

The Contest: Epilogue

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Echo wrapped his arm around Coco, and the two snuggled up under a blanket on the balcony and looked out over the forest and the wide, clear river far below them.

"It's hard to believe it's already been three months since the tournament," Coco murmured, cupping some hot tea between her hands.

"I know," Echo said, shaking his head. "But I gotta say, it's been a great three months! Those years spent training were—"

"Totally worth it, I agree," Coco said, nodding. "Who'd have ever thought we'd be living in a mansion, being waited on hand and foot?"

"Well," Echo replied, "I did."

"Of course you did, Love," Coco said, smooching him on the lips and smiling. "Is it everything you dreamt it would be?"

"It's actually better," Echo admitted. "I hadn't counted on having such excellent servants."

"Ahem," a voice said behind them.

Coco smiled to herself as Echo turned to look. "Oh, Marko, what is it?" he asked.

"Sorry to interrupt, Master, but breakfast is ready. Will you take it here or in the dining room?"

"What do you think?" Echo asked Coco.

"Let's do it in the dining room," Coco replied. "We can see how everybody else is doing."

"Very good, milady," Marko replied, disappearing.

"Did you know he was there when you said what you said?" Coco asked.

"The thought crossed my mind," Echo replied, grinning wryly, "But I would have said it regardless."

He took Coco's tea, and she stretched and got to her feet, wrapping the blanket around herself as she stood.

"Hoo, a little brisk this morning," Echo said, rubbing his shoulders.

"I *told* you that you ought to wear some clothes out," Coco replied, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, but then we couldn't have—you know..." Echo grinned, winking.

"Thank you for that, by the way," Coco said, leaning down to kiss him again and then holding out a hand to help him up. "Let's get you inside before you catch a cold," she said as he took her hand and got to his feet.

"Then you'd have to nurse me back to health," Echo said, following her inside.

"I'll sick Cleo on you," Coco teased.

"Okay, okay! I'll behave!" Echo said, putting his hands up and laughing. "She'd have fed me fifteen types of soup, wrapped and unwrapped me, and dunked me in the hot bath and the cold bath before I could even say 'hi!'"

"Hi!" Cleo said, waving frantically. "Oh, my gosh, you two are so cute! But Echo, why don't you have any clothes on?"—she gasped—"Did you two...do it?! Was it *great* doing it outside on the balcony? It must have been so cold! But then, you two were probably getting it all hot and steamy out there anyway—that's why the sun came up, right? It couldn't handle you two making more heat than it did? But anyway, have you seen my gold room? I feel so *happy* when I'm in there! I think it's got some kind of—I dunno, magical powers or something! I just feel so..."—her eyes narrowed—"in tune..."

Echo and Coco gaped at the abrupt greeting.

"Hi, Cleo," Coco said, chuckling and shaking her head.

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"Yes, we've seen the gold room," Echo chimed in. "It's *very* pretty...like the other hundred times we've seen it," he muttered to Coco, who snickered.

"You *have* to come and see what I've done with it!" Cleo said, her whiskers poofing out in excitement, "I've made...*changes!*"

Echo rolled his eyes and shook his head. "All right, Cleo," he said, "But *after* breakfast."

"Deal!" Cleo said. She gasped suddenly. "Hey, what *is* for breakfast?"

"Let's go see," Coco said, herding her towards the dining room.

They walked down the carpeted hallway, passing many tapestries depicting triumphs in battle—theirs and others—as well as more domestic scenes. Coco had commissioned them shortly after moving in, deciding that the walls were far too plain for her liking, and with her share of the cost of the mansion costing her fewer than 850 gold pieces, she had far more left to spend than she ever could on decorations. She smiled as she walked past one of her and Echo embracing.

They passed into the dining room, where Halo, Rocko, and Kimo were already sitting at a stout, wooden table, polished and lacquered to a high shine.

"You're late," Rocko said, looking up.

"We're rich," Echo needled back, "We're *never* late."

"Ha! Ain't that the truth!" Rocko agreed.

"Did you have a good night?" Coco asked Halo.

"Yes," Halo replied, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

Coco caught her exchanging glances with Rocko and figured there was probably *much* more to it than the simple one-word response had conveyed.

"What about you, Kimo?" Echo asked. Seeing the orangutan's bloodshot eyes, he chuckled. "Did you sleep at all?"

"I...did," Kimo said, "But I began reading a rather fascinating treatise on the ethics of war and conquest, and I just couldn't put it down."

