

Dame Show Network
A Mercynaries Story from <https://www.patreon.com/SinComics>

Tate slumped forward onto the bar and picked at the label on his beer. “nother year and what's the bonus? A shirt. Gee, thanks, Boss. So much better than money. Or time off. Or just about anything.”

The bartender gave his best customer-facing smile and went back to cleaning up, leaving Tate to grumble to himself.

“Was planning on taking my lady out for the end of year bash in the city, but... Totally can't afford that now. Ah... She was gunna leave me anyway. The trip would have just delayed it.”

Tate went back to peeling off strips of his label before some movement caught his eye. He spun around to see a gorgeous woman in a shockingly red cocktail dress looking him over. Tate did his best to shake off the beginnings of his buzz and blinked at her.

“My apologies, Sir. I was at the other end of the bar and couldn't help but overhear-”

Tate sighed. “Sorry about that. I do tend to get a bit loud when it's been a rough day. I'll keep it down.”

The woman giggled demurely. “Oh, no. Not what I meant at all.”

She moved gracefully and slid onto the barstool next to Tate, her dress fluttering just enough to reveal an enticing glimpse of sculpted thigh.

“I work in programming.”

Tate cocked his head. “Like software?”

She snickered again and lightly touched his shoulder. Tate felt a tingle run through himself.

“No. Like television. One part talent scout, one part salesman. I'm putting together a bit of a new show and we're looking for locals. Everyday people willing to give something new a chance.”

Tate couldn't help but hide the start of a sneer. “Reality TV...”

The woman expertly hid any reaction to the dig. “Of sorts. More of a game show!”

She dug into her purse and tapped a business card down onto the table. “Give me a ring if you have an open mind.”

With that, she slipped back onto her feet and sauntered out the door, full well knowing Tate was watching every step.

He sat the bar for a bit longer. Still picking at the label but no longer drinking; the bright red card where the woman left it. Tate silently stared at it until he lost track of time before abruptly grabbing it, slapping out a few dollars for the beer, giving the bartender a quick wave, and then heading for the door.

Outside the bar, he dug out his phone and flipped the card around. It didn't have any information

beyond a phone number printed in a small, simple font, white on the red card. Tate absentmindedly dialed the number and the line rang twice before clicking.

“Thank you for calling. We'll send a car to pick you up.”
The line clicked again and the call was over.

Tate stood in stunned confusion before blurting out to no one, “But I didn't-”

On the sidewalk, Tate meandered, flipping the card between his fingers, suspiciously eyeing each pair of headlights that drove by. Soon, a small black coupe pulled up and the window rolled down. A bookish woman gave him a wave.

“Hey, there! Saw the card in your hand. Hop in!”

The car was far more simple and less sinister than what Tate had built up in his mind. He slipped into the other seat, shut the door, and buckled up.

The driver immediately pulled back onto the now quiet street and shifted her focus to the road.
“It's just a short trip; we'll be there in no time. Feel free to grab some shut-eye if you want.”

Tate didn't think he was all that tired, but it did sound like a nice idea. The car was warm, a little humid, and had a pleasant fruity berry kind of air freshener attached to the vent.

Tate startled awake and almost rolled off the plush bed. His head was foggy, but not like a standard hangover. He remembered everything about the previous night up to calling a car service and then... His hand instinctively pat his side but his pockets were free of both phone and wallet.

He got up and looked around the room. It was almost like a hotel room. That impersonal but fakingly home-y decoration and layout any traveler knows well. He tossed open the curtains but the outside window was so glazed over that all he got was a fuzzy white light.

There was a hefty thunk from the door and it shuddered slightly. Tate crept over to it, running his hand around the knob before grasping it. There were no visible locks on this side of the door and it was missing the peephole.

Tate stepped outside of the room, into a hallway with a plush red carpet and several other doors that looked like his, outside of some numerals for room numbers. He followed the hallway towards some murmuring he could hear below.

The staircase led to what appeared to be a home's living room. Four other men were standing around the room, anxiously chattering. Every one of them was completely average in appearance and nothing special seemed to tie the collection together. They turned to watch Tate descend but everybody snapped to attention when an over-sized TV in the middle of the wall buzzed on.

“Good morning, my guests! I'm happy that you've signed onto my show, one and all!” A figure stepped back from the camera and every person in the room jointly recognized the woman in the red dress from a previous encounter.

