



## **DANGER ZONE ONE**

### **— COOKING ZONE —**

“**Y**ou want us to do...*what?!*” Madison shouted, clenching her fists. She glared at the weary man seated behind the desk. “Are you out of your mind, Chief?”

Victor Hardiman leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. He glanced down to the lowest desk cabinet—a locked drawer containing his favorite bottle of whisky. How much he longed for just a *drop* now...

“This is ridiculous,” the silver-haired officer continued, “not to mention a complete waste of my time! We have cases piling up and—”

“M-Madison,” Reena stammered with a nervous, twitching grin, “m-maybe we should hear the Chief out, right?”

“Figures *you'd* side with him over this,” Madison hissed.

Chief Hardiman exhaled and straightened his back. “I understand your concern, Officer Wynter. But this order comes direct from the Mayor himself. He requested that we hold a charity fundraiser to *soften* the PCPD's image with the public.”

“I like it,” Reena said, clasping her hands together, “and we'll be doing it for a good cause too!”

“So, whose stupid idea was it to hold a *cooking* contest?” Madison snapped.

“Well, uh...” Hardiman stroked his graying hair with unease, “I came up with that.”

Madison grit her teeth. “That was the *best* you could think of?”

“I suppose we could've done a volleyball tournament, but—”

“Oooh,” Reena perked up, a gleam in her eye, “that would've been fun, Chief! Madison and I could've been on the same team!”

“Forget it! I'm *not* playing volleyball, especially not with *you*, Rookie—and I sure as hell don't plan on cooking, either!”

“It's a little too late for that,” Hardiman groaned, “I already entered you in the contest.”

Madison's nostrils flared. “What did you do *that* for?”

“I needed reliable officers to participate,” the Chief replied. “Besides, this was a request from the

Mayor, it's not like we can just ignore it. It'll only take a couple of hours..."

"Dammit," Madison cursed, shoulders slumped. "Who else's in?"

"We'll have *three* teams competing against one another," Hardiman explained. "You and Officer Saffron will be together, while Gripps and Sev will be the second team."

"Gripps?" Madison rolled her eyes. "What's *that* clueless idiot going to cook?"

*At least including Gripps in the contest will make her a bit more competitive*, Hardiman thought, giving himself a mental pat on the back.

"And who'll be on the third team?" Reena asked.

"That'll be Sera White and..." Hardiman paused, straightening his tie, "myself."

"Whoa," Reena gasped, "you're joining us too, Chief? That's awesome!"

"Oh, brother..." Madison shook her head. "This isn't going to *soften* the PCPD's image—it's going to *humiliate* the entire department!"

Chief Hardiman lifted a sheet of electronic paper from his desk and held it out. "The rules are simple—you can make *any* dish you like. Each team will bring their own food to the event tomorrow, and we'll have one hour to cook and prepare it. The dishes will be judged, and one will be chosen as the winner. This is a public event, so expect an audience."

"Sounds wonderful," Madison said, her words laced with sarcasm. She grabbed the paper.

"You two can already start discussing what food you'll bring," the Chief continued, "and the department will reimburse you for the groceries. With that in mind, due to budget cuts, try not to buy anything *too* pricey."

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"So, what dish did you want to make tomorrow?" Reena asked, removing her shirt. "We can write a grocery list and I'll go shopping tonight."

Madison slammed her locker shut, causing the *clanging* of metal to echo across the empty room. "I don't care. Do whatever you want."

Reena stuffed the last of her uniform into the locker and grabbed her civilian clothes. "In that case, I'll put together a bag of food, and you can bring what you like. Then, between the two of us, I'm sure we can sort it out and make a really great, tasty meal!"

"I wonder what Gripps is planning to make?" Madison muttered. "Probably some greasy, inedible slop..."

"Ah," Reena smiled, "you're trying to get into the competition's head! That's good, it'll give us an edge in the contest!"

"Wh-what are you talking about, Rookie," Madison blushed, turning her back to the young officer. "I don't give a damn about this stupid contest!"

