Darkness Box

By

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On soft sand by the sea's edge a little boy walked leaving no footprints. Gulls cried in the bright sunless sky, trout leaped from the saltless ocean. Ear off on the horizon the sea serpent raised himself a moment in seven enormous arches and then, bellowing, sank. The child whistled but the sea serpent, busy hunting whales, did not surface again. The child walked on casting no shadow, leaving no tracks on the sand between the cliffs and the sea. Ahead of him rose a grassy headland on which stood a four-legged hut. As he climbed a path up the cliff the hut skipped about and rubbed its front legs together like a lawyer or a fly; but the hands of the clock inside, which said ten minutes of ten, never moved.

«What's that you've got there, Dicky?» asked his mother as she added parsley and a pinch of pepper to the rabbit stew simmering in an alembic.

«A box, Mummy.»

«Where did you find it?»

Mummy's familiar leaped down from the onion-festooned rafters and, draping itself like a foxfur round her neck, said, «By the sea.»

Dicky nodded. «That's right. The sea washed it up.»

«And what's inside it?»

The familiar said nothing, but purred. The witch turned round to look into her son's round face. «What's in it?» she repeated.

«Darkness.»

«Oh? Let's see.»

As she bent down to look, the familiar, still purring, shut its eyes. Holding the box against his chest, the little boy very carefully lifted the lid a scant inch.

«So it is,» said his mother. «Now put it away, don't let it get knocked about. I wonder where the key got to. Run wash your hands now. Table, lay!» And while the child worked the heavy pump handle in the yard and splashed his face and hands, the hut resounded with the clatter of plates and forks materializing.

After the meal, while his mother was having her morning nap, Dicky took down the water-bleached, sand-encrusted box from his treasure shelf and set out with it across the dunes, away from the sea. Close at his heels the black familiar followed him, trotting patiently over the sand through the coarse grass, the only shadow he had.

At the summit of the pass Prince Rikard turned in the saddle to look back over the plumes and pennants of his army, over the long falling road, to the towered walls of his father's city. Under the sunless sky it shimmered there on the plain, fragile and shadowless as a pearl. Seeing it so he knew it could never be taken, and his heart sang with pride. He gave his captains the signal for quick march and set spurs to his horse. It reared and broke into a gallop, while his gryphon swooped and screamed overhead. She teased the white horse, diving straight down at it clashing her beak, swerving aside just in time; the horse, bridleless, would snap furiously at her snaky tail or rear to strike out with silver hoofs. The gryphon would cackle and roar, circle back over the dunes, and with a screech and swoop play the trick all over. Afraid she might wear herself out before the battle, Rikard finally leashed her, after which she flew along steadily, purring and chirping, by his side.

The sea lay before him; somewhere beneath the cliffs the enemy force his brother led was hidden. The road wound down growing sandier, the sea appearing to right or left always nearer. Abruptly the road fell away; the white horse leaped the ten-foot drop and galloped out over the beach. As he came out from between the dunes Rikard saw a long line of men strung out on the sand, and behind them three black-prowed ships. His own men were scrambling down the drop, swarming over the dunes, blue flags snapping in the sea wind, voices faint against the sound of the sea. Without warning or parley the two forces met, sword to sword and man to man. With a great shrilling scream the gryphon soared up, jerking the leash from Rikard's hand, then dropped like a falcon, beak and claws extended, down on a tall man in gray, the enemy leader. But the tall man's sword was drawn. As the iron beak snapped on his shoulder, trying to get the throat, the iron sword jabbed out and up, slashing the gryphon's belly. She doubled up in air and fell, knocking the man down with the sweep of her great wing, screaming, blackening the sand with blood. The tall man staggered up and slashed off her head and wings, turning half blinded with sand and blood only when Rikard was almost on him. Without a word he turned, lifting his steaming sword to parry Rikard's blow. He tried to strike at the horse's legs, but got no chance, for the beast would back and rear and run at him, Rikard's sword slashing down from above. The tall man's arms began to grow heavy, his breath came in gasps. Rikard gave no quarter. Once more the tall man raised his sword, lunged, and took the whizzing slash of his brother's sword straight across his uplifted face. He fell without a word. Brown sand fell over his body in a little shower from the white stallion's hoofs as Rikard spurred back to the thick of the fight.

