



THE GREAT ZANTINI

AND THE CHAMBER OF DEATH

Written By

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OVER BLACK:

The THUNDEROUS ROAR of an excited crowd. Feet STOMPING and hands CLAPPING in complete unison.

THE GREAT ZANTINI (V.O)
Ladies and gentlemen. What you're about to see is not a trick. It's magic!

The crowd is whipped into hysteria. Their excitement builds and builds to a frenzied crescendo until we see a --

MAGICIAN'S TOP HAT

The inside. No white rabbit here. Just the inky darkness of its empty, velvet interior.

We PULL out of the hat to find ourselves in a:

INT. POLICE INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT

DETECTIVE KOVASH (50), as rough around the edges as his cheap suit, picks up the hat and twirls it around.

DETECTIVE KOVASH
I need a list of everyone that was in on it. Now.

He looks up at THE GREAT ZANTINI (60s), handlebar moustache, tuxedo with loosened tie, a self-assured look about him.

THE GREAT ZANTINI
I already told the officer. Me, my assistant, and my manager, Chad.

Kovash places the hat back on the table, checks his notepad.

DETECTIVE KOVASH
That would be Chad Schwartz? And what does he do exactly?

THE GREAT ZANTINI
He manages all my affairs, box office, wages..

DETECTIVE KOVASH
Nobody else?

THE GREAT ZANTINI
Detective, my illusions are highly sought after. Their secrets closely guarded. If their designs ever got out-

Kovash THUMPS the table, sends the top hat flying.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

I don't care about your damn secrets! What I do care about is that medieval contraption of yours and what the hell went wrong. So I want answers!

The Great Zantini SIGHS heavily.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

Are you going to arrest me?

Kovash leans forward in his chair, mano a mano.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

Well, that depends on you doesn't it. So let's start at the very beginning.

The Great Zantini shifts in his chair, stares at his hands.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

Tonight was probably the best show of my career. I had the audience in the palm of my hands..

He looks up at the detective. Off his dark, hypnotic eyes --

EXT. THE GRAND MAJESTIC THEATRE - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

A poster on the theatre wall reads: "THIS HALLOWED EVE FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY - THE GREAT ZANTINI AND THE CHAMBER OF DEATH!". And below that - "**CASH ONLY!**".

From inside we hear the APPLAUSE of an excited crowd.

INT. THEATRE - NIGHT

A packed house. The Great Zantini, dressed in a showman's tuxedo, stands in front of the house curtain. Top hat in one hand, cane in the other. He takes a bow.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

And now, it's time for the final act! On this hallowed night, one hundred years ago to this very day, a darkness spread across the land..

The lights dim. The curtain pulls back to reveal a dark stage. A thin layer of fog rolls across the floor.

The audience goes quiet.

In the center, a large box looms over the stage, shrouded beneath a black velvet sheet.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

Ladies and gentlemen. Prepare to be dazzled!

The Great Zantini whips away the sheet, revealing a thick steel box. Ten foot tall and four feet wide. Two large pistons at each side. On the front an LED COUNTDOWN clock.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

I give you - the CHAMBER OF DEATH!

The crowd GASPS.

The Great Zantini flings open the box's door revealing the inside -- wall-to-wall rows of sharp metal SPIKES.

He gestures to the box.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

Back in the 19th century they called this device THE IRON MAIDEN. A crude instrument of punishment and torture.

He takes a large PUMPKIN from a nearby table. It has a long wire at the center which he attaches to a hook inside the box. He gives it a light spin with the palm of his hand.

The Great Zantini flips a switch. The machine begins to POWER UP, sounding like it's fueled by a small nuclear reactor. The spectacle is all very futuristic. And of course, completely over the top.

The Great Zantini pushes a large RED BUTTON and the box's side walls begin to COMPRESS toward each other.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

150 tons of crushing force. More than any team of mortal men could ever exert.

The crowd watches with wonder as the walls close in on the pumpkin, the spikes CHOMPING down on the outer skin.

