

CHAPTER



THE ARRIVAL

The bearded stranger climbed the final flight of stairs, pausing as he reached the threshold of a dilapidated wooden door. *Could this really be the place?* he wondered, heart thumping in anticipation. *After all this time?* There was only one way to find out. Wrapping his stubby fingers around the broken glass knob, he whispered a prayer to the gods of old before slowly turning the latch clockwise; rusted hinges moaning a long, dry CREEEEEEAK as the door cracked open . . .

While his eyes slowly adjusted to the shadowy space before him, an unexpected jumble of junk and clutter began to materialize. The stranger continued to squint, leaning his head forward to peek farther inside.

Whoa. He pushed the door open wider to reveal more of the jam-packed scene, exhaling a long, low whistle as the enormity of his task began to sink in. Wrinkly eyes panning the room, he mumbled

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the first of two massive understatements:

[One] “This might take a bit longer than anticipated.”

[Two] “Well, I’m not getting any prettier standing out here.”

Sucking in a deep breath, the curious stranger then stepped through the doorway, finally entering the cluttered and cob-webbed repository of long-forgotten objects, great and small. Once inside, he stood quietly, momentarily mesmerized by the overwhelming mess that surrounded him; one hand gripping his ankh-shaped walking stick, the other planted firmly on his hip, the stubby toes of his sandaled left foot tapping lightly against the warped and dusty floor.

The only bit of light in this hoarder’s hodgepodge filtered softly from a small dirt-streaked attic window facing the road; its tired pane heavily caked with decades of dust and garlands of sticky spider webs that hung from either side like ghostly curtains, ghoulishly bedazzled with dried insect carcasses.

The stranger continued to scan the room, hoping to discern a pattern among the puzzling piles. Some of the boxes were carefully stacked like tall, leaning towers, while others were simply strewn across the floor in an avalanche of not-so-ancient ruins. Interspersed between the piles were miscellaneous pieces of forgotten furniture, retired musical instruments, bruised sporting equipment and other items of indeterminate use, age and origin. But the more he concentrated on finding the key to this bizarre storage system, the more apparent it became that there was no method to this particular madness. Unable to find a pattern, he decided to begin a systematic search for the object of his quest, starting in the front corner and working his way to the other side.

The Story of Bes

“Pile by pile,” the stranger muttered, resolute in his plan to tackle the formidable task one mound at a time. Exhaling a deep sigh, he began to sort through the first mountain of miscellanea, grumbling, “I think I might have more luck finding a needle in that soggy haystack out back.”

The stranger’s grumbling was suddenly interrupted by a strange rumbling from outside. Although he couldn’t quite place the sound, he could tell it was coming closer. Mumbling, fumbling and stumbling, he zigzagged with all the grace of an 87 pound mouse, over, under, around and through the obstacles blocking his path to the tiny gabled window; sneezing twice as the dust particles clouded around him. Climbing onto an old steamer trunk, he cleared the sticky cobweb curtains with his fingers and spit-polished a peephole on the grimy old pane. Pressing his broad nose against the glass, he peered outside – quickly spotting the source of the racket.

“Drat,” he groaned, shaking his head and balling his hand into a fist. “Intruders – approaching in one of those motorized contraptions.” This realization was immediately followed by a string of colorful, yet artfully creative, ancient curses at this unexpected turn of events. Hoping to avoid detection from below, he cautiously slid his head away from the rain splattered window-pane, flattened his short, stout body against the wall, and exhaled a low, disgruntled groan as he considered his predicament.

No worries. I mean . . . look at this place, he tried to reassure himself. *No one lives in this old house anymore – and who else would ever come here on purpose?* Swiveling his head left and right, he scanned his surroundings; taking momentary comfort in the knowledge that this particular dump was not likely to appear on anyone’s bucket-list. Heart pounding a steady rhythm, he peeked out the grimy window once again,

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hoping to confirm that the potential intruders would simply drive by, allowing him to complete his task undisturbed.

“Oh. Blast!” he cursed, sucker-punching a nearby mannequin, causing it to topple; triggering a domino-like avalanche among the adjacent artifacts. Oblivious to the indoor commotion, the stranger stood at ground zero, arms akimbo – eyes sharply focused on the activity going on outside.

The intruders were parking in the driveway and would soon be headed straight toward the house where he stood waiting and watching. It was time to formulate a plan, and it had better be a good one. The stranger’s mind began to race. He knew he was finally close to recovering the ancient object of his quest. There would be no rest until he had retrieved the sacred artifact, fulfilling his mission – and there would be no mercy for anyone who stood in his way. This particular stranger had been in tight situations before. His battle skills were legendary and his fierce gargoyle-like game-face so terrifying that many an adversary had simply dropped his weapon and beat a hasty retreat.

Mentally preparing for the worst, the stranger made a visual sweep of his surroundings, searching for the perfect hiding place to plan his next move. A clear and decisive strategy was essential, because this was one battle he was determined to win – at any cost.