

## The Contest: Prelude

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"Come on, Echo. You know you're not allowed to fight with your clothes on."

The grey wolf turned to see his wife, a curvy arctic fox, looking at him expectantly.

"I know *you*, Coco: you just want me to take my clothes off," he chuckled wryly.

"No gear is allowed. All contestants must fight naked and unarmed. Tournament rule #3," added Halo tersely.

The tigress was already completely nude, her stripes accentuating her toned muscles.

"Okay, okay, I get it," Echo chuckled, putting up his hands in defeat. "Sheesh, you'd think I was a slacker or something."

"Only when it comes to getting undressed," Coco said, winking and giving him a little strip-tease as she removed her clothes.

"Okay, there. See? No clothes on," Echo said. "Happy?"

"Oh, yeah," Coco replied as the two embraced, locking eyes.

"Sheesh, get a room, you two!" complained a tall, burly crocodile with a deep voice. "We're here to fight, not to make out!" he teased.

"You're just jealous, Rocko," Coco retorted over her shoulder.

"He's not the only one," Kimo chimed in.

"Aww, Kimo, you know I love you like a brother!" Coco teased, letting go of Echo and hugging the stout orangutan, who gave a toothy grin as he hugged back.

"Oh, my gosh, this is gonna be so fun!" a short, slender jaguar said giddily, practically bouncing around the room with excitement.

"Easy, easy, Cleo!" Echo laughed. "Save your energy for the fight!"

"I doubt very much that it will be 'fun' when our competitors break your leg," Halo interjected. "All injuries not intended to cause death are allowed. Tournament rule #8."

"Thanks for that cheery thought, Halo," Echo said blandly.

"Besides, they've got to get hold of us before they can do any damage," Kimo said. "Knowing us, I doubt they'll have the chance."

"Don't underestimate them," Echo warned. "We've all made it to this tournament, one way or another. You don't get to be in here by being mediocre. Goodness knows we fought hard to get to where we are, and I for one don't want to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory by getting cocky."

Coco giggled. "You said, 'cock.'"

Rocko shook his head and put his fingers on the bridge of his snout.

"Okay, Coco, time to turn it on, huh?" Echo said, rolling his eyes.

"It? What's 'it'? What do you have, Coco?" Cleo asked, peering over the fox's shoulder.

"It' is the mindset conducive to achieving victory," Kimo answered.

"Right," Echo said. "Now, I know we've all been over it a hundred times, but—"

"One hundred thirty-six, to be exact," Halo interjected.

"—but let's go over it the hundred and *thirty-seventh* time," Echo continued, giving Halo a dirty look.

"The rules of the tournament are simple: the tournament begins at noon and consists of four rounds. The first round consists of sixteen teams for a total of eight matches. The winners advance to the second round, and so forth. Tournament rule #1," Halo stated. "Each team begins with six players. Tournament rule #2. I have already covered rule number three."

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“Uh, yeah, uh, let’s do this a little quicker,” Echo said.

“And a little less monotonously,” Rocko teased.

“Ooh! Pick me! I’ll go!” Cleo said, raising her hand.

Echo sighed and shook his head, smiling helplessly. “You want to go, Cleo?” he asked.

“Yes!” the jaguar said, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet.

“Well, all ri—”

Cleo jumped right in, her voice getting higher-pitched and faster as she talked.

“So, we’re all gonna make a lot of money! If we win, we each get 50,000 gold pieces—that’s like, a million pieces total!—but first we have to beat all the bad guys, and we do that if we eliminate them; how do we eliminate them? It’s easy! We just have to make them surrender or hurt them enough that they can’t fight anymore! But we can’t kill them. No, killing is bad, and killing will get you thrown in the *slammer*! Plus, no gold! And no World Champion! Oh, wait, the World Champion! Yeah! That’s the other thing we get if we win, but anyway, all the teams start with six players, and if someone gets eliminated, they’re eliminated *forever*—oh, wait!—no, if someone gets eliminated but we win—which we’ll *totally* win—then we get to bring back two people! But not anyone who gets disqualified—because people who kill are *bad*, and they don’t get to have their gold! Oh, wait, I already said that. So, when we win—and I mean *when*, not *if*—we pick two people who got eliminated—but why would anybody get eliminated? I mean, we’re the best! We’re not gonna get eliminated!—but if we do, we’ll bring you back! And like Halo said, we can do pretty much anything to the other teams that we want: head-shots, gut-shots, ripping off arms, breaking toes, chomping on tails, pulling out eyes—!”

She stopped abruptly, panting, with a wild look on her face.

Echo blinked. “Um, thanks, Cleo,” he said, patting her shoulder.

“I believe that attacking a clearly incapacitated player is also a disqualifiable offense,” Kimo added after everybody had caught their breath.

“Correct. Tournament rule #9,” Halo confirmed.

