

A Rock and A Hard Place



A Leonine Investigations Mystery
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A Rock and a Hard Place

The problem with having the job that's your dream come true is that no one can work all the time.

That's what they tell me, anyway. "They" being Sakura, Maggie, and even Officer Thorn, who insisted that I stay at home and rest after the explosion in the shop. I'd survived, hadn't I? I didn't see any reason I shouldn't at least be in charge of the write up. But Lark, curse her, sent one of her employees down to the office to help Maggie—and to keep me out. There was nothing for me to do but stay at home and fester.

Internally, that is. My wounds themselves healed up just fine. I hadn't been that injured anyway—I'd poked the strange black rock with my brass hand, which is almost impossible to damage. There are some benefits to fairy magic. I'd just wanted to see if something was *there*. Turns out, there was.

No, my biggest problem from the explosion—aside from house arrest—was a lingering head injury caused by falling backward into one of the printing presses. Enchanted brass is one thing to have working for you. Iron magitech is a different matter entirely, at least when it comes in contact with your skull. Might've been that my cap and the sheer springiness of

my hair saved my life.

In Lark's opinion, I should also have thanked Nyx, who flew out the damaged window to find Officer Thorn. Word is, the cat yowled so fiercely no one could ignore her. But I don't see how everyone could have ignored a small explosion in a shop in the Square either. Even if they *were* tired and probably tipsy after a town picnic.

Still. It's not like I was ungrateful. Nyx earned herself a plush new pillow to nest on atop the type cabinets that lined the shop. Like all cats, raven-winged or not, she instead preferred the box the pillow came in. Maggie fished it out of the recycling pile for her.

For a part-time employee hired on to help with research and ads, Maggie had done well. That much I had to admit. With help from Lark's lackey and Sakura's magic—to work the presses—Maggie put out a special edition while I was laid up. Not half bad. Sensationalized the mysterious box, of course. Word on the street was no one in Belville would open their mail any more without charms of protection on hand. At least the local Witch's business was booming as a result of the mess.

On my first day back, Maggie was there at the door.

She had two large iced drinks in hand, which was good news, at least. She handed me my extra-black coffee and said, "Saki sends her congratulations. Mina said she'd come by later to check on you. She promised to send word to Lark."

Maggie, five foot nothing at best, was no taller than I was. Shoulder-length silver hair intertwined with flowers did nothing to make her look intimidating, either. But the fact that she was dating the local police officer, whom only *she* would refer to as "Mina," gave her words extra bite.

I pulled back my cap—gingerly—to glare at her. "You're

helping Lark look after me now?"

"That was the agreement," Maggie reminded me.

Rueing the day I'd thought to hire an assistant, I moved into the shop. From a corner atop a cabinet, tucked into a box, Nyx meowed at me. I glared at her too. Her pillow was perfectly fluffy and unused across the room.

I moved between the rows of machines, some for setting type, some for printing the paper. Aside from Maggie's special edition, they'd been quiet for a month. Too long. That said, Maggie had clearly not been wasting time. Everything was freshly cleaned and gleaming. I almost didn't recognize it all.

"Trent said specifically that you shouldn't work with the presses yet," Maggie said, trailing behind me.

"And did he say how he expects the paper to get out on time?"

"Um, he said it doesn't have to," said Maggie. She knew I wouldn't like it. She was already shrugging as I whirled around to face her. But she went on anyway. "And I think he's right, Leo. Everybody knows you're still recovering. They don't expect you to have the same schedule and everything."

"I expect me to," I said, "and it happens to be *my* paper."

"Um," said Maggie, again. "We thought you might say that. But, technically, it's Belville's paper, right? *Belville and Beyond?*"

"I know what I called it." I frowned, only more annoyed when the gesture made my constant headache flare up. This talk about technicalities had the hint of Lark about it. She was far more business-minded than Maggie and the others. It was why she understood me—perhaps too well. "Where is this going?"

"We thought," said Maggie, very distinctly, like she'd rehearsed it. "We thought that it might be best if you only work in the office for now."

I glanced over my shoulder at the office, the only room

partitioned off from the shop floor. "What you're saying is, instead of house arrest, now I'm under work arrest."

"Um—office arrest, yeah," Maggie said. "Trent didn't say anything?"

Truth was, he probably had. Our local Witch-turned-healer had plenty to say. He'd been at my flat that very morning, giving me the final go-ahead and a stock of herbal tea for my head. I'd stopped listening after he said *you're good to go, but . . .*

"I don't see him here to enforce his order," I said. But the point was moot, if Officer Thorn was planning to stop by later. Why couldn't all these people be so organized when it came to *preventing* crime and explosions?

"True, but," said Maggie, "think about it. Technically the paper kind of belongs to the town. You know how much people rely on it. But we also care a lot about you. We want to make sure that you are really okay. It's only for a little while, I'm sure. And there's still plenty of work to do in the office . . ."

We both glanced that way again. Through the open door, piles of paper were clearly visible on the desk. Because Maggie had been left to her own devices, the piles were stacked neatly. But they were still there nonetheless.

I could see how this was going to go. I didn't like it, but I'm not one to fight fate. Not all the time, anyway. Not when I have a headache. And she *had* given me coffee. I took a sip. "So what's the idea? You're going to run the presses again?"

