

Smoke and Mirrors

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"I don't want to wait," Crystamel said. "I want a new body *now*."

Dagmar rolled her eyes at Ramdane, who simply shrugged. Overhead, the sky was a cloudless blue and a crisp fall breeze brushed through a crazy quilt of forest leaves. The sun was sliding toward the horizon, and Dagmar's mail shirt chafed annoyingly as she raised a rock to pound the last tent stake into place. Ramdane had lost the stake hammer. Normally Dagmar would have made her forgetful brother put up the tent, but that would probably mean fighting their way out of a collapsed tangle of canvas at some point during the night. After a curious chipmunk sniffed at one of the stakes, say.

"This isn't fair," Crystamel groused from her perch on an old stump. "You two always have nice bodies, but I have to put up with this. Look at this—I'm wearing out." She shook her bedraggled brown feathers to prove her point. Two pinions fluttered away, then plunged straight down and clattered against the hard oak roots. Ramdane sighed and picked them up. Both had changed into solid stone. In addition to the feather problem, Crystamel was missing an eye and her beak was chipped. She looked less like a falcon and more like a battered stuffed toy.

"What do you think, Mar?" Ramdane reached into his backpack to pull out a small stone cat and a hammer. "A transfer won't take a minute."

"Oooh!" said Crystamel. "I haven't been a cat in ages!"

The rock skinned Dagmar's knuckles. She yelped and shoved her fingers into her mouth. "Mofe," she growled. "Afomufwy mot."

"What?"

A popping noise as Dagmar freed her fingers. She was a tall, stocky woman with ash-blond hair and a face that was pretty if the light was right and you couldn't see the scars.

"No," she repeated. "Absolutely not. It isn't safe. And gimme that hammer. You said you'd lost it."

"Aw, come on." Ramdane set the little cat next to Crystamel on the stump. He was shorter than his sister, with a whipcord build and curly brown hair above blue eyes. Talismans clacked and clattered at his belt, marking him a talismonger just as Dagmar's sword marked her a warrior. "The campaign's over. The enemy guys are dead or fled. It won't take but a minute. Just stand guard, all right?"

Before Dagmar could answer, he started chanting. Crystamel stiffened. Ramdane raised the hammer and brought it down hard on the falcon. It shattered into rocky rubble. Ramdane continued to chant. A silver mist seeped out of the crumbled rock and tried to dissipate, but Ramdane's spell caught it and pulled it back. The mist drifted toward the little cat. Dagmar shuddered. This part never failed to creep her out. The mist, she knew, was a part of her younger brother's soul, and if he focused it into a properly-prepared talisman, it would bring the talisman to life as a familiar. If Ramdane made a mistake, however, and the soul fragment didn't make it into its new home—

Dagmar's ears caught the sound of crackling brush. Something shiny glinted in the sunlight.

"Ramdane!" she hissed, but Ramdane, caught up in his spell, didn't hear her.

The bushes abruptly parted, revealing a greasy-looking man wearing a tattered red robe and holding a hand mirror. He spoke a single sharp word, and the silver mist was sucked away from the cat. It vanished into the mirror. Ramdane cried out and collapsed to the ground as Dagmar whipped her knife from its sheath. Her sword was on the other side of their camp, a fact Ramdane hadn't bothered to check before he started his spell.

I knew it, Dagmar thought fiercely. I just knew it. Do the right thing a hundred times and nothing happens. Do the wrong thing even once and it bites you in the ass.

"I wouldn't throw that knife," the stranger said. He had dark hair that clung to his skull from lack of washing, a wispy beard, and a thin, hungry face. Two bird skulls, a dried worm tied into a knot, and a dead snake with its tail stuffed into its mouth hung from his belt—a paltry collection of talismans. "If I got hurt, I just might drop this mirror, and wouldn't that be a shame?"

Dagmar shot Ramdane a glance. He was on his hands and knees, retching.

"What do you want?" she asked, not lowering the knife.

The man smiled, revealing perfect, white teeth that contrasted sharply with the rest of his appearance. "You killed my employer."

"Prepare to die?" Dagmar asked.

The man looked confused. "I'm the one holding the magic mirror. *You* prepare to die."

"I didn't—never mind," Dagmar said. "Look, a lot of people were mad at your employer. It was probably the altar and all those children. And the sharp, shiny knives."

"He paid his retainers on time," the man snapped.

"They do say no one can be all bad."

"Don't get smart. You're not in charge here."

