

## The Contest: Intermission

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“TEAM 4 IS THE WINNER OF THIS ROUND AND WILL FACE TEAM 5 IN THE FINAL ROUND!”

“Crap,” Echo sighed.

“Huh?” Coco asked, looking at him quizzically.

“Team 4 is *really* good. They were the ones who clobbered Team 3 in the first round. They’ve beaten every team they’ve fought decisively.”

“Well, we have, too,” Coco replied reassuringly.

Echo shook his head. “No, you don’t understand: they’ve *never* had anyone put out of commission! Their fights are always over almost as soon as they start!”

“Don’t *worry!*” Coco said to him as she led him back into the freshly refilled tub. “Think of how it will look to everybody if they see you worrying. Do you want to get their hopes down? Come on.”

Echo sighed and nodded. “You’re right,” he said.

The moment he felt the water touch his skin, he began to feel better. Sure, Team 4 was really tough and had demonstrated *really* good strategies every time he’d watched them, but then again, his team had only had anybody knocked out because he himself hadn’t been performing at his peak. The last round had certainly gone a lot better, and though he was tired—exhausted, even—he felt like he’d seen enough of Team 4’s strategizing that he could come up with a good counter to it.

But his thoughts began to melt away as he felt Coco rubbing his shoulders, all of the tension and soreness from the previous three rounds slowly draining from him under her expert touch.

“Nngh,” he said, his eyes closing reflexively.

“That’s right, Echo,” Coco said, smiling as she continued to rub his muscles, really leaning in to get good leverage on him, “Just relax. You’ll feel better after resting a bit.”

Kimo meanwhile sat cross-legged in the water with his eyes closed, his elbows resting on his knees and the tips of his thumbs and middle fingers touching as he slowly inhaled the eucalyptus-infused steam that cleared his mind and sinuses and brought him new energy. Cleo dove underwater and stretched luxuriously as only felines can, holding her breath as she felt the heat and gentle bubbling of the water enveloping her.

But Rocko and Halo weren’t in the bath. The two of them had stayed on the other side of the partition and were busily making out. It had all started with a quick peck from Halo onto Rocko’s muzzle, but as Halo pulled back from the peck, Rocko pulled her back in. The crocodile’s cock raged with arousal as his lips and hers caressed and nibbled each other.

“Don’t wear yourselves out, guys,” Coco called. “The hardest fight of our lives is still ahead of us.”

“Yeah!” Cleo said, popping out of the water, “You guys can have all the hot sex and make-out time you want after we win!”

“They’re right,” Halo said, exhaling.

“Bummer,” Rocko replied, pursing his lips. “One more?”

Halo gave a faint smile, and they started all over again.

“All right, you two,” Coco said, getting out and taking Halo by the ear and Rocko by the tip of his nose, “Come get washed up. The sun’s not gonna stay above the horizon for long.”

The two lovebirds reluctantly let Coco escort them to the bath, but as soon as they were in, they got back into each other’s arms and started kissing once more, abandoning any attempt at modesty.

Kimo opened an eye and chuckled at the two as Coco began indefatigably massaging one then the other.

“Not gonna break them up again?” he asked.

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"As long as they're in the water getting reinvigorated, they might as well be in each other's arms," Coco grunted back as she held Rocko's shoulder with one hand and dug her elbow into a particularly nasty knot on his back with the other.

"You need to rest, too, Coco," Echo said, his eyes still closed.

He patted the space next to him. "Come on; I'll give you a massage."

Coco hesitated, wanting to make sure the two fiercest fighters—whose tongues were at that moment fighting fiercely in their mouths—were well-relaxed and ready to go for the next fight, but the promise of a massage from Echo swayed her.

She sat next to him, and he pulled her onto his lap and began to firmly rub his thumbs where her shoulders met her neck. Her head tipped forward, and he held her upright as his strong hands began to squeeze her shoulders and work their way outward, driving the tension from her neck towards her arms.

