

Semi- Precious Spooks



GARNET? RUBY??



A Leonine Investigations Mystery
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Market Square was full of ghosts, every tree wrapped in ribbons as black as my coffee. Samhain—or as some call it, Halloween—had to be my favorite time in Belville.

Aside from all the kids running around hopped up on sugar.

Still, the “spooky stories” edition of the paper was one I looked forward to putting together all year long. Not that I could admit as much out loud. It was hardly cutting-edge journalism. But it was a good seller, and my team deserved a break. After several months of looking after me in my recovery—or as some might call it, imprisoning me in my own office—my two assistants had proved they were nearly as dedicated to *Belville & Beyond* as I was. Nearly.

Maggie, the longest-running of the two, had suggested we look at the proof copies of “Spooks and Shrieks” on a bench in the park. For “atmosphere.” Apparently shivering of cold while reading was just as good as shivering with fright. Good thing I had my trusty black plaid scarf to keep me warm.

She’d also been the one to name the edition this year. I figured it was only fair. She’d been part-time with the paper for more than a year now, and truth be told, she did good work. Granda

always said that true workers get true rewards, and now that I was in charge of my own paper, I did my best to see it worked out that way.

How well it worked out in the world at large, that was another matter.

“Leo,” said Maggie, from her end of the bench. She was bent over her copy of the paper, a latte steaming beside her. Her red pencil was hovering over the page. Indecision was often her worst enemy. “Should ‘specter’ be spelled with a t-e-r or t-r-e?”

“Neither’s more correct than the other. Pick one and be consistent,” I told her. “That’s what matters.”

“Or we could just say ‘ghost,’ I guess.” Maggie’s short silver hair fell forward over her cheeks, held in place by a purple knit cap. It looked much warmer than my own newsboy cap. I knew she’d made it herself. Should I—?

“You’re doing it again,” Maggie said, looking up.

I blanched. “Doing what?”

“Not thinking about work. What is it? Do you not like the stories we picked?”

“I like them fine.” I watched the cheesecloth ghost nearest to us waver in the wind. Instead of looking frightful, it looked like it was laughing at me.

Truth was, for as proud as I was of Maggie (and even Wulf, our new typesetter), I was annoyed with myself. The Samhain edition of the paper was nice, sure. But I was still preoccupied with the box I’d received over the summer. All it held were twelve measly rocks. How had it been so hard to identify *rocks*?

Minerals, Lark would have said, if she was here.

But she was at her own work, and I hadn’t told anyone I was looking into the box. *That* was why it was so hard.

Not to mention the fact that between Maggie’s keen eye and

training Wulf, I didn't have that many moments to spare.

"Leo," said Maggie.

I startled again. "What?"

She heaved a heavy sigh—impressive considering most of her bulk was a chunky sweater and oversized rainboots—and looked away, out through the park. And then she started waving enthusiastically, nearly spilling her coffee. I squinted. Obviously Maggie's golden eyes saw better than mine did, because it took me a moment to identify Officer Thorn coming toward us. I was losing my edge.

Or, maybe it was the power of love and all that. Maggie beamed at her partner as she approached.

Officer Thorn looked like she didn't feel the cold at all—as usual. She wore her police uniform and a satisfied smirk that put my guard up. After greeting Maggie affectionately, she turned to me. "Well, well. I was just on my way to the print shop to see you. I have some news you might like to hear."

"How exciting." Rarely did she look so pleased about sharing news with me when an actual case was involved.

"Ignore her lack of enthusiasm. She's been out of sorts with no new big stories," Maggie said. "Here, sit with us. Or—do you need me to leave? Is it supposed to be private?"

"It's nothing you can't hear too." Officer Thorn took the seat offered her, squarely in the middle of the bench. She smiled fondly at her partner before turning back to me, all business. I was busy wiping splatters of coffee from my scarf. When half-orc officers sit, they don't do it delicately.

"For the record," I said, "I'm not out of sorts."

Truth was, I should have been fine. Even though identifying rocks was hard—no pun intended—I'd actually managed to figure out one of them the night before. Garnet. Only took me

a week or two of clandestine research to figure out *that* one, and when I finally did, I didn't see the point any more. What did it matter? At least pyrite had some fool qualities. It could make a good twist in a story. Garnet was just . . . a red rock that was not ruby. It was like fool's gold, but worse.

"Sure," Thorn drawled. "You always scowl like that. Got it. Well, here's something that may cheer you up—if you're up for it. I've been looking into your box sender."

That was a surprise.

"Thought you might be interested," Thorn said smugly.

Maggie peered around her, dropping her pencil. "I thought we'd decided to let that go!"

"It was a package in the mail that caused real damage," Officer Thorn replied, levelly. "That sort of thing does bear looking into. I said I would, and I did. It just took me a while to get any kind of answers, dealing with other police stations all across Beyond. Not to mention the mail system. Although I'm getting pretty good at those kinds of jobs, thanks to you."

She winked at me, and I frowned. "The *point* of a paper is distribution and dissemination, so naturally I deal with the mail. It's not my fault some of my mail is dangerous."