Dagmar's heart was pounding, but she nevertheless kept the knife steady. "So you're going to break that mirror, release that familiar spirit without a proper body nearby, and kill my little brother, is that it?"

"Maybe. Or maybe you could do me a little . . . favor."

Despite her tension, Dagmar had to suppress an urge to roll her eyes. "And what favor would that be?"

Ramdane continued to retch. Dagmar was sure he must be empty down to his toes by now.

"There's a little town called Daralis north of here," the greasy man said, "and they have a little problem. A gorgon."

"Ugly woman? Snakes for hair? Turns people who look at her to stone?"

"You're smart for a sword-swinger. At least one person has already disappeared, and a huntsman saw a statue in the woods. Gorgon." The man held up the mirror. "I'll trade this bit of glass for its head. The talismans I could make from the hair snakes alone will set me up for life."

"How," Dagmar asked levelly, "are we supposed to cut the head off something we can't even look at?"

"I recommend shield polish," the greasy man said. "Just come back to this charming little grove with the head. I'll find you." And with that, he backed into the bushes and disappeared.

Dagmar flung the knife down and hauled Ramdane to his feet. "Dammit! Dammit dammit dammit!"

"Thanks for the sympathy," Ramdane said, staggering. "We're just talking about a piece of my soul, here."

Overhead, a bluebird twittered cheerfully. Dagmar would have cheerfully strangled it. Instead, she picked up Ramdane's hammer and started pounding the tent stake again. She swore in time with the rhythm.

"What are you doing?" Ramdane asked incredulously.

"Setting up camp. Are you up to hauling water? I need to wash like you wouldn't believe."

"What I don't believe is that we aren't packing up and heading out."

Dagmar sat back on her haunches. The cool breeze blew up stronger for a moment, making the canvas ripple. "You go on ahead. Me, I don't much care for stumbling through brambles after dark and turning my foot in gopher holes I can't see. Daralis isn't going anywhere."

"But my soul is!"

A little girl inside Dagmar jumped up and down and chanted *Told you so! Told you so!* But Ramdane's face was haggard, and his whipcord build looked even leaner than usual. Tiny lines of fear had already etched themselves around his blue eyes. Dagmar bit the inside of her cheek. There are times when even older sisters aren't allowed to say certain things aloud.

"Water," was all she said, and went back to pounding the stake.

* * *

"We're looking into the disappearances," Dagmar said, "and the innkeeper told us you could—"

"Well, it's about time," the woman snapped. A baby squalled in the house behind her. The sound mixed with shouts and screams from voices of varying ages, and Dagmar caught a heavy whiff of unwashed bodies. "Ever since that lazy, ungrateful little slut ran off, I haven't had a moment's rest. Who's supposed to scrub my floor and clean my fireplace? And do the mending? And wash the dishes? And—"

"How dreadful for you," Ramdane interrupted. "Can you tell us how she disappeared?"

The woman snorted. "I sent her into the woods to look for flax."

"Where in the woods?" Dagmar asked intently.

"North of here. Told her not to come back until she had enough to start my new dress." She turned and shouted a threat into the screaming morass. "Brats."

"Horrible," Dagmar said.

The woman bristled. "My children?"

"Your dress."

"Oh." The woman looked confused, and Dagmar wondered if she were related to the greasy talismonger. "Anyway, that was the last I saw of her. A week after she disappeared, that idiot Dillon Hunter rushes into town blithering about seeing her statue in the woods. Serve her right if she got turned to stone."

"Can't think of a better punishment," Dagmar said.

The woman looked at Dagmar sharply, but Dagmar kept her face blank.

"Well," she growled, "if you find her, tell her not to expect any back pay." With that, she marched into the house and slammed the door.

Ramdane gave Dagmar a long look. "So you still want kids one day?"

* * *

Two hours later, brother and sister were resting beneath a huge maple tree. Occasional red leaves drifted down around them like tattered feathers.

"I hate this," Ramdane muttered. He was holding a small stone in his hands. "We must've talked to the entire village and haven't found anyone to guide us north. Not even Dillon. They're all too scared. Chickens."

"Too bad you weren't chicken about giving Crystamel a new body," Dagmar said, and instantly regretted it when she saw the look on Ramdane's face. She sighed and gestured at Ramdane's rock. "That talisman will reverse what the gorgon's done?"

"In theory. I've never dealt with anything like this before, though." Ramdane's fingers gleamed, and the stone in his hand went soft as clay as he carved one final rune with the nail. When it was finished, he threaded it onto a leather thong and hung it from his belt.