"Really?" Reena asked, disappointed. "I think it could be fun."

"Whatever." Madison stormed off, heading for the exit. "I'll bring some crap tomorrow—you can figure out the rest yourself."

Left along in the room, Reena leaned up against the locker. Her eyes turned to the ceiling, lost in thought. *I bet Sera's a pretty good cook—not too sure about the Chief, though. Either way, I'm not holding back. I'm gonna go all out and make the best dish they've ever tasted!*

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“You've got to be kidding me,” Madison grumbled under her breath. As far as she could tell, every seat in the Erbius indoor stadium had been filled. The Chief's cooking contest ended up attracting a larger turnout than she had imagined. “People must have a lot of free time on their hands to waste on *this* nonsense.”

“People *love* food,” Reena replied with a smile. “What an amazing turnout—who'd have thought this would be such a big event?”

Madison groaned. To her side, the Rookie stood near a mock-kitchen, complete with stove tops, grills, convection ovens, deep fryers, blenders, food processors, cutting boards, pantry drawers, and assorted electrical appliances. Nearby, Chief Hardiman and Sera occupied an identical station while, further away, Gripps and Sev were situated at their own.

The audience sat in their stadium seats, forming multiple rows that encircled the pseudo-kitchen stations. Beneath one area of seating sections, a commentator's pit had been setup.

“Welcome to our special event,” a girl, no more than nineteen, cheered into her microphone. She wore a revealing vinyl dress and had glowing neon hair, styled in twin-tails, which shifted from bright pink, to green, to blue every few seconds. The girl stood in the commentator's area, giving a playful twirl as a cameraman filmed her—projecting her image on the jumbotron monitors throughout the stadium. “I'm Pallad City's number one idol, Callie Xcyter, and today I'll be hosting the first ever *Pallad City Police Cook-Off*—with all ticket sales going to the Mayor's favorite charity!”

“Looks more like a circus to me,” Madison whispered.

“Wow, they even brought in a celebrity idol,” Reena said, surprised.

Callie gestured to one of the two men standing next to her. “And let's welcome our special guests—first up, someone *every* Palladian knows, Mayor Neville!”

The Mayor leaned forward, speaking into Callie's microphone. “Thank you all for attending this afternoon, let's hear it for Pallad City's finest!”

A mild applause worked its way through the stadium.

“And our next guest is the world-renowned chef,” Callie took a step next to a man in a suit and tie, “Johan Velo! He'll be judging our contestants today.”

“Pleasure to be here,” Velo replied, stone faced.

“As for the rules,” Callie said, speaking into the microphone, “three teams of two have each pre-selected their food and will get one hour to prepare their dish of choice! After that, the dishes will be tasted by Chef Velo, who'll choose our winner! Now, without further delay—the clock is set, so let's begin!”

“We've got this in the bag,” Gripps said, offering a boastful grin. His expression quickly shifted, sunglasses nearly dropping from his face. “Y-you did bring the steak, right?”

“Yeah,” Sev sighed, “I brought it—and nearly *everything* else. This was supposed to be a *team* effort, y'know?”

“I got you next time, buddy,” Gripps replied, pulling out a pan from a drawer and setting it on the stove top. “Besides, I'll win us this contest with my extraordinary cooking expertise.”

“When do *you* ever cook?”

Gripps shrugged. “How hard can it be. I see them doing this kind of stuff on TV all the time.”

Sev buried his face in his hands. “Why me?”

“Eh, don't worry about it, partner—all we gotta do is heat this steak up, throw some seasoning on it and we're good.”

Callie made her way out from the commentator's station to the kitchen area. She leaned over the countertop across from Gripps, while speaking into her microphone. “Here we have Arlew Gripps and

Jonio Sev—our first team! And what are you two making today, hm?”

Behind Gripps' sunglasses his eyes widened at the sight of Callie. “Hey! Big fan of yours, baby! Got any plans Saturday night?”