"I suppose it *is* true that the vast majority of what we get is requests for ads and letters to the editor," Maggie said slowly. "Really, you do get lots more mail than anyone else I know, Leo."

"That doesn't mean it's bound to happen that some of it is dangerous," Thorn said, still eyeing me keenly.

"Of course it does." I sipped my coffee. "Anyone could be plotting something at any moment."

"Sounds like you two have been editing too many ghost stories," said Thorn, trying out her wink on Maggie instead. Needless to say, it worked much better in that direction.

Maggie smiled. “Enough about the tarot cards, anyway. That case is closed, right? So what did you find out about the box?”

“It’s not related to the tarot mess last year.” As she agreed with Maggie, Thorn turned back to me. “Not directly, at least. You do have a certain *reputation* now, and that’s probably what did it.”

“Are you going to tell me what you know any time before Samhain?” I asked, irritated.

Officer Thorn just grinned. “Turns out it’s a little bit macabre—right up your alley. Last spring, a rich and reclusive hermit living on his estate outside of Brass up and died in his sleep. Old age. So in comes the family to sort through the belongings. The family, in this case, was one distant niece. She sets up in the house, starts going through everything during the summer. Naturally she doesn’t want to keep it all—the officer I spoke to said the ‘collections’ were literally holding the roof up in places. A real messy inheritance.”

“So in the middle of her very involved cleanout, she took the time to mail me something she found?” I frowned again.

“She was a devoted reader of yours, turns out,” the officer said. “Kept every copy of your mining expose articles. My friend in Brass said if he had to guess, he’d say she meant to send it as some kind of thank-you.”

My frown deepened. “Why does he have to guess?”

“She died herself just a month ago,” Thorn said briskly. “Also old age. Don’t get any ideas.”

Too late. The two most recent owners of this box had died within a span of six months?

“She was eighty-four,” Thorn insisted. “The old man was one hundred and three. Stop it, Leo.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“But,” said Maggie, leaning forward again, “what would there be to do, anyway? Isn’t the box in custody?”

Officer Thorn’s gaze slid to me, and this time she looked more speculative. “I went looking for it when I contacted Brass, but all I’ve got is the outer wrappings.”

“Maybe the rest of it was destroyed,” I said on impulse. Sure, it was an opportunity to tell them I still had it . . . but why put them in danger?

“In any case,” the officer went on, “chances are, she had no idea what it would do. Might have been that her uncle knew it was dangerous, but never got the chance to tell anyone. Or her uncle booby-trapped it and she never got close enough to spring the trap. Just saw some rock samples, thought of her latest favorite reporter with a rock obsession, and there you go.”

Or the box was cursed and had taken them both out, and now it was looking for a third victim.

Or there was someone homicidal on the box’s trail.

Suddenly, the garnet I’d identified most recently made more sense. My copy of *The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals* said that garnet was used for protection and strength. Even that it was used to repel dangerous spirits and negative vibes. When I first read it, that seemed cute for Halloween, but of no real use. The book also said garnet was used in some bug-repelling powders, so I wasn’t getting my hopes up.

But now, knowing that there actually might be some negative energy following the box around, a little bit of extra strength sounded just right.

“But—did your friend say what the box was supposed to be for?” Maggie asked Thorn.

The officer shrugged. “Just a collector’s collection of samples,

seems like. A curiosity. Unfortunately for Leo, this time curiosity got the better of her.”

“Ha ha.” I pursed my lips at Thorn’s cheerful comment. “You don’t know that for sure.”

“True enough.” More seriously, Thorn said, “That’s part of why I wanted to talk to you, Leo. With both the uncle and the niece gone, there aren’t any more obvious leads for me to follow up. Unless you have some insight, we’ve probably hit the end of your box case. I know it’s not the most satisfying, but sometimes that’s how things go.”

“Who were they though, the uncle and niece? And who inherits now?” Maggie asked. For an instant I smiled. She might turn into a reporter yet.

“Let me see . . .” Thorn pulled a notebook from her chest pocket and checked it, rifling through pages. “Cornelius and Ambrosia Cosmos. Ring any bells? Ambrosia’s heir is . . . Oh, right. No heir for her: her lawyer’s selling it all off to benefit a ‘lost familiars’ society in Brass.”

I was still shaking my head thoughtfully. “Never heard of any of it.” But that didn’t mean I couldn’t learn more.

“That means an end to it, eh, Leo?” Thorn shut her notebook with an ominous snap.

“An answer for how the box got to me,” I agreed.

But not an end to looking into the box, or the Cosmos family, or this strange estate outside of Brass.

If the box itself was supporting my efforts with a little bit of protection and strength, who was I to argue?

As Thorn said her goodbyes to Maggie and a crisp breeze rifled through my copy of “Spooks and Shrieks,” I was feeling better than I had in weeks. Because that’s the best thing about a ghost story: it’s proof that even when you think things are over

and finished, all you need is one little clue to get everything going again.