“Today is the first day of some very exciting experimental television. You're all contestants on my new show, *Cross Over*.”

The room started to murmur once more but the group was quickly silenced.

“From here on out, there are some special rules you'll need to follow. They will have to be enforced, of course. As your director, I have full say of the entertainment. Next, we'll just be using code names going forward. A round of welcomes to Sweetie, Candy, Peppermint, Coco, and Cookie.”

She turned and nodded to each man as she recited the names. Tate was last and received “Cookie”.

A blond man stepped forward and squared off at the TV. “What the hell's going on?! I didn't agree to any of this!” A murmur of agreement rose out of the unwitting cast.

“Candy, please. You'll have to participate alongside your fellow guests and we'll all work towards making-”

“Cram it with the “Candy” business, lady! I'm out of here!” The man stormed over to the front door and grabbed the handle, but it refused to budge. He slammed his shoulder against it, shaking the door, but nothing more.

“Candy, I'm going to have to ask you to step back and contain your excitement.”

A middle-finger to the TV later, the man raised his leg, bringing it down on the door's handle. A flash of white sparked out, temporarily blinding the room. Rubbing his eyes, Tate could make out the man's figure on the ground, knocked out cold, accompanied by an unpleasant smell of crackling ozone. A door off the main room swung open and two staid women marched out, collected the fallen guest, and brought him out without saying a word or acknowledging the others.

The woman on the TV tried poorly to hide a chuckle. “I imagine there's always going to be one that gets a bit huffy. But I'm sure the rest of you are all well-behaved and the sweetest that can be! We'll see Candy again later. All will be well! Now off to your rooms and an assistant will be by shortly to get you prepped for your auditions and the cameras!”

The men glanced uneasy looks but were unwilling to speak up or act out with the woman's figure on the television staring them all down. One by one, they slowly made their way out of the room, back up the stairs, and to their chambers.

Tate was sitting on the edge of his bed, weighing the danger of trying to put the table through the window when his door swung open and a woman marched in. She was carting a large case and nonsense demeanor.

“Hello, Cookie, I am here to prep you for your first appearance.”

Before Tate could respond, she propped open the case, retrieved a few bottles, and tossed them onto Tate's lap.

“Wash up and make yourself presentable.”

“Lady, I'm not doing anything until I get some answers. What kind of show is this and what's going on-”

The woman stepped forward. Despite her simple stature and appearance, she posed a menacing aura and grabbed her charge by the arm and shoved him towards the bathroom.

“Towels are ready. Dirty clothes go in the hamper. A fresh robe is hung on the back of the door. Take your time; I'll be waiting.”

Tate emerged from the shower strangely refreshed but surrounded by a cloud of fruit and flowery scents. The assistant had set up several lights, a camera, and a black box on the table. She pointed towards the chair and then walked off to the side of the camera.

Tate looked around. “Hey! What happened to my clothes. I-”

“You were told to put them in the hamper. I have done so as a courtesy this time, but you'll be expected to follow directions moving forward. Now, sit and we can begin the debut.”

He looked around but the only way out was through the woman and he had his doubts he could do that on a good day, much less when drowsy and only wearing a bathrobe. Tate sat back in the chair and nervously tried to avoid the camera. The woman took something out of the small black box and returned to Tate. She gripped his forearm and he felt a quick sharp prick, followed by the hiss of an injector. It was latched onto his arm and the woman slapped his hand away when he reached for it. The tiny device had a metallic base and the clear dome revealed it was filled with some strange thick blue goo. The woman returned to her spot and checked the camera once again.

“Welcome, contestant! Tell us all about yourself! What's your name?”

“Tate, I-”

The injector hissed and shook. Tate slapped his arm and stiffened as it tingled.

“N-guh!”

The woman waited a beat before trying again. “What's your name?”

Tate hesitated and offered a meek, “Cookie?”.

“Say it with some heart, dear.”

“My name is Cookie.”

“It says here on our questionnaire that you're tired of the small town life and are looking for an adventure in the big city!”

“Y-Yes. I want to get away, and... See new things. That I can't get back home.”

“To see if you were right for *Cross Over*, we interviewed your sorority sisters. Can you guess what stories they shared with us?”

“Sorority'?! Look, Lady, I-”

The device hissed again and the right side of Tate's body went numb. He tried to rise from the chair but flopped to his knees while the goo inside the device roiled.

The assistant watched as the contestant dragged himself back into the chair.