“Eh?” Flustered, Callie lowered the microphone out of vocal range. “This is a cooking contest, not a dating show.”

“How about, if I win,” Gripps said, straightening his hair, “we go to the Belva Restaurant on Iohlis Street?”

“Uh, how about you just tell me what you're gonna make?”

With a short laugh, Gripps held up the raw steak, still in its packaging. “We'll be cooking up a showstopping Steak au Poivre—a boneless streak with crack peppercorns, pan-fried, and served with a rich cognac-infused sauce. A classic staple for romantic dinners, I might add. Once we're finished, I'd like *you* to have the first bite.”

“Ew,” Callie gagged, “I'm a vegetarian, so forget it!”

“Huh?” Gripps stammered, almost dropping the packaged steak. “S-seriously?”

Callie turned away, her jovial demeanor returning as she raised the microphone to her mouth. “Team A will be making Steak au Poivre!”

Gripps watched as Callie made her way over to the next kitchen station, before glaring at Sev. “This sucks! She's a vegetarian!”

“So?” Sev replied, turning on the stove. “She's not the one judging the food.”

“N-no, but—” Gripps tossed the packaged steak into the trash, “—we *need* to make something else!”

“What are you doing?! That was good steak!”

“Think, man!” Gripps shouted in protest. “What can we make *without* meat?”

“The only thing I brought *was* meat,” Sev replied, annoyance in his voice, “and some salad, but that—”

“That's it!” Gripps slapped his hands down on the countertop. “Salad! A classic low-carb dish! What girl can resist a fresh, well-prepared, non-fattening salad?”

“Of all the officers in this city,” Sev sighed, “I just *had* to get partnered with you...”

“Eek!” Sera shrieked, cowering behind the Chief. “E-everyone's staring at us! I'm going to mess this up for sure. I get really nervous when a lot of people are staring at me!”

“Just calm down,” Hardiman replied, his tone calm and reassuring. He grabbed a bottle of whisky. “You'll be fine. Here, have a drink. It'll help with your nerves.”

“Ahh! Alcohol only makes things *woorse!*” Sera flailed her arms in response, inadvertently slapping the bottle out of Hardiman's hand. It fell to the floor, shattering.

“Not the whisky...” Hardiman dropped to his knees, fingers shakily hovering over the broken glass and splattered liquid. “Th-that was for the whisky cream pasta sauce...”

“And what do we have here?” Callie asked, entering the kitchen station. “Our next team includes the police chief himself, Victor Hardiman, and officer Sera White! Let's see what they're up to!”

The audience offered a lackluster round of applause.

Callie aimed the microphone towards Sera. “Whatcha making?”

“W-we're making food!” Sera blurted out, hair frazzled and eyes twirling. “Food for people to eat!”

“Uh, is that right?” Callie responded, turning to the floor.

Hardiman was still on his knees, muttering. “Without the whisky...my cream sauce's ruined...that was our primary ingredient...”

“Okay,” Callie sighed, “I’ll, um, check back in a few...”

“I can’t wait to see what you’ve brought,” Reena said, lifting a shopping bag onto the kitchen station counter. “I have eggs, noodles, chicken broth, beef broth, biscuits, corn on the cob, tomato paste, peanuts, a few tomatoes, celery, onions, and—”

“That’s a really random mix of food,” Madison commented, raising an eyebrow.

Reena let loose a nervous laugh. “W-well, you didn’t tell me what you were going to bring, so I tried to compensate for everything.”

Madison placed a cardboard box on the counter. “Doesn’t matter, *this* is all we need.”

“Whoa, I *knew* you’d have a plan!” Excited, Reena peeked into the box, sighting various brown plastic packets. Her eyes widened. “Uh, Madison—what are these?”

“Field rations. We don’t *need* to make anything. They’re all ready to eat, for the most part, anyway. Some *should* be heated first, but—”

“Y-you brought military rations?” Reena stuttered, gawking at the white haired officer in disbelief. “B-but the whole point of this is for us to *cook* something...”

