



American Canine Alpha

Episode 9, "Neck Deep In The Real Deal" Part 1

June 9, 2021

5:00 PM

Colón Province, Panama

A white charter bus is traveling through the Panamanian countryside, riding along a small jungle road spruced with kapok and espavé trees. Inside, the six remaining canines - all clad in the green jerseys they obtained at the end of the previous episode, marking them having reached the individual portion of the game - are pressing their noses on the windows, all openly marveling at their surroundings.

*"The top six is where it gets serious." *Dionte looks out of the window* "Right now, not only everyone needs to cover their own ass from now on, but also a huge chunk of the final tally rests in our paws. Those that get eliminated from now on got some heavy-ass power on their vote to crown the winner of this shit, and whoever reaches the final has a clear picture on the ones they gotta really talk to. But no matter anything that happens or has happened, what I say stands: The American Canine Alpha will be the realest, and he will be Dionte Howard."*
~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner

"This is so fucking surreal," Jaxton comments, paws outstretched behind his head. "Can you imagine? All the people we started with, and now it's just us six on this final road trip..."

"I mostly can't believe I'm actually outta the fucking country!" Robbi chortles. "I've only been to Canada in 'n' out without realizing it!"

The bull terrier playfully elbows the wolfhound. "Alpha's really upp'in' you some social classes, huh?" he jokes. "What's next, you taking the prize money and settling down for good?"

"Can't take the stray out, bitch!" the mutt laughs loudly, slapping Jaxton's arm.

*"Looking back at my journey, it's been a wild ride of extremes. I was almost always at the top of it all or on the brink of going home, even by my own volition!" *the coyote is shown being deep in his thoughts, slightly disassociated from the group* "But after gaining the first ticket to this, my resolve is now strong. I have shown I can challenge and dominate whoever is here, and I'm itching to get more of that in Panama."*
~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

"Okay, guys..." Edge interrupts the coyote's musings, raising his voice. "Whatcha think is gonna happen here? Any ideas?"

"I could do without another camping sitch..." Kyle snarks, scratching the underside of his muzzle. "But I'm not really holding my breath. This jungle's no joke, and they wouldn't bring us out here if they didn't want to get us down and dirty, one way or another."

"Plus you heard what Ludwig said last time... 'Be ready for the roughest, most extreme road trip yet'," Jaxton adds, imitating the stoat host's deep voice. "Sounds pretty ominous."

"Eh, the ferret's probably hamming it up," Edge waves at the bull terrier dismissively. "Though I wonder how many of us will return alive. Could be just one of us, or two. Hell, what if we won't return to the Pound until four are gone and we're in the final two!"

"I don't think they'll get rid of four people just like that," the G-shep responds, intertwining his fingers on top of the seat in front of him. "However, I'm surprised no one mentioned the obvious yet."

"What, you mean the mystery of how Robbi managed to secure a passport?" Edge jokes.

"Aw, fuck y'all!" the mutt scoffs at the collective bout of laughter that unfolds, still in good spirits. "This dog's reglementary, bitches, and that's all ya gotta know!"

"Meant it more like... yanno, the bigass rewards they gave last time? Ring a bell?" the veteran asks the group, before addressing the wolfhound. "Who is even gonna turn out for you, Robbi?"

"Huh? Whatcha mean?"

"Ayo, we're parkin'," Dionte points out, interrupting the chatter. "Time to shut yer muzzles and see what Ludwig got to deliver!"

However, it turns out the fur waiting on the six is not the stoat - but rather a middle-aged bloodhound dressed in a camouflage uniform, standing in the middle of a clearing overlooking the Caribbean Sea just outside the premises of an old, abandoned military fort.

"What the fuck?" Robbi yells amused at the sight.

"Long time no see, cadets!" Kirk Lagrou, the Navy officer who coached the group during the first selection cut, salutes the surprised six.

*"First step on the ground and we're hit with our first surprise!" *smiles* "Kirk Lagrou, all the way back from when we were 24 dogs in some barracks, is here in front of us. I immediately feel a bit more reassured, the others..." *camera points at a grandstanding Catahoula* "We'll see."*

~Kyle, 40, German Shepherd, U.S. Army First Sergeant

"Where have the days gone by?" Kirk comments, welcoming the six with a warm tone. "Hope you been keepin' good and disciplined!"

"Well, I was keepin' damn fine until just now..." Edge mutters under his breath, careful to not be overheard by the bloodhound.

*"You could have had me guess, you could have given me 1000 guesses, and I would NEVER even fathom him... HIM, FUCKING CAPTAIN P.I.T.A., of all people, would be back." *facepalms* "But you know, in a twisted sorta way... I'm happy he's here. Now he'll get to eat Cajun-style crow, served extra hot, bon appetit!"*
~Edge, 31, Catahoula Leopard Dog, U.S. Coast Guard Diver

"So, y'all lot are the ones that survived?" Kirk asks, overlooking the canines one by one. "Robbi, least you cleaned up between then and now."

"Sure I did, and this baby held on!" the mutt lifts his shirt to show his pierced nipple.

"Don't speak too soon, I just might ask you to take it out again," the bloodhound replies, earning a snort from the mutt and a collective chuckle. "Kyle, the old Sarge learned a new trick, huh? Them old bones worked for something, I see!"

The German Shepherd instinctively takes a step forward, looking straight at his fellow military dog. "With all due respect, sir, 'old' is a mental state. I'm here to prove myself as much as any other, I know I managed to kick tail this far, and I'm looking forward to kicking some more!"

"That's the spirit!" the bloodhound laughs. "And, of course, cannot miss addressing my... favorite," he directs his eyes to the redhead canine. "From that day, I was sure there was something... special about this one, and I was right."

"I don't believe you, but okay," Edge replies without missing a beat, as smug of a façade as he could muster.

Kirk raises a brow, his expression changing almost imperceptibly. "Huh?" he says, glaring at the Catahoula.

"Let's be honest, Kirk. I've been Edge through and through, and I'm still standing... so... guess a seaman can admit he shot prematurely. As a treat," the Coast Guard winks, the others failing to keep a straight face at his remark.

"I see you haven't learned anything from our confrontation, have you?" the bloodhound says.

"Nothing at all!" Edge grins, Kyle visibly frowning at his dismissive demeanor. "And hey, it's working just fine, baby!"

"First of all, call me 'baby' one more time and you'll see how fine your ass will be doing," the officer says, leering. "And second, I'll make sure to keep a special eye on ya as long as I'm here, as a *treat*," he adds, the Catahoula grinning and wagging his tail for good measure.

"Sir Kirk, dawg, if I can cut out from Spots over here... where's our regular host?" Dionte asks, puzzled.

"Ludwig's out finishing the details of your experience, and entrusted me to give you a proper welcome to Panama," the bloodhound answers. "Right now, we are in Fort Sherman, a former U.S. Army Base which was built in the early 20th century as means to defend the Panama Canal. After the end of World War II, it got repurposed as a training center to prepare American military forces for jungle warfare," he says, encompassing the extent of the facilities with an arm.

"Wow, I heard of this place before," Kyle nods. "But it got decommissioned, right? The Army's doing jungle training in Hawaii right now."

"Talk talk talk..." Edge whispers to Dionte. "It's all Army nerds do."

"Exactly," the bloodhound responds, pretending he didn't hear the Catahoula. "In 1999, this base was turned over to Panama, and it's been used sparsely by the local Army forces ever since. But it still holds some of the most grueling terrain you may run across in your life, and you'll have plenty of time to get accustomed to that during your stay here."

*"For some reason, the jungle doesn't scare me as much as the Mojave desert or wherever else Ludwig might have thought of sending us." *the bull terrier nods confidently to the bloodhound's spiel* "I have experienced similar conditions before, and I know I'm coming more than prepared for this test. Takes more than a few bugs and critters to spook me!"*
~Jaxton, 26, Bull Terrier, Camera Operator/Mountaineer

"So, are you ready to enter your living quarters?" Kirk asks the group. "During your stay here, you'll be sleeping in one of the buildings which used to host the visiting troops at the fort. It has been refurbished since, but be sure to set up mosquito nets and use the running water sparingly..."

"Eh, I had it worse!" Robbi chuckles.

"Oh and, for the last piece of information before you get settled in," Kirk addresses the group. "Six of you have touched down in Panama... but the next stage has only space for four."

The canines stand shocked, some staring at the bloodhound, others at the dog next to them. "So that's two..." Nickolas whispers.

"That's right. On this trip, after all is said and done, four of you will return to the Pound and two of you will go home," the bloodhound nods.

*"Oh this shit's getting good! It's gonna be wraps for two of these people, and sorry, but fuckers gotta go and cinch the next immunity and leave the rest to their luck." *points to self* "I'm fuckers." laughs**
~Edge, 31, Catahoula Leopard Dog, U.S. Coast Guard Diver

**low, guttural chuckling, followed by a click of his tongue* "America, the heat's turned up to the highest setting. Two of these dawgs are gonna be put out for good. There's blood in the water and I can smell it, and I'll be sure said blood won't be mine when this gig's done!"*

~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner

After following a short path in the jungle, the group reaches their destination: a big, barrack-style construction, part of a similar complex of identical military sleeping quarters. Dionte is the first to head in, letting out a sigh at his surroundings as the inside doesn't reveal to be much other than a common area, a single bathroom and a humble bedroom with six unassuming beds.