“And, of course, when everybody is eliminated, the team loses,” Echo finished. “There’s a brief intermission to give the finalists time to rest, at least an hour after the end of the third round, or when the sun touches the horizon, whichever comes later.”

“Man, Echo, we’ve been doing this for three years,” Rocko said. “Don’t you think we can skip the lecture just *once*?”

Echo shook his head and grinned ruefully. “I can’t help it, Rocko; it helps me get into the mindset to see all the rules spelled out in front of me, to know all the constraints as we’re about to start. It’s true: we’ve been working towards this for three whole years—and what a three years it’s been!—but *today* is the day when all of that work *has* to pay off! We might not be *able* to compete again next year if we don’t win it today! So, it’s more important than ever that we have our heads in the game.”

The team chambers were suddenly very quiet. Everybody was listening or mentally preparing. Even Cleo had stopped bouncing and had a fierce look of concentration on her face.

“This is *it*, guys,” Echo said, “The moment we’ve been training for. You guys all know I love you, and so I’m going to say this: there is no shame in tapping out. If things start getting too tough, don’t put your lives in danger. While intentionally killing someone *is* disqualifiable, you *know* how it can get out there. Sometimes the emotions just run too strong, the adrenaline just flows too freely, and—well, just remember to take care of yourselves. *Always* work in pairs. No matter how much the other team tries to lure you away, always stick in groups. We all know that Coco is *really* good at luring people away, and look what has happened to every one of them.”

“They met me!” Cleo said, grinning wickedly.

“My point exactly. Cleo, who’s your pair?”

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"Coco."

"Right. Kimo?"

"I'm with Halo."

"Exactly. Rocko?"

"I'm with you, boss."

Echo gave a pained expression. "Don't call me that," he grumbled.

"But it's true, isn't it?" Coco said. "We're looking to you for strategy. Your idea of keeping us in pairs has *never* failed."

Echo nodded slowly. "There's a first time for everything. Let's not get cocky." He smiled. "You're right, though: it's always worked before. But this is the big leagues: these guys have won their right to be here from all over the country. Sure, the competition won't be as tough in some places as it is here, but it might be even *tougher* in other places. So, like I said, let's just not get cocky. Stick to what we know, stick to fundamentals, and always be ready to adapt."

He sighed and pursed his lips. "I wish there was a way we could watch the other teams," he said. "It would really help to be able to see how they play."

Kimo cleared his throat. "Like, perhaps, a window? Maybe one that looked out at the arena?"

Echo looked at him. Though the orangutan's mouth was inscrutable, his eyes belied a secret.

"Is there one?" Echo asked, looking around. "Ah!"

He rushed to the tiny window, barely big enough for one person to look through at a time, inset into the wall so far that the light from the outdoors fell only on the windowsill.

"Kimo, you're a genius!"

"Naturally."

"Thanks for that, buddy: I owe ya one! Man, it's a great view from here! You can see the whole arena, including all the hiding spots!"

"Hiding spots?" Cleo asked, shoving past Echo to look out the window. "Ooh..." she said, her voice turning mischievous. "Yes...*hiding spots*."

"Everybody get a good look at the arena," Echo said. "It'll help to be able to quickly describe the locations."

Each of the team members took a turn looking at the arena and committing it to memory. The arena itself was elliptical, about twice as long as it was wide. The floor of the arena was mostly sand, but piles of gravel of differing sizes provided cover and a high ground to those who would claim it. Large boulders were also positioned here and there to provide a hiding spot. The boulders cast barely any shadow—noon was soon to come.

"Everybody get a good look?" Echo asked.

The others nodded.

"Okay, good. Everybody get good and stretched out. We're the third match, so it won't take long before we get called."

"LADIES AND GENTLEFURS, YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE!"

Echo jumped at the booming voice.

"THE TOURNAMENT WILL BEGIN IN TWO MINUTES. TEAMS ONE AND TWO, PLEASE PROCEED TO YOUR ENTRANCES! TEAMS THREE AND FOUR, YOU ARE ON DECK."

The room was suddenly flooded with applause from a hundred thousand spectators.

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"Wow, this is so *real*," Coco yelled.

"Right?!" Kimo agreed.

"JUDGES, ARE YOU READY?"

There was an eerie silence as the audience awaited the thumbs-up from the judges in the arena and in the stands.

"TEAMS, ARE YOU READY?"

More oppressive silence.

"BEGIN!"

The audience burst into cheering, and as Echo watched, the two teams raced into the arena. These first two didn't seem very organized to him. Though he tried to get some idea of what their strategies were, things were moving so rapidly and seemed to be utter chaos. Team 1 scattered as soon as they got into the arena. One fur—a *mouse*?!—was left standing all by herself, looking truly terrified as three of Team 2's players charged straight towards it.