“What are you saying,” Madison’s tone took a harsh edge, “you’re saying we *can’t* use them?”

Reena shook one of the bags, marked with the words *Meal, Ready to Eat* on the exterior. “Is there even anything edible inside this?”

“Sure, I eat them all the time.”

“You do?” Reena opened the bag, revealing several smaller packets containing dehydrated beef, carrot sticks, freeze dried potatoes, and hardened baked beans. Her face contorted with disgust. “Eew—it all looks terrible! I wouldn’t give any of this to my dog, Sprinkle!”

“What are you saying,” Madison barked, “that your *dog* eats better than I do?!”

“N-no, I wasn’t saying that at all—”

“All right, ladies and gentleman,” Callie said, advancing towards the third kitchen station, “let’s see what our last team will be cooking up! Here we have Madison Wynter and Reena Saffron!”

Reena offered a playful wave, while Madison folded her arms and rolled her eyes.

“What’s your dish going to be?” Callie asked, holding the microphone out to Reena.

“Heh,” Reena let out an uneasy chuckle, “it’s a surprise!”

“Oh? Can you give us a little hint?”

“Well...let’s just say it’s going to be something no one will expect!”

Callie spun to the crowd with a playful smile and sly wink. “I see, they don’t want to give any secrets away to their competitors—they’re taking this contest very seriously!”

As Callie trotted away, Madison turned back to her partner. “You really don’t have *any* idea, do you?”

“I’ve got nothing,” Reena replied, aghast. “This is a nightmare. None of this food goes together at all!”

“Eh,” Madison grabbed another ration packet out of the box, “who cares about some cooking contest anyway. Just throw a bunch of it together and make up some dumb name for the dish.”

“Throw it together...?” Reena perked up, repeating Madison’s words. Her lips formed a wide smile. “That’s it! Maybe we *can* take certain food from your rations and mix it with the stuff I brought! My mom used to do things like that with leftovers all the time—we *can* make a *stew*!”

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“We only have thirty-minutes before the time’s up,” Sev grunted, slicing up a tomato.

“No sweat,” Gripps replied, tossing the lettuce into a bowl. “All we need to do is cut up the rest of the vegetables we were originally gonna use as sides for that steak, and we’ll have a first-class salad!”

Sev chopped into the tomato with his knife, frustrated. “And have you thought about what salad *dressing* you’re gonna make? Or are you planning to serve the salad dry?”

“Huh?” Gripps’ jaw hung open. “Dammit—I forgot about the dressing! Who would’ve thought making some stupid salad was *this* complicated?”

“Seriously? This is pretty simple.”

“Yeah, genius? Then what are *we* doing for the dressing? I don’t see a bottle of ranch or blue cheese anywhere around here!”

“Nah, but I did bring red wine vinegar and lemon juice for the steak. We can use that and some seasoning to make a lemon vinaigrette.”

Gripps clapped his hands together. “Hot damn, Sev—that’s *some* brain you’ve got there, buddy! I love it! What an amazing team we make...hell, maybe we should quit the force and go into the cooking biz!”

Sev groaned.

Sera adjusted her glasses, watching as Chief Hardiman unfolded an apron and quickly put it on. The words ‘Cooking with the Chief’ were sewn onto the front. She stood over a pot of boiling noodles, the steam fogging her lenses. “W-we only have thirty minutes left, are you sure we can do it?”

Hardiman stood over a pan of reddish-orange sauce. “Not to worry—I have it well in hand.”

“But without the whisky, how can we still make your whisky cream sauce?”

“We can’t,” Hardiman answered, reaching into a bag and pulling out a large clear bottle, “but I *also* brought vodka—which means we can make Penne alla Vodka!”

“I-I’ve never had that before...”

Hardiman poured some of the vodka into the sauce pan. “It’s one of my favorite dishes...”

*Does he know any recipes that don’t call for alcohol?* Sera asked herself, scratching her head.

“We’ll be cutting this close, Rookie,” Madison warned, glancing at the large digital clock across the stadium. “Just thirty minutes to go.”

