

The Contest: Round 2

© 2018 Jack Doe. All characters belong to their creator. Do not distribute without all copyright notices and disclaimers intact.

“THIS CONCLUDES THE FIRST ROUND OF THE TOURNAMENT!”

The roar of applause was almost deafening, even in the team’s chambers. Coco stepped out of the bath and came to stand next to Echo as the next round’s pairings were announced.

“TEAMS 1 AND 11, YOUR COMPETITION WILL BEGIN IN 5 MINUTES! TEAMS 5 AND 16, YOU ARE ON DECK!”

“Come on, Echo,” Coco said, herding him toward the bath. “You’ve got a few minutes; let’s at least get you cleaned up before they start again!”

Echo shook his head. “No, let me just stretch here, okay? I need all the time I can get to get my head in the game.”

“It doesn’t matter how in the game your head is if your body is too stiff to move,” Kimo said, appearing next to them. “You would do well to follow Coco’s advice.”

“Duly noted and appreciated,” Echo said, “But I’m fine.”

Kimo and Coco exchanged glances but acquiesced. As the team began to dry off and get ready for their next round, the announcer’s voice boomed once more.

“JUDGES, ARE YOU READY?”

Why didn’t that deathly silence ever get any shorter?

“TEAMS, ARE YOU READY?”

Ever?

“BEGIN!”

“Okay, guys,” Echo said, “Let’s all get down to our entrance; we don’t want to be caught off-guard.”

They all went down, and Echo started lining out their plan.

“Team 16 is pretty good, but they’re nothing like Team 4 or even Team 6. Then again, Team 15 was just as scattered as Team 1 was, so it’s not surprising that they got eliminated. Anyway, their strategy is to—”

“DISQUALIFICATION!”

“What?!” Echo gasped.

“TEAM 11, YOU ARE DISQUALIFIED! PLAYER 5, REMAIN WHERE YOU ARE!”

“Oh, shit! It happened again?” Coco asked.

There were murmurs all around.

“Guys, focus!” Echo said. “I have a hunch about Team 1, but we’ve got to get our strategy down for this round, which will happen any second! Our usual strategy will work, but Team 16 really likes to snipe people, so stay with your partners, and watch the rocks!”

“That goes for you, too, Echo,” Kimo said with a wink.

“Thanks, Kimo,” Echo said flatly. “Just what I needed.”

“Just kidding, boss,” the orangutan said, taken a little aback by Echo’s snippy tone.

“TEAMS 5 AND 16, PREPARE FOR COMPETITION! TEAMS 4 AND 10, YOU ARE ON DECK!”

“Sorry, Kimo,” Echo apologized. “Just...not the best time.”

“We got this,” Rocko said.

“Affirmative,” Halo confirmed.

“Let’s go kick their butts!” Cleo said ferociously.

“JUDGES, ARE YOU READY?”

The Contest: Round 2

© 2018 Jack Doe. All characters belong to their creator. Do not distribute without all copyright notices and disclaimers intact.

"Opposite directions this time, guys," Echo said. "Kimo and Halo to the right, Cleo and Coco to the left."

"Got it!"

"TEAMS, ARE YOU READY?"

Echo flashed a thumbs-up to the attendant, who relayed the message and got out of the way.

Everybody waited breathlessly, waiting for the call to start.

"BEGIN!"

Halo and Cleo seemed supercharged after their baths and made amazing time around the sides of the arena. Cleo quickly scurried up her rock and crouched back enough that she couldn't be easily seen while Coco got into position below her. Kimo meanwhile got to his vantage point and almost immediately began calling out enemy locations.

"Two away far, three away near, one away!" he yelled.

"Confirm three away near!" Coco called.

"Confirm one away!" Echo barked as a single tiger came charging towards him. "Do not engage!"

"Confirm!" Rocko called.

"Confirm two away far!" Halo yelled.

"Dibs!" Coco yelled as she pounced on a slight-looking cheetah from behind just as it whirled at the sound of her voice.

Before the cheetah could react, Cleo leapt down on top of her, knocking her to the ground, and Cleo and Coco began kicking and punching furiously at her.

"I yield!" the cheetah called hoarsely.

"Dibs!" Rocko yelled.

"Confirm!" Echo called, and they both took veered off to the right to ambush a horse that had accompanied the cheetah.

