’t change one iota. “I don’t know a Lady Branwyn, or Eglador, or anything else you’ve mentioned for that matter.”

With an indifferent grunt, he dropped his arms. “Very well.” He backed up a pace and stood straight. “Please return me to the box then, master.” He focused at some point over her head effectively dismissing her.

“You’re joking?” she cried, stifling a giggle that was bordering on hysterical. Her last threads of sense were unraveling and his damn apathy wasn’t helping any.

He arched a black brow at her, waiting.

“After I put you in your box, will you leave?” she asked, not wanting to think how stupid this all sounded.

“I have apparently been banished. It makes no difference to me.” His dispassionate response chilled her. Cold, cold eyes. Death. Like he was already dead. She felt trapped between her fear and his desolation. She barely controlled the shiver that thought caused to streak down her spine.

She tentatively scooped up the box, willing to try anything to get him to walk back out her front door. She’d never forget to lock it again. “Sure. You can wait in the box. I’ll call some friends and find you a nice place.” He said nothing. She cupped the box in her palms, slipping the shield from its pin on the front panel. “Return to your box,” she stated in a clear tone, hoping the man went along with it.

Once he believed himself ensconced in the velvet-lined trinket case, maybe he would just walk out again, or maybe he’d go berserk on her after all. It wasn’t a far stretch of the imagination to see him doing it. He was extremely huge and could easily overpower her again. She swallowed thickly and prayed for the best as she lifted the lid with her eyes glued to the tall form standing like a stature of an old world warrior in front of her. She waited for anything.

A heartbeat later Aran’s legs went out from underneath her, collapsing to the floor in a liquid puddle of astonishment and shock. “Oh. My. God!” she choked out. “This isn’t possible!”

He was gone! Vanished in a flash of muted light and a short-lived breeze that flowed over her until the room was empty once more.

Her hands trembled violently as she lifted the box to eye level. *He* was the enchantment on the box? Someone had given her a box with a man in it?

“Not funny,” she bit out. “Whoever did this, this is not funny!” she shouted into the room. She shook like a leaf everywhere.

“Oh God.” she whimpered. What was she going to do with a man in a box? What was she *supposed* to do with a man in a box?

She lifted a weak hand and rubbed disbelieving eyes. Someone had sent this to her specifically. Granted, not necessarily in a proper manner but someone had, and they had to have known she was a witch.

Or maybe they hadn’t after all. She sat up straighter, feeling hopeful her secret was still a secret. Maybe whoever had done this hadn’t known what she was. Then why give her the box at all if her ability wasn’t a factor? That didn’t make any sense at all. None of it made sense. She knew with a sinking feeling it was merely blind wishing that she hadn’t been discovered. Someone knew. She could ask her warrior what was going on, but just the thought of asking him to come out again made her tremble anew. The only other option she had was leaving him in the box. For how long? Was someone else after it? Why would he think he had been banished? And from where? Eglador? Wherever that was. And just who the hell was that man who had brought this to her? She wanted to smack him on the ears a few times. No danger to her? Ha!

Aran couldn't leave him locked in the box. It wasn't right, and it wasn't the way she was made. It was like keeping a wild creature caged. That man was not meant for a box, of any size.

He was too big to start with. He exuded strength and power in his massive body and solid muscles. Her brow shot up. She'd noticed his muscles? She snorted. Evidently, she mocked herself. At least the ones in his arms.

She pushed herself up, rising shakily from the floor, thinking she'd be at less of a disadvantage if she wasn't still sprawled on the floor when she did get around to calling him out. And as much as she hated the thought, if he got out of hand, she could stuff him back into it.

She needed some answers. Badly. She just hoped when she did 'summon' him, he wouldn't attack her. Her heart trembled as violently as her hands at the worry.

"All right, here goes," she said, driving up her courage. She closed her eyes and made a silent wish as the shield fell from its pin on the front.

She opened the ornate, carved lid.

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