"How's Crystamel? You can still feel her, can't you?"

"She's scared," Ramdane replied shortly. "What's our next step?"

Dagmar got to her feet with a clinking of mail. "I think we should wander around the woods for a while. North of here."

"Dagmar," Ramdane blurted, "how are we going to get the gorgon's head?"

"With a shiny shield and a pure heart."

Ramdane grimaced. "I don't trust that greasy guy."

"You think I do?"

"If she dies, I die, so what's to prevent him from sending us off on another monster hunt after this one?" Ramdane hooked the finished talisman onto his belt. "Threats and blackmail for the rest of my life. Gods, Dagmar, there's a twenty-ton rock hanging over me on a thread."

The little girl inside Dagmar jumped up and down. *Told you so! Told you so!* Dagmar told her to

shut up.

"Let's take it one step at a time," she advised. "And our first step should be toward the woods. There must be a trail the girl was following. Let's find it."

There was a trail, actually. It even led north. Brother and sister followed it under crisp, colorful leaves and over browning grass. Twice they lost their way and had to scour the forest floor to pick up the trail again. The air was crisp and fresh as a new-picked apple, and Dagmar's internal little girl was filled with a desire to roll in leaf piles and stuff dead twigs down Ramdane's shirt like she had done when they were small, in the days before magic and swords had taken over their lives. Those days were over now, though Dagmar couldn't resist scuffling through crunchy leaves when Ramdane wasn't looking. And then, in mid-scuffle, she stopped and stared.

"Flax," Ramdane said, pointing to a ground-hugging patch.

"Statue," Dagmar said, pointing to the trees. A motionless, white figure stood visible among them.

Ramdane caught his breath and went into a crouch. Dagmar whipped her shield off her back and followed suit. They crept closer, trying to be quiet but constantly betrayed by crunching leaves. Dagmar kept her highly-polished, silvery shield in front of her as she crouch-walked forward. Her mail shirt jingled at every move.

"You look like an armored duck," Ramdane complained in a whisper. "And you're twice as loud. Here." He took a dog's ear from his amulet belt and hung it around Dagmar's neck.

"Hush," Ramdane said. The amulet glowed red and faded. Then the pair continued creeping toward the house, but silently.

After a certain amount of nerve-wracking shuffling ahead, Dagmar could see the statue more clearly. It was a teenage girl carrying a basket and wearing the ragged clothes of a poor servant. She looked thin and tired, and it seemed as if she would gladly collapse to the grass if her muscles hadn't been carved from solid white marble. Behind the statue, the roof of a small cottage peeked above a tall, well-kept hedge. Dagmar blinked.

"I think," Ramdane whispered, "we've found our gorgon."

Dagmar eyed the cottage suspiciously. "It lives in a house?"

"Let's get the head and worry about details later."

"Easy for you to say. You aren't carrying the sword. No, don't say it. I'll scout. You take care of . . . her."

Without waiting for a reply, Dagmar slipped up to a gap in the hedge. She positioned her shield so it would reflect the view inside. The shield showed a well-kept little yard and a red front door with a fair amount of gingerbread molding.

Weirder and weirder, she thought nervously.

Ramdane, meanwhile, sidled up to the statue. With trembling fingers, he slipped the new talisman over its head and whispered, "Change."

A moment passed. Then the stone amulet shattered with a light popping sound that made Dagmar jump. A spot of fleshy pink formed on the statue's chest and spread with a wet, peeling noise. The young woman's cheeks acquired a rosy blush which crawled down her neck and swiftly suffused the rest of her body. Then the statue's arms plopped to the ground, followed by the head, torso, and legs. Ramdane leaped backward. Within seconds, the entire figure had collapsed into a mushy red pile at his feet. Dagmar stared.

"What," asked a querulous female voice, "have you done to my statue?"

Dagmar, who had been watching the statue instead of the yard's reflection, yelped and accidentally dropped her shield. It showed a perfect reflection of overhead green leaves.

"Watch out, Ramdane," Dagmar barked, fumbling madly for her sword and trying to recover her shield without raising her eyes. "Don't look at her."

"Too late," came the sour reply.

Startled, Dagmar snuck a glance in her brother's direction. Ramdane was leaning back on his elbows and looking directly past Dagmar. She could see reflected in the shield an elderly woman with a dark, raisin-like face. Obsidian eyes flashed in anger. She was standing in the gap in the hedge. Belatedly Dagmar realized she was staring at what must be the forest gorgon.