"Dibs!" Cleo called out.

"Confirm!" Coco acknowledged.

The attack on the cheetah had occurred so swiftly that the cheetah's teammates hadn't had time to react. Rocko and Echo were on top of them and Cleo and Coco had changed targets before they even realized what was going on.

Just as Rocko confronted the horse and Echo turned to join the fight, a "dibs" from Halo echoed across the arena as she began attacking a monitor lizard. The wolf that accompanied the lizard quickly began attacking her.

"Confirm!" Kimo called, leaping from his rock and landing hard on the monitor lizard's back.

There was a sickening *crack* as the lizard fell on one of his legs, breaking it in half.

"He's down!" Halo yelled.

Kimo was about to reply when a blow across the back of the head sent him sprawling. He flipped over to face his attacker and landed a solid kick with one of his feet to the wolf's face as Halo attacked him from the side.

Meanwhile, Echo was moving stiffly, and it was making his mind wander.

A horse? Who brings a prey fur to a predator's fight?

Just then, the horse whipped around and delivered a double-barrel kick to his chest. There was a loud crunch, and Echo flew backwards twenty feet.

"Oh, shit!" Rocko called. "Echo, you okay?"

The Contest: Round 2

© 2018 Jack Doe. All characters belong to their creator. Do not distribute without all copyright notices and disclaimers intact.

There was no answer.

"Kimo, Echo's down! Advise!"

"Proceed as planned!" Kimo called.

"Damn it, Echo," Rocko muttered as he dodged another kick from the horse, whipped around with his tail, and knocked him to the ground.

"Hang in there, Rocko!" Cleo called.

But just then, the tiger that Echo had deliberately avoided attacked Rocko from behind and tackled him to the ground.

This isn't looking good, Kimo thought.

"Halo, we've got to end this *now!*" he called.

"Confirm!"

The tigress caught the wolf's punch and wrenched her arm sharply. The wolf spun sideways as Halo's impressive strength showed. Kimo lined himself up and delivered a fierce uppercut just as the wolf's head came towards him. Blood shot out of the wolf's muzzle as he connected, and the wolf was out cold before he even hit the ground.

Meanwhile, Cleo was having trouble catching the stupid fox they were supposed to be taking out. She and Coco chased the fox all over the place on a wild goose chase around the arena.

"Cleo, break off!" Kimo yelled as he and Halo charged past. "Target the tiger!"

"Confirmed!"

Cleo and Coco both broke off and charged towards the tiger that was busily pummeling Rocko with both fists while the horse kicked him in the side. Rocko had curled into a ball and was protecting his face but wasn't able to do much more than endure.

"Get the fuck off my teammate!" Halo roared, grabbing the tiger by the arm, flipping him over her head, and slamming him into one of the rocks.

Cleo and Coco gasped and quickly redirected their attack toward the horse. Coco distracted him while Cleo pounced on him from behind, digging her claws in. Yet the horse was surprisingly durable.

"Not again!" Cleo groaned.

"Watch his hooves!" Rocko called, coughing blood.

His warning came not a moment too soon. Coco ducked just in time, and the horse's hoof sailed over her ear so closely that the wind rustled her hair. She snarled and tackled him.

Halo meanwhile had pinned the tiger to a rock and was punching and clawing him in the face over and over again. Her mouth flashed out, her whiskers flared in fury, and she bit him hard in the shoulder, throwing him to the ground and tearing out a chunk of flesh. The tiger's eyes went wide, and he began trying to scramble to his feet, but Halo was on him in an instant. She got hold of his tail and snapped it in two, eliciting a piteous roar from the tiger.

"YIELD!" he screamed.

Kimo started to join in, but the intensity of the tiger's shriek made his hair stand on end.

"Oh, no."

"Coco, Cleo, INTERVENTION!"

Wolf and jaguar immediately let go of the horse and charged after Kimo.

Halo wound up to finish the tiger off when Kimo, Cleo, and Coco all tackled her and drove her against one of the rocks.

The Contest: Round 2

© 2018 Jack Doe. All characters belong to their creator. Do not distribute without all copyright notices and disclaimers intact.

"Breathe, Halo!" Kimo cried. "Don't attack him after he concedes!"

The fire in Halo's eyes disappeared instantly, replaced by her usual calm. "Tournament rule number 9: attacking an eliminated player is a disqualifiable offense."

