

As Old as Rocks



A Leonine Investigations Mystery
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Some mysteries are infinite. Others are so mundane it hurts.

I'd spent the better part of a month investigating the Cosmos family, the once rich and reclusive collectors who had sent me a strange box of rocks. All I had to show for my efforts was a pieced-together family tree, the great-uncle's self-published autobiography, and a handful of articles in the local school paper written by the niece. And rather than topics like *how I'll one day exact revenge on my enemies with cursed objects* or *proven ways to create panic and mayhem*, the niece liked to write about *what my hometown looked like in the ancient age* and *a day in the life of a library cat*. For a family with such an expansive last name, it turned out their horizons were small.

Such was the obvious conclusion. But my granda always told me to never lose sight of the physical *point* of a story—the thing that would drive it home. And in this case, the point was that my office had nearly been blown up by that strange box of rocks over the summer. So either the Cosmos family was more nefarious than their writings let on, or the answer lay farther back in the box's history.

I wasn't much of a historian, myself. But that's where living

in a small town has its advantages.

"There's Luca, obviously." My assistant, Maggie, tapped her pencil against her chin. I didn't bother pointing out to her that she was leaning on a printing machine we'd recently used, smearing leftover ink on her apron. That's what aprons were for, and that was a lesson she'd have to learn herself. "And the mink who works with him, Frank, is pretty knowledgeable too—that's what everybody says. He's been alive for centuries I guess. Oh, and if you want someone old, there's always Lavender. Or Rhys, at Red's potion shop. But maybe don't tell either of them that I said they were *old*?"

Thanks to her other career as assistant hairdresser, Maggie was always a good sounding board for local gossip. Even if she did worry too much about what other people thought.

"I was hoping for someone less . . ." I waved my hand, the brass prosthetic catching the light. As winter settled over Belville, the print shop became darker and darker in the afternoons. Normally I liked relying on the windows over the Square for natural light. Fortunately, our work was at a lull today.

Hence my interest in finding someone to surreptitiously interview about boxes of rocks. As a rather overbearing and police-affiliated assistant, Maggie still had no idea about my little side project. But she smiled and caught my drift in this particular instance. "Connected with Red, you mean? What is it with you two? She's perfectly nice."

That was all very well and good for Maggie to say—the hair salon was right next to Red's shop, so they were neighbors. And besides, Maggie had yet to meet a resident of Belville who didn't adore her. She'd even worn *me* down over time. But faced with the prospect of a meddling alchemist, I grimaced. "Call it a petty rivalry."

Maggie's grin widened, framed by her silver bob. "Does Red know you're rivals?"

"I said it was petty," I replied. Not an answer—but enough of one.

"Well, if it's going to keep you from talking to the town scholar and archivist purely because he's engaged to her, then it must be pretty strong," Maggie giggled. "Not to mention Rhys, who knows basically everything. He's like—"

"I need someone who knows *strange* things," I interrupted. I wasn't interested in hearing what Red's employee was like. Not to mention I fully realized how silly it was for *me*, a reporter, to be relying on my own employee for town gossip when I'd actually lived in Belville longer.

But we all have our strengths . . . supposedly.

"I guess you've already thought of Saki?" Maggie's good humor faltered. "That said, she—she hasn't really been herself lately."

I *had* thought of Sakura, the one and only shadow witch in town. If there was a curse on my box, she'd be the one to sniff it out. She'd been helpful in my tarot card case last year, but if I'm honest, I was hoping for intel on the box itself—not on whether or not it was magicked. I was pretty sure that it *was*. We could flesh out that lead later.

Even so, my story ears perked up. Come to think of it, I *had* noticed a lack of sparkle around the shadow witch's cafe. I'd assumed she was just busy—with the holidays on the horizon, everybody was. But had Maggie hit on a story? "Do you know why?"

"That's the thing," said Maggie, leaning over the printing press. "I don't. She came in for her hair appointment like usual and hardly said a word! It was like she was trying to keep a secret,

but she *never* keeps secrets, not if it's something to do with *her*."

Interesting. Could be nothing, of course, but—what if Sakura had also received something strange in the mail? Could she possibly be wrapped up in the Cosmos family legacy too?

If she was, it would be more than coincidence. It would be quite a story . . .

"Leo," said Maggie, sounding too much like her girlfriend.

I almost looked over my shoulder for the police. "What?"

"Don't," she added. She even shook her pencil at me. "Whatever's bothering Saki shouldn't go in the paper. Hearts should be trampled on if they're readers, but respected if they're subjects, right?"