“No worries,” Reena replied, looking over a cutting board filled with beef chunks, carrots, potatoes, mushrooms, celery, onions and green peas. She quickly began tossing the food into a pot, already steaming with beef broth. “Since the food from your rations was pre-cut, it saved us a bunch of prep time!”

“But doesn’t stew take a while to cook?”

“Usually people make beef stew by slowly simmering it—but we’re not doing it that way. I’m following my mom’s ‘thirty-minute stew’ recipe. Plus, all of the rations are also pre-cooked, so it’ll take us even less time than that!”

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“Time’s up!” Callie shouted as an alarm bell rang out across the stadium. “Now’s the moment of truth—when our guest chef Johan Velo gets to taste and judge our contestants’ dishes! First up is Team A!”

Callie trailed behind Chef Velo as he marched to the first kitchen station.

“And what is this?” Velo asked, stopping in front of the counter and gazing at the salad.

The plate consisted of romaine lettuce, topped with shredded carrots, chopped tomatoes, and sliced onions. A sprinkling of cranberries and baked chickpeas sat atop, drenched in lemon vinaigrette dressing. “It appears to be more like an appetizer.”

“No way, this is a classic-style salad,” Gripps countered, “made with our special dressing. Haven't you heard of healthy, vegetarian eating?”

“Hm, is that what you call this?” Velo muttered, grabbing a fork. The audience was silent as he tasted the salad. “Not bad. A little light for a main course dish, but a rather passable salad. A tad much lemon vinaigrette, however. It overwhelms the palate, but not disastrous. I would have recommended grilled chicken to be added, or perhaps some boiled egg. Something to liven the plate up would have done wonders. As it is, this is a rather mundane presentation, the dish lacks color or flair.”

“Hey,” Gripps countered, “it's supposed to be food, not art!”

“Make no mistake, the presentation of food *is* an art!” Velo's expression became icy. He turned, walking away from the kitchen station and towards the next one. “I am done here. Onward!”

“Of all the...” Gripps mumbled. He leaned forward as Callie passed by. “Wanna try my salad?”

Callie waved her hands in protest, not stopping as she followed after Velo. “I can't stand the taste of lemon, sorry!”

Gripps slumped over the counter. “I *knew* we shouldn't have made a salad...”

Sev slapped his forehead in hopeless frustration.

“I am something of a perfectionist when it comes to Penne alla Vodka,” Velo remarked after tasting the noodles, “but, I admit, this is satisfactory, albeit not flawless. The pasta wasn't overcooked, the garlic and onions were used to just the right about, and the sauce was rich without being overbearing—many times the sauce for this dish is prepared too thick.”

“I'm happy to hear it,” Hardiman replied with a smile. “I've been making this dish for years.”

“Is that correct?” Velo said with a frown. “Then I'm surprised you never learned to put in the right *amount* of vodka to give it the proper zest!”

“The right amount of vodka?”

“Yes!” Velo held a finger to the air. “You were too light with the alcohol. It lacked the taste of the vodka—it *is* called Penne alla Vodka, after all! Regardless, all is not a total loss. I approve of the dish, but find that it could be improved upon. We are not perfect, yes?”

Hardiman stood back, stunned as Velo and Callie moved on to the next kitchen station. He turned to Sera, confused. “I don't understand—if anything, I always thought I used *too much* vodka...”

“At least he seemed to like it,” Sera replied, visibly relieved that the contest was over. She grabbed a glass of water and lifted it to her lips.

Hardiman shook his head, not satisfied. “Still, that *doesn't* make sense. You *did* add the second cup of vodka, right?”

“What second cup?” Sera asked, before drinking.

“The one I gave you.”

“There never was one, just this glass of water I put aside.” Sera took a long gulp.

“Wait,” Hardiman protested, “that's not—”

“Aagh!” Sera spit out the vodka and clutched her chest. “I-I thought it was water! My insides are on fire! I need water!”