"It ain't the Ritz, but it ain't Fallujah either..." Kyle shrugs, looking around.

All dogs quickly settle for spots and roughly disrobe, eager to shower and wash away the grime of the long trip and the persistent humidity.

*"There's been an underlying tension ever since Kirk said two of us will go home. Dunno how or when that bridge will be crossed, but I can't be the only one thinking... who would I rather have gone on my path to the end?" *camera focuses on Jaxton, Dionte and Edge talking, then on Kyle helping Robbi up* "There are just too many factors to consider to just say this dog or this other dog..."*

~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

"The big question is... who do you think should go?" Jaxton asks Dionte, his tone of voice low as others are seemingly distracted with their own businesses. "And rather more than the usual 'weakest one gotta go' answer..."

The Rottweiler leans against the wall, pondering the bull terrier's question. "If it's a matter of track record and attitude, dawg, my mind hasn't changed. If we gotta pick two, Kyle and Nick be comin' short."

"Thing is... Kyle won the last challenge as a cap, and Nick won the big immunity and got here first. Track record may be one thing, but some people are just going to win immunity no matter how many times they lost before," the mountaineer huffs. "If we're going by competition, the one that must go is... Robbi?"

"Thought you two were pals..." Dionte shakes his head.

"And you with him, Mister Mutt Makeover, huh? I'm also pals with Nick, and Kyle, and hell Edge and I are cool for the most part," Jaxton shrugs. "It doesn't kill the fact that I'm still competing against these people. And it doesn't kill the fact Robbi's been fucking acing this. Five wins in a row, one as cap, getting his footing right in challenges, liked by all of us..."

The barber peeks at the wolfhound as he chills on his bed, waiting for his turn to shower. "Ya right. If we let Robbi get to the final two, he gonna Hoover all the damn votes, whatever the

final challenges be,” he says, biting his lip in slight annoyance. “Dawg’s made no enemies but Lance, and he got the best story to boot. No one here stands a chance against him, I tell ya.”

“I don’t wanna say...” the bull terrier points in an exaggerated way. “YOU gotta go home! But fuck... this is so messed up to even talk about.”

*“Robbi’s basically my lil’ bro, but as much as he and I are cool, there’s still that twang in my mind about how the vote went. I think he did manage to bamboozle me when he voted for Edge. He made his move... to ensure no one made a move at all.” *low growl* “I still believe the dawg with the worst record gotta go, but this puts shit in perspective on my journey to the end... and that does include you, Jax. I’m not forgetting you had it too good for too damn long.”*

~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner

Meanwhile, Kyle’s the first to return from the shower - his short, black and tan fur coat still damp in spots as he hops to the bed closest to the door and lets himself fall on the mattress, clad only in his compression shorts. On the bed nearby, Robbi scoots closer to the shepherd, seemingly trying to catch his attention.

“Dude...” the wolfhound whispers. “Is it just me, or people are like... avoiding me?” he says, nervously fidgeting with his rat-tail.

“Maybe that’s cuz you haven’t showered yet,” Kyle jokes. “To be fair, everyone’s avoiding everyone ever since Kirk left.”

“Yep, but...” Robbi replies, unconvinced. “Feels like it started with the last vote, and me saving Edge instead of Jax,” he says. “I don’t want people to think I’m... kinda lettin’ the game get to my head, you know?”

*“This part of the game’s always the one that wrecks my vibe.” *the wolfhound looks as the shepherd puts his compression sock on* “With six dogs left, everyone’s at a hair trigger to just go bite off the jugular of the fucker next to them. But I can’t let this get to me. I always find a way to adapt, and it’s time to take my little play in stride.”*

~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed

“I think you had your reasons, and Nick likely would have voted to save Jaxton anyway, so you just delayed the obvious result a bit,” Kyle rubs his muzzle. “Guess the big question I gotta ask you is who you think got to kick the bucket. It’s gonna be two this time.”

“Thing is... I don’t really know?” Robbi shrugs. “I’m on good terms with all, but hey...” he says. “It’s hard to let go of anyone.”

Kyle leans over the mutt, looking around before lowering his voice. “You, me, Nick. I feel those three are ones I’d like to see continue. The rest I feel would be trouble.”

"Hear ya on Nick, but who's number four?" Robbi asks. "See, D is a ride or die, but Jax's been growing on me a ton. And I know you and Edge butt heads n' shit, but he's been solid too."

"At this point you gotta think of it in terms of competition. Out of those three, Jaxton could be the more trouble in general, while Diente's stubborn and has good rep around the Pound. For me, it's Edge and one of those two, but dunno who yet," Kyle whispers.

"I guess..." Robbi sighs. "It'll be painful whatever goes, for sure. I hope I'm not asked to damage anyone!" he nervously laughs. "If I gotta think of somethin', I think Diente's scarier in the fighting challenges, and Edge got the edge... pun intended... in whatever's water themed or super formally athletic," he says. "Talking game alone, I rather take my chances against Jaxton, 'cause his skills are closer to mine."

"It's going to be a bitter battle, and it's all about testing the waters and feeling the environment. If it was on my call, I'd have Edge packing for good, while Jaxton and Diente have been pains in different ways, though my gut says... Jaxton. There's something about him that I feel I don't wanna face in the next stage. I feel I can predict Diente, but the bully's different."

~Kyle, 40, German Shepherd, U.S. Army First Sergeant

"It's Kyle and Diente..." Nickolas succinctly tells Edge, both hanging out just outside, overlooking the ocean. "It may be an emotional decision, but after what I saw, I feel those two should go next."

"Well, we agree on one," Edge chuckles. "But Diente? Really? Taking out the shit he said, is he one you gotta... kick out ASAP?"

"Then who else?" the coyote asks back.

The Catahoula ponders a bit, though seemingly already having an answer in his mind. "You gotta start thinking about who you'd rather not face in the Gauntlet. Jaxton's been a proven pain in challenges, and you just KNOW Robbi would charm the jury like no one else."

*"Thing with who's got to go, and I don't feel this is overconfidence... I think I can... take on Jaxton and Robbi." *the coyote is shown listening to Edge* "Sure, they've been scary competitors, but I feel I got what it takes now that the game has shifted to an individual state. I trust my own talents, and I trust I know who I am facing."*

~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

"So, if Robbi and Jaxton are big competition, why is Kyle someone who's dead certain to go?" the native asks. "After all, it's like, what? Two weeks of dealing with whoever's left?"

"I just don't... want him around," Edge responds. "He's been going after me ever since the early days, and... trust me, he can be a true blue motherfucker when he wants to. I know if there's a chance of him having any kinda power between now and the end, he's dead set on using it against me. He's fucking shady!"

"So who's *really* making an emotional decision between us?" Nickolas chuckles.

The Catahoula raises his paws in defiance. "Aw, Nick, it's not emotional! A dog needs to cover his ass!"

"True, and I feel Diente's gonna keep yapping at mine until I break, hence," the coyote shrugs. "Ever since the final seven, he's been trying to stir shit against me, and well, he is the strongest of us six. Can't have that in the fighting challenges against us and you know we'll be fighting, or throwing hands, as he says..."

*"Me and Nick haven't had the chance to be close so far in the game, but I can see he got a solid plan and he's hunting for allies to help him put it into motion." *the Catahoula is shown listening to the coyote* "The good thing is that he's indirectly telling me that I'd be spared, so that's a point for me. He could be a great tool to propel me into that final four where I feel... I can take him."*

~Edge, 31, Catahoula Leopard Dog, U.S. Coast Guard Diver

The evening passes by without much going on, all six dogs getting used to their new sleeping quarters and killing the time in different ways - be it socializing, eating their rations, or simply tending to themselves. Eventually, though, they all gather in the common bedroom, all too pumped about the new situation and the impending challenges to go to sleep early.

"So you want the same buzz?" Diente asks Edge.

"Yep," the Catahoula nods, pointing at the back of his head and the messy tufts of red hair. "It's grown a fair bit since I made the Pound, so might as well tidy up a little."

"Damn, you took the kit even here?" Kyle asks.

"Hey, you keep your gadget, I keep mine!" Diente replies, not missing a beat, as Edge settles down in the middle of the room on a makeshift barber seat. The whole group gathers around, mostly lying on their beds, all pretty curious to see the Rottweiler working on the Catahoula.

*"I might as well keep the cuttin' and the clippin' going, the boys back home wouldn't want me gettin' rusty! Plus, these dawgs need help..." *the Rottweiler takes out his clippers, looking at Edge* "...hella help."*

~Diente, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner

"Whatcha think it's happening tomorrow?" Jaxton wonders, taking a large bite out of his pre-packaged dinner. "We haven't heard shit from our ferret ever since arriving. I don't think we should let him by himself this long."

"Something's definitely cooking," Edge responds, looking straight as Diente instructs him to keep still. "I'm thinking all of his scare tactics have to be for a reason. Dunno, maybe they off

someone right away, and then we all play in the second challenge to get a massive advantage for the third?”

“Maybe we getting a reward?” Kyle asks, looking at Nickolas. “Cuz this is too much of a downgrade from the Pound for us to just be fine with it.”

The Catahoula glances at the German Shepherd. “Thought you’d be used to barracking and eating a shitty MRE,” he says to the veteran.