*Oh, a bait and tackle?* Echo thought, but though Team 2 definitely took the bait, the only tackle was that poor mouse. *What the hell?* Within seconds, she was incapacitated, lying on the ground, out cold. Echo looked around, and finally he saw the rest of the teams. Three members of Team 1 had gotten into a brawl with three from Team 2 and were busily trading blows, but the members all seemed to be fighting for themselves on both sides. Eventually, all three mini-battles had their winners, with one from Team 1 still standing and two from Team 2. But instead of ganging up on the one Team 1 member, the two Team 2 members then took off in different directions, running for cover.

"You *had* him!" Echo protested aloud.

"You're rooting for the competition already?" Coco teased, but Echo didn't hear.

"I hope he doesn't wear himself out, getting that involved," Kimo mused.

Meanwhile, back in the arena, the remaining members of Team 1 had *finally* found their teammates and were counting their losses. Team 2, on the other hand, remained scattered and disorganized. Only then did Team 1 start moving like a juggernaut, tracking down the Team 2 players one-by-one and eliminating them.

"DISQUALIFICATION!"

Everybody gasped and flocked to the window.

"TEAM 2, YOU ARE DISQUALIFIED. PLAYER 3, REMAIN WHERE YOU ARE."

There was sudden silence. The audience couldn't believe it, either.

"Holy shit..." Coco whispered.

"Whoa..." Cleo breathed.

"In the *first* round?" Rocko shook his head in disbelief.

"What happened?" Kimo asked.

"There," Halo said, pointing.

The audience suddenly started booing as a snake was escorted off the field by armed guards. Three medics rushed into the arena and began administering treatment to a fur that none of the team could see, and then they carried him or her away on a litter.

"TEAM 1 IS THE WINNER OF THIS ROUND."

"He panicked," Echo said, stunned, as the audience roared in applause.

He couldn't believe his eyes as all the pieces of what he'd just witnessed clicked together.

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"Guys! Remember, above all else, it's just a game! That snake—he was cornered when Team 1 started working together, and rather than just conceding defeat, he tried to *kill* someone! Always keep things in perspective!"

"TEAMS 3 AND 4, PREPARE FOR COMPETITION. TEAMS FIVE AND SIX, YOU ARE ON DECK!"

"That's us, guys," Echo said, swallowing hard.

Everybody suddenly felt like they'd each swallowed a rock.

"Okay, guys, let's stretch out, huh? Halo, will you lead them, please? I want to watch this round and see as much as I can."

"Place your legs shoulder-width apart. Bend down. Touch your toes. Continue lowering your upper body to place your forepaws flat on the floor. Hold it. Feel the stretch. Yes. Feel the stretch."

As Halo droned on, Echo did some stretches standing in place while watching the arena.

"JUDGES, ARE YOU READY?"

Silence.

"TEAMS, ARE YOU READY?"

*Pregnant silence.*

"BEGIN!"

The teams rushed out, and team 3 split into two groups, one going to the left while the other charged down the middle.

*Huh, interesting.*

Team 4 immediately scattered, much like Team 2 had, but they seemed to be moving a bit more in concert. As Echo watched, a leopard leapt onto one of the boulders and perched atop it, unseen by the charging middle group from Team 3.

*Memo to self: watch the tops of the boulders.*

As they charged past, she leapt down behind them and tackled the middle one while two of her teammates got the attention of the other two brawlers. The guy in the middle didn't stand a chance: before he could react, she'd already locked him in a tight head-lock, driven her knee into the small of his back, and pinned him to the ground.

Echo's sharp hearing picked up on the words, "I yield!"

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. He had a hunch the leopard had threatened to do much worse to him if he didn't concede.

*Watch your back.*

Meanwhile, two of Team 4's members had joined one of the distractors, making it three-on-one. The leopard pounced on the other brawler as he engaged with the other distractor, and the sixth member of Team 4 quickly joined the fight. The two brawlers went down very quickly.

Echo exhaled sharply. *That's a really good strategy.*

The rest of the match proceeded much like the first half. Though Team 3's splitting up did delay the inevitable, the leopard easily got perched on her rock again, and they just repeated the motions once more.

"TEAM 4 IS THE WINNER OF THIS ROUND!"

"That was...no contest," Echo breathed, swallowing hard.

He really hoped their strategy would work, and he *really* wished he knew what their first opponent was going to do. He began replaying the fight in his head, trying to substitute his team's strategy for the hapless Team 3.

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*As long as we watch the rocks, that should take away their element of surprise. What if we'd caught them? Would they have somebody else sneaking up from somewhere else? What if—*

"TEAMS 5 AND 6, PREPARE FOR COMPETITION. TEAMS SEVEN AND EIGHT, YOU ARE ON DECK!"

Echo jumped again.

"Phew...here goes," Kimo breathed.