"She's back," Kimo said. "Get that fox!"

Cleo and Coco raced off to attack the fox again.

"Dibs on the horse," Kimo said.

"Confirmed," Halo replied calmly.

"Don't kill him," Kimo warned knowingly. "Rocko will be fine."

The two sprinted after the horse, who was getting up a little slowly after Coco and Cleo's attack, and Halo tackled him from the side. As the horse struggled to kick out, Kimo quickly grabbed one of his legs, bent it backwards, and hugged it tightly, leaving the horse hobbled. The horse struggled to get his leg free, but given his position wrapped around the horse's leg, Kimo had the obvious advantage. It was quick work after that. Halo swept the horse's other leg out from under him, stood on it, and drove the ball of her foot down hard. There was a crack, and the horse quickly yielded, unable to fight effectively with a broken pastern.

"Good *grief*, how much is this stupid fox gonna run?" Cleo panted.

"I dunno, but aren't you supposed to be the one with boundless energy?" Coco asked.

Every time they thought they had the fox cornered, she did something acrobatic, like running up the wall of the arena and leaping over the two of them. The audience roared with applause every time, but it was beginning to get on the teammates' nerves.

Kimo quickly surveyed the scene and saw the two still in hot pursuit. He shook his head, rolled his eyes, and quickly scurried up one of the boulders.

"Coco, away! Cleo, near! Halo, far!" he yelled.

"Confirmed!" the teammates called and quickly changed positions. Cleo ran along the left wall of the arena, hot on the heels of the fox. Coco peeled off and began running down the middle, and Halo sprinted down the right side, all three converging on the enemy's entrance.

The fox looked out the corners of her eyes and could see the trap that was being laid for her. She glanced around, saw a boulder here, a wall there, and a really pissed-off-looking tigress running right towards her. She timed it just right, jumped, leapt onto the tigress's head, and sailed into the air, doing a backflip as she went over the head of all three of her attackers. As she spun in slow motion, she smiled to herself. She could do this all day. But as she looked over the arena upside-down, she saw an orangutan on a boulder at the far end of the arena.

He was looking right at her.

In his hand was a rock.

Uh, oh.

Kimo launched the rock right at the fox's head and hit her between the eyes. She fell to the ground in a heap, out cold.

"TEAM 5 IS THE WINNER OF THIS ROUND!"

The audience was silent for a split-second as what had just happened sank in. Suddenly they burst into applause as Kimo dropped to the ground. He and Halo met the medics as they rushed onto the field and helped them get Rocko back to their chambers while Coco and Cleo went to fetch Echo.

As soon as they made it back to their chambers, Halo quickly scooped Rocko up and put him in the bath.

"Echo! Are you okay?" Coco asked worriedly.

The Contest: Round 2

© 2018 Jack Doe. All characters belong to their creator. Do not distribute without all copyright notices and disclaimers intact.

The wolf grimaced and nodded. "Sorry I wasn't worth much," he said hoarsely. "I didn't realize that horse packed such a punch."

"You need to bathe," Coco said firmly.

"No, I need to—" Echo began to protest.

"BATHE!" Coco snapped.

Echo gasped, then winced at having done so.

"Cripes, Echo! You almost got your chest crushed out there, and you're going to tell me you *don't* need to recover?" Coco yelled. "What the hell is wrong with you? Don't go playing Mr. Macho with me! You let the whole team down by being so stubborn on the last round!"

"Whoa, hey, Coco—" Kimo started to interject as he reached to put a hand on Coco's shoulder.

"I *know* you, Echo!" Coco continued, smacking Kimo's hand away. "You could *easily* have dodged that horse's kick if you'd been on your game! You know better than that! I told you so many times that you needed to bathe before the last round, and you kept brushing me off! Well, thanks to your pig-headedness, you *and* your partner suffered! You could have lost us the tournament!"

"It's just a competition—" Cleo began.

"But what's more important, you could have *died*!" Coco finished, panting with emotion. "The medics told us: had he hit you two inches higher, it probably would have knocked your head back so hard that you might not have survived it."

She took a deep breath and let it out.

"Damn it, Echo," she said softly. "I love you, and I have *not* come this far to watch you get killed thanks to your own stubbornness."

