

Crystal Clear



A Leonine Investigations Mystery
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The thing about the “new year,” I find, is that it always comes two weeks late. At least.

The holidays, the parties, the recovering from parties, the reflections—it all spills over into the new year. Doesn’t it? Maybe it’s just me and my lackadaisical approach to organization. (That was the one thing my Granda never could teach me: adherence to structures. Or schedules. Unless it’s a paper deadline, it’s out the window—or in a pile on the desk.) Suffice it to say that, despite my best intentions, I did *not* take advantage of the holiday break to get all my rocks identified. Lark made me spend the break taking a *break*. It wasn’t half bad, but don’t tell her I said that.

Snow was flying past the office windows and not one, but two editions of *Belville & Beyond* had gone out already this New Year. Too late to worry about falling behind now. Maggie was out for the day at her other job, and in her absence Wulf was tidying the shop floor. My assistants were so good that they were starting to specialize: Maggie dealt more and more with vendors and customers, and Wulf seemed to prefer anything to do with the printing presses themselves.

If it worked for them, it certainly worked for me. I dotted the

final “i” and crossed the last “t” on my *letter from the editor* for the next paper, took a look around, and decided my industrious assistants had done more than enough work already. So, I tucked myself under my desk with my box of rocks and my battered old edition of *The Encyclopedia of Crystals, Gems, and Metals*. I’d just picked up my next unidentified rock and was fishing my notebook out of my pocket when the door to my office slammed open.

“What the—!” Let it never be said that a guilty conscience can’t do damage. I hit my head against the desk, foiling my own attempt to stand up. Nyx, our raven-winged office cat, swooped past my limited view. “Nyx!”

“Not just her,” a new voice said. Someone peered over the edge of my desk at me. Priya. “Why don’t you try working *at* the desk instead of *under* it? I hear they work better that way.”

“This is a covert operation,” I reminded her. I scrambled up, rock and notebook still in hand, to check the door behind her before I said any more.

She’d closed the office door, at least. Priya stood in front of the desk. Her enormous fluffy coat dripped on the floor, and a silk paisley scarf was wound all the way up to her ears, leaving her dark hair to spill out in awkward loops. Her arms were crossed and she was staring at me.

The flat determination in her look answered my first question. Wulf was great when it came to setting type, but he wasn’t one to get in someone else’s way.

“Let me guess,” Priya said. With a jerk of her chin—or more accurately, her scarf—she indicated the rock in my hand. “You couldn’t decide between emerald or aquamarine, right?”

Even startled, with a lingering headache, my ears pricked up at possible new information. I took a good look at the rock for

the first time. Like all the others from the box, it fit easily in my palm and had been cut in a rough square. This one, though, was a seafoamy color. Like cloudy water, it was vaguely see-through.

“I was weighing my options,” I said cautiously.

Priya smirked as she unwrapped her scarf. “They’re both wrong anyway. It’s all technicalities. Beryl comes in a lot of varieties, just like quartz. People come into the shop thinking quartz is the ultimate crystal, but that’s just because beryl is better known by its variety names. They don’t even know how they’re connected.”

I watched Priya toss her coat over the one usable chair in the office, praying Nyx wouldn’t attack it. The last thing I needed right now was a distraction. Priya had steadfastly refused to identify any of the crystals in my mysterious box, on the basis of being “not a geologist.” But if she was going to show up and be chatty, I was going to make the best of it. “Is that so?”

“You could have thought fluorite,” Priya went on, “especially with one that color. But fluorite’s new on the collector scene. *That* is definitely green beryl.”

“Not emerald?”

All I had to do was ask, and she was off to the races. “You should be so lucky! Emerald’s very valuable. But a collector’s emerald would be a deeper green, and much clearer. Aquamarine would be clearer and blue, and then there’s heliodor, which is yellow, and a pink one too—morganite, it was, and—” Priya faltered as I set down the rock and picked up my notebook.

“And these colors are due to different inclusions?” I knew to ask *that* because of Lark.

But apparently my note-taking had reminded Priya that she was giving more than she’d bargained for. “If you want all the

specifics, you can read about them yourself. I wrote a paper on them at university—it'll be in the library archives now. But there's plenty out there about it."

"You wrote papers on rocks at school, and you're *not* a geologist?"

"No. Yes. It was a different program, and it was a long time ago," Priya said. She'd crossed her arms again. "That's not what we're here to talk about. I got some answers for you."

"Rock answers help too. For the record." I picked up the crystal—the *green beryl*—and nodded my thanks. "But I take it you mean the box?"

Priya reluctantly stepped back to the desk. From the pocket in her voluminous burgundy vest, she withdrew a letter. Though I'd only asked her to help last month, the letter looked well-read. All the folds were worn. "I just got this from my old professor. He shares his thoughts—"

"Hold up," I said. Now I was taking notes for a different reason. "The professor who taught you not to be a geologist? Name?"

"Yes." Priya sighed heavily. She still hadn't let go of the letter. "It was an archaeology program. Okay? And no, I'm not an archaeologist now. I sell things, that's all. And I know archaeology isn't what you expected, but—but Professor Dee would know what you're looking for, so I reached out."

I accepted this, still writing. "How do you spell that?"

"D-E-E. No relation, though," Priya said. For the first time, a self-conscious smile flitted across her face.

But I didn't get it. "To you?"

"No, there was this famous occultist who had a very famous crystal and—never mind," Priya said, sighing again. "Red would have got it."

“I still think you should be friends. Bygones and all that.” I made a note to look up some history if this letter of Priya’s didn’t pan out.

