

The Command Performance

"Cut!"

The gargoyle director swung his megaphone in my face when he yelled. He stood two heads taller than me when he wasn't on all fours. His fanged smile was both warm and menacing. With a wincing smile, I took a defensive step back and bumped into a set of golden elevator doors. As they slowly opened, I realized how I got here.

Bladder cancer had ended twenty-seven seasons and 5000 episodes of my TV show. After tearful goodbyes to my family and friends, I took my last breath. My hospital room flashed blindingly white, then black.

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I found myself waiting in a hallway outside of what looked to be a standard, mid-level corporate executive's office. As my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, the vague outline of my hulking host came into focus. He sat behind a large desk, with his back to me, facing a deep crimson velvet curtain. Without a word, he pointed over his head toward the oversized red leather armchair on my side of the desk. I sat.

Downlit by a single candled sconce, a partially unwound scroll, burnt around the edges and splotted with faded reddish-brown stains, caught my eye. It looked biblical. On the desk was a picture of two red-faced kids with pointed buckteeth and unnervingly crossed eyes. Not just a little, I'm talking nose-staring-crossed, each sporting the wickedest grin I've ever seen. I decided to avoid discussing his family unless he insisted, and I hoped he didn't.

It seemed like hours while we waited for each other to speak. My socks were drenched in sweat, and my mouth turned to cotton as the heat rose from the old plank flooring. It couldn't be from one of those fancy radiant floor heaters.

I dry-gulped as my hand traced rows of fingernail grooves etched across the desktop that trailed off the edge. My eyes flit from a red glow flickering through the square of floor cracks around my chair to the long, gold handle protruding from the right arm of his chair. A chorus of tortured screams came from behind the curtain.

This office could belong to only one guy. I wasn't happy.

Like a well-rehearsed schtick, he slowly swiveled his chair to face me, *accidentally* brushing the curtains, releasing a blinding red-orange flash of light. It quickly diffused through the gray dusty air, casting a menagerie of shadows, some inching towards me. He was ruddy-faced with slick-backed ebony hair. Casually examining his long, curved fingernails, he uncrossed his legs and revealed a glimpse of cloven hooves over the desktop with a lightning-fast chair aerobics maneuver. I dreaded what might come next.

He toyed with the tips of black stubs protruding through his golden crown. "Oh, nothing to dread." I couldn't tell if his heavy black coat was made of wool or had sprouted from his thick, scaly skin.

His eyebrows rose to the crown. "That show earned you a bad reputation, but I know it's all an act." He stood and extended a claw. "*The Jerry Springer*. I'm quite a fan, quite a fan."

I swallowed hard and gave it a fist bump.

He pointed a finger gun at me and winked. "Got lots of bad ones down here, and you have such a flair for presenting them at their worst—and I mean that in a good way. I called in some favors to borrow you before you head *up there*." His brows knitted, and his lips pressed into a frown as he looked upward.

His eyes darted manically as he sprang to his hooves. "We don't have much time. Read these notes for your final show, and we'll get to it. Dancing out of the office with a low-pitched, slow-motion laugh, he left me to worry and prepare. Bizarre as it was, this grand finale was quite fitting. Some might say I deserved it.

Thankful for the smell of sulfur, I eased out a long-held fart in small installments, taking care not to cause a flame-up.

My last show! It was only an audience of one, but what an audience it was. With this cast of characters, it should be fun. *Hmm. Up there*, now that's some great news. I got busy studying the script. This was one guy I didn't want to piss off.

An hour later (maybe it was five or six?), my host returned. "I think you're ready now."

"Yes, I am," I quickly replied with a great deal of respect.

"I know you are. I just said so," he bellowed, giving me an evil look that sent chills up my spine. His voice softened. "You must be hungry. I'll have something brought in. You like spicy food?"

I guessed the right answer to that one. "Yes. Extra hot, please."

"My chef is *The Genghis Kahn*. The dude usually cuts a chunk from his horse's neck for a fast bite, but he can also do a stir-fry to die for." My host was very animated, jabbering and waving his claws. "After the nosh, we'll be off. The cameramen are queued, and our people are all in place."

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After lunch, a weird little guy, half goat, led me to the studio.

