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SMOKE AND MIRRORS

Stage hands Joe and Steve were in the room beneath the stage of the theatre making final adjustments to the equipment that would be used for the evening performance. This consisted of a trapdoor that fitted into the floor of the stage above and attached directly under it was the smoke machine. Both would make the magician Mesmero's act quite amazing, as long as everything worked on the night. At the moment it didn't. The jerking as the trapdoor was lowered had been fixed with a squirt of oil on the cable pulleys; the smoke machine, however, wasn't making enough smoke. Steve pulled out a small drawer in the side of the metal casing and looked in. "It's the crystals," he declared. "I should have thought to check them after Mesmero's last show. They're nearly all gone."

"Easy done," said Joe, going over to a shelf unit. Taking off a can, he started walking back, lifting the lid as he went. "Here we go," then he peered into the can and groaned. "Uh-oh, it's nearly empty. What are we going to do now? Mesmero won't be happy if he doesn't have enough smoke."

The two lads went quiet as they tried to think of a solution; then one of them did: "Hey," said Joe, "Remember that magician Geordie the Great? He used the smoke machine in his final show." He panned his gaze around the room, then stopped. "Over there," he said, pointing at a dark mound in a corner. "That's the stuff he used. Never came back for it."

"Weird that," commented Steve. "Some say he disappeared during the performance. It was the first and only time he ever used smoke and when it cleared he was gone. Magic, people said."

Steve chuckled. "I reckon he wanted to pack in the magician gig and rigged the act so it seemed like he'd disappeared. Nothing magic about that – it was just a trick, a pretty clever one seeing as no-one could figure out how he'd done it."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Joe agreed, "But I'm going to have a look through his gear anyway: maybe there are some smoke crystals."

Following a brief rummage through Geordie the Great's stuff he found what he was looking for: a can labelled 'Smoke Crystals', but when he took off the lid he frowned. "It says 'Smoke Crystals' alright, but they're different to Mesmero's. These are sort-of glittery."

"Whatever," drawled Steve. "Just put some in and let's try it." He waited while Joe topped up the crystal drawer and had closed it; then he reached out over the square grill above the machine. This would fit into the hole in the stage floor above replacing the original wooden trapdoor. On one edge of the metal plate were three buttons. One triggered the mechanism to raise and lower the trapdoor, another switched the smoke machine off and on; the third was for the extractor fan to clear the smoke. All were designed so that they could be pushed by the magician's foot. Steve simply pressed the smoke button by hand.

Smoke began to pour from an opening in the top of the machine to rise through the grill.

Steve flicked off the smoke and switched on the fan briefly to quickly draw most of the smoke back into the machine's box. "Good," said Steve. "That all works."

"The smoke's a funny colour though," Joe pointed out. "Not the same as Mesmero's. Do you reckon he'll mind?"

"It's smoke, isn't it?" said Steve with a shrug. "Let's send it back up to the stage." He pressed the third button and the two men watched as the smoke machine with the trapdoor on top was hauled by cables up to the stage floor. Once there it stopped automatically. Joe nodded his satisfaction. "I reckon we're done. Let's go grab a coffee."

The show that evening was a sell-out. The audience chatted excitedly, having been promised an unbelievable magic act, and those who had seen Mesmero in the past were wondering how it could possibly be any different to the stunts they had seen before. They were soon to find out. The main theatre lights dimmed, the curtain went up; but instead of being brightly lit as expected, the stage was in darkness. People held their breath and waited. Seconds ticked by and tension began building when nothing happened. It was broken by a strong spotlight which focussed on something in the centre of the stage. And there it was as advertised: The Portal to Oblivion, a four-sided glass cubicle. For now it was empty, but everyone expected that Mesmero would suddenly appear as if by magic inside the cabinet. He didn't.

The audience looked to the wings either side of the stage from where the performers would normally enter; and somebody did. The magician's assistant, the Delightful Doreen flounced onto the stage in her glittery costume and turned this way and that as if searching for something. Facing the audience she announced in a very theatrical voice: "It seems Mesmero hasn't arrived yet. It's not like him to be late. I wonder where he can be...?"

"Yes, I wonder," Anna said to her brother Marty with a chuckle. The pair had watched this particular act of their grandfather's earlier in the week, but that was from seats in the main theatre as part of the audience. They were now seeing it again, this time sitting on chairs off-stage in the wings, a suggestion of Mesmero's because the children kept asking how he made the trick work. "See if you can figure it out from a different angle," he had said. As for giving away his secret, all he would offer was: "Maybe it's magic, or maybe it's just smoke and mirrors."