The attackers fought on doggedly, always fewer of them, and those few being pushed back step by step toward the sea. When only a knot of twenty or so remained they broke, sprinting desperately for the ships, pushing them off chest-deep in the breakers, clambering aboard. Rikard shouted to his men. They came to him across the sand, picking their way among hacked corpses. The badly wounded tried to crawl to him on hands and knees. All that could walk gathered in ranks in a hollow behind the dune on which Rikard stood. Behind him, out on deep water, the three black ships lay motionless, balanced on their oars.

Rikard sat down, alone on the dune top among the rank grass. He bowed his head and put his hands over his face. Near him the white horse stood still as a horse of stone. Below him his men stood silent. Behind him on the beach the tall man, his face obliterated in blood, lay near the body of the gryphon, and the other dead lay staring at the sky where no sun shone.

A little gust of wind blew by. Rikard raised his face, which though young was very grim. He signaled his captains, swung up into the saddle, and set off round the dunes and back toward the city at a trot, not waiting to see the black ships steer in to shore where their soldiers could board them, or his own army fill up its ranks and come marching behind him. When the gryphon swooped screaming overhead he raised his arm, grinning at the great creature as she tried to perch on his gloved wrist, flapping her wings and screeching like a tomcat. «You no-good gryphon,» he said, «you hen, go home to your chicken coop!» Insulted, the monster yawped and sailed off eastward toward the city. Behind him his army wound upward through the hills, leaving no track. Behind them the brown sand lay smooth as silk, stainless. The black ships, sails set, already stood out well to sea. In the prow of the first stood a tall, grim-faced man in gray.

Taking an easier road homeward, Rikard passed not far from the four-legged hut on the headland. The witch stood in the doorway, hailing him. He galloped over, and, drawing rein right at the gate of the little yard, he looked at the young witch. She was bright and dark as coals, her black hair whipped in the sea wind. She looked at him, white-armored on a white horse.

«Prince,» she said, «you'll go to battle once too often.»

He laughed. «What should I do—let my brother lay siege to the city?»

«Yes, let him. No man can take the city.»

«I know. But my father the king exiled him, he must not set foot even on our shore. I'm my father's soldier, I fight as he commands.»

The witch looked out to sea, then back at the young man. Her dark face sharpened, nose and chin peaking cronelike, eyes flashing. «Serve and be served,» she said, «rule and be ruled. Your brother chose neither to serve nor rule … Listen, prince, take care.» Her face warmed again to beauty. «The sea brings presents this morning, the wind blows, the crystals break. Take care.»

Gravely he bowed his thanks, then wheeled his horse and was gone, white as a gull over the long curve of the dunes.

The witch went back into the hut, glancing about its one room to see that everything was in place: bats, onions, cauldrons, carpets, broom, toad-stones, crystal balls (cracked through), the thin crescent moon hung up on the chimney, the Books, the familiar—She looked again, then hurried out and called, «Dicky!»

The wind from the west was cold now, bending the coarse grass down.

«Dicky! … Kitty, kitty kitty!»

The wind caught the voice from her lips, tore it into bits, and blew it away.

She snapped her fingers. The broom came zooming out the door, horizontal and about two feet *off* the ground, while the hut shivered and hopped about in excitement. «Shut up!» the witch snapped, and the door obediently slammed. Mounting the broom she took off in a long gliding swoop southward down the beach, now and then crying out, «Dicky! … Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!»