“Hold on!” Hardiman rushed over to the sink, filling a glass of water. He turned, watching as Sera opened up a bottle, downing the clear liquid inside. “Wait! That's not water, either!”

Sera coughed, tossing the bottle aside. “Aaah, that's *gross!*”

“That's tequila!”

“I-I thought it was just a fancy water bottle...” Sera wobbled back and forth, bumping into the countertop. “W-why'd you bring so much alcohol, Chief?! What's wrong with you?!”

“An interesting beef stew,” Velo said, nodding. “The quality of the beef and vegetables leave something to be desired, but your choice of seasoning makes up for it considerably.”

“Yay!” Reena cheered.

“So, do we win, or what?” Madison asked, unamused.

Velo took another spoonful of the stew and tilted his head. “I’m curious, though—where did you say this beef came from?”

Madison cocked a thumb to a nearby box. “It’s from military ra—”

“Aah!” Reena cried out, interrupting her partner. “Just prepackaged, that’s all! Heh, not sure of the grade, actually...”

“Regardless,” Velo said, “it’s a finely prepared stew, despite any shortcomings. Of course, even a master chef can only do so much with sub-par ingredients.”

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“And now for the big moment,” Callie cheered into the microphone, “Chef Velo will choose the winner of our cook-off!”

“It was a tough choice,” Velo began, “and there some was merit in each dish—but the winner is...”

The stadium fell silent as the chef paused for dramatic effect.

“...the Penne alla Vodka,” he said, before muttering under his breath, “which was sorely missing the vodka.”

“And we have a winner!” Callie said, excited. “Victor Hardiman and Sera White are our cook-off champions! Any reason why you chose their dish, Chef Velo?”

“It was most suitable as a main course,” Velo replied. “The salad would have been a decent side dish to the Penne—but could not stand on its own.”

“And the stew?”

“Truth be told, over the last ten minutes or so, my stomach has become rather upset from the beef. I question if it was fit for human consumption...”

Gripps sulked in defeat. “You believe that, Sev! We make a top quality salad and get stiffed.”

“Guess we should’ve made that steak,” Sev replied with a sharp glare of the eye, “like we originally *planned* to do.”

“Oh, so now you’re gonna blame me?”

“Who *else’s* fault was it?”

Gripps straightened his sunglasses. “I see how it is, make me the scapegoat...”

Sev shook his head, frustrated. “No wonder you’re single...”

Madison sighed. “All that for nothing. What a waste of perfectly good military rations...”

“I still can’t believe you willingly *eat* those things,” Reena said, holding one of the leftover ration bags and sticking her tongue out as if mock gagging. “If you’d like, I can make a packaged lunch or dinner for you every day. Then you can eat *real* food.”

Madison snatched the ration out of Reena’s hand. “This *is* real food, and I’ll have you know—I *like* them!”

“Well,” Reena shrugged, “I guess Sprinkle likes *his* food too.”



Madison's face turned red. "Are you comparing me to your stupid dog again?!"

Hardiman took off his apron, a feeling of achievement welling up inside him. His attention shifted to Sera. "You hear that, Officer White, we've—"

"*Hic! Hic!*" Sera stumbled around the kitchen station, plagued by a bout of fierce hiccups. She held tight onto the bottle of tequila. "Heeey, Chief—c'mon have a drink, huh? Let's c-celebrate!"

Hardiman was taken aback by the officer's slurred speech and unsteady gait as she approached him. "Are you okay? Maybe you should sit down and—"

"D-don't you tell me what do do," Sera hissed, the words barely recognizable. "You're n-not the boss of me, I'm m-my own p-person..."

"Are you sure you're all right, I—?"

Before Hardiman could finish, Sera was tripping over her own feet, stumbling forward and crashing into the counter—her face landing into the plate of Penne alla Vodka.

"S-soft, squishy..." she muttered, "...pillow."

Hardiman sighed. He pried the tequila bottle from Sera's grip and took a long swig. *Maybe this cook-off was a bad idea, after all...*

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