"Mmm," she murmured.

"Got to get you in fighting shape, too, right?" Echo asked, smiling.

"Mm, hmm," Coco replied, feeling heavy.

The matches had taken their toll on her: worry for Echo and his safety and protectiveness towards the rest of her teammates on top of the strenuous exercise of fighting had all contributed to wearing her out. Now, feeling Echo close to her, she finally let herself relax and let her guard down. As Echo began working down her back, she smiled faintly and thought about how life could be if they won the last round: living together with Echo in a little villa by the sea, getting up in the morning and sitting next to him to watch the sunrise while the servants tended breakfast and the upkeep of the house. Or maybe traveling the world instead, finding exotic places to camp for the night and making passionate love beneath the fireflies. Mmm, she could practically feel his teeth on her shoulder.

His teeth on her shoulder! Her eyes snapped open.

"Echo!" she scolded him, "After I just told Rocko and Halo they had to wait until after the competition?"

"Sorry," he said, grinning sheepishly and letting go of her shoulder, "It's been a while since we've been this...erm...close."

She suddenly realized that the hard thing pressing against the small of her back wasn't his hand.

"Win this one for us, and we can spend all day celebrating," she said huskily, turning around to kiss his lips.

"Mmm, I'll fight for that," he grinned, kissing her back.

They both sighed, and then Coco got off Echo's lap and sat next to him.

"I've got a new strategy that I think will work against them," Echo said.

"Oh?" Kimo asked, opening his eyes.

"Let's hear it," Rocko said as he and Halo turned to face Echo.

Cleo surfaced, and Halo tapped her shoulder and pointed to Echo. Cleo turned to look.

"Team 4 likes to use the element of surprise to split up the other team and then gang up on them one-by-one afterwards," Echo said. "In the first round, they pounced down from the boulders to take out their opponents. They did the same in the second round. I didn't watch them in the last round, but it seems like they'd do the same thing if it's working for them. Kimo, I want you to get to high ground as quickly as you can and then pick off anybody you see up there. Your rock tactic seems to be working for you, so let's milk it for all it's worth!"

"With pleasure," Kimo said, grinning.

"The rest of us are going to stick together under Kimo's boulder. For one thing, that keeps them from getting to him, and for two, that gives us a lot of strength. We'll still be in two groups—I'll explain that in a

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minute—but it gives us the ability to all attack one person at a time if we have to. Just don't get distracted! I know, I know, I'm one to talk."

"Water under the bridge, Echo," Rocko said, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, but still," Echo replied. "Anyway, Team 1 might have been a really lousy team, but they did do one thing that I think we can steal," he said, grinning wickedly. "To pick our targets and throw Team 4 off guard, I want Coco to bait them, and then Rocko and I can sneak out from behind the home far rock to attack. Halo and Cleo, stay hidden until Rocko and I engage our targets. If we do it right, Coco, Cleo, and I will pick off one of the opponents while Rocko and Halo take out the other one, with Kimmo assisting. If either of our groups gets in a tight spot, we can join forces to take one out. Just call dibs. Make sense?"

"So, we're not going to charge down the field?" Cleo asked.

Echo shook his head. "No. I dunno about you guys, but I'm feeling kinda worn out. This late in, it's better to save our energy. Coco will stand in the middle and act as bait, and we'll all huddle behind our rock, staying out of sight until we attack. They seem to like to split up, so that will probably work in our favor. If it comes down to us hiding behind one rock and them hiding behind another, we'll take things one step at a time, trying to lure them out and pick them off, but I don't think it will come to that."

"Got it!" the team chorused.

"Good! Then in that case, everybody get rested up and get all the tension out. Then I want everybody to take a dip in the cold-water bath to get good and energized before the fight. The sun's coming really close to the horizon; we've only got another fifteen minutes or so."

There were nods of understanding all around.

"Just think, guys: we've come this far, and we've only got one more fight between us and being set for the rest of our lives. Let's get out there and beat them!"