“Your sorority sisters said you were quite the flirt back in your college days.”

Tate felt dizzy and the tingling in his arm continued. “I-” His voice cracked and he cleared it with a grunt. Straining his jaw against the unfamiliar feelings. “They exaggerated a lot. It really wasn't much. Just a few parties.”



The assistant chuckled a phony television laugh. “Maybe the audience will get to see some of those dancing skills! Sooo, what are YOU hoping the grand prize is?”

“You're not going to tell me? What are we-”

“All will be revealed during the season! But this girl talk is all about you, Cookie. Let's go on!”

The interview continued for over an hour, with the assistant pushing him on questions, and after several more shocks and injections, Tate relented and went along with the charade. Flushed and tingling

all over, he wasn't sure what he was agreeing to and what mocking backstory he had established. He was focused on the tightness he felt all over his body, the pressure in his waist and chest that prevented him from taking deep breaths, and how much he was shifting and fidgeting, unable to get comfortable the longer he sat in that chair.

Finally, the woman pressed a button on the camera and then flicked off the lights.

“Not the best performance, but there's enough material to cut around. While I pack up, you get dressed for the premier. The boss will be on set, so best behavior.”

She grabbed a package from her case and tossed it onto Tate's lap. He tore open the wrapper and out fell satiny purple lingerie and a glimpse of some more shiny fabric inside.

“The hell is this?!”

“Time's wasting. We're on a schedule now, Cookie. Get dressed!”

As Tate rose up to argue, the device in his arm latched in and the jolt dropped him to his knees once more. Breathy pants spilled out from his mouth as he gasped and groaned. The jolt stopped and suddenly all the pressure that had built up inside him burst out. He grabbed the side of the bed and groaned, feeling heavy and washed out. Tate meekly reached out for the new clothing without looking back at the assistant and worked the underwear over now unfamiliar curves.

The assistant gave his hips a pat and checked his top with an unimpressed huff. She ran her hand down his arm and the device dropped peacefully off at her touch.

“Not much to get the ratings going but you made it through with only half a dose. Let's get your shoes on and see how the competition fared.”

Tate made a wobbling descent down the staircase to the main part of the house, where he saw the three others dressed in similar costumes and with varying degrees of some changes. The dark-skinned one, Sweetie, had her arms crossed against her front, trying to hide her new curves. Peppermint, a tall woman now had longer, shiny brunette hair down to her shoulders. A more meek Coco, had full, plump lips in a natural red that matched her hair. The four looked over one another silently, knowing the experience they each just had.

The door side sprang open and out walked the woman formerly in the red dress as she made grand waves and gestures to cameras hidden across the house set.

“Hello, my lovelies, and welcome to the first season of *Cross Over*! Our Crossed Cuties will fight, scheme, and bond as they take on our challenges, build friendships, and compete for our grand prize! Can we get my lovely helper out here to kick off the night?”

Out from the door, strut a woman, barely constrained by the tight black minidress she was stuffed into. The hem of the skirt and neckline barely covered her voluptuous figure and she tossed back curls of thick blonde hair as she made her way to the host.

Next to Tate, Sweetie sucked air in through her teeth. “Candy?!”

The threat was made to the contestants. They'd seen what this organization was capable of and the price of disobedience or an escape attempt was now bouncing and wiggling in front of them.

“Candy, our lovely assistant, has vowed to help dominate the ratings and run our events, so

watch out, Ladies! Over the coming weeks, you'll be put to the test, face challenges, and only one of you will claw her way to the top. But play nice, Girls!"

The boss winked and motioned to a camera off to the side.

"Tomorrow night is your first trial, so party tonight, get to know your new girlfriends, and the crew will come by with some cameras so you can introduce yourself to the audience. Keep it clean because we heard some steamy stories backstage! And if that doesn't get our audience to sit through this commercial break, what will!"

As threatened, the next night, Tate was delivered a new outfit for the show and given a kit to make himself up. He gave the final unsure touches to his lipstick and presented himself to his minder.

"Aww, you went with the blouse. I was rooting for the tube top myself. But you look great, break a leg out there."

"What are you even making us do? Why is any of this-"

"And ruin the boss's show? No way. She gets to make the reveals!"

There was a commotion downstairs and the assistant hurried past Tate, still trying to navigate the stairs in heels. Peppermint was shouting and her assistant was blocking her path to the boss.