“You’re *kind of* a servicedog, you should be used to this as well...” Kyle replies, furrowing his brows.

“Hell naw, the Coast Guard treats its officers better,” Edge says, just as Dione begins running his clippers on the back of his head. “Though if you insist, I can just... expedite you back to Chicago or wherever!” he jokes, leaning back on the chair.

“Okay, Imma need you to stay still or you’ll walk out with one ear less than you walked in, hear?” the Rottweiler adds in a deadpan tone.

“Damn, you’d think I’d be a tougher client!” Robbi chortles. “Whatcha think, Big D? Is Kirk gonna fall for the military cut and stop badgerin’ him?”

“Nah, he’s still him,” Dione chuckles. “He may be actin’ a puppy sometimes, but he be here for a reason.”

“And I did it without pandering to him once!” Edge jokes.

“Speaking of puppies, I realize Kyle’s the only dad left,” Nickolas adds, sitting cross-legged on his bed. “In the former season, they had two, John and Arron...”

“But they had one kid each, if I remember. Kyle here’s got them beat by double,” Jaxton jokes.

The German Shepherd chuckles at the quip. “Heh, what can I say? The tribe’s gotta keep strong!” he laughs, winking at the coyote. “Seriously though... I got the best family I could ever have hoped for, and I don’t regret shit about fatherhood. Hope y’all get to see what I mean one day,” he adds. “Which... have any of you plan to have your own?”

“Nah, I got my life plan set, and won’t be for like another three or four years. I got some good mileage on the playing field, dawg!” Dione laughs, moving the Catahoula’s ear up to keep detailing. “Only one tops though. None of that largeass fam’ business you got there.”

“I will say...” Nickolas intervenes. “Me and my girlfriend have talked about it, but we both feel it’s too soon. She’s younger than me, and we kinda lack the stability to make it work,” he says, fidgeting with his long ponytail. “One day, though.”

“Single, and too young,” Jaxton dismisses the question.

"Do I *look* like I can provide all that shit to a lil' one?" Robbi loudly exclaims. "I oversee a ton of youngsters as is, I don't need to bring more to this world, the fuck? Plus I fancy the liberty too much to get tied up, and ya can't keep strayin' if ya gotta provide for a pup, innit?"

"What about you, Ed?" Kyle directs the question to the redhead canine, looking at his freshly finished buzz.

"Oh..." The Catahoula passes a paw behind his neck, visibly uneasy at the turn the conversation has taken. "I... guess at some point? Dunno," he says, somewhat dismissing the shepherd.

"C'mon, dawg, we all said something!" Dionte chuckles. "Is it ya lackin' the material?"

Edge snarls at the Rottweiler more defensively than intended, shaking his head. "That's um... just like... I never really gave that much thought? Mostly focusing on my career right now, and whatever comes..." he ponders halfheartedly. "I'm working hard to make sure I can make room for it once I'm done guardin', that's all."

"Sore spot, huh?" Robbi innocently asks, as the redhead canine stands up to check himself in the bathroom mirror.

*"So... Everyone starts talking about puppies and life, and what they wanna do in the future, and I'm there like..." *the camera shows the five socializing* "I don't really wanna do this, not in front of the whole group." *goes quiet for a second, biting his lower lip* "There are... things I made sure to not bring up while I'm here. Cards close to my chest n' all. But while they're likely on the path of growing what they got, I'm on the path of cutting that out and going somewhere else. I don't want to keep in the Coast Guard forever, I know there's something out there for me, but if I say that, they'll use that against me as me being noncommittal or some shit, probably. But there are more important things right now, and I want to fully dedicate myself to them."*

~Edge, 31, Catahoula Leopard Dog, U.S. Coast Guard Diver

June 10, 2023

7:00 AM

"Wake up, lazybones!"

On the second day, Kirk comes to summon the group fairly early, blowing an airhorn into the dogs' living space.

"Bro, what the fuck?" Edge props up, pulling himself out of the sheets with a big yawn.

"It's drill time, Coastie!" Kyle taps the redhead canine's shoulder, having already pulled the mosquito net off his bed. "Lagrou ain't waiting, let's go!"

The Catahoula's expression turns visibly annoyed. "Drills? Again? Can we just move to the fucking challenge?" he grumbles, stepping up and getting dressed nevertheless.

**the camera shows Robbi and Nickolas heading out* "I dunno what's goin' on, it's action time alla sudden, and we don't even have the luxury of a damn explanation! Did Ludwig even arrive to the right country?"*

~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed

"Okay, noseflaps, what happened?" Edge asks bluntly. "Did you get the scent and gotta tell us or what?"

The bloodhound crosses his arms over his chest. "Ludwig's got his paws tied in a situation and asked me to take care of you guys for the time being," he says, paying no mind to the Catahoula's comment. "Hence, today I'll be leading you to some basic jungle survival training. We'll be heading straight to the heart of this forest and I'll teach you how to navigate and travel through the wilderness. Y'all with me, cadets?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Kyle loudly states, others following suit.

"But don't you gonna tell us where he is?" Jaxton asks, confused. "You said situation, is he in the ICU or?"

The bloodhound officer turns towards the bull terrier. "No, nothing that serious. He'll be back soon," he says. "Let's get going now!"

**the whole group marches through the terrain* "There's something oddly beautiful about all of these surroundings. Almost untouched nature; a greenery and jungle deal that doesn't look the same as the middle of South Dakota, I'll tell you that! It feels like such a before and after from the last challenges. We're neck deep in the real deal!"*

~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

A few hours pass by as Kirk leads the six through the thick vegetation, often stopping to instruct them how to navigate the dense marsh. They end up rappelling down a steep cliff - Jaxton easily leading the group down the slippery rocks, while Robbi and Dione look decidedly more stumped but manage to complete the task thanks to the bloodhound's advice.

"You see that?" the officer suddenly points towards a large tree, having noticed a pretty large snake coiled around a lower branch - its camouflaged pattern making it almost impossible to distinguish it against the scenery. "That's a *boa imperator*, or common boa. Maybe the most widespread snake around these lands... a male specimen, likely, given its size and length," he whispers. "We've been pretty lucky to catch him, they're usually more active during twilight."

"Okay, Crocodile Dundee..." Edge snarks.

"Dawg, we even got snakes n' shit, what the fuck?" Dione confusedly points out. "We finna die in these woods and shit..."

"Nah, not on my watch," Officer Lagrou replies, allowing the group some time to look closely at the reptile before moving on. "Boas can bite, but they're usually not dangerous unless they get provoked. They're commonly kept as pets, after all."

"I guess..." Robbi nervously comments, taking one last look at the snake before following the rest of the group.

*"Listen, listen. I know all about the underbelly of the big cities and the shady deals of the suburbs. I can deal with that in my sleep. But deep wilderness like in the nature documentaries? Outta my element." *the wolfhound is shown tripping on a protruding tree root* "I'm tryna gettin' whatever piece o' notion I can, hoping it can be helpful for whatever's to come like I did in Vegas, but you can't make a jungle dog outta city stray in a day, yah?" ~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed*

Eventually, the entire group returns to base camp, all pretty tired and muddled after the exhausting walk under the jungle canopy. "Y'all got thirty minutes to get squeaky clean and change into your challenge clothes," Kirk says in a stern tone. "I'll be waiting for you here and driving you down to the battlefield."

"Can we even get a hint of a damn explanation?" Edge blurts out, clearly annoyed and frustrated.

"What's there to explain?" the bloodhound steps up to the Catahoula, raising his tone as he gets inches from his muzzle. "You came here to compete in challenges or what, cadet?"

"Did ya off Luddy or what?" the spotted dog asks back, incredulously scoffing. "We're bordering on absurd here!"

Kirk lowers his voice, punctuating each word. "You'll know... what you need to know... once you change. OK?"

*"I don't know what's going on and it fucking irks me. I've just been through a three-hour jungle walk for literally no reason, and now we're ordered to get out for another challenge with no explanation or whatever shit?" *the Catahoula reluctantly makes his way back into the barracks* "Kirk, I tell ya... whatever it takes, I'm not gonna leave this game under your watch. Order me around, call me names, whatever. I showed ya once, I'll show ya again." ~Edge, 31, Catahoula Leopard Dog, U.S. Coast Guard Diver*

Clad in their green challenge clothes, the six dogs get on a large 4x4 six-seater and driven to another location - a large clearing just off the ocean, where a large, 40-feet tall web-like structure has been built between trees. As Kirk instructs them to dismount the vehicle, a familiar figure steps out of the fray, clad in the same camo uniform the bloodhound is sporting.

"Welcome to Panama, guys..." Ludwig says, bumping fists with Kirk as the whole group settles in front of the two. "I take my buddy treated you well during my absence?"

"Nope," Edge replies, others cracking up.

"Dunno how long we were in there, but damn, we know the place now, for sure!" Dionte says.

The stoat rubs his paws together. "Well, you all know by now that here on American Canine Alpha, everything happens for a reason. I called Drill Instructor Lagrou to teach you some basic skills that will be useful to you throughout your stay here," he says with a smirk.

