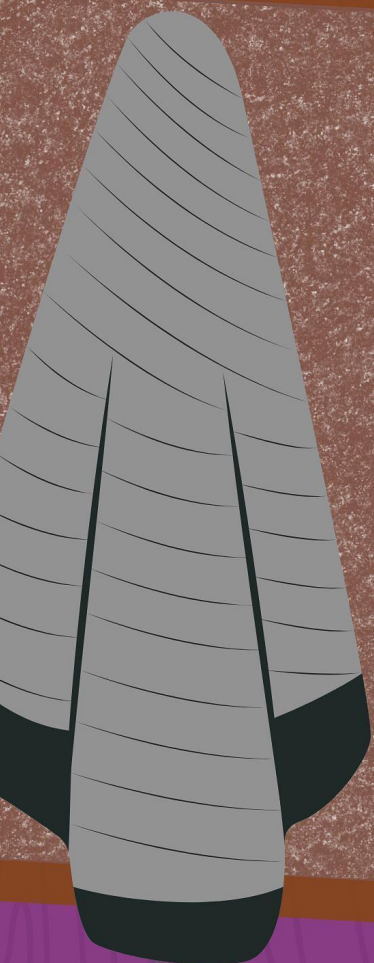


All That Glitters



A Leonine Investigations Mystery
Elle Hartford

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All That Glitters

I publish a regular edition of *Belville & Beyond* every week. Like clockwork. Like, some might say, a *respectable* paper. Knowing what *respectable* reporter and printer I am, you might wonder, what about the rock box case? Certainly I wouldn't let it grow cold. Or gather dust on my desk.

But you can't blame *me* for the dust. The box showed up on my doorstep dusty, and the one explosion so far hadn't helped in that department. Maggie and her zeal for cleaning had made the print floor good as new, but the box itself was still hidden in my office, in the bottom drawer of my desk. (Not a very inspired hiding place, I grant you, but Maggie was the first assistant I'd ever hired who had a moral aversion to snooping, and her ethics were spoiling me.) Only I knew it was still around.

And—that was the issue. *Only I knew* that the box a) hadn't been destroyed in the explosion that put me on house arrest and then office arrest for two months to “recover,” and b) had in fact been lost in a stack of papers, only to be discovered during one of my half-hearted attempts at organization. I didn't dare tell Maggie: she'd immediately tell her girlfriend the police officer, and I'd never see the box again. I also didn't dare tell Lark.

That was the stickier issue.

Not only did Lark run the one mining business in town, she lived in the mountain itself. Word around town was she'd begun her operation in a series of caves, and lived there at first, same as her mining crews. But she'd moved up in the world—literally. Now, her crews worked a large mine site halfway up the mountain, shipping ores to the cities and to the coast. And as for Lark, she oversaw it all from her little office right in front of the mine during the day. During the evening, she retired to a home built out of the remains of an older mine site. A meeting of mountain and mansion.

Since our work together on the tarot card case, she'd taken to inviting me up for dinner sometimes. I wasn't one to turn down a meal, even if it meant hiking up the mountain.

For that matter, I wasn't one to turn down a chance to see Lark.

That evening she was perfect, as always. The glowing orb supporting her wheelchair glided effortlessly across the stone floors of her house, and her aquamarine eyes sparkled in the light from the crystal chandeliers. Why a coastal elf with skin the color of sand and hair like ocean waves wanted to live in a place where half the "windows" were just veins of shiny ore was something I'd never understand. But I didn't have to understand anything about Lark. She just *was*, and at risk of repeating myself, she was perfect.

Meanwhile, I was out of breath and my nose and cheeks were probably bright red from my walk. My newsboy cap and long jacket hadn't been a match for the weather. Fall was creeping down the mountain, and there was a definite chill in the air.

Lark noticed it too. "You haven't pulled out your winter scarves yet, hm?" She took my hat and jacket as she met me in her front hall. A gesture that always made me want to check my

shirtsleeves for ink stains or tug my curls into order, though I knew both actions would be futile.

"I don't bother with scarves." I shrugged. "That's what walking fast is for. Warms you up."

"And here I thought you were just excited to try my pumpkin stew," she said.

I grinned. "It's the cornbread I really came for."

Lark led the way into her dining room. One of the grander rooms, it ran the length of the old mine, extending into the mountain. At the far end, a magical fireplace flickered. The interior wall was smooth, built of blocks left over from the mines and pummeled into shape by Lark's best masons. It was covered with art, mostly landscapes. But on the other side, the outer wall, that one Lark had left completely bare. Instead of art, the veins of the rock were visible—some dark, some sparkling. If you asked Lark, she'd probably say that *was* art.