The stage was ready to go. A red backdrop curtain behind yellow flames was a great touch, especially with real fire! And was that genuine brimstone I smelled? The sofas carved out of the cave granite weren't comfy but perfect replicas of those on my set. Behind each was one of those Minotaur creatures, maybe eight feet tall. You know, with the bullheads and 'roided biceps. They stood there with their hairy arms folded over their bulging chests, smirking as if to say, "Yea... go ahead."

It was showtime. He sat in the third-row center with his hooves up on the seat-back two rows ahead. *My audience.* From the thick hazy air, a voice proclaimed, "It's the Jerry Springer Show." My host started clapping, whooping, and waving his hands in the air, prompted by an audience participation sign.

My show-biz instincts kicked in. "Today, I have a very, very special show for a very, very special audience."

A thunderous disembodied applause filled the room, and a big, cheeky grin spread over The Evil One's face. I adlibbed a strong but unoffending intro while keeping my sphincter in check. He had that effect on me, and the stir-fry didn't help.

"And for today's show, all the way from an engagement in the Garden of Eden, I have the original Adam!" A phantom audience of male voices cheered, met by an equal measure of feminine boos and hisses. My first guest materialized onto the stone sofa to my left, careful to dress his fig leaf as he grinned and waved to the audience. Adam was not what I had imagined. There was an out-of-shape, middle-aged redneck with a blonde and brown mullet. He hadn't shaved for days, and I could smell beer clear across the set. "So, what's your side of the story," I asked.

"Well, it's like this, we were just plain out, a bad match. You know? It's not like I was looking for anyone else, you know? And she was so needy. '*Adam*, it's too cold. *Adam*, I'm hungry. *Adam*, your rib itches me.' She just drove me crazy. The last straw was old Jake, the snake. I knew I couldn't trust that one. So, finally, it was like, 'So eat the damned apple and leave me alone.'"

I feigned my best look of intrigue. "I see. That sounds rough. Now, let's hear the other side of the story."

Out from behind the curtain came a sight I thought would give me cataracts. Eve came slinking over to the cave couch, her low-cut leaf-halter top accented by the amateurish snake tattoo above her right breast. Someone backstage gave her a pair of pink, heavy-duty-booty tights that looked like a sack filled with cellulite potatoes. She wore way too much make-up, and her short, black, spiked do, completed the *unhappy hooker* look.

"He lies like a thief," she said between cracks of her chewing gum. "All the time, he'd tell me it was pure kismet. He'd always look at me down *there* and then at himself and say, 'I think we were made for each other.' It was creepy. A one-track mind, I tell you." Out came the female cheers and the male boos with an occasional taunt of '*Bitch*'.

"And don't let that big fig leaf fool you. Trust me, ladies, I know. You know too. I hear you laughing."

The audience looked restless, so I moved on. "Well, whatever your problems, you seemed to make you-know-who angry and wound up down here. Once He got over the embarrassment of his awkward first try, He replaced you two and tried again. I think He named them Bob and Fran. Now, those guys worked out much better."

Eve rolled her eyes. "That was after this no-good weasel knocked me up six times! Who would be interested in me after that? Anyhow, I hear the foster parents set a much better example than us, even though they were stuffed shirts."

"A great example of nature vs. nurture," I added to segue into my big surprise. "Guess who else has come to visit? Your boys Cain and Able! Eve slapped her hand over her mouth, and Adam stared at the floor, shaking his head. The air was magically filled with hundreds of hoots and whoops. The two came from different sides of the curtain, looking like they had just stepped out of Better Farms and Meadows, glaring at each other.

Suddenly, Able lurched across the stage at Cain, only to be stopped by one of the bouncing bulls. "You son of a... You jerk! They brought me down here to tell you off, but I'm at a loss for words.

"Well, I'm not, asshole," Cain yelled. "You got what was coming to you. Mom always liked you best, and besides, you weren't the goodie-two-shoes everybody thought you were. You might have fooled the family, but ooh.... if those sheep could talk."

This was getting out of hand. Trying to avert a here-after-disaster, I interrupted. "After all this time, you guys haven't learned anything. Every generation after you has a little Adam and Eve in them, but luckily, their Bob and Fran keep them in check. Now shake hands. How 'bout we all go out for a little stir-fry and hash things out? Y'all like spicy food?"

My horned host held up two daggered thumbs, then pointed to that golden elevator beside the gargoyle director.