*"Or did you call him cuz you wanted a small vacation?" *chuckles* "Come on, Luddy, be honest! We're family at this point!"*

~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed

"You ready to take on your first Individual Challenge of this cycle?" he says, everyone answering with a loud cheer. "Today's challenge is called Jungle Web, and will test your agility, speed and stamina. On my go, you'll rush to ascend this giant web-like structure, trying to block each other as you see fit. Your ultimate goal is to reach the top platform," the stoat says, Jaxton immediately nodding along as he points to the big contraption behind him. "We'll play this in multiple rounds, with the last two competitors to get up there getting the boot until it's just two dogs left. Whoever reaches the platform first in the final round wins the challenge."

*"A climbing challenge? Baby, I got this a thousand percent. I'm ready to win this, no sweat." *the bull terrier giddily jumps in place* "I'll start this green jersey chapter with a bang!"*

~Jaxton, 26, Bull Terrier, Camera Operator/Mountaineer

"However, I must point out. You won't be playing for immunity nor elimination," the stoat points out, leaving the group perplexed. "For this occasion, you'll be competing solely... for reward."

Before he can add anything, a young coyote girl with long, jet black hair comes out from behind the woods. As the rest of the group looks over in shock, Nickolas' eyes pop wide open, taking his paws to his muzzle and yelling in disbelief. "Nick!" she exclaims.

"Sammi! What?" he exclaims, running towards her for a rough, but loving hug.

Ludwig turns to the rest of the group as they finally realize what was happening, looking at each other in shock and anticipation for what's to come. "Everyone, this is Samantha Little Thunder..."

"My girlfriend, people!" Nickolas screams, laughing in disbelief. "What are you... How-"

Sammi laughs openly, looking up at the taller coyote. "I'm doing great! Everyone is, we're all rooting for you," she says. "How are YOU doing, though?"

"Much better now," he replies, trying to hold back a tear as he places a quick kiss on the side of her snout.

"Nick, what does this moment mean to you?" Ludwig asks.

The coyote turns to the host, still hugging his girlfriend. "It means everything, Ludwig," he says, slightly choking on his words. "I've known Sammi since we were teens, and like... she's not just my girlfriend, she's my best friend and my one true confidant. Having her here's like... Nick, let's do this, you got one more reason to fight now," he says, the whole group politely clapping.

*"To be honest, the first thing in my mind is 'I could not have been a bigger idiot'. Just a couple of days ago I was about to give away all of this in a moment of weakness that doesn't even compare to the ones I've been through in my life." *Nickolas and Sammi kiss before he returns to the line* "There's simply no way I'll get out of here without the title now. I will fight for Sammi, for mom, for the Runsabov brothers' clan, and there's no one that can stop me now."*

~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

"Dionte..." Ludwig calls for the barber's attention. "It's your turn now. Are you ready?"

The Rottweiler answers with a huge grin. "I am, dawg, bring 'em in!"

"If you say so... Demetrius, come on over!" A stocky Rottweiler dressed in baggy clothes walks in, slightly prancing as he motions towards his older brother.

"Yoooooooooooo!" Dionte dashes to give a firm handshake to his brother, soon evolving into a hug. "Bro, what is good?"

"You being still here's what's good, dawg!" Demetrius answers, stepping back to take a look at the bigger canine. "I hope y'all be schoolin' them good!"

The stoat host and the bloodhound can't help but chuckle at the impromptu family reunion. "So, Dionte..." he says. "We've seen many sides of you here on AMA, but this family visit is certainly showing us a whole new facet. What does it mean to have Demetrius next to you right now?"

"Ludwig, the Lord could have given me any dawg to be my brother..." Dionte says, visibly emotional, putting his paw on the younger Rottweiler's shoulder before shaking it. "But thank FUCK he gave me this one!"

*"Growin' up, I was thankful I had rocks in life that made me the rottie I am today. Mom, Demetrius, my aunties, good pals that were on the right path, and so on." *the Rottweiler returns to the line, still hollering to his brother* "I know there are many lil' ones out there that do not get those privileges, and Demetrius being here reminds me of a big reason why I am here. To be an Alpha for the people, to be the Alpha Atlanta deserves, and make a true splash all around. I'm pumped, let's fucking do this."*

~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner

"Ayo Ludwig, before we move on, can I say one more thing to D?" Demetrius calls out.

“Sure, go ahead!” the stoat agrees.

The Rottweiler clasps his paws together, looking at Diente.

“Fellas here, you gotta see this dawg got fight
You try fucking with him, then it’s on sight
Gotta say what I feel
You got your Alpha, that’s the deal
That’s Diente Howard, signed and sealed!”

“Aw, dawg, that’s what’s up!” Diente claps. “Y’all, that’s my bro!”

The group collectively hoops and hollers as Ludwig moves to the next dog in line. “Edge, you ready to see who made the trip to see you?”

The Catahoula stretches the neck of his jersey over his muzzle, looking in uncharacteristic anxiety, a slight nod and a stare to Ludwig as his only answer.

“Well, let’s meet your girlfriend, Rue!”

All canines look at each other in shock as a shapely Bluetick Hound girl dressed in a light grey cardigan and bleached jeans walks in, cheerfully waving towards the Catahoula and the rest of the group.

Uncharacteristically to the persona his rivals have come to know, Edge gingerly walks towards Rue, his disbelief turning into happiness as he hugs her tightly. “I can’t believe you’re here!” he finally says, before kissing his girlfriend.

“Damn, did ya know?” Diente whispers to Kyle, who shakes his head in return. “He’s been holdin’ out on us. Baddie, capital B...”

“Shit, ya could have told us!” Robbi excitedly waves at the Catahoula and his girlfriend, casually winking at the girl. “If I can say so, you got good taste, Coastie!”

Edge ignores the wolfhound, looking lovingly at Rue as Ludwig turns towards him. “Edge, by the looks of the rest, I take you’re not the only one surprised Rue is here...” the mustelid comments.

“See, there’s things I feel kinda hard to open about with people I barely know, and I’m trying to be as focused on the game as I can,” the spotted dog answers. “That doesn’t make me love her any less. We’ve known each other for years, been through a whole rollercoaster together, and really... there’s no one else I’d rather have with me right now.”

Rue smiles. “Before he left, I told him... Ed, do all you gotta do to win this and let them have it,” she says, clutching the Catahoula’s arm. “I know all that he’s been through, so there’s very little he’s afraid of, and I know the moment he applied to be here that he was going to make it to the end. We’re halfway there, but I’m sure he’s going to claim this title!”

"If they thought I was a hardass, I just know she'd have all of them defeated in half the time." Edge chortles. "She's one of the most ambitious, beautiful people I know inside and out. Love you so much." he says, quickly kissing her.

*"I've never felt more in tune with someone than I am with this girl. I don't really wanna sugarcoat stuff, but... I know I can be a whole lot to deal with, for good or bad, and having someone this supportive at my side is a blessing I sometimes feel I don't deserve." *sighs* "I'm glad I could introduce her to the group the proper way, and above all, I'm glad she's here to see me crushing this challenge for her."*
~Edge, 31, Catahoula Leopard Dog, U.S. Coast Guard Diver

"Now, Robbi..." Ludwig directs his sights on the expecting wolfhound. "We are aware of your particular circumstance, and just how sparse your inner circle has been," he says, the mutt nodding and understanding. "But... there is someone who came to see you. Wanna know who it is?"

"I guess we all kinda do!" Jaxton exclaims, patting the wolfhound's back.

"Y'all didn't trace up my mom and dad, right?" Robbi jokes.

"Not really," Ludwig can't help but chuckle. "But from what *she* told us, *she* could not wait to see you. Come on over, Chris!"

A shriek pierces the jungle as a young possum girl with bleached hair, wearing a black T-shirt over a pair of loud, red street trousers, comes out running and throws herself into Robbi's arms. The wolfhound picks her up and lifts her, visibly beaming, not wasting a word before joining his lips to hers in a greedy kiss.

"Whoa..." Nickolas looks away, bashfully, as Robbi and Chris smooch in a way that makes his own loved one meetup look dull in comparison.

"That's quite the greeting!" Ludwig laughs. "One call to Mount Vernon Safe Harbor Shelter, and turns out someone was up and able to make the trip all the way here! Robbi, care to tell us the story?"

"Woohoo!" Robbi hollers, reluctantly breaking the kiss and setting the girl down. "Duuuuude, you made a stray's day here! Chris here came into the system a couple years ago, and we've hit it off ever since. She also knows the importance of offering a helping paw to those in need, has lived, survived, and thrived in homelessness, and most importantly, she got the stray spirit through and through!" he beams, struggling to contain his excitement.

"You know, I'm always surprised that you talk in such good spirits about your situation," the stoat says. "Can you add something to this, Chris? What does your bond with Robbi mean to you?"

"This guy's special, but I'm sure you all know that by now," the possum girl answers, slightly flustered, all canines nodding along in agreement. "When you called, I was like... 'I dunno where the hell you are, but I'm going.' I ain't gonna leave this mutt hangin'! He has... done

so much for me, that being sent to wherever the fuck in the world and go through all of the drama of flying is nothing," she says. "Whatever there is I could give back to Robbi, it's a done deal."

"Same goes," the wolfhound replies, brushing his lips against hers for another kiss before turning to the group. "If ya can get yerself a friend like this possum thang, fuckin' do so!"

*"There always was a part of my brain that said that while others were gonna get their families, you'll be left solo, and that's all okay. But man..." *shakes his head* "...I'm in a lucky position that I got to build a stellar family from what many would say is nothing, and that when you're dedicated to bettering lives, they will thank you back. And I'm good goddamn sure that Chris is thankful for the advice on trying to get some papers when you can now!"*
~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed

"Hey, Jax!" Ludwig turns to the excitable bull terrier. "We got someone waiting for you, too!"