"-so all you care about is the success of your show and ratings! Fine then! I'm going to tank it. Sit in a corner, do nothing, say nothing. I won't create any of the drama you're trying to push or humiliate myself for your entertainment in this- this nonsensical garbage!"

The boss angrily sighed and waved off Peppermint's assistant. "Pep, dear, please. If you won't think of the audience or the fun you're ruining for your fellow ladies, then think of yourself. How would the people back home react to seeing your audition tape you filmed upstairs. We've covered for you back home with the firm saying you're on a business trip, but if we were to broadcast this, well then who knows..."

The contestants all shrank back. The humiliation was one thing in the anonymity of their new bodies and costumes, but to have their identity revealed to family, friends, and coworkers...

The boss whirled her finger in the air and put her camera personality back on.

"Welcome back to night twooo, audience. Gossip abound the manor all day as the squad discussed the coming events. They're all prepped so let's follow them to a night out on the town!"

She motioned to the front door, which finally popped open and revealed a black limousine waiting out front. The four were hurried off to it, and Tate could just barely make out some sand and palm trees around the compound but nothing to identify where they were being held.

Coco pounded on the driver's partition. "Please, what do you want from us? What is this event?!"

The window lowered slightly and the driver waved them back. "Don't worry! Have fun and we'll tell you what the event was at the end of the night. But don't forget, you're on camera. Saying or doing anything silly will- Well, the boss needs more on-screen helpers than just Candy."

The limo slowed to a stop and the door was opened for the ladies. They lined up outside the entrance where a neon pink sign happily buzzed “Date Night” before being rushed inside. The club was dimly lit but it was an inviting atmosphere with people mingling, music softly playing, and drinks being handed out. The contestants looked nervously to each other before separating and being drawn into the crowds.

Tate was bounced from group to group across the club, unsure of his purpose and who was there to spy for the boss or worked for her show. He chatted up several men and women, cautious to remain in character but trying to hide the elements of Cookie they were forcing onto him and his backstory. Several offers for drinks and dancing were given, but Tate politely refused, so the patrons typically exchanged their phone numbers and winks instead.

The night was a confusing blur, unclear on what was the show or what the show's purpose even was. Finally, a tap came to Tate's shoulder and Peppermint nodded towards the door.

“Hey, the driver is back. I think this means we can finally scam.”

“Thank you! Let's get the hell out of here!”

Sweetie and Coco were waiting for them in the limo, Coco's head rolling around and the smell of booze on her breath.

“Can't drink as- as much as I used. Must be reacting to what they did to me. I'm not a-a- Was just trying to get through the event.”

Sweetie shrugged as Peppermint and Cookie got in.

Back at the manor, the boss and the assistants were waiting for the squad when they were led back inside. Candy hopped up and down in excitement.

“Dish, Ladies! Diiish! How was the club!?”

The boss chuckled and put an arm around her helper. “Slow down, Dear. There will be plenty of time for girl talk around the manor, but our contestants want to see how they did!”

She gestured to the TV in the center of the room and Sweetie's picture flashed on screen.

“Oooh! Our first win goes to Sweetie! She got the most votes from our crowd. AND the most numbers, folks.”

The three looked over at Sweetie but she was confused as they were.

“Who voted? You humiliated us to see who could get hit on the most?”

The boss rolled along. “Dear, all that whining gets cut in editing. And start up again in...” She motioned above herself again and resumed her act.

“Cookie, love, you came in third after Peppermint made some last minute moves with those flirting skills.”

Peppermint stomped forward with a raised fist. “Flirting'?! Some jerk grabbed my butt! You call that 'flirting'!?”

The host ignored the complaints and hostility as her assistants stepped forward in case they were needed.

“Audience, let's watch some highlights and interviews from the night!”

She motioned again and dropped her act as the TV started to show clips of people at the club raving about the contestants.

An excited woman motioned with a drink in her hand at a camera. “Cookie totally danced with me! She's so hot and that girl has some moooves!”

Tate stumbled back. “What the- Who is she? I didn't.”

As another clip played with a suave man boasting that he got kisses from both Coco and Sweetie, the squad caught on with how the host was shaping her show. She grinned back and shrugged.

“It's TV, darlings! We have to put on a show! Now, Coco and Cookie... You did come in last but we can't have you slipping behind early on or where's the drama and competition?”

