

The Assistant's Revenge

Submitted into **Contest #207** in response to: *Write a story about a magician who never reveals their secrets – until now...*

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SPECULATIVE

SUSPENSE

FANTASY

“How do you do it?”

“A magician never reveals his secrets,” was all he would say. And then he told bald-faced lies.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Presto’s arms opened wide to encompass every spectator in the theatre. His smile sparkled, and his handlebar moustache shone with glittering wax. Everything was in the details. There were no cheap seats when your audience was composed of keen-eyed elves.

Presto Falsbottum rubbed his hands together and launched into a long story, while his stagehands and assistant wheeled two heavy looking boxes onto opposite ends of the stage. The halfling entertainer was a controversial character. Although he was known far and wide for bringing glee wherever he went, his volunteers often left the stage with expressions that suggested

coin to reveal his tricks, Presto's staff were always silent. But that was largely because Presto was so enraptured by his own ideas that he more or less saw the other members of his troupe as set decorations. He never revealed his effects, not even to the people he worked alongside.

The staff whispered amongst themselves, but his stagehands and ushers stuck around. They could complain that their boss was a bit tyrannical, or a mad magician, but they were extremely well compensated compared to the national average. His assistants were a different story. Presto was constantly losing assistants and proteges. He told himself that young magicians were afraid of commitment. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dizzy, his latest assistant, pushing the cart a tenth-of-a-mile off the exact center of the marked x on the stage. He sighed inwardly, but didn't change his plastered on smile. People these days simply weren't capable of learning things properly.

"You see before you an ordinary box, with no hexes, enchantments, jinxes, incantations or any sort of magic whatsoever." On cue, Dizzy pushed the box in a wide circle, showing it empty of any magical machinations. Presto walked sideways across the stage as he spoke, and stuck his foot out, tripping his assistant and sending the bewildered gnome headlong into the box. Presto shut the lid and 'accidentally' dropped a torch onto the box, setting it aflame. Dizzy emerged unscathed. The audience politely applauded.

'Elves,' Presto thought. They hardly reacted to anything. He'd have to kick it up a notch.

"Dizzy, send for a new box! This one's a little bit smoky!" The audience gas a polite titter as Dizzy stood up in the box, with his eyes watering and hat still smouldering.

Presto had been an entertainer for many years. He had learned that some things could much more easily be accomplished with

about how things were accomplished and kept his secrets close to his chest.

“In fact, “I’ll have whoever is the most revered wizard in attendance, step up to show the audience, there is no sigil, no rune, no arcana whatsoever.” In the background, Dizzy stumbled out of the box and it clattered to pieces. The stagehands wheeled out a different box, with a fancy blue and gold facade, decorated with paintings of rapiers.

When there was little response from the audience, Presto asked again.

“We need a venerated wizard. Is there one in the audience?” Presto cupped his hand above his eyes and made to scan the audience, resting on the ancient looking bearded elf with the tell-tale robes. Wizards of a certain generation still insisted that they were masters of the cosmos, and wore the robes of swirling stars and moons that had long since fallen out of fashion. And if they had removed their pointy hats (as was proper in a theatrical audience) the robes made it much easier to pick one out of the audience.

An usher dutifully helped the doddering old elf up the stairs and positioned him on the x marked on the stage, Presto presented the old man with a modern feat of magic he was quite unlikely to have ever stumbled across.

“Can you tell me, sir, what this orb is?”

The wizard eyed him somewhat wearily. “It appears to be a detecto-orb.”

“Very good. Can you confirm to the audience it’s usual purpose?”

“It’s a standard detecto-orb, from the look of it. Rather cheap.”

“Cheap?” Presto feigned surprise.

“You’ve left the made in Vecana sticker on the bottom.” he pointed out. The crowd laughed. Presto fanned himself.

“It ought to detect all magic in a radius maybe 20 miles wide?”

Presto nodded along with the volunteer. The wizard was holding a very expensive detection device which Presto had commissioned. In actual fact, it was more of a non-detection device, because it was specifically trained to ignore all of Presto’s props, and only detect his stage jacket, which had a glittering aura upon it. It would also detect whatever magic the orb’s handler happened to have about him.

“Very well, we’ll have it project whatever magic it detects as an illusory image.” Presto’s assistant Dizzy was very proficient with illusory magic, and did so with a wave of hands, as usual, Presto didn’t notice.

His focus was on his volunteer, who seemed to have a sort of elderly fall-detection system in the form of an enchantment which made him fall more slowly, a memory aiding spell, and some sort of flatulence dampener. All good for a laugh from the audience at the volunteer’s expense.

“And do you sir, declare the area free of magical devices?”

“I can detect no other magical devices in the vicinity, sir.” This was very important for Presto Falsbottom. When you could accomplish just about anything with an expensive wizard, a magic-free “magic” show was an exciting event. Presto’s show boasted feats of legerdemain, prestidigitation, and baffling gnomish machinery. It promised lots of laughs, but no funny business - no sigils, runes, or magic.