Just looking at it made me feel guilty. I was dying to ask Lark about the rock samples I'd received in the post. If the box hadn't *exploded*, she would have been just as interested as I was—probably more. But just because there'd been an accident and I'd hit my head, now she frowned like a disappointed teacher every time the subject came up.

I'd been able to identify one sample myself: quartz, a clear, plain crystal. My encyclopedia said that quartz was known to "amplify" other energies, so the next obvious step was to figure out what the rest of the rocks were. They were all different. The one next to the quartz, for example, was a dull gold color . . . but I didn't for a moment believe that someone had sent me actual gold in the mail. I wasn't that kind of lucky.

"Wondering if I redecorated?"

Lark was ladling out soup and I was staring across the table

at those veins in the wall. I turned in my seat to share her smirk. "Love what you've done with the place. Who's the designer?"

"Geology," she said without missing a beat. "And eons of time. You might take note, Leo. It's perfectly acceptable for good things to take time."

"You don't have to give me the 'healing lasts longer than you think' lecture again. I hear it every day from Maggie and Trent. They even managed to rope your temp worker into it. Thanks for that, by the way," I said. Lark had loaned one of her employees to the paper to make up for the fact that I wasn't supposed to be running the presses by myself. With his help, the paper was back on schedule, but everyone continued to remind me of my summer injury.

"Someone has to keep an eye on you," Lark said.

"Agree to disagree." I knew she wouldn't, though. After a quick and heavenly bite of cornbread, I said, "What kind of rock sparkles like that?"

Lark looked amused. She was sitting at the head of the table, letting a spoonful of soup cool. Elegant. I knew she saw right through the diversion, but I hoped she didn't see why I was interested in it. "Many of them," she said, when I didn't back down. "Technically what you're seeing are metallic *minerals* which are naturally occurring within the rock wall."

She was way too cool when she pulled technicalities on me. "Come down to the print shop and I could sound just as fancy, explaining the magitech," I said.

Lark laughed. "I don't doubt your expertise, but even so, I doubt you're one for 'fancy' language. How's the stew?"

"Perfect." The only thing *I* didn't doubt in that moment was that I was blushing. Highly inconvenient. I hid my face behind another cornbread muffin and continued looking at the wall.

“So, do different minerals come in different colors?”

“Of course.” She still sounded amused at me. “That’s where many dyes or colored inks come from, you know. Different minerals. Cinnabar and hematite can both create red, for example. Lead, found in galena, or silver—like the ore you were so interested in last year—are gray, and so on.”

“What about yellow?” I asked. For a moment she looked suspicious. I added hastily, “Since you’re showing off and all.”

“Many yellow inks come from plants,” she said. “You’d have to ask Belville’s resident alchemist about that.”

I couldn’t tell if she was on to me. I swallowed a spoonful of stew too fast, scalding my throat. But it was too late to back down now. “You’re saying you can’t think of any?”

“Yellow minerals? I could name too many to count,” Lark said, rising to the challenge. “Gold is the obvious one. Native sulfur is another, though you’re more likely to notice the smell than the color. There’s also pyrite and chalcopyrite—”

“What does sulfur smell like?” I interrupted.

“Rotten eggs. Hardly dinner table talk, I’m afraid.”

And unlikely to be my sample, either. I hadn’t noticed any smells coming from the box, though I made a mental note to check. And had to restrain myself from making *actual* notes in the journal in my pocket, which would have given me away for sure. “What’s that about pyrite, then? Why does that sound familiar?”

“You’d probably know it better as ‘fool’s gold,’” Lark said, smiling wryly. “To the undiscerning eye, the two look the same.”

“If that’s the case then how do you tell them apart?” I asked.

“A real expert can tell by the color. But if you don’t have that kind of expertise, you can do a streak test. Rub both samples on a piece of raw ceramic. Gold will leave a yellow streak, but

pyrite, despite its appearance, leaves a dark one.” Lark tilted her head at me. “Why do I feel like I’m being interviewed for a dangerous article?”

Once again, I swallowed too fast. At this rate, I’d be done with dinner before she’d cooled her soup. “What could be dangerous about testing minerals?”

“Where gold is concerned, people often get . . . touchy,” Lark said, “as you should remember well, having dealt with mesmerized silver. What’s your new assignment, Leo?”

“Nothing,” I protested. “I haven’t got one. Unless you count healing, right? And training this new employee you saddled me with. I’m just curious. It’s a weakness.”

