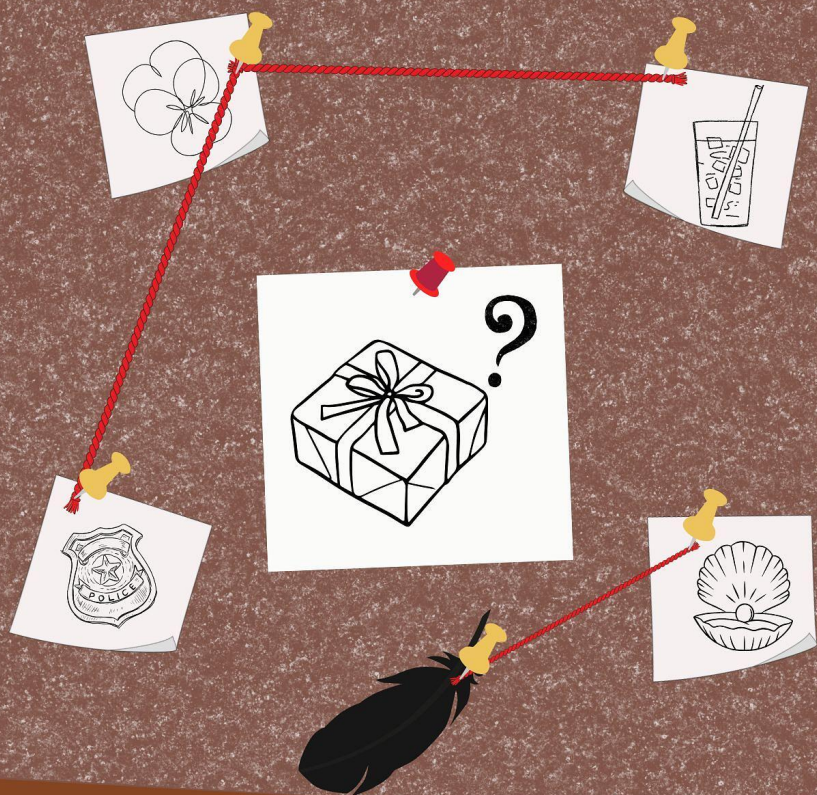


Pandora's Box



A Leonine Investigations Mystery
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Pandora's Box

People tell the story of Pandora and her box like it's a cautionary tale. As if it had a moral, and that moral is, *don't get too curious.*

What most people don't know is that nearly every simple moral has a second part. If you tell me *curiosity killed the cat*, I have an easy answer. *Satisfaction brought it back.*

And—stop me if you haven't heard Pandora's story before—but at the end, hope was left in the box. So what's the moral then? *Get curious to make things better*, if you ask me. Only the people who know to ask questions are the ones to find the good stuff.

And as summertime came around Belville again, people were asking me plenty of things. Between you and me, I was feeling pretty smug. I'd written up my adventures with the mining industry and some mysterious tarot cards into a full serialized story, and the final chapter had come out with last week's edition. My small town paper was being distributed not only around the mountain, but as far away as Brass.

With work done for the day and the printing presses quiet for the night, I was ready to bask in the glow of it. There was going to be a picnic in the town square that evening, and I was

starving.

But I got stopped at the door.

Once upon a time, I might have told you I was in charge of Belville's paper. Editor, reporter, printer, person in charge. But that was back when I had my second-story headquarters all to myself. Now I'd learned better. Ever since a winged black cat had taken up residence, there'd been no question who was boss.

From her perch atop the type cabinets, Nyx meowed at me.

I had my hand on the doorknob, but I turned around to see what she wanted. Her silver eyes glowed in the shadowy room. She was looking at a pile I'd dumped on top of one of the printing presses that morning.

"Oh, right." I tugged at my newsboy cap, wondering how I'd forgotten the mail. All the gesture did was let some auburn springs escape.

I crossed back to the printing press. Used to be that all I got in the mail was ad requests and tarot cards. Now, I had a stack of letters daily. Truth be told we could have used another employee around the place to go through them all, but I still liked looking through them myself. When I remembered to. People wrote in with reactions to my big story, or tips on shady mining practices. I'd become a regular lightning rod for anything wrong in the rock industry.