Echo opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it. He swallowed hard and took a deep breath, then winced for having done that, too.

"You're right," he said finally. "I'm sorry." He looked around. "To all of you. Coco's right; I let the team down, and I should have listened to you. Boy, this has been a bad time to learn all these lessons," he said, shaking his head, ashamed.

"Let's get him into the bath," Coco said. "He needs as much healing as he can get."

She and Cleo hoisted him off the litter and helped him into the bath. He winced and squeezed his eyes shut as the hot, medicated waters closed in around his chest, but the vapors he inhaled quickly began to make him feel better. His breathing improved, getting deeper as the pain in his chest subsided somewhat. He finally opened his eyes and looked around to see the extent of everyone's injuries. Fortunately, it looked like he and Rocko were the only major casualties.

"How ya doing, Rocko?" Echo asked.

The crocodile nodded slowly. "Getting better," he said. "It's good to see you in here, too."

Echo hung his head. "I'm sorry, Rocko. That was all my fault."

"Yes, it was," Halo said simply.

"Yeah, don't cross Halo or her man," Cleo said, lightly teasing.

"I'll say!" Kimo agreed.

"Get the *fuck* off my teammate!" Coco chimed in. "I've never heard you use that word before!"

Halo remained expressionless. "I was merely helping a teammate in trouble," she said.

"Uh, huh," Kimo said, raising an eyebrow. "I don't believe we've ever had to perform an intervention on you before."

Halo blinked and looked at him.

The Contest: Round 2

© 2018 Jack Doe. All characters belong to their creator. Do not distribute without all copyright notices and disclaimers intact.

"You were ready to rip that tiger limb-from-limb!" Cleo said.

"There's nothing wrong with liking a teammate," Coco said, glancing at Echo. "After all, we're married!"

"Team dynamics and personal relationships don't mix," Halo replied.

"Augh! Just kiss already!" Cleo groaned.

"Your affection for each other is apparent, whether you want to acknowledge it or not," Kimo said. "What benefit does pretending it doesn't exist provide you?"

Halo took a breath and let it out.

"Echo," she said, "What do you think?"

Echo gasped, startled, and winced again. "Me? What does my opinion matter on this?"

"You're our leader and a teammate," Halo replied.

"Oh, uh..." Echo trailed off, sighing. "In light of recent events, I think my judgement is rather dubious at the moment."

"Don't beat yourself up," Cleo said. "We all make mistakes."

"Didn't we just have this discussion?" Echo asked morosely.

"Come on, Echo!" Rocko said, breaking his silence. "Get it together, man!"

Echo started.

"I dunno where you put your head lately," the crocodile growled, "But this isn't the Echo I came to follow. You are confident, competent, and an excellent strategist. Quit feeling sorry for yourself, get your head in the game, and do your job: lead us to victory."

Echo swallowed. "You don't hold it against me?" he asked.

"Of course I hold it against you!" Rocko snapped. "Twice this competition, I've needed my partner there to get my back, and twice you've failed to do it! But just because you screwed up doesn't mean that you need to keep harping on it! What do you always ask me when I screw up? 'Rocko, what did you learn?' So now I'm gonna ask you: Echo, what did you learn?"

Echo smiled wryly in spite of himself. "Rest up," he said. "Stay in the game for my teammates."

"That's right!" the others chorused.

"We know you want to strategize, and we know you're really good at it," Kimo said, "but we need you to be able to fight and to stay conscious during the fight. I can stand in in a pinch, but that's not my strong suit."

"Coulda fooled me!" Cleo said, grinning. "Boy, that last move against that stupid fox was—"

"Awesome!" Coco agreed, brightening. "Yeah, that was an amazing tactic, and the look on that stupid fox's face when she saw you was just priceless!"

"You saw that?" Halo asked.

"I was right under her as she started flying through the air," Coco grinned. "I was looking up to see how to grab her, and it was just this, 'uh, oh' look. Smug, self-satisfied smile to 'I just screwed up' in 0 seconds!"

The others laughed.

"Thank you," Kimo said humbly, "But that was a lucky win. Champions don't count on luck; they count on strategy, and that is *Echo's* strong suit. I must impress on you, Echo, that we *really* need you. *I* really need you."

Echo nodded slowly. "Okay, team, I get it. Your words are well-heard, and I promise: the old Echo is back to stay!"