I hadn’t really expected this rambling to work. But Lark’s face softened. “It is a weakness, at times, but it’s also what makes you such an open-minded reporter. Belville is lucky to have you. Bear that in mind, won’t you?”

* * *

I was still “bearing in mind” Lark’s comment the next morning, when I went into work. I didn’t even notice the cold.

We’d kept to safe topics for the rest of the previous evening. I couldn’t say for sure if she’d figured me out or not—Lark could be canny like that. But for now, I had my office to myself, and I had a rock to test.

Sorry—a *mineral*.

I climbed the stairs to my print shop, gave Nyx her breakfast—that’d keep the nosy cat occupied for a few minutes at least—and locked my office door behind me, for good measure. The hard part of the plan had been finding “raw ceramic.” It turned out what Lark meant in her expert-speak was just a rough clay tile,

one that had been fired but not glazed. They had plenty of those in the art shop downstairs. After bribing them with coffee from the local cafe, I'd been able to leave with one in my pocket.

With the piles of paper cleaned up, there was just enough room on the floor behind my desk for me to sit. I put the tile down beside me. It still gave me a little shiver, opening the drawer that held the rock box. I'd determined last time that the box wasn't going to explode any more, but still. It had made quite an impression.

But I shook the nerves aside and pulled up the lid. Using my brass hand to brace the tile, I picked up the lump of gold look-alike in my other hand and rubbed it across the surface. I'd say I held my breath, but if we're being honest, it only took a second. There wasn't any time to get worked up.

And just like that, I was holding a piece of identified pyrite in my hand.

I couldn't help but grin as I looked at it. If all rock identification was this creative, I could see why Lark liked it. There was a do-it-yourself-ness to it that might become addictive if I wasn't careful.

With the pyrite still in hand, I reached over to my reference shelf and pulled out *The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals*. I had to thumb through it a bit to find what I wanted. Turned out, pyrite was in the "Metals" section:

Pyrite. Also known as fool's gold or iron pyrite. A metallic mineral with a cubic crystal habit, in appearance very similar to gold. However, pyrite is not as dense as gold, and its color is generally described as more "brassy."

Furthermore, gold is easily scratched, while pyrite is harder and more likely to flake when met with force. Despite the “fool” association, pyrite may still be used in spells meant to attract money, luck, or protection.

The reference to a “fool” in the last sentence caught my attention. I’d heard the name before, Lark had said it herself, but this time it reminded me of the tarot card. The “Fool” card meant new adventures or the start of a fresh cycle. I’d certainly signed myself up for that by investigating this box. I could hope it wouldn’t lead to as much drama as the tarot case had, but I had a suspicion that hoping wouldn’t do me much good.

Better, most likely, to have some of that *protection* energy.

A knock at the office door startled me. I tucked the book back on the shelf and, while the desk hid me from view, stuffed the pyrite into the box and the box into the drawer. The tile went in too, just in case. I popped my head up to see my new part-timer, Wulf, peering through the window inset in the door.

“What is it?” I asked as I opened it. The best distraction is a good question, that’s what my Granda always told me.

“Just that my shift is starting,” Wulf said. He had a tendency to talk to the floor instead of to me. A strange tendency if you think about it. As a full-blooded orc, he could have lifted me and my rocks and my desk *off* the floor, and maybe a printing press besides. But maybe he was glad to have left physical labor like that back at the mine. “Also, Lark said to pass this along.”

He pressed a package into my hands. What had been dwarfed in his large, dark green palms was surprisingly light in mine. It wasn’t any kind of rock, that was for sure. I looked up at Wulf.

“What is it?”

He shrugged. “Came by special express early this morning, I heard. Want me to keep setting type?”

I waved him off to his work. The package in my hands was about as big as my encyclopedia, but a quarter of the weight. It was from Lark—I wasn’t worried. But I *did* have a bad track record with the mail. After a moment, I decided to open it there, in the doorway. If it came from an impostor and exploded on me again, at least I’d have a witness.

I pulled off the thick white paper and let it fall for now. The box lid slipped out of my hands and onto the floor too. Inside was the most lovely cream silk scarf I’d ever seen.

Unable to believe it was real, I poked at the fabric only to find that there were other things in the box—another scarf, this one a rougher, black plaid wool. And a note. It trembled a little in my hand as I read,

Leo. I thought you might like to have options. You do remember that you’re supposed to be looking after yourself? Lark.

Unlike my latest rock experiment, *both* these scarves were perfect.