Today, though, I'd sifted through only two or three letters before I realized why the pile was so big: there was a battered box at the bottom of it.

Nyx meowed again.

"Since when do you care so much about the mail?" I asked.

If only I'd known!

Not that it would have changed much if I had.

I took a look at the box. It was wrapped in brown paper,

tearing at the corners, tied up with a grubby string. It wasn't addressed to *Belville & Beyond*—it was addressed to me personally, Mary Jane Leonine. Somebody who didn't know to call me Leo, then. But there wasn't any return address.

My instincts didn't like it. Odd. I brushed one finger over the torn paper on the corner. Looked like aged wood might be underneath. But I could have sworn it tingled a bit when I touched it.

My stomach rumbled.

Across the room, Nyx stretched out her raven-like wings and hissed.

"I'm allowed to take my own time looking at my mail," I told her. "In fact, I can leave it anywhere I like. I'm the one who pays rent here, not you. So you're just going to have to deal with it sitting here until tomorrow."

I had a party to get to, after all.

I tossed the letters back on the printing press next to the box, and I headed for the door again. The staircase let me out into the alley behind the shops, but it was a short walk around the corner to the Square.

And coming around that corner, it hit me, as it often did. Belville might have been a tiny town out in the backwoods, but it had something special. The mountainside rose up on one side, the town sloped down to the lake on the other. All the storefronts lining Market Square like brightly-colored dominoes holding each other up. They knew how to do up events, that was for sure. Strings of lights lit up the giant trees in the square, with sizzling barbecues and racing children beneath them. Fireflies rose up from the grass. I was never big on *idyllic*—covering town events could sometimes be a chore—but it was home.

I joined the crowd lingering around the appetizer table outside Lavender's Tavern. I'd managed to down one mozzarella-stuffed pepper and was holding a veggie skewer in each hand when Maggie found me.

"Leo, did you skip lunch again?" Maggie, short for Magica, was an ex-acrobat who'd settled in town to work at the salon and the paper while dating the local police officer. She was a reporter's dream. She heard everything, even when she didn't realize her own strengths.

She'd also taken her job at the paper as an excuse to mother me. Which was ridiculous, because not only was she younger than me, she was shorter, which is saying something. I swallowed the rest of my pepper. "I keep telling you not to worry about the paper when you're clocked out."

"I didn't ask about the paper," Maggie said. She used to be shy, when she started out. Now she took me by the elbow. "Come on, there's a lemonade stand outside the cafe. Did you see that I left the copy for next week's 'Around Town' column on your desk?"

"Who's not asking about the paper now?" I polished off a skewer as we walked.

"So you're saying you want to talk about something other than the paper?" Maggie's silver hair brushed her shoulders as she looked back at me. There were blooming violets entwined in the strands. "How's Lark?"

"Did I tell you we got a strange box at the paper today?"

Maggie's golden eyes crinkled. Amusement, mostly, but she was prone to worry too. "A box? From who?"

"No idea," I said. "Thought you might know something about it."

"I don't remember anything," Maggie said. "Nobody's sup-

posed to send anything. The museum in Pine did offer to send over some brochures for us to distribute, but they haven't finished printing them yet. They shouldn't get here until next week, I thought. I could check through the schedule—"

"It's probably nothing," I interrupted. No need for her to go looking for the paper's "schedule," which was currently written on a napkin and probably lining Nyx's lair. Granda always said a reporter's schedule should only be in their head. It's easiest to change things around there.

"Was there a sender?" Maggie said. Still worried. "Could it be the same as the tarot cards?"

"We found out who that was, and they're fine now," I said.

"But what if it's some kind revenge or something?"

At this rate, she was going to run us both into a tree. Or a keg full of lemonade. I tugged on her arm to make her slow down. "No use worrying about it until I open it."

"Maybe we shouldn't, though," Maggie said. "Or maybe we should ask Saki to look at it first."