Doreen went to the front of the cubicle, opened the glass door and peered in. "Not here yet," she announced to the audience, then: "Oh, wait a minute. I think Mesmero's coming."

Standing to one side she spread her hand as if to draw attention to something in the cabinet. Quickly closing the glass door she waited as did everyone in the theatre including the two children in the wings. "The smoke's just starting up," said Anna unnecessarily. It certainly was, rising up from the floor of the cubicle. In less than fifteen seconds the glass cabinet was full of smoke. "Now it stays like that for a bit," added Marty.

"For about a minute," said Anna. "That's to keep the audience wondering. Once it begins to clear Gramps will be there in the cabinet, appearing as if by magic." Lo and behold, the smoke seemed to be drawn back down to the floor where it came from to reveal Mesmero standing inside the glass box. Some in the audience gasped and all of them applauded loudly. Delightful Doreen opened the door, stood to one side and said: "Hello Mesmero. Would you like to come and meet these lovely people?"

Mesmero stepped out of the glass cabinet to be greeted by cheers from the audience. Following a theatrical bow, he made the same welcoming speech his grandchildren had heard before so they didn't take much notice and began talking to each other in whispers. "I reckon there's a trapdoor in the bottom of the glass box that goes down to somewhere under the stage," suggested Marty.

"And that's where Gramps comes from when the cabinet's full of smoke," added Anna. "Next, he'll go back in and the smoke will start up again..."

Mesmero did just that. Delightful Doreen made a show of walking around the cubicle and could be seen through the glass panels to prove that there were no secret compartments that

the magician could sneak into and hide; at least that was how it seemed. Smoke began rising up past Mesmero's feet and ankles and continued on until he was completely enveloped. "It must really be hard to breathe in there," said Doreen. "How long do you think Mesmero can hold his breath?" She asked the audience: "How long can *YOU* hold your breath? Why don't you try as we wait for Mesmero to re-appear?" and after an extended pause added: "If, of course, he survives." Some of the audience tried holding their breath and most gave up after a minute; then they all waited. Five minutes must have passed before the smoke began to clear from the top down. Mesmero should have been in the cubicle, but it was empty. The audience gasped.

Not so his two grandchildren because they had seen this same act previously. "I bet the trapdoor with Gramps on it is down below under the stage," said Marty. "Next, the glass cabinet will fill with smoke, and once it has he'll come back up again."

Doreen repeated her walk around the empty cabinet, declaring loudly: "Mesmero, it seems, has truly gone – but to where: Oblivion, maybe? Will he ever return; could anyone?"

The glass cabinet filled with smoke once more in preparation for Mesmero's return. A minute ticked by, plus two more. Marty looked at his sister and frowned. "Gramps should be back by now. I reckon something's gone wrong."

Before Anna could comment there was movement behind them. It was the stagehand Joe, and he was of the same opinion. He peered at the empty cubicle, saying to no-one in particular: "He didn't come down, so we thought he must still be on stage. Where is Mesmero...?"

The children were up out of their chairs. "Take us down to where he was supposed to be," urged Marty. When Joe just stood there open-mouthed and silent, Marty snapped: "Now... please."

When the three entered the room below the stage, Steve blurted out: "Well?"

Joe shook his head. "He wasn't there."

"He can't just have disappeared..." Steve began; then had a thought: "Surely not the smoke crystals...?"

The children had no idea what that meant. They had moved close to the smoke machine and were looking up to the trapdoor hole in the stage floor above. "We've got to go look for Gramps," said Anna.

"Yeah," Marty spun to face the two stagehands. "Tell us how to work this trapdoor thing."

"No way," stated Joe flatly. "It's too risky..."

Anna cut him short: "He's our grandfather and something *you* did made him disappear. Whether you help or not, we're going to find him." She glanced at her brother. "Give me a hand up onto the trapdoor..."

Once the two children were standing on the grill above the smoke machine, very reluctantly Steve explained about the buttons. "Before they start it," he said to Joe, "Go up to the stage, and as soon as the smoke clears, get them out of the cabinet before they disappear too."

