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DEEP HOOD

IF THERE'S ONE THING hotels have a lot of, it's strangers. Hotels are kind of in the stranger business, after all. But no hotel in the world puts the *strange* in *stranger* quite like the Grand Nautilus Hotel.

Take this guy, for example. The one who's just come in from the storm. The one walking across the empty marble floor of the lobby. See him? The one whose face is hidden by the enormous hood of a long waxed coat streaming with rainwater? He doesn't even pull his hood back to talk to the receptionist, and his luggage – a metal-bound wooden box clutched in one gloved hand – doesn't leave his side for a moment.

Who is he? What's his story?

What's in the box?

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Of course, we'll probably never know. And that's fine. People are entitled to their privacy. Privacy is something else hotels have a lot of. Besides, there's something sinister about this man, something threatening that makes me *not want* to know, to be honest. I'll be quite happy once he's up in his room, doing whatever dark and secret things he's come here to do, far away from me. He takes his key and steps away from the reception desk …

… and starts walking in my direction!

I sit up and adjust my cap.

"May I help you, sir?" I say as the man in the overlong coat stops before the desk of my little cubbyhole. I look up and see nothing but darkness in that drooping hood. My cap starts to slip down the back of my head, so I straighten it.

"Herbert Lemon." A voice comes from inside the hood, and I flinch. There's an unnatural edge to that voice that makes my skin crawl.

"Th-that's right, sir," I reply. "I'm Herbie Lemon, Lost-and-Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel, at your service. Have you lost something?"

There's a sudden *KER-KER-BOOM!* as a clap of thunder gallops around the town outside. The flash of lightning that rides with it only serves to highlight the

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darkness in the man's hood. The wind flings rain against the windowpanes, and the hotel lamps flicker.

The man remains motionless, dripping rainwater on my counter.

"U-u-umbrella, perhaps?" I suggest.

I glance at the metal-bound box in the man's hand. There's barely room for a change of underpants in a thing like that.

"Or luggage, maybe?"

My voice is almost a squeak now.

The man leans in, his hood nearly closing over my head. My nostrils fill with the stink of wet coat and fishy breath.

"Do not ask what I have lost, Herbert Lemon," comes the man's voice, sounding as if each word is made with a great deal of effort. "Ask what I have found."

And that's when there's another crash of thunder and the hotel's lights go out.

Now, I know what you're thinking. Yes, you – sitting there safe at home, staring into your book with bug eyes, waiting for something horrible to happen to me. You're thinking that I'm going to freak out now. And I admit, I am considering it. But you don't get to be Lost-and-Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel without learning

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how to be a professional. So, OK, yes, maybe I'm not the bravest mouse in the basket, but I am in *my* place, behind *my* polished desk, master of *my* own little world of lost property and shiny buttons. And so that's why, when the lights come back on again, I'm still sitting exactly where I was, clutching my Lost-and-Founder's cap with both hands and … blinking at empty space.

Because, of course, the man with the deep hood has gone.