Two of the assistants stepped forward and slapped the injectors onto their arms again. Peppermint and Sweetie recoiled from them on sight. Tate grabbed for his but the device latched on and hissed. The punishing buzz from before was gone and it instead felt like a warmth washing through him. He bit his lower lip and heard a groan from Coco next to him. The warmth swelled and strands of hair started to sway and curl down into his vision. His blouse tightened, the buttons taut as his curves pushed outward.

The assistants collected the devices once again, leaving the pair wobbling on their feet.

“Cookie, are you-” Sweetie steadied him.

Tate looked over and Peppermint was holding Coco up. She gripped her head.

“That hit hard. I'm-” Coco clutched her throat against the breathy, seductive voice that had just escaped her. “Why do I sound- Oh gods no.”

Candy clapped. “Oooh! It's so fun to see what happens each time!”

Tate woke the next morning, expecting to feel sore after the night mincing around the club and then the changes, but his body felt fine and invigorated. Whatever they pumped him full of was going to keep him running for the show.

Three raps on door startled him.

“Miss Cookie. We're just shooting B-roll today so no events. You're expected to mingle and I've laid some new outfits by the door when you're ready.”

There was a hefty clunk from the door unlocking again, and Tate rose from the bed. A small decorative box in the hallway contained his presents. Tate dumped it out onto the table and examined the new, larger lingerie. A long-sleeved fuzzy shirt with a deep neckline was his only option but he had a choice between a miniskirt and cut off shorts. Tate threw them angrily to the bed but sighed and headed to the shower.

Peppermint was propped against the counter eating a bagel and grumpily swirling some juice when Tate arrived in the kitchen and gave her a meek wave.

“Hey, Cookie can weigh in.” She nodded her head towards Sweetie, sunk in an oversized chair,

her legs bound by a too-tight knee-length skirt.

Sweetie turned to Tate. "Any thoughts on the nature of this... show?"

Tate shrugged. "It doesn't make any sense. She called it a game show, but- It's some weird mix of manufactured drama and- Who would watch this?"

Peppermint chugged the last of her juice. "Idiots that watch this garbage all the time. But Sweetie says there isn't even a show."

"Maybe. There are a few cameras we've found and it's set up like a show, but it feels like more of an experiment."

Tate bristled. "On what?"

"That's what I don't get. Maybe they're testing the chemicals they pump into us. Or if they can make us break."

"But with Candy, we know they can already break you if they want to..."

The group nodded and heard the clacks of Coco's heels on the tile floor. Tate gave her a wave. "Morning. You okay?"

Coco went to speak but stopped herself and just nodded.

"Not used to the voice?"

Coco glowered.

Sweetie wobbled to her feet. "We need to think of a plan. If this is an experiment, maybe we can drop out. Not in a way that got Candy in trouble, but peacefully. Just call it quits?"

Coco ignored her seductive call. "And be stuck like this? No way!"

Peppermint shrugged. "We drop out and get stuck like this or keep playing along and wind up even worse and still stuck like this." She motioned to Tate's cleavage on display. "Er, no offense, man."

Tate sighed. "I get what you're saying. But what if completing this game is the only way back to normal. We end the show and go back to our lives?"

Coco poured herself some juice. "Or that's the grand prize and only one of us gets it."

The next night, the assistants called the squad to the set once more, each dressed in simple skirts but revealing tops and full make-up. They were assigned to podiums and the host revealed herself again.

"Good evening, ladies! It's trivia night at the manor, so put on your thinking caps and regret all those times you partied instead of going to class!" She winked at a hidden camera and motioned back

to her door.

Candy hurried out, waving excitedly. She was dressed in a suit, too tight for her figure, and holding a stack of cards.

“I get to ask the trivias tonight!”

Trivia night rolled forward with Candy's bizarre, unconnected strings of questions, with the unwilling contestants doing their best to keep up and answer. Not being able to follow a trail of logical thought but ever fearful of giving a wrong answer or not participating was exhausting and broke the four down as the event ceaselessly continued.

The assault was finally broken with the host's clapping.

“Everybody! A round of applause for our very own Crossed Cutie, Candy! We'll be right back after this break with the dashing results!”

Tate brushed away the loose strands of his hair and propped himself up at the podium. “What was that?”

The host was gleeful. “Love those confused looks, ladies! Wonderful job playing along to the narrative.”

