



All
Ore

Nothing

A Leonine Investigations Mystery
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Contents

All Ore Nothing

1

All Ore Nothing

I straightened slowly and looked around the room, my hand on Lark's shoulder. "Alright," I said, "which of you creeps tried to attack Lark and steal her rock?"

There was a wide-eyed, blinking pause. Long enough that I could feel individual people's reactions. Red, William, and Luca were staring at me with their heads to one side. I did, in fairness, still have a flying cat perched on my hat.

Maggie was watching from the back of the room with her jaw practically on the floor, held securely in place by Officer Thorn's protective arm. Skar and Skaab still looked like they were considering rushing the front of the room, but Lark was fine. I could feel her looking up at me askance—probably because I'd called her precious hematite a "rock."

Priya seemed just as stunned as Maggie. Even though everyone else had gone still, she toppled over when I looked her way.

That left three.

As I glared at them, the pearl-bedecked lady sighed like someone'd let the air out of her. And sure enough, like a popped

balloon, she thinned out—stretched upward—

“That’s enough of that, I think,” she declared. But she was no longer a stout, enormous-hat-wearing lady. The hat had been lost in the scuffle, and so had the heavy, fur-trimmed coat. Now, standing up to a respectable six feet at least, a gray-eyed man in an old dress grinned insolently. “Don’t you think so, Red?” he went on. “I was under the impression you solved all the crime Belville had to offer.”

“Hey!” From the door, Officer Thorn rustled indignantly.

“Hey indeed,” Red said, her voice dry. “Luca, William, you remember Quinn? Leo—”

“I don’t care what his name is,” I interrupted. “This is *my* crime to solve, sir, and right now you’re my number-one suspect. Turn out your pockets!”

Next to the man, the professor popped up. “There’s no need—”

And next to the professor, the assistant popped too. “Professor? I thought you said she was a donor—”

But the man was laughing. “Leo, I’ve been a devoted reader of yours for years. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance. My name,” he said, with an elaborate bow as he swept off the dress, “is Quinn E Doyle. I’d empty my pockets, but it would take far too much time.”

My hand on Lark’s shoulder was as much for my support as hers at this point. Under the disguise, he was wearing a shirt and vest and trousers, like some kind of gentleman.

“There’s no reason fancy dress means you aren’t a thief,” I said.

“True, and in many cases, it probably *does*,” said Quinn E Doyle contemplatively. “But in this case, I am employed. By this man here.”

I turned to the blushing professor and the sputtering assistant. And then there were two.

Between the pair of them, they couldn't have looked more guilty. Professor Dee spread his hands—which was *still* not emptying pockets—and said, “He’s a detective, you see. From Helenia? No? Nonetheless he *is* one, and I’ve enlisted his service to help me with—er—a rather delicate matter.”

“He is one,” Red broke in, addressing me. “Thorn and I have met him. That part’s true, at least.”

I’d already moved on from the annoying detective. I narrowed my eyes at the professor. “What kind of delicate matter involved needing to bring him *here*?”

“Ah, well . . .” Professor Dee gulped, more like a teenager than a distinguished scholar in tweed, and glanced at Selene beside him. “Usually student affairs are considered confidential, you understand, but under these circumstances . . .”

Following his drift, I glanced at the assistant too.

The last suspect standing.

“I have no idea what’s going on,” protested Selene, hunching over to make herself look small.

It didn’t work. Quinn had stood up, and Dee had too, and both had made free with some secrets. It was time for Selene to do the same. The entire room was staring at her.

Talk about peer pressure.

“Selene,” said Professor Dee. I had to hand it to him—he sounded conflicted, like he really cared. “Surely you must have realized that when the box went missing on its way from Leo’s printshop, I would make inquiries. I’m afraid there was really only one possibility—”

“Wait,” Selene cried. She looked around. “That’s what you all think? You all think I’m a thief?” Red and co looked confused,

but myself and Maggie were nodding. So was Officer Thorn, though *she'd* theorized it was someone else. "Well, if that's the case, why haven't you had me arrested?!"

"There are matters of university policy to consider—" Professor Dee coughed.

"Why do you think we're here now?" Lark said at the same time.

"I told you we should have—!" Maggie was shouting across the room.

"Because," Quinn said, cutting through the noise, "we need to know where the artifact is."

"What he said," I said, frowning at him. "Where's the box, Selene?"

There was silence as the entire room stared at her, and she stared back. As one, we all noticed that Selene's beat-up messenger bag was still hanging off her shoulder.

She must've noticed everyone's eyes drift down because she took a step back, colliding with a chair. She clutched at the strap of the bag.

"Really?" William the talking dog snorted derisively.

"It's not like I could leave it at home!" Selene sounded exactly what she was, which was so much younger than everyone else left in the room. Instead of acting chagrined or embarrassed by her admission, she went on defiantly, like *we* were the ones frustrating *her*. "I don't see what the big fuss is about anyway. It's useless. It was supposed to be some big powerful collection but I never could get it to *work*! It's broken. Not even the Cosmoes wanted it!"

"Not wanting a thing and condoning theft are two very different concepts," Quinn said in an undertone.

I glared at him. Did the man never shut up? Stepping forward,

I said, "What do you mean, 'it doesn't work'? It's a box of rocks."