"Let's go, Lud!" Jaxton yells, jumping excitedly on his spot. "Who's that?"

"Come over, Colton!"

"YOU FUCKING DID NOT!" the dog yells, immediately running to hug the bobcat as soon as he enters the frame. The feline is clad in casual skater wear, with chunky sneakers, old jeans and a band t-shirt.

"Ya still hit hard, egghead!" Colton chuckles.

"From what I was told, you've been best friends ever since childhood, right?" Ludwig asks.

"We are!" Jaxton answers. "Can't even start to tell ya all the shit we got in together! Dude's been my partner in crime through my skating years, and like..."

"Pre-K, elementary, high school, even some time together in college. We've been this close since forever!" Colton bellows. "Sure, Jax here had a wild hair up his ass to climb mountains and shit, but we still keep in touch nearly every day!"

*"I came into this not quite knowing what to expect 'cause my family's really busy as is, and they kinda made it clear to me this was my deal and they'd rather not appear. Nothing against me, they just don't like TV and whatever." *shrugs* "But having my best bro here? Incredible. Colton means the world to me, and him being here is huge."*
~Jaxton, 26, Bull Terrier, Camera Operator/Mountaineer

The lynx hugs the bull terrier tightly, his muzzle next to his ear. "Hey, focus on the next big challenge. Save your energy," Colton whispers as Jaxton flinches.

"What th-"

"Don't worry 'bout me. Save your energy," Colton insists, sending off the bull terrier back in line in the most natural way he could.

“And finally, Kyle...” Ludwig talks to the veteran, barely able to contain his emotions. “Who do you think has made the trip here to see you?”

“I’m sure it’s Emily,” he says, trying to answer as composed as he can.

The stoat host shakes his head as he smiles. “No.”

As soon as the athletic German Shepherd teenager walks in, Kyle can’t help but bend over in shock. “OH MY GOD!” the veteran kneels down, sobbing, as the youngster is the one that goes towards the others, pulling him into a hug.

“It is none other than your son, Hunter!” Ludwig replies, the entire group and even Kirk clapping along at the heartwarming scene.

“Dad, you did it!” Hunter says, clutching the older dog’s hands as he visibly gets emotional.

“I cannot believe... Come here, you!” Kyle exclaims between sobs, positively squeezing the youngster tight.

Ludwig looks in awe at the emotional reunion. “Kyle... I’m sure this display, this moment, says all you wanted to say.”

Kyle attempts to control his breathing, holding his head, his eyes still glassy with tears. “Ludwig, I’ve grown to expect literally whatever from this game, but not this,” he says, finally managing to get some composure. “For Hunter to come here on his own, just to be here and support me... I don’t wanna be repetitive, but my kids really do mean the world to me.”

The stoat turns towards the younger shepherd, still beaming at his father. “So, Hunter, we all got to know your dad and we know to what degree he has pushed himself in order to be where he is today. But... how is he in his routine? His day to day?”

“Well, I-”

“Wait, what does your mother say about you getting all the way here? Alone?” Kyle interrupts, others laughing at the sudden parenting. “Don’t give your siblings ideas!”

“Yeah dad, I escaped from home for good without telling anybody...” Hunter sarcastically chides, playfully pushing his dad’s muzzle. “It was mom’s idea, she wouldn’t go and leave all four of us by ourselves. Flying here alone was the easy part, you know I’ve gone out by myself for school sport stuff!”

“Oh you...” Kyle shakes his head, then turns to Ludwig and Kirk. “That’s Hunter. Whatever you propose to him, he’s in, full send. Same as me at his age, really,” he says, messing with his son’s hair much to his annoyance. “I’m sure he’ll make for a great dog, and I am so thankful for him to be here and see his old man kicking tail!”

The young shepherd chuckles. "And he does make for a great dad. I guess sometimes he can be a bit too controlling... shut up, it's true!" he laughs as Kyle looks like he wants to intervene. "But as he always tells me 'I've done so much with one leg, imagine what you can do with two. The world's yours'. And yeah, I guess that just drives me to achieve what I wanna."

*"The fellas don't understand how big this actually is." *sniffles* "Hunter, Kameron, Grace, Kara, they're my everything, and having them play their part in supporting me as I supported them over the years, it's just... the most welcome role reversal of all. Regardless of what happens, this little meeting only bolsters my resolve to go all the way."*
~Kyle, 40, German Shepherd, U.S. Army First Sergeant

"Well, and there's no doubt that purebred puppy's yours, a mutt he ain't..." Robbi chortles, trying to lighten the mood.

Kyle turns towards the wolfhound. "He doesn't need your bad influence either!" he says in a playful tone.

"I hate to break up all of these moments," Ludwig nods, "But there's a reward to earn, and I'm pretty sure you're eager to know all the details..."

"Lud, I just gotta know one thing," Kyle comments, turning to Hunter. "I hope you've been taking care of your brother and sisters, mister. No funny business even when I'm out."

Hunter sighs, amused. "No dad, Grace isn't picking fights with Kameron and Kara's too busy playing with her toys and tablet to take sides. Satisfied?"

"Very much so," Kyle replies, clutching Hunter's waist one last time before letting him join the other loved ones.

"Alright, y'all..." Ludwig intervenes again. "I'm sure your loved ones being here is already enough motivation for you to compete, but allow me to explain what else is at stake in this challenge. The winner and his loved one will get to spend one day and one night at Gamboa Rainforest Reserve, an exotic resort overlooking the Panama canal, nestled in the middle of a pristine, lush natural paradise," he says, everyone's ears perking at the revelation. "You'll get to experience a taste of the jungle, with plenty of comforts and activities to choose from, as well as the chance to spend a night out of the Fort Sherman barracks and rest in a real bed."

*"I know it's a bit egotistical of me, and that coming here and getting to see Edge should be more than enough..." *the girl watches anxiously from the sidelines as the six get fitted and secured to the top of the structure* "But I really, really hope he manages to snag this prize for ourselves."*

~Rue, 29, Bluetick Coonhound, Edge's Girlfriend

"It's like daaang, that'll be shit I don't know if I'll even live to get this naturally! Robbi, come the fuck on, let's win us a five-star experience for once in our lives. Let the rags experience the riches, bitch!"

~Chris, 20, Virginia Opossum, Robbi's Roommate

"You heard Officer Logemann, only the first four to reach the top platform will get to move to the next round," Kirk tells the six, standing in different spots around the circular, web-like structure. "Physical contact is allowed, so get strategic!"

*"This challenge should be my fucking bread and butter, and yet again I got Colton's words ringing in my head. 'Save your energy, Jax!'... In other words, throw the damn thing." *scoffs**
*"Spending this reward with him would be a godsend, but I don't know if I want to get into a discussion about other couples 'deserving' this more than us. Dogs here have resented others for a lot less, and I gotta keep an eye on the biggest prize..." *laughs** *"This asshole cat, I swear!"*

~Jaxton, 26, Bull Terrier, Camera Operator/Mountaineer

"Are you ready?" the stoat host yells, all six nodding in determination. "GO!"

As soon as the air horn sounds, all six begin climbing the web - their feet quickly finding the gaps as they move up, twisting and turning in tune with the structure's motion. While most of the contestants shoot straight for the top, Nickolas instantly gets climbing to his right, trying to cross Jaxton's path before he can gain ground on the rest.

"Hey!" the bull terrier utters as the coyote pulls close to his frame, climbing in his immediate proximity and somehow impeding his motions. Looking around, he can see Edge trying to pull the same trick on Kyle - the veteran making quick work of the web despite the impediment of his prosthesis. The Catahoula doesn't hold back, shouldering him and making him lose his footing for a second before resuming his ascent.

"Dad, no!" Hunter yells, as the shepherd is left hanging by his left elbow and his healthy leg for a second - fumbling to resume his grip on the web while Edge makes visible gains on him, progressing to the upper part of the structure.

"This is some rat king bullshit goin' on right now. Dawgs are tangled, meleein' with each other, trying to scrape by the win. D, bro, your lane's free, tighten the durag and get on raggin' them bitches to the top."

~Demetrius, 26, Rottweiler, Dionte's Brother

However, the barber is struggling to get going - his lower limbs getting repeatedly tangled in the ropes, no matter how hard he tries to wrestle them out. Being way limber than most, Robbi looks like a natural as he climbs the structure, drifting close to Kyle and grabbing the Army Sergeant's arm for leverage as the two wind up in pursuit of Edge.

The Catahoula looks behind himself, smiling inwardly as he sees the wolfhound and the German Shepherd tangled slightly below as well as Jaxton and Nickolas further down. He pulls himself on the chimney of the structure, grasping the edge of the platform and pulling himself on top with practiced ease as the whole row of loved ones applauds his feat. "Edge's through!" Ludwig yells, Rue cheering louder than the rest as her boyfriend blows her a kiss from the top of the structure.

Realizing they're fairly ahead on the bottom three, Kyle tries to shake Robbi off his back and resume his climb. "Let me go!" the veteran growls, frettingly motioning to the mutt as he tries to get him to reason. "We got enough spots for us two!" he says between pants.