"I told you that months ago." I was surprised she'd remembered. It was my own little code of reporting—not that I have many—but this one had stuck. An emotionally devastated reader was a hooked reader, but a devastated subject was bad press. (Unless they deserved it.) It was why *Belville & Beyond* didn't carry any but the most lighthearted gossip. I'd learned my lesson in my early years, and besides, I wanted people to focus on *real* reporting. I liked to think this choice was why my paper was so popular in towns far away from our little mountain.

"Well, it works," Maggie said. I would have suspected her of outright flattery if she hadn't added, "as long as you stick to it. You have to set an example for me and Wulf, right?"

She'd taken to doing this lately—using my newest part-timer, an ex-miner with a steady hand that was perfect for setting type, as leverage against my leaderly instincts. The terrifying thing was that it worked.

"I wasn't thinking anything," I said. I knew I was scrunching my shoulders up guiltily, and I knew Maggie knew it was a tell of mine. I caught her eye and she grinned. I huffed. "I'm going

back to my office. At least my piles of paper don't throw out accusations."

"Check your town records," Maggie said to my back. "I'll finish cleaning up out here."

"I was *going* to," I muttered. I should've been the one to tell *her* what to do, but that was one of the best things about Maggie. She never needed to be told.

I shut my office door behind me out of habit. The sound earned me one lazy blink from the cat curled up in my desk chair. Nyx was darker than the dusty once-black upholstery, her raven-like wings tucked tightly along her back. She didn't relish the cold weather and spent more and more of her time in the coziest places possible. A tall task in a print shop, but she seemed satisfied.

"You're lucky I'm planning on working," I told her. Rather than fighting her for a seat, I crossed the small room to my filing cabinets.

I kept files on everyone in town. Nothing nefarious—mostly. Addresses, records of the ads they'd placed in the paper, which articles they'd given quotes for. I'd found it never hurt to be specific with a detail. Particularly when someone thought you'd done a little too much trampling on hearts.

But rather than rifling through the drawers, I paused. Sitting down between the filing cabinet and Nyx's chair, I reached for the lowest drawer of the desk.

In months of keeping the rock box a secret, I'd learned one thing. It was temperamental. That was why I knew it was magicked, somehow. After our first explosive encounter, I'd approached it more carefully, and I'd noticed that sometimes as I reached for the box I could feel a warning tingle, like too much energy coming off the lid. The feeling was worse when I

used my prosthetic.

So with my other hand, I fished the box out of the drawer and pulled off the lid. Same collection of lumps of rock as ever. Over the summer I'd started identifying them—quartz, pyrite, garnet. There was one more unknown left in the top row. I'd been distracted by the Cosmos angle.

I reached out and poked the rock in the upper right corner. It was a deep but almost see-through yellow. In fact, I could see streaks of brown and cracks running through it. More than that, I could see—

I forgot about being cautious. I stuck my nose down close to the box, peering at the corner. It was obscured by the rock, but it was definitely there—a marking on the wall of the box itself.

How had I missed it before? Most likely by being thrown backward in an explosion. But since that wasn't the case now, I pressed my luck. Quickly, I pulled my notebook from my shirt pocket and did my best to copy the marking down. It wasn't anything I recognized. A rounded symbol of some kind, with little rays coming out like a sun.

More curious than ever, I pulled the rock out of its corner and looked at it. There weren't any symbols on the rock itself, but there did seem to be markings on the bottom of the box where it had been sitting. The lines disappeared under the wooden walls which separated each sample, indicating that whatever it was covered the entire bottom of the box.

And *that* was when I hesitated. Taking out one rock at a time, sure. But taking out all of them? What if that triggered some kind of reaction—or what if I put them back in the wrong order and *that* was what did it? The possibilities were endless, and identifying rocks was *not* one of my strengths. The likelihood I'd mess something up was high.

And if I did, and the others learned about it, they'd take away the box for sure.

But the good news, I realized as I sat there with a lump of see-through gold in my hand, was that I'd just had a flash of inspiration about who to interview next.

* * *

In no time flat I was bundled up in scarf and jacket, my curls shoved under a cap. The lump of rock was in my pocket and I was flush with triumph at having sneaked it from my office. Apparently, the box *didn't* explode when you took away one of the rocks.