The young prince, rejoining his men, had dismounted to walk with them. As they reached the pass and saw the city below them on the plain, he felt a tug at his cloak.

«Prince—»

A little boy, so little he was still fat and round-cheeked, stood with a scared look, holding up a battered, sandy box. Beside him a black cat sat smiling broadly. «The sea brought this—it's for the prince of the land, I know it is—please take it!»

«What's in it?»

«Darkness, sir.»

Rikard took the box and after a slight hesitation opened it a little, just a crack. «It's painted black inside,» he said with a hard grin.

«No, prince, truly it's not. Open it wider!»

Cautiously Rikard lifted the lid higher, an inch or two, and peered in. Then he shut it quickly, even as the child said, «Don't let the wind blow it out, prince!»

«I shall take this to the king.»

«But it's for you, sir—»

«All seagifts are the king's. But thank you for it, boy.» They looked at each other for a moment, the little round boy and the hard splendid youth; then Rikard turned and strode on, while Dicky wandered back down the hills, silent and disconsolate. He heard his mother's voice from far away to the south, and tried to answer; but the wind blew his call landward, and the familiar had disappeared.

The bronze gates of the city swung open as the troop approached. Watchdogs bayed, guards stood rigid, the people of the city bowed down as Rikard on his horse clattered at full gallop up the marble streets to the palace. Entering, he glanced up at the great bronze clock on the bell tower, the highest of the nine white towers of the palace. The moveless hands said ten minutes of ten.

In the Hall of Audience his father awaited him: a fierce gray-haired man crowned with iron, his hands clenched on the heads of iron chimaeras that formed the arms of the throne. Rikard knelt and with bowed head, never looking up, reported the success of his foray. «The Exile was killed, with the greater pan of his men; the rest fled in their ships.»

A voice answered like an iron door moving on unused hinges: «Well done, prince.»

«I bring you a seagift, Lord.» Still with head bowed, Rikard held up the wooden box.

A low snarl came from the throat of one of the carven monsters of the throne.

«That is mine,» said the old king so harshly that Rikard glanced up for a second, seeing the teeth of the chimaeras bared and the king's eyes glittering.

«Therefore I bring it to you, Lord.»

«That is mine—I gave it to the sea, I myself! And the sea spits back my gift.» A long silence, then the king spoke more softly. «Well, keep it, prince. The sea doesn't want it, nor do I. It's in your hands. Keep it—locked. Keep it locked, prince!»

Rikard, on his knees, bowed lower in thanks and consent, then rose and backed down the long hall, never looking up. As he came out into the glittering anteroom, officers and noblemen gathered round him, ready as usual to ask about the battle, laugh, drink, and chatter. He passed among them without a word or glance and went to his own quarters, alone, carrying the box carefully in both hands.

His bright, shadowless, windowless room was decorated on every wall with patterns of gold inset with topazes, opals, crystals, and, most vivid of all jewels, candle flames moveless on golden sconces. He set the box down on a glass table, threw off his cloak, unbuckled his swordbelt, and sat down sighing. The gryphon loped in from his bedroom, talons rasping on the mosaic floor, stuck her great head onto his knees, and waited for him to scratch her feathery mane. There was also a cat prowling around the room, a sleek black one; Rikard took no notice. The palace was full of animals, cats, hounds, apes, squirrels, young hippogriffs, white mice, tigers. Every lady had her unicorn, every courtier had a dozen pets. The prince had only one, the gryphon which always fought for him, his one unquestioning friend. He scratched the gryphon's mane, often glancing down to meet the loving golden gaze of her round eyes, now and then glancing too at the box on the table. There was no key to lock it.

Music played softly in a distant room, a ceaseless interweaving of notes like the sound of a fountain.