"Oh shit!" Robbi exclaims. "Then fucking kick it!" the mutt haphazardly goes up, easing off the shepherd's back and getting back on the ropes.

*"If you tell Jaxton to act natural, he just freezes and loses it." *chuckles* "But it seems the message got through to him. He'll thank me once he progresses to the next stage. I know that bully's got the guts."*

~Colton, 25, Bobcat, Jaxton's Friend

"And Kyle is through!" Ludwig exclaims. "Two more to go, and Robbi's pretty close!"

Meanwhile, Dionte has started making good progress, and Jaxton and Nickolas' climb has slowed to a halt as the two are mostly focused on stopping each other. "Dude, what even?" the bull terrier asks the coyote.

*"Deep inside, I know Jaxton's the only one who can outclimb me come the final round. Only way I get to see Sammi is if I take him out by my own paws." *the coyote girl is shown looking up apprehensively* "I don't like playing dirty, but I want this reward more than anything, and I just know nobody here will roll over and let me keep my winning streak going. I gotta work for this, and I'm ready to."*

~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

"Robbi's in, one more to go!" the mustelid says, the mutt grinning at the crowd of guests, as Nickolas easily disposes of Jaxton on his way up. The coyote has his suspicions over the mountaineer, but pays little mind as he dashes his way up to the platform the other three were sitting on. Everyone looks bemused as the bull terrier follows the coyote up the structure, never really trying to retaliate or push him off.

"Go, Nick!" Sammi yells, standing up from the bench in excitement as the Lakota reaches the platform, swiftly pulling himself on top a second before Jaxton can grab his ankle.

The host raises his paws as the four canines huddle on the small platform, while Jaxton and Dionte stop climbing just below the top. "And we got our four! Edge, Kyle, Robbi and Nickolas move to the second round!"

"Dawg..." Demetrius huffs, looking at his brother making his way down. "Fuckin' jungle-gym lookin' ass challenge."

Hunter looks up at where the four winners are sitting, a precarious, round metal platform. "They're right on the edge of the thing! Dad could just push that dog off there and he'd go down plummeting," the teenager says out loud, pointing at Edge.

Rue blinks, looking at the young canine next to her. "That's what we call an intrusive thought, and we don't say those out loud, puppy."

"Why not?" the young German Shepherd asks, cocking his head. "I'm just saying he could, not that he *has* to... can he?"

Ludwig can't help but chuckle, amused. "No, Hunter. That'd be crossing the line."

*"Sheesh, I was just asking a question! No need to be so pressed!" *snickers**
~Hunter, 14, German Shepherd, Kyle's Son

*"Edge winning the first round kinda puts a target on his back, but he's not the kind to worry about being targeted." *the four surviving dogs get ready for Ludwig to call round two**
"Everyone is striving to get that jungle getaway, but I'm confident at the end of the day it'll be me and him there."

~Rue, 29, Bluetick Coonhound, Edge's Girlfriend

"Remember, only the top two move to the third and final round," the stoat reminds. "Ready? GO!"

As soon as the air horn sounds again, all four canines shoot up and begin climbing the net - their motions more eager and practiced than in the round before as the competition gets tougher. Curiously enough, while Nickolas and Robbi climb straight up and pay no heed to their opponents, Kyle slightly deviates to his left and pulls close to Edge - the Catahoula growling in defiance as he notices the German Shepherd nipping at his heels.

"Fuckin' elbow his ass, Robbi!" Chris shouts from the stands, startling the rest. "How ya taught me!"

"He taught you *what*?" Sammi turns towards the possum.

"Oh, lotta things!" she replies, grinning. "Self defense, money saving, and kn-... nevermind," she corrects herself as she glances at Hunter.

Meanwhile, on the structure, Kyle has managed to get a hold of Edge's leg - looking up with determination as he uses it as leverage to pull himself up. The Coast Guard officer tries to shake the shepherd off, but to little avail - growing more and more frustrated as his progress is halted, Nickolas and Robbi climbing undeterred ahead of him.

"Fucking... let go!" Edge hisses, struggling against the veteran's grasp.

Even as he sees his disadvantage, Kyle doesn't relent. "Make... me," he grunts, hooking his arm around his opponent's right shoulder for good measure.

"While we got a fight, there's another one with a free way to the top two, as Nickolas is swiftly making his way!" Ludwig shouts. Robbi looks over the bickering pair, deciding to step up his own pace - the coyote and the wolfhound making quick progress compared to the shepherd and the Catahoula, still tangled together a few feet below.

Suddenly, Kyle manages to rip the Catahoula's arm off the rope, immediately resuming to climb behind Robbi as his opponent loses his grip and stumbles down. While Hunter yells in

celebration, Rue covers her eyes with a paw as her boyfriend resumes his climb a few feet down the rest with a murderous scowl on his face.

"Nickolas, unopposed, is in the top two! Only one more to go!" the stoat says to Sammi's excitement.

Robbi looks behind himself, taking notice of Kyle pulling closer and getting ready to make his move on him. The wolfhound redoubles his efforts, hooking hands and feet in each hole as he makes his way up the structure's chimney.

"Let G.I. Joe and Aquaman bicker over there! I'll be busy getting the goods in the meantime!"
~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed

Just as the German Shepherd eyes Robbi's ankle - already planning to pull the same move he did on Edge - the mutt manages to grasp the outer edge of the platform, swiftly pulling himself alongside Nick a fraction of seconds before his opponent can grab him. "Next time, baby," Robbi huffs, his chest heaving slightly as he glances at the shepherd below.

"And we got a final two! Nickolas and Robbi, duking it out for the big reward!" Ludwig declares, as Rue slumps on her seat, disappointed.

"You fucking tore me off the ropes!" Edge shakes his fist at Kyle, visibly frustrated, as they both make their way down the web. "So focused on me you let Nick take it, numbskull..."

The shepherd jumps down the structure, ignoring the Catahoula. "Well, you didn't let me go either, so who fucked over who?" he scoffs defensively, trying his best to not look dejected as he sits next to Jaxton and Dionte.

*"It sucks, man... I do feel that I have the strongest relationship bond of the pack and that I deserved this reward over any other rewards that we had." *Kyle looks up to a smiling Hunter, smiling back himself* "But I got to look for the bigger picture, and even if I don't get that enormous, fantastic trip, just seeing him is fueling my motivation to go to the endgame."*
~Kyle, 40, German Shepherd, U.S. Army First Sergeant

"Alright, it's down to the top two, for the biggest reward yet," Ludwig recalls. "Nick, Robbi, are you ready?" The coyote and the wolfhound nod in unison. "GO!"

Starting on opposing sides of the structure, the two canines tackle the final round as a contest of speed, barely looking at each other's progress as they climb up. Everyone cheers and hollers as the wolfhound seems to be pulling ahead, his thought affixed on the platform above him and the reward to come. However, Nickolas takes on a more methodical style, tackling the net with determination and slowly closing up the gap from his opponent.

"I know how physically strong Nickolas is, I was surprised to see the other one keeping up. I am praying he manages to win this and gain this reward. It would be something we'd never be able to forget."
~Sammi, 23, Coyote, Nickolas' Girlfriend

“Robbi and Nick are neck and neck!” Ludwig exclaims, not failing to notice how both contestants’ motions are growing more and more labored with the repeated efforts. “This is for the biggest reward yet, so don’t give up!”

The coyote grits his teeth as he approaches the upper part of the structure, where the climb gets nearly vertical. On the other side, Robbi is similarly focused, slightly huffing with each movement as he takes notice of his opponent’s position.






“Robbi, don’t tell me you’ve grown soft, not when we can win some good shit! I’ve seen you kneecap a gorilla AND a gorilla-lookin’ cat at two separate times, I’m sure you can get rid of this yolk in a snap.”

~Chris, 20, Virginia Opossum, Robbi’s Roommate

Nearly all contestants and loved ones are on their feet as the two canines dangle just a few feet below the platform, loudly cheering and hollering at both. “This could be close!” Jaxton points out, tail wagging in excitement.

Eyeing Robbi on the other side of the chimney, Nickolas reaches out with his longer arm to connect with the platform - the mutt desperately trying to grab the coyote’s right leg, but to no avail as he swings it out of the way and pulls himself up with a push of his biceps.

“He’s about to...” Ludwig says, but a triumphant scream cuts his thoughts as Nickolas stands on the platform - grasping the central flagpole in elation as the entire group cheers and applauds. “AND NICKOLAS WINS REWARD!” Ludwig yells, Robbi pulling up just enough to bump fists with his opponent in a sign of respect.

INDIVIDUAL CHALLENGE #8, Jungle Web			
CONTESTANT	RD 1	RD 2	RD 3
 DIONTE	OUT		
 EDGE	1st	OUT	
 JAXTON	OUT		
 KYLE	2nd	OUT	
 NICKOLAS	4th	1st	1st
 ROBBI	3rd	2nd	OUT

*"Winning a second straight individual challenge is a real blessing, but doing it with Sammi here to support me makes it doubly so." *a drone follows the coyote as he stands on top of the structure, way above the rest of the group* "I'm sure everybody here needed this reward, but I wanted it just that much. Spending time with my baby in this jungle paradise will fill me with motivation to win again tomorrow."*

~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

Sammi runs towards the ropes and excitedly jumps towards Nickolas as he makes his way down. The coyote haphazardly goes down and roughly hugs his girlfriend, the entire group applauding his win out of courtesy, despite the evident envy.