"I repeat," the woman said. "What have you done to my statue?"

"Are you the gorgon?" Ramdane asked cautiously.

It was the woman's turn to look surprised. "Gorgon?"

A rather pretty teenage girl stepped around the hedge, and Dagmar inhaled sharply. It was the young woman whose image lay squashed on the ground, only she wasn't nearly as thin and tired-looking.

"Granny, who are you talking to?" the girl asked.

"A pair of statue wreckers."

"Uh, we came from Daralis," Dagmar explained uncertainly, eyeing the girl. "Someone is missing from the village and—"

"What Dagmar is trying to say," Ramdane put in, "is that there's supposed to be a gorgon living in the forest and she's been turning people to stone." He peered intently at the old woman a moment longer, then got to his feet, brushing bits of . . . flesh? . . . from his clothing. "But if you're the gorgon, why haven't you turned *us* into stone? And did I or didn't I free her from your spell?"

"You didn't free anyone," the woman snapped. "I'm a sculptor, not a gorgon."

Dagmar blinked. "Say that again?"

"You deaf, girl? I said I'm a sculptor, not—"

"I'm dead," Ramdane whispered. "Oh gods, I'm really going to die."

"What's wrong with him?" the girl asked. She had a low, sweet voice.

"May we go inside?" Dagmar asked levelly, though her heart was sinking. "This would be a lot easier to explain sitting down."

* * *

"And so I retired from the guild," Granny Carver finished. "But I kept getting people who wanted advice about this piece of work or that bit of chipping. So I moved out here. The house used to be the summer home of a talismonger who liked his privacy and I figured I could finally get some peace and quiet. The talismans he used to cloak this place must be wearing off, though, which is how Kate found it." She nodded at the girl. "I offered to give her a place to live if she would help around the house and pose for some pieces, one of which you destroyed, young man."

They were seated in a rough but comfortable parlor sipping tea from paper-thin stone cups. Several small stone figurines had been arranged tastefully on wooden shelves and stands about the room while a round, bas relief carving of some species of demon glared moodily from its perch over the mantle. Dagmar was staring at the latter, fascinated, but she looked away when Granny addressed Ramdane.

"Sorry," Ramdane apologized. "The talisman was supposed to turn stone back into flesh. It worked. Sort of. If the statue had been human in the first place, things would have worked differently. As it is . . ." He trailed off with a shrug.

"You could always have barbecue for dinner," Dagmar couldn't help saying.

Granny Carver looked thoughtful, and for a dreadful moment Dagmar thought she had taken the remark seriously. Ramdane blanched.

"Um, you're an awfully fast worker," he said quickly. "I mean, carving that statue—and making all these in here—should have taken years, shouldn't it?"

The woman held up her wrinkled old hands and showed Ramdane the fingernails. They were glowing faintly.

"I've got the talent for molding," she said, "but not for enchanting. For me it's like working clay."

"Look," Dagmar broke in, "why don't you two come down to Daralis and tell the people what's going on? After that, you could come with us and explain to that greaseball of a talismonger that there's

no gorgon."

Kate vehemently shook her head. "I signed a serving contract," she said. "That woman could make me work for her if I went back. And her husband tried to . . ." Her hands twisted uneasily in her lap as her voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm not going back to Daralis, not ever."

"And if *I* went back to explain," Granny put in, "everyone would know where Kate went."

Dagmar puffed out her cheeks in vexation. "I don't think you realize what's going on here. Ramdane needs to give that damned talismonger a gorgon's head or he'll break the mirror. If the mirror breaks without the proper spell and a proper new housing, Crystamel will disperse—and Ramdane will die."

"What do you expect me to do?" Granny growled. "Conjure up a gorgon's head out of nothing?"

Ramdane screamed and fell across the coffee table. Cups and teapot crashed to the floor. Startled, Granny and Kate shrank back in their chairs while Dagmar rushed to her brother's side.

"What is it?" Dagmar said helplessly. "What can I do?"

"Nothing," Ramdane panted through clenched teeth. Dagmar helped him sit up, and he opened his tunic. "Look."

Everyone looked. Three ugly welts on Ramdane's chest formed the numeral one.

"The greaseball is scratching that mirror. He's telling me we've only got one day left to meet him—with the gorgon's head," Ramdane gasped.

Dagmar assisted Ramdane to a chair. For once her internal little girl was quiet. "There's nothing to worry about," she soothed without believing it for a minute.

"Right," Ramdane replied dully. "We've been in worse spots. Maybe we could set up an ambush."