I did my best to stop it. We were almost at the cafe table. "I really don't—"

"What am I going to be looking at?" Sakura, shadow witch and owner of the Pomegranate Cafe, said the words with relish. I sighed. The two were almost a pair, standing the same height, Saki's white hair bobbed just a little shorter than Maggie's, though her skin was much paler and her eyes wide, blue, and totally innocent. A look which would have suited Maggie more truthfully.

Still, Saki knew her business—both the cafe business and the less-than-lawful magic business. And she was already handing Maggie a strawberry lemonade in a sparkling cup. For me, an iced coffee, large and extra black.

"The paper got a box," I said, knowing there was no option but to cut Saki in on it now.

"The paper or you?" Her outfit today was watermelon-themed, from green headband to pink poofy dress sprinkled with seeds. But her gaze was sharp as ever.

"Me." I lingered by the cafe's table, sipping my drink. "It's probably nothing."

"Do you know the sender?"

"No."

"Any indication of what it is?"

"No."

"Have you sent away for anything lately?"

"No. Haven't had the time." I didn't shop a lot anyway, not via the mail and not in person either.

"And you're looking for advice on what to do with it?"

"No," I said, for all the good it'd do.

Saki grinned. "Good thing I have no scruples. Do not, under any circumstances, open that box, Leo."

"See!" Maggie sloshed her drink emphatically. "That's what I was going to say too!"

"It's my box," I said. "Says so on the label. I don't recall reading either of your names on it."

"Well, do you recall reading 'this is how you get cursed' on it? Because that's exactly how these things happen." Saki had her hands on her hips, letting her co-owner take over handing out drinks. Since her co-owner in this case was Mel, the local postmistress, I had an interest in keeping this conversation quiet. I might have interviewed Mel on my own to see what she knew about the box, but I knew better than to invite her to gang up on me with Maggie and Saki.

But once again my practicality struck too late. Someone else

had already overheard us.

"Maggie, there you are. What's this about curses?"

The newest gang member was none other than Thorn, one and only local police officer. She came up behind Maggie and put a friendly hand on her shoulder. This was an easy feat, since Officer Thorn was easily six feet tall and nearly as broad.

She was also still in uniform. I tugged at my cap. The last thing I wanted was to make some kind of report. To someone other than the paper, I mean.

"Leo got a strange box at the paper," Maggie said, too helpfully. "We don't know who sent it or what it is. Saki thinks it might be cursed."

"It's not cursed," I said, in vain.

Officer Thorn looked down at me. Her skin was mossy green, her eyes dark and her hair long and black. But sometimes she could look exactly as disapproving as Nyx. "You know that for a fact?"

"Yes, do tell us how you know," Saki said.

I made a face at the witch. She knew very well I have no magic of my own. "Okay, fine, I don't know."

"Did you ask Mel about it?" Officer Thorn's eyes drifted past Saki to her coworker, who was handing out lemonades to what looked like the entire local school.

"She's busy," I said, secretly grateful.

"No need for anything to happen right away, is there?" Thorn leaned over, stealing a sip of Maggie's drink. "How about you bring it over to the station tomorrow?"

"You think it could be something bad too?" Maggie asked her girlfriend.

Thorn shrugged. "Might just be a prank or some kind of mistake. But we have protection spells set up at the station. It's

just as easy to open it there, just in case, eh?”

“Eh,” I agreed. Somehow, my coffee was already gone.

“It’s a good idea,” said Maggie.

“Such is the cost of fame,” said Saki, who seemed to be enjoying herself.

I waved my brass hand at all three of them. I’d lost the lower part of one arm in a printing accident long ago—long enough ago that no one seemed to remember any more. Including me. “I know plenty about the costs of reporting.”

Officer Thorn looked skeptical. “Was that due to reporting? Not sure I ever heard that story.”

“Never mind,” I told them all. I was all set to turn on my heel and go get some more food. “I’m just saying, if I say it’s nothing, then it’s nothing to worry about. It’s just a bit of mail. I only brought it up in the first place because—”

My dramatic exit was ruined when I turned and bumped right into Lark.