"Saki said she could come over when we're ready. She said that now that she's done it once, it probably won't be as—um—" Maggie hid her face behind her drink. Suddenly, the cleanliness of the shop seemed more suspect. "Anyway, she said she thinks she figured out how the magitech works now. And it'll probably only be for one run. Or . . . two."

That was suspicious too, the way they were all ganging up on me. Trying to tell me only what I wanted to hear. Sort of, anyway.

But I knew Maggie. Nervous as she might still seem, she'd learned how to put her foot down, and she was doing it now. There was no use fighting at the moment. This required a little strategy.

"Fine," I said.

Maggie perked up, surprised. "Fine?"

"*Fine*," I repeated. "But I want whatever you've got for the next edition on my desk before lunch."

* * *

My attitude had lost its effect. Maggie was having more fun at work than I was.

I could hear her humming to herself out on the shop floor. She'd apparently decided to organize the type cabinets. It was a good idea. I'd set everything up to be alphabetical once upon a time, but these days I came across the letter, symbol, or word I needed mostly by luck.

It's not that I didn't want Maggie to be happy. Her and the cat—let them enjoy themselves, it didn't do any harm. That they wanted to be at the paper was a good thing. That was my usual opinion. But it was hard to be so magnanimous with a constant, dull headache.

Not to mention while organizing. My least favorite task. Office work inevitably meant going through ad requests, editing, and researching articles or pulling back issues of the paper from my "archive"—a bank of cabinets on one wall. My strengths were more along the lines of making sources, or

printing presses, cooperate. But leaving the premises to do interviews was off the table, as was running the magitech.

I tugged at a nearby pile of folders. Too emphatically. Papers slipped, hesitated, and then cascaded down to the floor. All I could do was be glad I'd shut the office door so no one noticed my clumsiness.

And then to be doubly glad I was alone—because the fallen papers revealed a wooden box.

It must have been moved to the office when they found me after the explosion. Set out of harm's way, maybe. Then forgotten and concealed in a stack of letters. How had Officer Thorn not confiscated it? Maybe she'd assumed it was destroyed.

But it was not. This was undoubtedly the same box. Pulling out my penknife, I reached out and flicked the lid off the box. There were those same thirteen little rocks. Glinting in the sunlight from the window like they were totally innocent.

And how *had* a box of rocks exploded? Without suffering any ill effects, too. It was something that had plagued me while I was “recuperating,” and it still bothered me as I stared at the box. It could have been an enchantment or curse, of course. I'd written about some of those myself. But if so, was the magic gone now? Had it been spent?

And if not, then what was going on?

I glanced through the window cut into my office door. Maggie had disappeared. By craning my neck, I could just spot her kneeling to rummage in the lower drawer of a cabinet now labeled “LETTERS A-L.” Nyx was sitting next to her, paw up to bat at little pieces of type.

They'd be there a while. I turned back to my desk.

I tucked my brass hand behind my back. Couldn't tell you why. Maybe it felt like bad luck to do the same thing twice. This

time, I reached out with my pen knife again. I'd have to move the box at some point if I was going to use my desk.

What did I tell you: when given options, people make the wrong choice.

But this time my choice wasn't the wrong one at all. Nothing happened. I poked the side of the box: nothing. I pushed it across some papers. Nothing.

Maybe I'd touched the wrong rock before. Maybe there had been some kind of booby trap in the corner. Curious, I picked up the nearest envelope—empty—and crumpled it into a ball before tossing it at the rocks.

It settled on top of the upper right corner. Harmlessly.

I moved closer, flicking the envelope out of the way. The rock it had landed on was rough-hewn but mostly clear, aside from little flecks and lines. Rocks themselves had never been my forte—I was in it more for the shady mining practices—but if I'd been asked, I would have said it was quartz.

Struck by an idea, I went to the bookshelf and pulled out a reference book called *The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals*. I'll be honest with you: I had no idea which one quartz would be, if any. But after a little searching through the index, I found a relevant entry:

Clear Quartz. Also called rock crystal or pure quartz. Abundant mineral known from ancient times. Used widely in magitech, crafting, and spellwork. Acts as an amplifier of other frequencies. Impurities in the structure can cause colorations, many of which are recognized by their own name, including but not limited to: rose quartz

(pink), amethyst (lavender), and citrine (yellow). Clear quartz associations include purification, protection, new beginnings, and augmenting power.

You could have knocked me down with a feather. Or a mineral, in this case. “Augmenting”? “Frequencies”? Was this why the box had exploded?

It remained perfectly stationary now. I looked back at that first rock—the clear quartz. That part about new beginnings—there was something there. The start of a story. I just wasn’t sure what kind of story it would be.

My Granda always said it wasn’t a reporter’s job to determine where a story goes. The job was to follow the story wherever it might lead. Maybe if I took this box one rock at a time and researched them all carefully, I’d understand what happened.

And once I knew *what* happened, I could figure out *why*.

I snapped the encyclopedia shut and looked at my messy bookshelf. If the outside of the box was safe to touch, I could keep it right there with the reference material. Hidden in plain sight. I could take my time—do this properly.

After all, whoever caused my headache and prevented me from working needed to face a few consequences.

I pulled out my notebook and began to write down notes. Orders and office arresters wouldn’t keep me out of it. I was back on the case.