

Rock Bottom



A Leonine Investigations Mystery
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Lark's talk went well. Of course.
Too well.

Even the schoolkids listened with rapt attention as she talked about mesmerized silver and other kinds of enchanted rocks. My own past with magic rocks was questionable at best, but even *I* would have been rapt—if I hadn't been staring at the heads of our suspects.

There they were, all in a row. Priya, Selene, the mysterious professor, even the pearl-wearing lady. Each with a possible motive for sending dangerous mail to the paper and then stealing said mail back.

Each perfectly, annoyingly *polite* during the presentation.

Lark was just getting to her concluding thoughts, and I had to admit to myself that I might've been hasty with this plan. Audiences were *supposed* to be polite. It was the perfect excuse for them to just sit there. I hadn't thought this through properly. I'd thought that if I could just get them here, then—then what? They'd be overcome with guilt? Obviously I'd been spending too much time with Maggie. That kind of optimism was absurd. I never *really* thought that they'd stand up during the presentation and confess.

But apparently Lark did.

As always, Lark had a plan she hadn't clued me in on. I should have expected it, honestly.

She said thank you to the crowd, and to *Belville & Beyond* for hosting the lecture. The schoolkids skedaddled, notebooks clutched to their chests. That's when it began.

"I'm happy to take questions," Lark said, rolling her chair a little closer to the half-emptied rows of chairs. The nosy alchemist and co were still present, of course, as were all four suspects. Maggie was hovering in the corner, practically biting her nails.

The professor raised his hand. "What experience have you had with crystals whose innate properties are enhanced by runes?"

Runes? I thought of the strange drawing on the inside of the rock box. Now *I* felt like biting my nails.

Lark's expression didn't so much as flicker.

"Limited experience," she said evenly. "I deal primarily with the minerals as they come out of the ground, before they have been cut, polished, or inscribed. Though of course, the subject interests me. Have you made a study of them yourself?"

"Professor Dee's the best," said Selene, before the professor could get his mouth open. "But what I want to know is, how do you choose which pieces go on to be used for magical purposes? Can you, like, test how strong they are?"

Lark held her gaze for just a moment. Just enough for the professor's assistant to shift in her seat. Then she smiled.

"The ultimate choice is, of course, up to the purchaser," Lark said. "But yes, it is possible to test individual specimens. Many factors affect the suitability of a crystal for a specific purpose. There's the purity of the mineral to consider, as well

as the overall clarity and the presence or arrangement of any inclusions.”

Purity, arrangement, inclusions—fancy talk. Had we been alone, I would have been daydreaming at this point. But since our suspects were interested and Lark was clearly up to something—her arch smile was a dead giveaway—I tried to follow along. *Inclusions* were the extra bits that sometimes got mixed up with the main star of the show. I could just barely remember reading something about inclusions and impurities in my encyclopedia when this mess began. I’d been looking up clear quartz. But clear quartz could become other stuff, like rose quartz or smoky quartz, if it had impurities like iron or aluminum.

As I struggled to keep up to speed, Lark was still talking. “Then there is the resonance of the specimen, which I suspect is what you are driving at. That is affected by clarity and composition, but it is testable on its own. Several methods and tools have been devised. At Belville Mine, we employ a specialist to evaluate our products before we sort and ship them.”

This was news to me, but Red the alchemist—and Lark’s hench-trolls, hunched over in the back row—were all nodding along.

“But don’t let me bore you,” Lark added. That arch smile was a smirk now. She had something up her sleeve for certain. I just couldn’t guess what it was yet. “Geology and mineralogy are precise sciences, it’s true, but the fact of the matter is that there is a qualitative aspect to crystals, too. Buyers often speak of a particular specimen ‘calling’ to them. I believe that such things are possible, no matter what our tests say about strength or resonance. Sometimes it’s a matter of personal alignment or

preference.

“For example.” From the breast pocket of her impeccably tailored blue suit, Lark withdrew a flat, palm-size rock. It was silvery black. I recognized it only because there’d been a lump of the same stuff in the stolen rock box. “This is hematite, as many of you know.”

I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I saw her wink at me. Like I was the only one present who didn’t know rocks! Maggie and Officer Thorn, still lingering by the door, probably didn’t know very much either.

I’d at least managed to identify eight rocks before the box was taken. Eight-ish.