In actuality there were several other magical devices on Presto’s stage, notwithstanding the ‘enhanced’ detection orb, none of which he’d told his assistant about, and all of which assisted heavily in his act. The worst kept secret about Presto’s show was his fear that his assistant would upstage him, or steal the secrets and start his own show. The grand irony was that Presto’s obsession with keeping the secrets that made his work easier actually meant that Presto worked much harder. There

about their deceptions. Presto lied, convincingly and often. Presto's audiences knew that he abused his assistants and that pretending things were going wrong was fundamental to his act. They ate it up.

And so, as Presto approached the rapier box, he didn't have any more concerns than usual. Presto lived very firmly in the belief that he was the expert on magic, and so he rarely had any concerns about how a show's finale would go.

It was quite simple, an unsuspecting volunteer would be lured into the box, and teleported via real magic, to another box, wherein he would be trapped, in a silent zone, until all the swords were plunged into the first box. It made for wonderful drama.

Presto's magic box had a few enchantments on it, not the least of which was a silent zone; if someone banged on the box or hollered with surprise, they wouldn't be heard. Presto found that oftentimes when he booted someone unsuspecting into a box, they yelled and hollered. This didn't suit Presto. He wanted the audience to think it was all part of the show. They ate up his antics. And, he told himself, it was all in harmless fun.

He secretly wished he could have a decent protege to share his secrets with, but noone seemed willing to stick with it long enough to learn as much as Presto knew. Dizzy had lasted 6 months, and Presto suspected that was only because his skull was too thick to fit much of a brain inside.

The audience had tittered when Presto 'accidentally' poured milk on Dizzy to put out the fire.

They giggled when Dizzy tripped over the broom handle that had been deliberately placed in his path, and chuckled when he held on for dear life as the seemingly mechanical contraption raised him in the air while he clung to it.

Everything was going fine, until Presto invited up a tall man for

He was perfect. A bit goofy looking, crooked teeth; maybe half human? A perfect butt to Presto's jokes.

Presto obliged the man's concerns, and stepped inside the box to show the audience how roomy and safe it was inside. As he stepped forward to exit, he noticed the volunteer's crooked grin and paled. The door swung shut with a click.

Presto tried to push. But he hadn't installed a handle. The door was designed to open only from the outside, controlled by Presto, and Presto alone. The magician began to sweat.

He had a specific command phrase to activate the sequence of spells to continue the effect, but as he tried to speak the words,

"There is nothing inside the box," he found that nothing came out of his mouth. The zone of silence!

He wasn't being teleported!

Ohh noo.

Presto was dimly aware that his contorted face, silently screaming the command words, was being projected via illusion onto the back wall of the stage. An added entertainment bonus that he had recently added.

On stage, Dizzy stood still for a moment. He wasn't sure exactly what had happened, but in his experience with Maestro Falsbottum, the unexpected had become practically routine. Something was off, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. The spectator was outside of the box, and the master magician was inside of it. That was unusual, but in Dizzy's experience Master Presto never told him what to expect in his shows. The best thing to do was to follow the Maestro's doctrine. The show must go on.

Dizzy began to prepare the swords, bringing them out and handing them to the volunteer to test their sharpness. Presto had sharpened their edges recently, and their points were like

Dizzy plunged the first sword into the case. The Presto projection dove right, Dizzy plunged the second sword into the case, Presto dove left. He wiped his brow as Dizzy dropped the third sword. A skilled lip reader could probably pick out the words, “blasted ten sword trick”. He also seemed to be shouting a series of instructions... but his lips were moving too quickly for anyone to make them out.

As Dizzy picked up the third sword, Presto planted his feet on the opposing wall and shoved the first one out of the case - just enough to brush his thigh. The third sword came through, and he shuffled to the side. Then the fourth, with Presto contorting himself in practically inhuman positions. His fingers sweating through white gloves that held the blades at bay, Presto managed to push a couple more blades back out enough to give himself a couple of precious centi-males of breathing room. He was sweating. Dizzy was particularly strong and if this next sword went through any further, there wasn't any place for him to go. It would go right through him!

Dizzy, who had never had the tricks revealed to him, had no real way of realizing that something was going wrong. His job was just to plunge the swords through the box. Oddly, the swords seemed to be coming part way back out of the box. Dizzy pushed another one through and felt a strange resistance, although the sword was pushing back on him! The audience laughed and hollered. Dizzy had never seen a crowd this excited before. Dizzy paused and took a bodybuilder's pose. He flexed and had the laughing volunteer kiss his bicep, before returning to wrestling with the sword. For once, he was the star of the show. The illusory projection cut out then, in preparation for the grand finale.

Dizzy plunged the sword through - it was difficult to see if it had gone the whole way.

And as the final sword went through, where someone's neck should be, he noticed unusual resistance.

Dizzy invited the spectator to throw open the other box - to herald Presto's teleportation arrival.

It was empty. Fireworks erupted, applause signs blinked on and off, Dizzy scratched his head and shrugged. The crowd went wild. Everyone cheered and hollered what a joke! Presto had finally made himself the butt of his infamous jokes. What a show!

And as the theatregoers began to exit their seats in an orderly fashion, Dizzy took another look at the box. Only Maestro Falsbottum was permitted to touch the box after the show. He was forbidden from removing the swords, lest he accidentally discover the secrets of its workings.

Dizzy shook his head, the Maestro sure was strange.

All the while, a slow stain seeped invisibly on the red carpet beneath the box.



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