“Do you run a paper or a matchmaking service?” Priya dropped her letter on my desk. Finally. “There.”

And before I could pick it up, she snatched it back. “But you can’t *have* it,” she added.

“Thanks for the help,” I said, pointedly.

“Just—keep taking notes. I’ll read it to you.” Priya unfolded the letter and cleared her throat. Lucky I was already ready, because she wasted no time before reading out, *“My dear Priya, How delightful to hear from you and to know you’ve set up your own shop . . . This first part isn’t relevant to what you want . . . ahem. Boxed collections are, as you know, not uncommon. Whether the box is built to house an existing collection, or a small number of stones are sold within a box as some sort of ‘kit,’ they are most often generic and harmless. However, your account is interesting because of the sigils included, and the mysterious provenance. I have heard, of course, of the Cosmos collection. It may interest you to know that . . . that part is really just for me.”*

My pen paused. “Really?”

“Really. It’s just about some old artifacts, not at all related to geology. Professor Dee tends to—wander.” Priya said it like I was wringing a confession out of her. And before I could comment, she stuck her nose in the letter and kept reading. *“Unfortunately, as you know, there could be one of any number of things going on here. That the collection itself is dangerous, I doubt. The sigil looks to me like one more attuned to combination or strengthening, rather than destruction. This of course is based on my own cultural perceptions and you well know how limited those are . . .”* Priya chuckled to herself. “He’s just saying that to be funny.”

I certainly didn't get the joke, but I took her word for it. Maybe. I made another note.

"And we don't know, of course, if it was added before or after the collection was brought together. These questions of timing get so tricky, don't they?"

"Do they?" I asked.

"What he means is, it's the kind of thing everyone debates about," Priya said. "Which came first, the box or the samples, that sort of thing—it's important."

"Is it? Because I'm a lot more worried about the fact that it exploded once, and seems like it could again."

"It's important because it helps us determine the *purpose*," Priya insisted. "This is the kind of thing archaeologists debate all the time."

I was beginning to understand why the profession had a reputation for being dry and dusty. I shook my head. "Okay, fine. Well the answer is, we don't know. Unless he has any more revelations?"

"It's not quite like the ones we have here, it sounds, from your description," Priya started. I stopped her.

"Wait—what's that mean?"

"He's doing research on artifacts in modern use. It's sort of a hobby," Priya said. I stared. She sighed. "The university has a collection of collection boxes like yours, and other sets. But they're usually organized on a theme. Yours is . . . random."

A suspicion entered my mind. "How do you know that?"

"It's pretty obvious from you, and from your drawings," Priya said. "And before you ask, no, I don't want to get any more involved. I have enough to deal with. Besides, Professor Dee is sending somebody."

"Excuse me?"

“He goes on,” she said, like all this confusion was *my* fault for interrupting. “*Nonetheless, it could have some merits. One of my new research assistants will be in the area next month. Why don’t I have him stop by and give a quick assessment? He’s reasonably sharp, for a student—nothing like you were, of course—and should be able to give your friend some sound advice about where to take it.*”

“I haven’t said I wanted to take it anywhere.” I shut my notebook. I don’t like being told what I’m about to do. “I’m still doing research.”

“Take it or leave it, it doesn’t matter to me,” Priya replied, re-folding her letter.

“And for that matter, what’s with you and this professor?”

“None of your business,” Priya said primly. “I’ve done my part, yes? No more staking out my shop?”

“I make no promises.” I hesitated. Though the letter left me feeling more dubious than comforted, Priya *was* knowledgeable. “Are you sure you don’t want to take a look? I have it right here.”

“I really don’t. I’m sure. Goodbye,” Priya said, all in one breath. And just like that, she was out the door. The sheer volume of her coat nearly knocked Wulf flat into a printing press.

I watched the exit uneasily. Usually there was nothing more exciting than a new lead, but I had a funny feeling about this one. It wasn’t nearly as straightforward as it could be. And neither was Priya. Her professor had known *Cosmos* . . . was it possible she had, too?

I added that to my fresh list of mental questions. Looking back down at my rock, I realized that though she had identified it, she hadn’t said anything about what it was *for*. Typical. Looking for a bit of closure, I thumbed through my *Encyclopedia* and did a bit of reading myself:

Beryl. Common varieties include aquamarine, emerald, goshenite, heliodor, and morganite. Though colorless in pure form, the name itself refers to a sea-green color. A hard mineral which can be quite valuable, depending on clarity and color. Traditionally associated with the sea, beryl is used to promote intellect, helping its wearer maintain clarity, win debates, and find lost items. Some even consider it to be more suitable for scrying and psychic purposes than its popular cousin, quartz.

Maintaining clarity would have been nice, but after Priya's visit, this project was all muddied waters to me. I looked at the stone again. I could see why it might be valuable. It *was* a bit pretty.

“Better to be pretty *and* functional,” I said to the stone. Admittedly grumpy. “So much for finding lost objects when you *are* one, eh?”

... Of course, that was still assuming someone hadn't sent the box to me on *purpose*. Hoping for some kind of explosive result.

“Leo,” Wulf called. I stuffed the stone in my pocket as he poked his head around the door. “Didn't you promise to go to Lavender's with us? It's just past closing time.”

“Coming. Just let me tidy up.” Wulf didn't know me well enough yet to find that suspicious.

I tucked the stone back into the box, and stuffed the box back into its drawer, still thinking. Clarity, huh? Maybe it was within reach after all. If a research assistant was due to show up here, he could tell me all about the rocks ...

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. . . But he could *also* tell me more about the people involved.