"Nickolas, this is your second individual win in a row," Ludwig addresses the Lakota. "It might not have any immunity or stake in the game, but I'm sure it's the victory that feels the best up to date, right?"

"You can say that, man," the coyote nods, pulling his girlfriend tight. "I have pictured this moment ever since I got in the Pound. It's a thing to win for yourself or your team, but when it's about the people closest to you, it's a whole different ballpark," he says. "Getting the first green jersey AND the first green jersey win for sure it's on another level."

"Sammi," the stoat directs her attention to the ecstatic guest. "Did you expect, coming all the way from South Dakota to here, that you'd be taken away to a reward this monumental?"

"Ludwig, well... me and Nick have pretty much grown together," the female coyote responds, looking up at her boyfriend and briefly nuzzling him. "Trust me when I say I know how capable he is and I know how much heart he got. It's not the first time I've seen him take on challenges that look bigger than us both, and like..." she pauses for a moment, trying to come up with words. "I knew he'd stop at nothing to win this one challenge. Just to be here and spend more time with him is a dream come true."

"Well, as I mentioned before, here's the keys to your reward. Courtesy of Gamboa Rainforest Reserve..." Ludwig says, handing a hefty wooden keyring over to Nickolas. "A one-bedroom suite facing the Chagres river, where you both will be able to spend a night among luxury and nature. The hotel organizes several activities and tours, so you're free to decide at what pace you wanna take on this coveted getaway."

"I can't believe it..." Sammi says giddily, looking at Nickolas.

"It will be a night to remember, for sure, Sammi," Ludwig nods. "But... it may feel a little isolated without... some company."

Realization hits among the group - all the loved ones gasping as Nickolas loudly sighs, closing his eyes and grimacing. "Indeed, Nickolas. I want you to choose one couple to join you on this reward," the mustelid says, pulling a second keyring out of his pocket and handing it over.

"Fuck..." the coyote scratches the back of his head. "First of all, to you five, I hope you remember that this isn't personal, and that holding this against me is a petty thing to do," he says, addressing the group directly. "It's just a choice I gotta make, and like... I hope no one makes it a matter of who deserves this more, 'cause we all do."

*"Aw, dawg, ya ain't gotta tease me with this BS. I know me and Demetrius ain't gonna be taggin' along." *the Rottweiler is shown rolling his eyes* "Plus, I know Nick knows this little skit can cause him to win or lose a quarter million just like that, 'cause ya know some ain't never gonna forgive or forget this." *camera focuses on Kyle and Dionte**
~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner

Nickolas walks towards the five as they look expectantly, pleading without saying anything out loud, before he nods, and hands off the key to one of them.

"BULLSHIT!" Robbi blurts out.

"It's not," Nickolas answers. "You came the closest, so I guess that's only fair."

"Ayo, Chris!" Robbi yells at the possum, running towards her and lifting her up. "We goin' to the hotel!"

"It was a difficult decision, but I already picked Jaxton before, and Robbi was the runner-up of this challenge, so by performance, he deserves it. Plus, they all seem like they got stable, strong relationships, something I'm sure Robbi has had barely anything of. So the fact that he has someone that feels that strongly about him right now is something I feel he has to cherish in his situation as much as he can because it's more likely it's short-lived for him than the others."

~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

*"Holy fuckin' fuck, did Nick really pick me and Chris? Did he?" *beams at the camera* "This game really is a gift that keeps on giving to this lowly stray. I'm so fuckin' thankful right now that Chris is gonna get to enjoy all of this! This is gonna be EPIC!" *wags his tail* "Nick, hope ya realize what ya signed up for!"*

~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed

"Alright, I guess it's settled," Ludwig says, looking at the two winning couples. "Nickolas, Sammi, Robbi, Chris... you'll be taking a chopper straight to your jungle getaway, and come back here to Fort Sherman tomorrow night," he says, turning his attention to the rest of the group. "Colton, Rue, Demetrius, Hunter... thanks so much for coming over."

"Can we at least hug goodbye all of us?" Hunter asks. "I'm underage, so that'll be abuse if you say no," he quips, the group laughing along.

"By all means," the stoat concedes, chuckling at the young shepherd's bravado.

The four losing canines give one last hug to their loved ones, Kyle holding his son for just a little longer. "Hey, champ..." he says, slightly ruffling his hair. "So proud of you for coming over."

"Don't fret over this, just go win the big thing. Like you say in my games," Hunter responds, breaking the hug and following the rest of the loved ones as they walk off scene.

Ludwig turns towards the winners. "Well, now that's out of the way... you guys ready to go?" he asks rhetorically, both couples cheering in response. "Then follow me..."

The two canines and the loved ones follow the stoat to the white helicopter, cameras zooming out as they get on board and it takes off to their luxury destination.

"A fucking chopper? For real, Robbi?"

"This is already much more than I was expecting, and I'll be sure to thank those two too. For now, we oughta celebrate big!"

~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed

~Chris, 20, Virginia Opossum, Robbi's Roommate

"The closest thing to this experience that I've ever seen was in movies, and I'm so excited to live this experience together with Nick."

*"Being here is one thing, but here with you?" *hugs his girlfriend and blows a kiss on her cheek* "I'm feeling like a winner, alright!"*

~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

~Sammi, 23, Coyote, Nickolas' Girlfriend

The sun is setting onto the Chagres River as the helicopter lands on a grass clearing just in front of the resort, Robbi being the first to jump off and take in the surroundings. Chris follows through and instantly hugs the mutt from behind, while Nick and Sammi close the line - a bit more demure, but still visibly excited to be on the biggest reward so far.

"Shall we head to our rooms?" the male coyote asks, trying to get the attention of Robbi and Chris as the two are too busy marveling at the new environment. "I'd rather wash off this humidity a little before we get dinner. You?"

"I mean, it's gonna get steamy pretty soon, if yanno what I mean, Nicky!" Robbi chortles, both coyotes slightly blushing at the wolfhound's shamelessness. "But yah, let's go!"

A raccoon chaperon leads both couples to their suites, standing next door across the same upper corridor. Robbi and Chris are the first to enter theirs, gaping in shock at the main living room, the lavish bedroom and the two-person hammock strewn across the balcony. "Geez, Chris, why does it have to be just one night?" the mutt mockingly pouts, letting himself fall on his back on the plush bed.

"You gotta get where Robbi and I come from. We know a thing or two about underbridges, difficulties, not knowing if the mattress you're in is gonna carry some fucking monster bedbugs or not. So all of this is the best thing ever, and I will make sure to be completely up Jasmia's ass for making me flying here a possibility. Bet!"

~Chris, 20, Virginia Opossum, Robbi's Roommate

"Mutt, come see this!" the opossum girl calls over from the master bathroom, paws on her muzzle, as she takes in the sight of the large bathtub with built-in water jets. "Have you ever seen this shit?"

Robbi peeks in from the door, grinning from ear to ear at the sight. "What Nick said about getting cleaned. You, me, in now," he chuckles, pulling off his shirt with little thought before giving Chris a sly look.

"Hey, we just got in here, silly!" Chris chuckles, playfully pushing Robbi. "You already talking like you are worth billions, like all of this doesn't even faze you!"

"And?" the mutt asks, grabbing the girl's paw and dragging her towards the tub. "C'mon, I don't wanna waste the day just gazing and gawking at the lavishness. Let's dip in!" Positioning Chris against the edge of the tub, he catches her lips in a playful smooch, instantly growing more heated as the two feel each other up.

"So you rather gaze and gawk at *this* lavishness?" the opossum coyly asks, slightly panting as she breaks the kiss. "It's been a hot minute. Sorry if it isn't up to your rich boujee pooch standards anymore," she jokes with an exaggerated posh accent.

Robbi just laughs, helping Chris off her black T-shirt and throwing it on the counter with little care. "Ah, let me set my own standards," the mutt growls in a mischievous tone, darting a quick lick to the girl's nose before letting their lips join again.

*"A mutt's gotta do what a mutt's gotta do, huh? People won't get a chance to live THIS out every day!" *the wolfhound finally manages to pull the girl in the hot tub with him, water splashing all around* "It's crazy to think thousands of furs are watching me and Chris right now and saying 'shit, I wish I was them'. It's just one more notch in my Alpha belt, and goes to show it ain't how you start or where you are, it's about where you gonna be. And right now, I know exactly where I wanna be!" *chuckles and winks at the camera* ~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed*

"Oh my God, Nick..." Sammi can only say before covering her face with her hands and trying to not sound emotional. She and Nickolas are resting on their bed, clad in pristine white bathrobes after having taken a quick shower, now simply taking in their surroundings as the sun sets over the lush Panamanian jungle. "It's all so pretty and beautiful. I can't..."

"We both earned this," Nickolas says, his long, black hair still somewhat damp and loose over his shoulders. "It's been a hard road, but I am fully locked in on the main goal. Call it confidence, call it whatever, but I really fancy my chances now that I'm with you," he muses, slightly chuckling.

"What's funny?" Sammi asks.

"That I was... kinda this close to giving all away some days ago. Now, knowing it'd lead to me missing on this dream reward, me not seeing you... it just feels so damn stupid," Nick says. "It's been a whirlwind, and the finish line's just that far ahead. But honestly? Right now,

I could care less,” he adds, slightly shifting on the bed and pulling closer to his couple. “Got you here, that’s all it matters.”

