

Titus and the Glowing Stone

Test your mineral skills. Can you guess the mineral in this story?

About 2500 years ago, everyone knew that Titus' shop in Athens was the place to go with strange rocks. It was an unassuming hole in the wall on a back twisty street in the bustling Placa, within site of the Acropolis. Inside, it was barely lit, dark and crammed with mysterious objects. As one walked in, it took a moment for the eyes to adjust, but one had an instant claustrophobic sense of many heavy things piled on shelves over one's head. In that moment of disorientation, a form would detach itself from the shadows and moved wraith-like, flowing forward until it was close enough to whisper:

"Can I help you?"

This was Aegirine, Titus' assistant, who has also helped Titus' now-deceased father on many missions, studying and collecting the rare and unusual from the Mediterranean and beyond. Aegirine was wiry, even cadaverous, with a mischievous gleam in his eyes that suggested he enjoyed the startling visitors.

In this case, the visitor was a young woman. To Aegirine's admiration, she didn't stay disoriented long. She set her feet firmly, brushed a lock of dark hair out of her eyes and said:

"I'm looking for Master Titus. I'm told he may be able to help me."

"Perhaps," said Aegirine slowly, drawing out the word to a hiss. "It depends on whether it is something to engage his interest, for he is not generally for hire."

Wordlessly she reached into a sack she was carrying, drew out a lemon-sized stone and placed it in Aegirine's hand. Aegirine glanced at it and tried not to start himself. He closed his hand and said, "Wait here while I see my master."

Titus was a short, dark, slightly pudgy young man with an energetic manner. He looked up from his cluttered table of rocky oddities at Aegirine's discrete knock. Aegirine entered with a smile, anticipating his master's wide-eyed reaction as he held out the stone. Here was a knot of crystals that glowed blue with a dull internal light, illuminating faintly the yellowed skin of Aegirine's hand.

"Wherever did you get that!" burst Titus. He took it from Aegirine and turned it around, examining it closely from all sides then holding it to the sunlight from the small window. Now the stone looked greener. He held it back in the shade and the pale blue glow returned.

"A young lady, waiting outside brought it."

Titus hurried out and introduced himself. "You must tell me of this unique stone," he said.

The story was a simple but sad one. Her name was Orithia and she had recently lost her husband to fever. In his younger days he had traveled widely and had gotten this stone from a cold island somewhere far to the northwest. Now creditors were coming around and she needed money. She was hoped this strange stone was an emerald that glowed in the dark and could bring her wealth upon its sale. She mistrusted her ability to value such an item, but had heard that Titus was honest and could help her.

"Well, this is remarkable, but I think it not an emerald. See here, emeralds are six-sided in their rough state and these are decided square, cubes even." He then took a small piece of iron and carefully rubbed it against an unobtrusive part of the stone. "Also emeralds are tough but the iron can scratch this. No, my lady, it can't be emerald. It does resemble some of the myrrhina I've seen from Persia, but the glow is remarkable. It lights without burning, like a fire fly."

Orithia looked crest fallen. "Then is it worthless?"

"Not so. I know people who would pay well for such a curiosity." He had Aegirine bring wine and sweet cakes, then they settled down and negotiated a fair price. Aegirine looked disapproving but said nothing and fetched the coins.

When Orithia left, Aegirine did speak up. "You aren't going to resell that are you? That's for you and you've overpaid. Again."

"Hush," said Titus. "I know a good deed when I see one. Besides, I've never seen anything like this, and must have it for my collection. Find a place for it, good Aegirine. I'll study it more in the evening."

Dourly Aegirine picked up the stone and thought a minute. He took it out into the sun and exposed it for a while. He then brought it inside, got up on a stool and used the stone to look into the containers on the tops of the musty shelves. "Hmm", he mused to himself, "Almost as good as a candle and drips no wax. Perhaps this will be of some use after all."

O.K. you 21st Century mineral people, what mineral did Orithia bring for Titus to see?

-Dr. Bill Cordua, University of Wisconsin-River Falls

Answer: The mineral is fluorite, which can sometimes phosphoresce strongly enough in sun light to give the effect described in the story.