And then a thought struck Dagmar. She looked at Granny Carver's fireplace, then at Ramdane. Her internal girl clapped her hands with wicked glee.

"No," Dagmar said. "I have a better idea."

* * *

"Did you bring me the head?" the greasy talismonger demanded from his vantage point across the clearing.

"Right here," Dagmar said, holding up a small strongbox. She held her still-polished shield in the other hand. "We'll bring it out as soon as you show us the mirror."

Grinning crookedly, the greasy talismonger dipped into a pouch and pulled out the bit of glass. "Do you feel your familiar, talismonger?" he taunted. "Can you sense her fear? One little accident is all it would take."

He dropped the mirror.

Dagmar and Ramdane let out a single cry. Time slowed, and Dagmar watched the mirror turn end over end as it headed for the rocky ground. The talismonger negligently flipped his foot, allowing the mirror to bounce off one toe into a patch of grass.

"Clumsy," he clucked, squatting to retrieve the object. He straightened and looked mockingly at Ramdane. "I'm sorry. Did I frighten you both?"

Dagmar opened her mouth but her heart was beating at the back of her throat and she couldn't formulate a reply. Apprehension warred with red-tinged anger.

Kill him! urged the internal little girl, and Dagmar *really* wanted to listen.

"I'll just put the box in the middle of the clearing," she called quickly. "After I've backed away, you come and exchange it for the mirror. And we'll all be home in time for supper."

The talismonger nodded jerkily. "Hurry up," he ordered. "The sun's going down."

Dagmar stumped past the boundary of trees and set Granny's heavy, metal-bound box on a flat stone in the exact center of the tiny meadow. Then she backed away, careful to keep her shield pointing in the talismonger's direction. Sunlight glinted off the shiny surface, creating a wobbly circle of light on the grass. The talismonger's eyes flicked toward it, then back to Dagmar.

"Don't try to blind me with that," he warned.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Dagmar said, still backing away. "I can see you're way too smart to fall for that trick."

The talismonger looked suspicious, but didn't reply. Dagmar waggled her shield one more time, sending the bit of light dancing across the ground. Behind her, she heard Ramdane chanting softly, though the greasy talismonger didn't seem to notice. His attention wandered between Dagmar, the box, and the light.

That's right, you bastard. Pretty light. Look at the pretty light. Never mind what Ramdane is doing. Pretty, pretty light.

Once Dagmar was safely back on the other side of the clearing, the talismonger sidled cautiously out to the box. Exultant avarice gleamed in his eyes as he opened it and reached inside without looking, examining the contents by touch alone.

Three . . . , Dagmar counted, two . . . one.

The greed dropped from the talismonger's face, replaced by a thunderous fury. With a screech, he snatched a handful of stone chips from the box—refuse from Granny's workroom—and flung them furiously to the ground.

"You *lied* to me?" he screamed. "Your life is forfeit!" And he hurled the mirror to the stone at his feet just as Ramdane finished his chant.

The mirror struck the rock and exploded into a hundred cloudy shards. A fine gray mist fogged upward, then sucked itself down into the stone at the talismonger's feet. Laughing, the talismonger ground the fragments into dust beneath his heel.

"Now we'll see," he crowed, "how a talismonger dies."

And a wild scream of pain and terror cut through the laughter.

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"I don't want a new body," Crystamel said, hunched at Ramdane's feet. "I like viff one."

"Don't you think it's awfully heavy?" Ramdane commented.

"The voice is really grating," Dagmar put in. "And the extra fangs make you sound like a leaky teakettle."

"Vere iff vat," Crystamel acknowledged. She scratched her ear with one claw and ran a long tongue over improbably pointy teeth. "Fwitching bodief would alfo take the tafte of vat talifmonger out of my mouf. He waf awfully dirty."

"He should have looked where he was standing," Dagmar observed as she plucked the strongbox from a bloody mess of ragged clothes and ruined talismans.

"I'm rather glad he didn't," Ramdane replied. "He'd have known something was up if he'd noticed the stone on the grass was Granny's demon carving." He sighed heavily. "The woman bargains like a moneylender. It'll take me weeks to make enough talismans to cloak her house again."

"It's the only fair way to pay her back," Dagmar remarked. "Between the demon carving and the meat statue, you've ruined two of her better pieces."

"Fo when do I get my new body?" Crystamel asked. "You ftil have the cat ftatue, don't you? You could fange me right now."

"No!" Dagmar and Ramdane said together. Then they laughed.