And as the walls almost touch, the pumpkin explodes in a shower of orange flesh.

The Great Zantini leaps back as chunks of pumpkin splatter his shiny shoes, the floor.

Then the stage goes dark.

OVER BLACK

GASPS from the crowd. The occasional *COUGH*. Then --

A SPOTLIGHT

Stage left.

It tracks four *CHANTING BURLEY MEN* dressed in black robes as they carry a scantily-clad woman on stage. This is *MAXINE* (45). Wrists bound with rope. Mouth gagged with cloth.

The men reach the box and lower Maxine to the ground. She puts up a fight, if a tad over dramatic, as they heave her in and attach her hands to the hook on the box's ceiling.

Maxine lets out a muffled *CRY* as she dangles helplessly inside acting like a damsel in distress.

The Great Zantini slams the door shut then turns to the audience. A grave look washes over his face.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

May I suggest that anyone with a heart condition now leave the auditorium.

Light *CHATTER* from the audience. A few seats *CREAK* here and there. Even the patter of footsteps.

The Great Zantini returns to the box and a slow *DRUM BEAT* begins to reverberate around the stage.

The Great Zantini flips another switch and the *LED* panel flickers to life - "00:30" blinks up the screen.

The *DRUM BEAT* picks up tempo. The Great Zantini smacks the red button and the box comes alive once more. The pistons rising, *SQUEEZING* the walls toward each other.

The *LED* clock begins to count backwards. *TICK... TICK...TICK.*

More *GASPS* and *CRIES* from the audience as the drum *BEATS* faster and faster. Louder and louder.

20 seconds to go. The Great Zantini looking rather calm as the crowd hold their collective breaths.

10 seconds to go. Then from inside a muffled *CRY* for help.

And even a few *CRIES* from the audience.

5 seconds..4..3..2..1. The machine shudders to a halt.

The Great Zantini beckons toward the box as a SPOTLIGHT shines down on the top, expecting Maxine to emerge triumphant, and in once piece.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

Ta-da!

But she never does. There's an awkward silence in the room.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

Ta-da?!

Concerned, The Great Zantini races to the box, SMASHES the red button with his fist. And as the walls begin to pull apart, The Great Zantini flings open the door.

And the whole audience begin to SCREAM --

INT. POLICE INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT

The Great Zantini rocks back and forth, his hands cupped over his ears.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

I can still hear their screams in my head. Over and over. It never stops.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

I admit, that's pretty fucked up.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

We practiced that act a hundred times. To perfection.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

How does the trick work? If I were a betting man, I'd say twenty bucks it's a trapdoor.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

(taken aback)

A trick? It is not a trick!

DETECTIVE KOVASH

Isn't all magic just a bunch of tricks?

This is blasphemy to The Great Zantini's ears.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

No, no, no! All magic is based on one founding principal.. Misdirection.

THE GREAT ZANTINI (CONT'D)

(then)

And yes. It's always a trapdoor.

Kovash FIST PUMPS the air.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

I knew it!

THE GREAT ZANTINI

But I checked it. I always checked it..

INT. THE CHAMBER OF DEATH - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Dark. Claustrophobic. A cacophony of Muffled OOHS and AAHS from outside the box.

Maxine dangles from the hook, struggles to get the rope free. And the walls are closing in -- FAST!

THE GREAT ZANTINI (V.O)

There's a hidden switch at the base.

She kicks at the switch with her foot, over and over again, but nothing happens.

THE GREAT ZANTINI (V.O)

The door should slide open, and down you go.

Maxine kicks and kicks while the spikes begin to poke and prod her skin. Her muffled SCREAMS echo around the box --

INT. POLICE INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT

Detective Kovash leans back in his chair.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

So what's the fail safe?

THE GREAT ZANTINI

What do you mean?

DETECTIVE KOVASH

You know, for when you need to get your ass out of a sticky situation pronto. BDSM, domination, mummification, figging, shit like that. Everyone has one. My wife's is "Beetlejuice". But saying it three times is way too much for her. You know what I'm saying?