Steve checked his watch and as soon as he figured Joe had enough time to get up to the stage he nodded. It had been decided that Marty should operate the buttons. Taking a deep breath and holding it, he pressed down on the button that activated the pulleys. The assembly with the children on it began to rise. As instructed, Marty stopped it just before their heads were through the hole in the stage floor and trod down on the smoke button. Smoke rose from the top of the machine, past the children and through the hole.

Up on stage, Delightful Doreen was concerned that the trick was taking too long, but she had filled in the extra time with more of her usual patter, keeping the audience on edge while they waited. Joe was watching from the wings as smoke rose into the glass cabinet. After a minute it began to clear and he was ready to race towards the cabinet, but there was no sign of Mesmero's grandchildren. The Portal of Oblivion was empty!

"Where are we?" queried Anna looking around. It seemed they were still on the theatre stage; but looking through the glass panels of the cabinet it all seemed different somehow; and there was no sign of the Delightful Doreen.

Marty pushed open the glass door and the children stepped out. The moment they did a man's voice echoed around the stage: "You are at the Gateway to Oblivion. So too is Mesmero. He is in one of the Portals you see before you." The voice was referring to a line of five identical glass cabinets and their grandfather seemed to be in all five. "But only one Mesmero is real," the voice continued, "The others are mere reflections. To free him you must open the correct door. Open any of the wrong ones and you will send him straight to Oblivion. But heed this warning – you only have one chance, so choose wisely or say goodbye to Mesmero."

The children walked slowly along the line of cabinets, peering intently at each. "They all look like Gramps," said Anna. "How do we know which one is real?" She had reached the end of the line and started back again.

Marty was about to follow when he stopped and stared, first at one cabinet, then the next and back again. "I've had an idea," he offered, "But I need to check it out before we open a door." Not saying what his idea was, the boy continued along the line, pausing at each image of Mesmero, rocking his head from side to side as he examined the details. Reaching the end, he returned to the fourth, stood before it and pointed. "I think this cubicle's got Gramps in it."

"How can you be sure?" Anna wanted to know.

"Because of the scar on his cheek – remember he got it when one of his tricks went wrong."

Anna looked along the line and frowned. "They've all got scars on their cheeks," she said.

"Yes," replied Marty, "But look carefully at each. The voice said the wrong ones are reflections," and in case his sister didn't understand he added: "If you look at yourself in a mirror your image is reversed; so left becomes right. The scar is on Gramps' left cheek, but four of these images have it on the right cheek, so they must be reflections." He pointed once more at the cabinet in front of him. "This is the only image with the scar on the left cheek. It's not a reflection: it's just a glass door with gramps behind it." He turned to face Anna. "Do we open it?"

Anna closed her eyes to think long and hard. When she opened them again she breathed a heavy sigh and said: "Okay, go for it; and I only hope you're right."

Marty reached out, hooked trembling fingers in the edging track that served as a handle and pulled gently. The children hadn't noticed before that none of the images moved; they simply stared blankly ahead. As the door swung open, there was Mesmero inside the cabinet. Now he stirred, blinked a couple of times and frowned on seeing his grandchildren. "What are you doing here?" he asked, "And where are we; where am I...?"

"Somewhere we need to leave immediately," said Marty reaching into the cabinet to catch his grandfather's arm and coax him out. "Let's get back in the cubicle we came here in."

Hearing this, Mesmero turned to gaze along the line of cubicles. Surprisingly, now they appeared to be the same, just empty glass cabinets - the images had gone. "Which one?" he asked, intending to walk along the line.

"None of these, Gramps," said Anna pointing to the centre of the stage. "That's it. Come on." Catching hold of Mesmero's free arm she helped her brother guide the old magician to the lone cube. It was a squeeze with the three of them in a cubicle only meant for a single person, but they made it. "Get ready with the buttons Marty," she instructed as she pulled the door shut.

Mesmero was obviously confused and peered out through the glass sides. "How did this happen?" he asked. "How *could* it? Is there truly such a thing as magic?"

Marty chuckled. "No Gramps," the boy assured him. "It's like you said: smoke and mirrors."

And that was the way it ended, with the smoke filling the cubicle covering those in it to eventually be drawn back into the machine revealing not one but three people in a glass cabinet in the centre of the original stage. Doreen gasped in relief and the crowd went wild as they witnessed a never-to-be-seen again spectacle. As for the mirrors, there weren't any on stage; and three people at least were extremely glad of that.