"Kimo, you should rest!" Cleo said, pouncing over behind him to rub his shoulders. "No!" she said, her eyes widening, "You should come to the *gold room*."

"You're obsessed," Halo said.

"But I'm serious!" Cleo replied. "You'll feel better, and you'll sleep better, and—"

"I'm also serious," Halo interjected, eliciting a chuckle from the rest of the group.

Cleo's whiskers puffed out indignantly. "But!"

"Don't worry, Cleo," Kimo said, blinking slowly, "I will come see the gold room after breakfast."

"Yay!"

Marko entered, followed by a number of other servants, who proceeded to set out various cheeses, grapes, olives, and breads on the table, as well as fill each person's wine goblets.

"To another beautiful day of relaxing," Echo said, raising his goblet.

"To good friends," Coco said, raising hers.

"To the pursuit of enjoyment," Kimo added.

"To love," Rocko said, looking at Halo, who smiled.

"To shiny things, oh, and tapestries, and, um, snuggling, and—ooh! A bath! I'm so gonna take a bath after breakfast, but wait, I have to show you guys the improved gold room first, and then—"

An expectant, amused smirk from Echo silenced Cleo, and she blushed in embarrassment.

"To food," Halo finished.

They all clacked their goblets together and took a drink, then set about tasting the different foods in front of them.

"Rocko, this is a delicious spread!" Echo said, impressed. "Was this your doing?"

"Well, no, it was the servants' doing," Rocko replied, "But I did put the idea in their heads."

"I just love that we're all benefiting from your interest in cuisine," Coco added.

"It's better than hard bread," Halo agreed.

"Well, I'm glad you all liked the choices," Rocko said.

"So, what's everybody got planned for the day?" Coco asked. "Echo?"

"I've got a bit of working out and training to do, and then I've got to figure out where to go next!"

"Ah, yes, how was your trip to Rome?" Kimo asked.

"It was beautiful," Echo replied. "I say, that city will be a force to be reckoned with someday!"

"Clearly Rocko liked the olives we brought back," Coco chuckled. "Where to next?"

"I dunno," Echo replied, "But with you by my side, it could be as far as India or as close as the bedroom," he chuckled.

"Oh really, now?" Coco asked, raising an eyebrow.

Echo grinned sheepishly. "So, uh, what about you, Kimo? More reading?"

Kimo shook his head. "No, I've got to go into town. My scrolls are fascinating, but I long for some enlightened discourse."

"After you've seen the gold room," Cleo interjected.

"Of course."

"Cleo, I'm sure you'll be tending, watching, staring at, and obsessing over the gold room, right?" Echo teased.

"Of course!" Cleo replied, "Well, but I also have to look after my plants."

"Your plants?" Coco asked.

"Yeah! I found this really cool plant the other day. It smelled so good that I just had to get some of my own! Here, sniff!"

She held up a handful of jagged, green leaves with pronounced indentations on the tops where the veins were.

Coco cocked her head, frowned, and took the handful of green leaves, sniffed it, and shrugged. "It just smells like leaves to me," she said, offering it to Echo.

He, too, sniffed the plants, shrugged, shook his head, and passed it to Rocko. The crocodile looked at Halo, shrugged helplessly, and offered it to her.

Halo took the plant, sniffed it, and then her eyes dilated.

"Ohh..." she said, her breath catching. "That's *good*!" she gasped, rubbing it all over her face.

"See?! Halo gets it!" Cleo said excitedly, taking out another handful and holding it to her own face.

"I feel...happy," Halo said, a hint of edginess in her monotone voice. "Rocko, come on!"

She grabbed him by the hand, and the two of them hastily disappeared.

"What the hell?" Echo asked, laughing. "What did you do to Halo, Cleo?"

The Contest: Epilogue

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"Let me see that," Kimo said, grabbing a few leaves and examining them minutely. After a few seconds, he began chuckling. "Cleo, you drug-dealer, you," he laughed.

"What?" Cleo protested, rubbing her paws all over her face and writhing ecstatically in her chair.

"*Nepeta cataria*," Kimo said to Echo and Coco. "Or, more commonly, 'catnip.'"

Echo and Coco burst out laughing.

"Cleo, is this how you've stayed so hyper all the time?" Echo asked.

"Mmm, what?" Cleo asked, her eyes half-closed as she rubbed her paws all over her body, "No, this stuff makes me mellow! I just wanna...cuddle."