THE GREAT ZANTINI

No, I don't. I assure you detective, I do not use such a thing. Repetition, repetition, repetition. That's how my acts work. And that's what my assistants learn. By the time they're done practicing, they can do it with their eyes closed.

Kovash leans forward, curious.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

Let's talk about your assistant.
Sorry, ex-assistant.
(checks notepad)
Maxine. Your wife.

Tears form in the corner of The Great Zantini's eyes.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

Where was she that morning, before the show?

THE GREAT ZANTINI

Preparing. As usual. She's not just my wife and assistant. She's my eyes. She sees everything.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

That so?

INT. STAGE, THE GRAND MAJESTIC - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Maxine alone on the stage setting up an illusion for the opening act that night. As she walks off stage, she catches the intern DAVINA (20), vivacious and alluring, emerging from a backroom door.

Maxine ducks into the shadows of the side wing. She watches with scrutinizing eyes as Davina straightens her skirt and fixes her lips. Then hurries away in her cheap high heels.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - LATER

Maxine sits alone in front of the large mirror, staring at herself as she applies make up over a BRUISED CHEEK. She looks tired and fed up.

Door opens, Davina bounds in carrying an assortment of costumes.

DAVINA

He's amazing, isn't he? Ahh-mazing.

Maxine watches her skip by, but doesn't even answer.

DAVINA

You are sooooo lucky.

Maxine puts the foundation brush down.

MAXINE

How so?

Davina leans up against the counter top.

DAVINA

I mean, what I would give to be his assistant, in one of his acts. He just showed me this one trick and poof! Mind. Blown.

Maxine rolls her eyes, goes back to her make up.

MAXINE

He doesn't like it if you call them tricks.

DAVINA

Wonder what my name would be? Don't take this the wrong way, I loooove The Marvelous Maxine, but I would need something, well, bigger. More extravagant. How about The Dazzling Davina?

Davina looks at Maxine for approval.

MAXINE

Sounds great.

DAVINA

You think he will let me be in one of his tricks?

MAXINE

One day, I'm sure.

Davina spins away, muttering "Dazzling Davina" to herself over and over.

Maxine watches Davina giddily dance around, reminding her how she was once like this -- beautiful, young and so very naïve.

So she turns back to the mirror and just stares at her reflection. There's a real pain behind those aging eyes.

PRE-LAP: BEEP BEEP BEEP --

INT. POLICE INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT

Detective Kovash grabs his cellphone. On the screen, an incoming text message from UNKNOWN.

Curious, he taps on the message. It reads - "For Detective Kovash". And attached is a VIDEO. Kovash taps PLAY.

The Great Zantini studies Kovash's expressions as he watches.

Then, Kovash slides his phone across the table to share.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

You need to see this.

The Great Zantini stares down at the phone.

CLOSE ON VIDEO

A CCTV image from the corner of the dressing room. Maxine, alone in the room, changes outfits. The Great Zantini storms in. Arms flying, fingers pointing. Then he BACKHANDS her, sends her flying into the costume rack.

The Great Zantini storms out, leaving Maxine crumpled in the corner, teary-eyed and nursing her face.

BACK TO SCENE

THE GREAT ZANTINI

That fucking bitch!

INT. MANAGERS OFFICE, THE GRAND MAJESTIC - NIGHT

The manager CHAD (40), tanned and handsome, sits behind his desk, feeding stacks of bills into a money counter.

On the desk, a small TV plays the local news -- The Great Zantini being led from a police station in handcuffs.

Chad pauses to watch as a TV REPORTER races up to them, shoves a mic in Detective Kovash's face.

DETECTIVE KOVASH

We can confirm that we have arrested Bill Suggs, also known as "The Great Zantini", in connection with the senseless and tragic death of his wife, and stage assistant, Maxine Suggs.

The TV Reporter turns the mic on The Great Zantini, now looking not so great at all.