Peppermint angrily slapped her hands down. “That event made no sense! What was the theme?! Nobody is going to watch your gar-”

The boss waved away the huff. “Oh, we'll just dub in new questions from Candy later and cut around as needed. It will help us have more control over crafting your personas. With Sweetie we'll keep those smarts shining. The hot teacher look is ALWAYS in. Coco has the bombshell seductress to work with. But Pep and Cookie, we'll see where the season takes you.”

She glanced away and perked back up. “We're back and the results are! Oooh, Peppermint, not a good night for you. The lowest score even among your competition... We'll have some lovely parting gifts for you as we turn down the lights here at *Cross Over*. G'night, everybody!”

With another wave of her hand, three assistants rushed over to the group with small cases. “That's special treatments for Coco, Pep, and Cookie.”

Coco reeled back. “H-Hey! You said only Peppermint lost!”

Sweetie was hesitant to risk her safety but leaned in. “Last time it was only two people!”

The host motioned for her helpers to go. “You'll love it. Last lipstick you ever need to apply! Very intriguing design and processing, but I won't get into it since it would just go over your heads. Another episode ready for my magic!”

After his morning shower, Tate wiped away the fog from the mirror. All morning scrubbing and his lips were still perfectly glossy pink and his long eyelashes fluttered. The usual wrap on the door shook him from his moping and he hurried to suit up in the house dress assigned to him. The frilly skirt and ruffles swished around his thighs, but at least provided more cover than the previous assignments.

His minder was waiting at the entranceway. "Looking good, but let's hurry. It's a long shoot today."

She led Tate down to the manor and to the kitchen. They were shortly joined by the others and the assistants moved in a flurry laying out containers, platters, and ingredients across every space. Candy tottered in, clearing the way for the boss in mid-speech.

"-why we have the *Cross Over* Cuties ready in the kitchen to prove they have what it takes to satisfy a man... 's appetite! Are you ready, homemakers?"

Sweetie looked around. "What?"

The boss waved dramatically. "Cook off and go!"

The four exploded in a panic, each rushing over to a station in the kitchen to find a recipe book waiting for them. They grabbed ingredients from around the room, bumping and tripping over themselves and each other's frills.

Tate huffed, balancing several bowls his chest was pushing forward. "St-stop. We can't go at it like that."

Coco slapped down her book. "Cookie's right, we don't even know the assignment. Is it to make everything? To cook one thing well? Who knows!"

"They want us to fight so let's join up." Peppermint started dividing up her supplies. "Everybody grab a station, man that, and share as you prepare each step.

"Efficient. I like it. Hand me your ingredient stash and I'll get to chopping and slicing." Sweetie spread out on the counter and reach out for the squad's items.

The day was rushed and its standard of confusing nonsense, but they assembled dish after dish, working their best on a combination of speed and presentation. Tate was finishing up the icing on a cake when a loud siren rang out and he splattered the side of the dish in shock.

The host stomped back into the room, glowering. "What was THAT? Do you know how hard it will be to edit around that mess and create some drama? I'm going to report this back upstairs and get you all-"

Candy gleefully licked a spoon clean of batter and pouted. "But boooss! It was SO cute! All of 'em working together. I'm getting weepy just thinking of it!"

The boss softened. "Hmmm, fine. No punishments. I'll get the writers spinning something new of this and craft a better ending. We'll film it ourselves. Off with you all!" She stomped out of the room muttering to herself.

Tate sighed. "Wow. Haven't seen her that mad before. And we got away with it. Thanks to Candy."

Coco huffed. "Good. Screw her and her stupid show."

Peppermint stood in the mirror, adjusting her top as best she could but the daisies on the uniform were strategically positioned to draw the eye to her chest. “What is this crap...” she muttered, knowing the answer already but the group not knowing any more about the why.

Sweetie tugged at her skirt trying to get whatever millimeters more of coverage she could. “At least there are no pom-poms. Let's get this over with. As much as I hate the manor, I hate when they bring us out of it more.”

The four walked out of the locker room out to the field. It was lined with assistants assuring no escape attempts could be successful. A camerawoman followed the boss as she expertly continued to chatter and walk backwards towards the group for the day's shoot.

“And we said it was a sports day and THIS is the uniform our crew picked! Oooh, ladies.”

The contestants hid their hatred and swished forward, cheering skirts fluttering with each movement and the thigh-high boots forcing nothing but dainty steps lest they topple over.

The host swept her hand majestically towards the field. “So we gather here for our extra special physical challenge! Who has the stamina, the drive, the will to triumph and which unlucky lady won't be returning to the manor tonight?!”

The four stopped. “What!?”