"I'll handle this," Kimo said, rolling his eyes. "But don't worry; it's harmless and non-addictive. She just...loves everything right now."

"Mmm, I love *you* right now," Cleo said, wrapping her arms around Kimo as he lifted her and carried her out of the room.

Echo looked helplessly at Coco. "So, uh...yeah. What did *you* have planned today?"

"Well, I was going to see the gold room," Coco said, looking at the doorway where Kimo and Cleo disappeared, "But now..."

Kimo returned, smiling and shaking his head. "She really *has* redone the gold room," he said as he sat back down at his seat.

"What, you didn't stay to let her love on you?" Echo laughed.

"Hardly," Kimo replied. "I would never take advantage of her that way."

"You're a good man, Kimo," Coco said, smiling. "What did she do to the gold room?"

"Come see for yourselves!" Cleo said, appearing in the doorway.

"Cleo, you're back already?" Echo asked, surprised.

"It wears off fast," Cleo and Kimo chorused.

"Jinx!" Cleo yelled before whirling around, calling, "Come on!" and disappearing down the hall.

"Let's go humor her," Echo said, shaking his head.

They left the table and went down the main hallway as the servants began to clean up from breakfast. To the right, they passed Kimo's library, decked out in cubbies from floor to ceiling, each stuffed with multiple scrolls in various languages. A desk in the middle of the room had multiple scrolls on it—Kimo's most recent research project—and a simple, undisturbed bed in the corner showed how often Kimo actually used it.

They walked a few yards, passing some more of the tapestries Coco had picked out, and then a door appeared on the left, Rocko's and Halo's room. The door was closed, and the sounds coming from inside gave a hint as to why.

They continued walking, and they finally came to another door on the right. Golden light shone from it, casting bright yellow streaks on the ground and on the opposite wall. Cleo practically danced in place, waiting on them to make it to her, and then as soon as they arrived, she jumped inside and turned to watch them follow her in.

"Well?" she asked excitedly, "What do you think?"

The room was covered in gold. Floor, ceiling, walls, everything. There was no bed; rather, there was a sort of shelf, also covered in gold, on which Cleo slept. Gold coins were stacked here and there, seemingly at random, but one of the "benefits" of the room that Cleo touted was that you could see new patterns by focusing on them as you sat and stared at them. Of course, the others had been quick to point out that she herself moved them as she was staring, but that was beside the point.

The Contest: Epilogue

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The new addition, however, was rather interesting to behold. A golden sphere about six inches in diameter hung from the ceiling, suspended by what looked like a gold filament, though gold seemed too flimsy a material to hold it. The surface was perfectly smooth and polished shiny, so that as you walked up to it, you could see your distorted image, as well as that of half the room.

"Isn't it *cool*?" Cleo asked, stepping up to the sphere and moving her head forward and backward. "It makes me wanna..." She reached forward and bopped the sphere, making it swing on its pendulum. "Hehe!" she giggled, clapping her hands. "Try it!" she said enthusiastically.

Coco shook her head and dutifully stepped up to the sphere, slowed its movement down a bit, and examined herself in its shiny surface. "Well, I'm not *quite* sure what the big deal is," she said, "But it *is* pretty!"

"I know, right?" Cleo asked. "I could sit and stare at it for *hours*!"

"And on that note," Echo said quickly, "We'll leave you to...do that."

"Okay! Bye, guys!" Cleo said, waving at them as she stared at her reflection.

"I swear, you'd think she was a ferret," Echo chuckled as they stepped out. He turned to look at Coco. "Now you've seen the gold room, new and improved. Now what?"

"I kinda liked what we were doing before breakfast," Coco said, walking her fingers up Echo's chest. "How about some more cuddling?"

Echo grinned. "I could go for that," he said.

The two walked the rest of the way down the hallway to their room and stepped inside. Pictures of their travels and souvenirs they'd collected were showcased on shelves around the edge of the room, making them smile as they thought of the places they'd traveled so far. The sun had risen and warmed the air, so Coco doffed her blanket, letting it fall carelessly to the floor of their room as they stepped out onto the balcony.

Echo sniffed the air and smiled as he held Coco close. "I like that smell much more than catnip," he said.

"Which one?" Coco asked, nuzzling him.

"You," Echo replied.

The two embraced and kissed as the trees waved lazily in the breeze below them and the river glistened in the sunlight. The tournament had been fun, but this—*this* was paradise.