"It's not *supposed* to be," said Selene, who was starting to sound whiny in addition to mad. "Everyone said the Cosmos family had had it for generations because it aligned the stones' frequencies just right to make something *magic*. That's what Professor Dee said!"

Officer Thorn cleared her throat at that, which brought attention to the fact that she'd advanced towards the hapless professor and the confessing Selene. Her arms were crossed. "Rumors about magic, huh? Wouldn't *that* have been helpful to know."

"You never told me!" Priya added. I'd almost forgotten her. She was staring up at Dee with a hurt expression.

"Well, I, you see, the rumors were purely unsubstantiated, nothing academic at all, no proper studies," Professor Dee mumbled, not looking at anyone. "I happened to mention the possibility of the box resurfacing to Selene when I received Priya's letter, perhaps, but I really wouldn't have considered the legends to be trustworthy information—"

"They were *lies!*" Selene cried bitterly. "It was supposed to be my big chance—my contribution to the field! A study of something rare and unique! *But it's really just a box of rocks!*"

Dee was staring at Selene, Priya was staring at Dee, and Thorn and Quinn were watching them all with eerily similar speculative, not to say predatory looks. But for me, for a moment, time stopped.

Just a box of rocks. Selene kept harping on about that. Sure, I myself had been calling it that for the better part of a year, but I knew when I said it I was being glib. Selene was disappointed—betrayed, even. And she was wrong.

I *knew* she was wrong. Because I'd seen—I'd *felt*—the box

explode.

And I'd known all along what might have made that happen .

..

In that moment I realized I knew something that the fancy professors, assistants, and detectives did not.

"I'm tired of all of this," Selene went on. "I'm done. I'm not going to study or grade stupid papers any more. This was the last straw! And now you're accusing me on top of everything else!"

Her hand went to a pocket on her bag and whipped back up, now holding something green and sharp.

"A mere," Lark said behind me, softly. "A broad blade made of jade."

I was not in the mood for a lecture on the properties of jade. From the way Selene was holding it, the unpleasant properties of the weapon were clear enough.

"I'm leaving right now, and none of you can stop me!"

Nobody bosses me around. Not in my own headquarters.

Professor Dee had leapt hastily backward, taking Quinn the detective with him. They were blocking Thorn's path. Priya and Red, the local contingent, were too far away to help. I certainly wasn't going to let Lark or Maggie get mixed up in this. Maybe I could have waited for Skar and Skaab to step in, but where was the fun in that?

Besides, they didn't have the experience that I did.

I lunged forward, aiming for the space right next to Selene. The space where her bag—and the box of rocks—was. I reached across with my right hand, my prosthetic hand, as a chair caught me in the gut and I began falling. Fortunately, Selene was one of those who don't believe in zipping their bags shut. My fingers made contact with the box and I had one thing on my mind:

explosion.

But—maybe a little smaller this time.

I don't know if the rock gods heard me, or if the effect was muffled by the bag, or what. But it turned out perfectly.

Selene got knocked sideways and she lost her grip on the strange weapon. The rock went flying and Nyx darted after it, which was just as well. Myself, I was only partially protected by the chairs between me and the bag. Not that my cat cared, of course.

There was shouting and scuffling as the confusion cleared, but most importantly, things got done. Skar and Skaab caught hold of Selene and Officer Thorn joined them. Just about everyone else seemed to be involved in helping me up, which made the process ten times harder, as I was being pulled in all directions.

But it was kind of nice.

"What? But *how*? Why couldn't *Iiiii*—" Selene was wailing, as two trolls and a half-orc police officer marched her from the room.

"Good question," Quinn said lightly as the door shut behind them. "Why couldn't she?"

"More importantly," Lark said, much *less* lightly, "are you alright, Leo?"

In the background, William shook himself. "I've got to come to more of these lectures."

"Yeah, a lot of help you were," I muttered. "And where's my cat? I'm fine. Nothing else got hurt this time?"

"You're not fine, you're reckless." But Lark smiled as she watched me stand up straight.

"Fascinating," Professor Dee was muttering in the background. I think he was taking notes.

"But wait," Maggie said, pushing past him. "What about Lark's

hematite?”

Once again, everyone in the room turned to contemplate Lark.

Who smiled placidly from her chair. “Oh, this?”

From behind her back, she drew the shiny black rock. I should have known! Not only had she set up the little truth-telling game, she’d faked it being stolen to put pressure on the room.

“It might interest you to know,” she went on, “that the properties of jade are really quite extensive, though usually peaceful. It has a particular resonance—”

“Enough,” I declared. “I’ve heard enough about rocks to last me a lifetime.”

“Are you sure about that?” It was Professor Dee who spoke, and heads swiveled to look at him. “Because I believe I can answer all your questions.”

I hesitated. Part of me—a large part—felt like saying, *no thanks*. He’d brought an undercover detective into my shop, after all! And in the past months of our own investigating, we’d effectively solved the mystery of who sent the box—the Cosmos family, why—because it was odd and I wrote about rocks, and who’d wanted it for themselves—namely, Selene, though also Dee. I was ready to leave it at that. But the allure of quotable answers for the paper was hard to resist . . .

“Oh, go on, Leo,” Lark said with another small smile. “It’s time we put *all* the pieces together.”