An assistant pushed them forward. “Big ratings push. Standard gimmick to keep the stakes high and ensure people watch through the middle. You get more even viewership. It naturally spikes at the beginning and end of a season for the finale, so you shake it up in the middle.”

Coco swung her elbow to clear the assistants from around her. “You damned well know that's not what we care about. What happens to that person? Where do they go?!”

The assistant shrugged. “There's always work we can find. Just put on a good show. Try to balance giving it your all and lasting to the end. It's no fun if you're all tuckered out for the finale.” She pushed the four towards their starting positions and the beginning of an exhausting day.

Tate huffed alongside Sweetie and came up behind Coco at the finish line, dropping the balls they held between their knees.

“I hate- Hate how I've gotten used to running in heels by now.”

Coco nodded. “Another of their traps. Messing with your feet so it starts to feel natural or something...”

Peppermint slowly waddled up behind them all, her hoop earrings jangling and glinting in the sun. “N-No more...”

An assistant came by, offering each one a bottle. The squad all eyed them suspiciously but were too tired to continue without drinks so they chugged the fruity water.

“We'll start the final challenge in a moment, so start thinking of a good floor routine. Dancing and twirling are one thing but if any of you are up for a lot of hopping and bouncing, that's great for a

snippet in a commercial. Give it some thought!”

The four exhausted contestants were brought back out onto the field, supporting each other to stay up as they wobbled in their boots. The host stepped out, fresh from watching on the sidelines and bowed.

“Wonderful, exhibition. Wonderful, all! But as you know, the world has been tallying, judging, and keeping a watchful eye on each of you and it's time... for a decision.”

She motioned to Candy, who gleefully presented a tablet to the boss.

“The results are being tallied... And... it looks like we have to regretfully say good-bye to... Oh, it's Peppermint. I'm so sorry, Pep!”

The others clasped onto her and gave her heartfelt concern and worry. Peppermint stepped forward but was immediately intercepted by a bevy of assistants, who took her by the arms and hurried her off the field and away from the camera.

The boss dusted off the hem of her dress and smiled. “Oooh,exciting day! That one will be a smash for the ratings, I can feel it. We'll film a weepy confessional for Pep on her ride away. Now, who's ready to head home and prep for filming a finale!”

Tate hurried through the dressing ritual, now much faster due to the pre-applied make-up he was still unable to dull. He squeezed is way into the bustier, rolled up his stockings, and pulled on the gloves laid out for him. The finale was near and finally a chance to end this madness and get out. Or go down swinging...

A shimmering silken dress was handed over by his minder and Tate sucked his breath in as she tightly zipped him up.

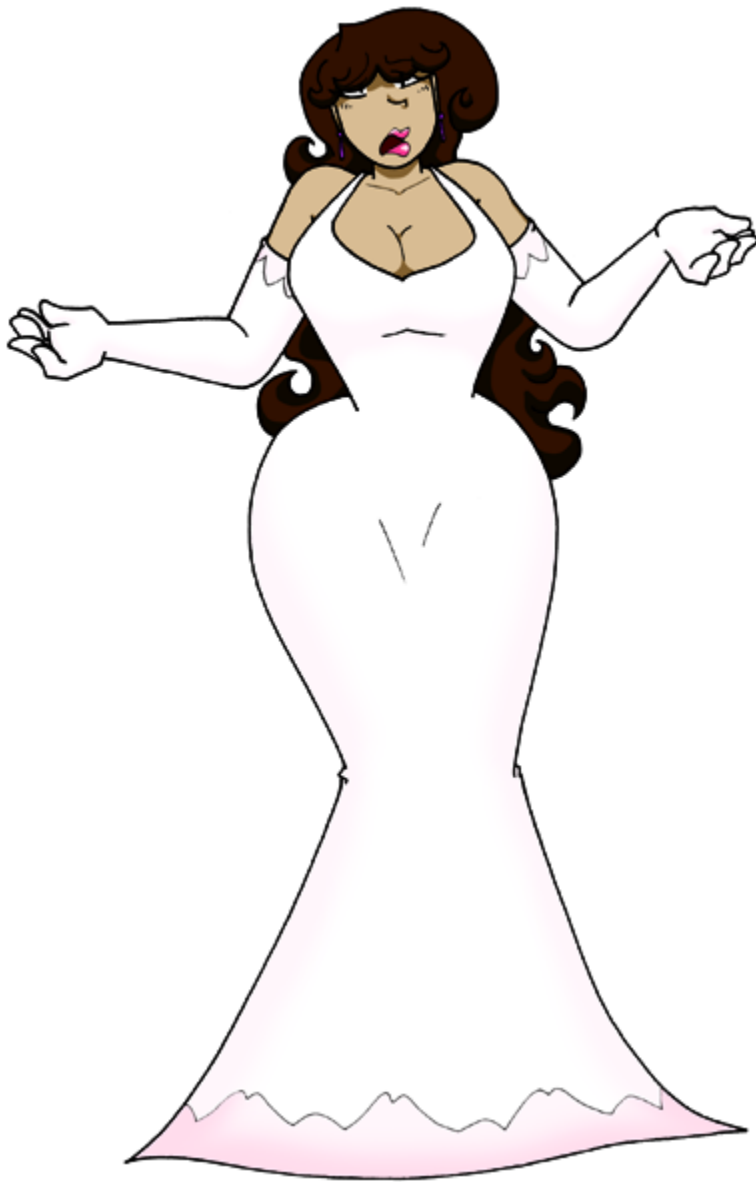
“Oh, Cookie. You look divine! You just ooze ratings potential! Hurry downstairs!”