He turned to look at the clock on the mantel, an ornate square of gold and blue enamel. It was ten minutes of ten: time to rise and buckle on his sword, call up his men, and go to battle. The Exile was returning, determined to take the city and reclaim his right to the throne, his inheritance. His black ships must be driven back to sea. The brothers must fight, and one must die, and the city be saved. Rikard rose, and at once the gryphon jumped up lashing her tail, eager for the fight. «All right, come along!» Rikard told her, but his voice was cold. He took up his sword in the pearl-encrusted sheath and buckled it on, and the gryphon whined with excitement and rubbed her beak on his hand. He did not respond. He was tired and sad, he longed for something—for what? To hear music that ceased, to speak to his brother once before they fought … he did not know. Heir and defender, he must obey. He set the silver helmet on his head and turned to pick up his cloak, flung over a chair. The pearly sheath slung from his belt clattered against something behind him; he turned and saw the box, lying on the floor, open. As he stood looking at it with the same cold, absent look, a little blackness like smoke gathered about it on the floor. He stooped and picked it up, and darkness ran out over his hands.

The gryphon backed away, whining.

Tall and white-armored, fair-haired, silver-capped in the glittering shadowless room, Rikard stood holding the open box, watching the thick dusk that dripped slowly from it. All around his body now, below his hands, was twilight. He stood still. Then slowly he raised the box up, clear up over his head, and turned it upside down.

Darkness flowed over his face. He looked about him, for the distant music had stopped and things were very silent. Candles burned, dots of light picking out flecks of gold and flashes of violet from walls and ceiling. But all the corners were dark, behind each chair lay darkness, and as Rikard turned his head his shadow leapt along the wall. He moved then, quickly, dropping the box, for in one of the black corners he had glimpsed the reddish glow of two great eyes. The gryphon, of course. He held out his hand and spoke to her. She did not move, but gave a queer metallic cry.

«Come on! Are you afraid of the dark?» he said, and then all at once was afraid himself. He drew his sword. Nothing moved. He took a step backward toward the door, and the monster jumped. He saw the black wings spread across the ceiling, the iron beak, the talons; her bulk was on him before he could stab upward. He wrestled, the great beak snapping at his throat and the talons tearing at his arms and chest, till he got his sword arm free and could slash down, pull away, and slash again. The second blow half severed the gryphon's neck. She dropped off, lay writhing in the shadows among splinters of glass, then lay still.

Rikard's sword dropped clattering on the floor. His hands were sticky with his own blood, and he could hardly see; the beating of the gryphon's wings had blown out or knocked over every candle but one. He groped his way to a chair and sat down. After a minute, though he still gasped for breath, he did as he had done on the dune top after battle: bowed his head and hid his face in his hands. It was completely silent. The one candle flickered in its sconce, mirrored feebly in a cluster of topazes on the wall behind it. Rikard raised his head.

The gryphon lay still. Its blood had spread out in a pool, black as the first spilt darkness from the box. Its iron beak was open, its eyes open, like two red stones.

«It's dead,» said a small soft voice, as the witch's cat came picking its way delicately among the fragments of the smashed table. «Once and for all. Listen, prince!» The cat sat down curling its tail neatly round its paws. Rikard stood motionless, blank-faced, till a sudden sound made him start: a little ting nearby! Then from the tower overhead a huge dull bell stroke reverberated in the stone of the floor, in his ears, in his blood. The clocks were striking ten.

There was a pounding at his door, and shouts echoed down the palace corridors mixed with the last booming strokes of the bell, screams of scared animals, calls, commands.

«You'll be late for the battle, prince,» said the cat.

Rikard groped among blood and shadow for his sword, sheathed it, flung on his cloak, and went to the door.

«There'll be an afternoon today,» the cat said, «and a twilight, and night will fall. At nightfall one of you will come home to the city, you or your brother. But only one of you, prince.»

Rikard stood still a moment. «Is the sun shining now, outside?»

«Yes, it is—now.»

«Well, then, it's worth it,» the young man said, and opened the door and strode on out into the hubbub and panic of the sunlit halls, his shadow falling black behind him.

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