THE GREAT ZANTINI

I was set up! I was-

Detective Kovash forces him into the back seat of a police cruiser to shut him up.

Chad leans over and flips the TV off when - POP!

Startled, he looks up to see Maxine in the doorway holding a CHAMPAIGNE BOTTLE and TWO glasses. She's dressed in a sexy red dress and a long flowing wig. Gloves and sunglasses.

MAXINE

That's a lot of money.

CHAD

The fuck!? I thought you were dead?

Maxine saunters in, puts the glasses down and fills them up. She steps over to the desk, placing a glass down in front of Chad, then starts kissing his neck.

MAXINE

And miss out on the biggest box office of all time?

Her eyes shift to the stacks of money on his desk.

She grabs her glass, raises a toast.

CHAD

What are we toasting to?

MAXINE

To The Great Zantini of course.

They CLINK glasses. Chad chugs the glass then realizes --

CHAD

Wait. If that's not you in the box, then who is? How'd you pull it off?

She leaves his side and sits opposite him in a torn leather chair, sparks up a cigarette.

MAXINE

You of all people should know by now, Chad. That all magic is based on one thing.

He shrugs.

MAXINE

Misdirection.

Off her sly grin --

INT. CHAMBER OF DEATH - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

The walls are closing in. Maxine kicks the fail safe switch and the trapdoor *SWOOSHES* open.

A hidden winch begins to lower Maxine down into the --

INT. TRAP ROOM - CONTINUOUS

A dingy, musty room beneath the stage. As Maxine's feet touch down she unhooks herself with no time to lose.

Nearby, Davina is curled on the floor. Wrists bound, mouth gagged. She's dressed in the same outfit. Same hairstyle. Same makeup. She could pass as Maxine's twin.

Her eyes widen as Maxine starts dragging her over to the hook. She *MOANS* and *CRIES*, but of course nobody can hear.

MAXINE

Remember you said you wanted to be part of the act?

Davina sort of nods her head.

MAXINE

Well this is it. This is your big moment. This is your big audition.

Davina's eyes widen and she look up through the hole above as the tips of the sharp *SPIKES* begin to reveal themselves.

In cry of desperation, she struggles as Maxine lifts her bound hands over the hook.

Maxine flips a switch on the wall and the winch reverses, lifting a kicking and *SCREAMING* Davina back toward the box.

MAXINE

Now you remember your name don't you? The Dazzling Davina!

Maxine watches as Davina vanishes back up through the trapdoor hole and into the dark bowls of the box. The trapdoor *SWOOSHES* shut under her.

Then a moments silence before a *SICKENING CRUNCH*.

A concerted blood-curdling *SCREAM* from the audience, which takes us back to --

INT. MANAGERS OFFICE, THE GRAND MAJESTIC - NIGHT

Maxine smirks, proud of her plan. But Chad looks STUNNED.

CHAD

Davina.. why her?

MAXINE

You didn't think I'd find out?

INT. STAGE, THE GRAND MAJESTIC - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Maxine still hidden in the side wings, watches as Davina scurries away.

The backroom door opens, and out steps Chad, zipping up his fly with a look like he just climbed the tallest mountain --

INT. MANAGERS OFFICE, THE GRAND MAJESTIC - NIGHT

Maxine takes a long, hard drag of her cigarette and exhales.

CHAD

You dumb bitch. You think you're so smart. When they find out that's not you in the box, they'll-

MAXINE

They'll what? By the time they're done scraping her off the walls I'll be long gone.

On that note, like on cue, Chad's face begins to turn bright red. He COUGHS HARD and white FOAM spews from his mouth.

Chad CLAWS at his neck. He can't breath. His wild-eyes dart to the champagne glass on the table.

CHAD

What did you.. give me? What kind of.. trick.. is this?

MAXINE

It's not a trick, Chad.

Maxine stubs out her cigarette in an ashtray. She grins.

MAXINE

It's magic!

And as Chad takes his final breath, he face-plants the desk as we --

SMASH TO BLACK.