“Hematite is often used as a grounding stone, to help with focus. The iron in the stone lends it an energy of strength. That’s speaking generally. But I found myself drawn particularly to *this* stone, which has been charmed to enhance its energies, specifically at focusing on the plain and simple truth.

“A handy reminder in business.” Lark’s smile was now downright wolfish.

And at last I saw where this was going. Probably our culprit, whoever they were, did too. But with the right application of peer pressure, we could still pull this off.

“Why don’t we do a bit of hands-on show and tell for the folks who’ve stuck around?” I said. Several heads swiveled back to look at me like they’d forgotten I was there.

Or like they were afraid to touch the stone.

“Maggie can go first,” I added.

My assistant made a small noise. Something more like *eep!* than *sounds good, boss!*. But she was the one up by the podium, and I didn’t want to lose any momentum. Besides, what secrets could Maggie really be keeping?

Hopefully nothing big, for her sake. Not with her girlfriend in the room.

Lark held out the stone, flat on her hand. “Don’t worry, Maggie. It is not an infallible truth spell. Its energies simply make it more difficult than usual to stray from the truth. Try it—try telling us what you had for lunch. A lie first, if you please.”

I have to hand it to her: Maggie had guts. After her initial cringe, she walked right over and put her hand on top of the rock.

“For lunch today I had—I had—oooh, it is harder! I had a turtle-sandwich,” she said, all in a rush. This broke the tension. Most people in the room chuckled, and Maggie herself laughed, glancing across the room at Thorn. “I’m a terrible liar anyway! Everyone knows it. I had a piece of leftover quiche and a strawberry macaron. Phew! That feels much better. Red, Luca, you have to try it too!”

I was pleased to see she got the picture. We needed more people to step up, to add pressure on our suspects. And to give them a false sense of security. I wasn’t even remotely interested in what the bookseller and the alchemist had for lunch, though they did get everyone laughing when they tried to get their talking dog in on it too. William (the dog) insisted that he was inherently truthful already.

“Anyone else?” Lark held the stone out for the folks in the middle chairs.

Four heads in a row. Which would be the one to fall for the bait? Which was the one we needed? The professor with his pompous questions? The assistant with her need to change the subject?

Priya, sitting at one end of the little group, stood and leaned

forward, so that her hand covered Lark's. With her fingers firmly on the hematite she turned over her shoulder and looked at me.

"Leo," she said. Then a look of uncertainty crossed her face. She took a deep breath and started again. "I'm jealous of you. I've always been jealous of you. You have a business that the town loves. You're a part of every event, every season. Even when you don't want to be there, they drag you out, that's how much they need you. I've been here since I was born, in the shadows. But you! You're always coming and going on one assignment or another, and everyone eats it up. You're always in the light."

In the *light*?

My mouth was hanging so far open I wasn't just catching flies, I might as well have been catching flying cats.

Speaking of. For reasons only known to feline culture, Nyx chose this moment to assert her ownership of the print shop.

I'd *tried* to lock her in my office with her dinner. I'm not a complete fool. I knew that my half-feral flying cat and a crowd of innocent victims (with one guilty one added too) wouldn't mix well. But in my shock at Priya's confession—which was not at all the confession I'd wanted it to be—I'd stepped away from the office door. Its lock, never too strong to begin with, failed. Nyx shot out of her hiding spot and dove over the crowd like an oversize avenging vampire bat.

Chaos was the result.

Chairs went flying as people ducked and scrambled. William the talking dog actually *barked*, a sound I almost never heard. Officer Thorn threw open the hall door and was yelling *shoo!* at Nyx, which was having no effect. Somewhere amidst it all, Lark cried out.

I charged forward over the chairs. Skar and Skaab were cowering in the corner. I could have told them, told everyone, that this was far too dramatic: Nyx had never hurt anyone—well, she'd never *killed* anyone. Not anyone bigger than a rat. That I knew of.

But I was focused on getting to Lark. As I did, something sharp and heavy collided with my head. I ignored it.

It—Nyx—made herself one with my cap and remained sitting atop my head, hissing at everyone who'd forced her to eat her dinner confined in an office.

"Are you okay?" I asked Lark.

She was incredibly disheveled, which for Lark meant that a few strands of wavy hair were in her face and her pressed collar was askew. And she was breathless.

"My hematite—it's gone!"