Not that I'd gone all that far. I stood in the Square in front of a narrow, jumbled storefront just a few buildings down from the cafe. There in the window, looking back at me, was a statue that shone dimly in the eerie shop lights. A statue that I now knew was carved of rock. The same rock I had in my pocket. The shop owner should be able to tell me what kind of stone it was—and more. I had a good feeling about this. As the owner of a curiosities shop, Priya was exactly the kind of source I'd been looking for.

She'd run into some trouble years back, shortly after I'd arrived in Belville. Something to do with the infamous Red. Since then, she'd kept to herself—so much so that I'd almost forgotten all about her. But while she wasn't a scholar or a know-it-all like Red's friends, she just might be exactly the person I needed.

The only gamble was whether or not she could keep a secret.

The chime on the door as I entered was the only noise. I was the only person in the shop. Which was for the best, because it

was so crammed full of eerily glowing orbs and dried flowers and black netting that there was barely room to move. I had to concentrate on not knocking anything over as I made my way to the sales counter, so I didn't see her as I approached. She was sitting on a stool behind the counter, lips pursed, like she was counting the seconds until I left.

That was fine—I didn't want to waste time anyway. I held up the lump from my pocket. "Hi. Priya, right? Haven't seen you around in a while. I'm Leo. What's this?"

"I know who you are." Priya, her black hair parted severely down the middle and her brows heavy over her dark eyes, squinted at my hand. "Did you pick that up off my shelves?"

"When would I have had time? No, it was in—it was in my mail," I said.

"You get strange mail."

"It's a hazard of the job. So, what is it? It's the same rock as the sculpture in your window, right?" I tugged at my cap. Priya's brown skin faded into the dimness, but her grimace stood out.

Priya glanced at it dismissively. "Amber. Is that all?"

"Amber?" I had forgotten that was an option.

"Fossilized tree resin," Priya said. "It's not a rock. It's not even a crystal."

"Every box has its exceptions," I muttered to myself. Resolving to look it up in my encyclopedia later, I fished in my pocket for my notebook and held it up for Priya to see the most recent page. "How about this symbol?"

"What is this? A quiz?" Priya's frown deepened.

"Just a bit of information-gathering," I said. "Speaking of, I'd appreciate it if you kept it between us."

"Exactly who do you think is going to come asking?" Priya gestured at her empty shop.

Too late, I realized I might have been a bit rude. “I didn’t mean—”

“I happen to *like* the quiet,” Priya said. In fact, she stood, and began to circle the counter. She was actively shooing me toward the door as she went on, “I’m not keeping anything between us because I don’t want it there in the first place. I don’t have any need for reporters. You can go and gather your information somewhere else. Shouldn’t you be good at that kind of thing?”

By now my back was to the front door. How I’d got there without tripping, I had no idea. “But if you could just make a quick identification—”

“I don’t have anything to say to you.”

The old days of junior reporting came back in a rush. “Just one more moment of your time—all I need is a few words—then you can get back to your nice quiet shop—”

Priya got me out of her shop with one well-placed shove. The door snapped shut in front of my face. But Priya lingered behind the glass, and when I didn’t leave right away, she said, “It’s a sigil from an ancient culture. Happy? Now get out of here!”

In fact I *was* rather pleased as I hustled back to my office. She might have been lying about the ancient sigil—but then again, she might not have. A lot of people were far less imaginative when put on the spot than you’d think. It was a lead worth looking into, which was one more than I’d had earlier.

Not to mention the identification of my fourth rock: amber. When I was huddled beside Nyx’s chair once more, I read all about it:

Amber. Though not a gemstone technically, it is likely the oldest substance used for adornment and decoration. Early cultures believed

it possessed life of its own, due to its natural warmth and the occasional inclusion of small fossils. Amber can be used for many magical purposes, including protection, fertility, and luck. Because of its translucent nature, it has also been used in potions for treating the eyes or granting clear sight.

I wondered about that last bit, but *The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals* hadn't let me down so far. I closed the book thoughtfully. Priya had given me the right answer about the rock, no doubt about it. But what was this collection of rocks and not-rocks getting at? Was it just a bunch of odds and ends? If so, why draw symbols—or sigils—on it?

"Mrow," said Nyx, reminding me that it would soon be dinner time.

"I know," I told her. Maybe that little hunk of amber *was* helping me to see clearly, because I knew exactly what to do next.

The amber was ancient. The symbol was ancient. Priya had said it herself—a sigil from an ancient culture. She was about to learn that, however interesting the past might be, the *present* could be a whole lot more persistent.