Tate ignored her and tottered down the stairs, a feat he had now mastered in six-inch heels. Coco and Sweetie were waiting, also dressed in luxurious white dresses, looking as eager and confused as he was. Trying to divorce their pasts and the situation that brought them together, they were both gorgeous women.

Suddenly, the overhead lights went out and the entranceway was lit by bright lights at the floor. The front door dramatically popped open and all three contestants instinctively stepped forward to freedom but moved back at the sight of fog rolling in. A figure was silhouetted against the light and fog and a suave man in a gray suit stepped forward.

Coco leaned back to the allies at her side. “Who the hell is that?”

The others shrugged.



The man ran his fingers through his hair and looked solemnly into a camera hidden about the room.

“Ladies, it's been a long road and we've been through SO much together.”

Sweetie turned. “Does he work as part of the crew?”

Tate shook his head, his hair bobbling. “No, I think they're all women. Was he at the bar that first day?”

The man continued his impassioned decree. “But despite the beach trip, our time at the fair... And those were fantastic adventures I'll cherish always... Coco. I choose Coco as my loving angel to cherish always.”

The floor lights shut off and a spotlight swept from the man to a confused Coco, looking around

for support from her housemates. In the darkness, Sweetie and Cookie were grabbed from behind and shuffled out of the foyer. The sounds of Coco cursing at the mystery man and demanding to know who he was fading as doors were sealed between them.

Inside the break room, the host raised a glass of wine to the two remaining characters.
“Phew! Heck of a season, right, ladies?”

Tate threw up his hands. “Who WAS that guy? Is that what we've been competing for?”

Sweetie was knocked back by the revelation. “Was THAT the grand prize!?”

The boss grinned. “The intrigue has got to you too! Oh that means we'll be a ratings smash, I know it! Will they continue dating, stay together as fiancées, or... ratings bonanza, get married!? Television is SO exciting!”

Candy stood off to the side, her hips wiggling back and forth and her lips quivering. “I'm sorry, Boss, it's just all so beautiful! And romantic!”

The host got up to console her creation.
“That it is, Love, that it is. Now what to do with you while we wait to hear from above?”

Tate feared the worst for the contestants. If Coco had been forced into the prize, what was left for him and Sweetie? And would Peppermint be returned? Could Candy be freed and returned to her original self? The host was serving some other master, but the squad was no closer to finding answers.

He was snapped to attention by the boss.

“Same for you, my lovely actors. Sending you home seems a risk. Might spill the beans on the ending or some behind the scenes information. Which... is a big no-no. I could use some... more intelligent co-hosts in you two. Or we go with a format where you stay on until you win! But then I'd have fewer new subjects to work with. A pickle indeed.”

The boss tapped her chin and “hmmm”d dramatically.

“Ah, there's plenty of time to decide while we wait to hear if this pilot gets picked up for a full series! The superiors are always looking for ways to advertise their wares. Oooh, speaking of!”

She motioned to a camera above.

“It might be more efficient if we got some professionals to help with initiations, set-up, and styling next time around. For now, I've contracted with a lovely lady that runs her own salon and I expect you two to work with her. Assistants, bring Brill in to say hello to my girls.”

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