“My, my.” She smiled that smile at me. The one that made my insides do flips. “I wonder, should I have a horn installed in this thing? Some lights?”

She was referring to her chair, of course. Not so much a wheelchair: it was supported atop one spinning orb, some kind of magic that looked like pure water holding up a throne. Lark herself was owner of the local mine and a fierce businesswoman, but she had a regality that was outside of all that. Her sandy skin, turquoise eyes, sea-blue waves of hair falling down her back—all perfect, as usual.

“I—I was distracted, that’s all,” I said. “I didn’t hear you come up.”

“And what were you talking about that was so distracting?”

I could hear Maggie take a breath to reply. I glared at her over

my shoulder.

"Leo got a dangerous delivery today and she's determined to open it by herself," Saki said in a sing-song voice over my other shoulder.

"It's not dangerous," I protested.

"I thought you didn't know anything about it," Officer Thorn said.

Any further protest died on my lips as Lark looked at me. She had perfected the one-eyebrow arch. "We're all intelligent adults here, are we not? There will be no opening unknown boxes. Let Officer Thorn handle it. It's her job. Now. Why are we talking about work at a party?"

There was nothing left to say. Nothing else I wanted said, either. We left Saki to run her lemonade and coffee stand, and went to find the evening's main course.

It was late when I next looked around. Most of the kids had gone home to bed, and the fairy lights were bright against the night sky. The crowd was still loud, but most of the food was gone and my belly was full. And that reminded me that I'd forgotten to feed the cat.

It would have all been different if Nyx had deigned to live in my actual house. But she was strictly an office cat. I'd found her on the eaves of that building, and once inside she had settled right in.

I gave my excuses to Lark and everyone else. As I headed back to the shop, the noise and light receded. It gave me a different perspective. I had to admit it was my own fault everyone had gone after me about the box. I'd only brought it up to distract Maggie. That plan had certainly backfired.

I let myself in the back door and climbed up the stairs. Nyx was sitting at the corner of one of the windows overlooking

the Square, like she had been watching the party. It was one of her favorite spots. As soon as I opened the door, though, she flew over and took a swing at my cap.

"At least I remembered," I told her, swatting harmlessly back.

I went to the office to get her food and dish. She followed me like a shadow. I left her eating on the desk.

And as I stood in the doorway with my back to her, the lights from the party outside lit up that box still sitting on the printing press.

I pulled my cap off and ran my hand through my curls. I'd told everyone it was nothing, but that was a lie. It was a mystery. A mystery I wasn't going to be able to resist.

As a reporter, I've seen a lot of stories play out. If you asked me, this is what I'd tell you: when you give people a choice, they make the wrong one.

The paper and string on the package were harmless. The wooden box looked normal. A little old and beat up, but nothing special. It was no bigger than an encyclopedia. And I wasn't going to stand there with knowledge left on the table, no matter what anyone said about curses and pranks.

The lid of the box was shut with tiny little nails. My pen knife was enough to pry them up. There was a piece of paper under the lid. In neat cursive, somebody had written, *For the expert on mining and ores.*

Nothing else. I never claimed to be an expert—that'd be Lark more than me. But I was intrigued. Under the paper, the contents of the box were visible. Wood slats divided the box into twelve little sections. Nestled in shredded paper inside each section was a different rock. Crystal? Ore? Mineral? Each was a lump of something Lark's team might pull out of a mountain. None were silver, like the ore in the story I'd run.

One was pink, one was lavender, some were darker or shinier or rougher or plain. It looked like something you'd find in a curiosities shop. Or a professor's study.

Except—it wasn't quite orderly enough. One of the bottom corner sections had been subdivided, so that instead of holding twelve rocks, the box held thirteen. The thirteenth rock was so black that I wasn't sure there was anything there. Without a thought, I reached out to touch it, to see if it was real.

That's when the explosion hit.

And in that instant when white light filled my vision and the world was falling backwards, I thought to myself,

That's not fair. I didn't get to the bottom of it yet.