Sammi looks up at her boyfriend. “Knew it as soon as the challenge started. You looked like a ‘yote on a mission,” she says, her lips distending in a smirk. “Did you plan ahead on picking Robbi and Chris?”

“Eh, it was a spur-of-the-moment decision, to be honest?” Nickolas grimaces a bit. “But he was runner-up. Like, I’d love to have chosen Edge or Kyle as their visits meant a lot. Jaxton I already took, and Diente... yeah, not my first choice, if you get me.”

“Some of them looked slightly upset,” Sammi muses, looking away. “I just hope it doesn’t cause you much trouble in the long run.”

“I mean of course, Sammi. I’d be pissed if I didn’t get this shot!” he chuckles incredulously. “They’ll get it’s a game, and if they wanted this... maybe they should have been runner-up instead of Robbi,” the coyote shrugs. “He’s a handful, but his heart’s in the right place, you’ll enjoy him.”

The female coyote stretches on the bed, leaning in Nickolas’ embrace. “I’m sure of that...” she chuckles. “But I’m looking forward to enjoying *you* the most.” Without any warning, she rolls over enough to connect snouts with her boyfriend - him jumping slightly at the contact, somewhat uneasy with displaying his affection in front of the cameras, but still returning the kiss before she parts her lips. “Shall we go to dinner?” she asks, still straddled on top of her boyfriend’s body.

“Yeah, but why the rush?” Nickolas asks, leaning back on the soft king-sized mattress. “Let me just see you for a little longer...” he says, grabbing Sammi’s hand and caressing it gently over the soft cotton of her bathrobe. The two stare lovingly at each other for a long while, taking in the moment and the beautiful sunset just outside the window, before the male reaches forward to rekindle the kiss - joining lips to her, timidly at first, but growing bolder and more passionate as the situation and the surroundings get soon forgotten.

*“I’m not that used to express my intimate feelings in front of this... many people and cameras and stuff, but Sammi’s helped me to come out of my shell and be confident about our relationship.” *Sammi is shown lovingly braiding Nickolas’ hair* “Having her here has been my highlight of this game, and I couldn’t be more thankful for that!”*

~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

Back at Fort Sherman, the four excluded dogs have eaten their dinner and are lounging by the barracks’ front porch in order to fight the sweltering heat and humidity, taking in the slight evening breeze.

“Shoulda told us you had a Xerox machine instead of a dick, we’ve been knew...” Edge ribs at Kyle, both paws hooked behind his freshly-shaved nape.

The German Shepherd turns towards the Catahoula, propping himself up on both elbows as he lies on a beach towel in just his running shorts - his prosthetic leg and containing sock taken off and propped against a nearby wall. "Hah, I'm happy you all could meet Hunter. He's just a great kid, and yeah, he's pretty much my spitting image as a high school freshman, if you only knew..." he says, taking a short pause before letting out an audible sigh. "Spending some more time with him would have been a blessing, won't deny that."

"I mean we all could say that, but in the end someone had to win and the others had to lose," Jaxton shrugs. "Nick managed to conquer, and I'm sure he'd love to take us all on that trip."

"Speaking of... what with you and flopping the climbing challenge?" Edge asks, cocking his neck at the bull terrier. "The Everest's fine but a jungle gym scares ya?"

Jaxton slightly flinches, clearly uneasy at being put on the spot. "I-I mean, you guys saw that, no?" he asks back. "Nick just held me down long enough for you to barrel me over afterwards. Figure he knew I was his main competition, and had to take care of me early," he says with as much conviction as he can muster. "He clearly wanted it more than each of us."

*"There's a bit of sour grapes going on, which is... pretty unavoidable, because obviously everyone wanted a piece of that crazy reward." *makes a 'duh' gesture with his paws* "To be honest, of course I wish me and Colton were chilling at the hotel right now, but I'm counting my blessings that he kinda took me out of having to deal with that decision. I hope that taking it easy after the whole mud monster truck derby from last time will lead me to a win when it matters most."*

~Jaxton, 26, Bull Terrier, Camera Operator/Mountaineer

"I do wonder if Robbi's a copout answer, cuz yanno, everyone likes Robbi," Diente muses. "I was never gonna be it, and it's whatever, but I was dead sure that the two servicedogs were gonna get picked," the barber points at Kyle and Edge. "'Tween kiddo or a baddie, I guess you both were gimmies."

"A baddie?" Edge snorts.

"Hey, ya held out on us!" Diente quips. "If anythin', props to ya. Hard to keep the secret for a whole month."

The Catahoula looks away, visibly pensive. "I guess no one really asked. It's not a secret that me and Rue have been together for, what is it... five years now? Just wasn't expecting her to pop here," he shrugs, somewhat dismissive of the Rottweiler. "As for Robbi, well... between us, I was kinda wondering the same. He's been on nearly every big reward so far. Props to him, but try arguing against someone like him that he doesn't deserve goods," the spotted dog says. "You see, it's the kinda decision that angers less people."

"The more time it passes, the more I see what some of these other dawgs mean. Nick is a tough nut in the individual challenges, which will be that all the way from now on, and Robbi's both good at challenges AND got everyone lappin' it up. Then it hits me... these four can be THE four to advance to the next stage. Sure, we haven't seen eye to eye this full time, but no one denies an olive branch when it means keepin' your tail here."

~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner

"I just wonder... are we just lettin' those two cakewalk to the title?" the Rottweiler ponders. "Think about it. Robbi might just sail through if he connects the immunities right, and hell, I'd highkey vote for him in the end," he says, adjusting his headcover. "He got the best story to charm the jury with, y'all can't deny that. Would any of ya vote for anyone over him?"

"I guess..." Jaxton shrugs. "It depends on stuff, but I'd be hardly pressed to deny him my vote," he candidly says. "Not just on story merit, mind. He's been killing it in challenges just as much as anyone here, if not more."

"As for Nick, sure he had a tough time in teams, but if shit flies solo, he might then fly solo to the end as he's doin' now, no matter how he did before," Dionte counts his second point with his fingers. "So, my wild proposal. If we can control anything in this... we focus on gettin' us four to the next stage."

The entire group goes silent, as all dogs realize the implications of the Rottweiler's words. "You know..." Edge puts his paws forward. "Rottie got a point. We gotta start thinking about the future," he says, albeit reluctantly. "I'm not gonna bring someone I can't beat to the Gauntlet, the fuck? And the longer we let those two in the game, the less chances for us four to make a goodass case for ourselves."

*"Shit does give me pause." *the Catahoula stretches* "Whoever's sitting with me next to the Gauntlet can make or break my game more than my performance would. First of all, it's not a vote I gotta consider earning." *camera points at a pensive Kyle* "Second, are they gonna have the cred or charisma to sway these dogs over me?" *camera points towards Jaxton* "Third..." *the canine pauses, before pointing his finger at the camera, narrowing his eyes* "Are you fucking with me, Dionte? Is this a bluff to pad your way?"*

~Edge, 31, Catahoula Leopard Dog, U.S. Coast Guard Diver

"I'm just saying, Dionte... what you're pitching us kinda implies you're sending your best party bud out," Kyle points out to the Rottweiler. "How you'd explain that down the line?"

"A bridge that gotta be crossed," Dionte shrugs. "But hey, dawgs, Robbi knows he's in a competition. He ain't a dumb kid, else how he'd make it to 28 in the streets?"

"I didn't mean that," the German Shepherd raises a brow. "You've been beating this 'American Canine Alpha gotta be the realest' thing since the day we met, and now you're here scheming against who you always called the realest among us," he says, looking straight at the Rottweiler. "I'm just saying, you might have to justify that to more dogs than just Robbi."

"I am being real," Dionte insists. "This is the shit the game demands, and I don't feel like I gotta be lacking if all y'all elbow deep already."

"It also doesn't even matter if it's all individual, huh?" Jaxton quips. "I know you possibly mean some advantage or some shit down the line or who picks who to duel, but it can be as cut clean as just axing one of us like that and so it depends on each of us to save our tails."

*"D may have sounded a bit too eager in relying his plan to us, but... that doesn't mean I can totally see his point, and I'm sure Edge and Kyle are too." *the bull terrier is shown listening closely to the conversation* "I mean, I did put a tick in his ear regarding Robbi, and Nick." *scratches his ear* "For now, I'm going to smile and nod and keep the truce between us four. And while I love Nick and Robbi to bits, I'm not going to sit and look as they win this title I worked hard for."*

~Jaxton, 26, Bull Terrier, Camera Operator/Mountaineer

Edge joins his paws together, stretching his arms. "Honestly, I think there's no such thing as being too prepared," he says. "Bottom line - I think all of us can do the math. Two will go home, and it's four of us here now. Less hard feelings that way."

"Hm. If you all in, I am," Dionte nods, his eyes darting from one dog to the next. "No funny business, though. Either we pull this off without snitching or shit'll get messy."

Jaxton shrugs his shoulders, leaning against the wall. "I know you might be wary of me because I buddied up a lot with both, but I know a good plan when I see it," he says. "It's like Edge said. Taking them out betters everyone's chances, and once it's down to us four, we'll just play it out and see who comes on top."

"Damn right," Dionte agrees, nodding to the bull terrier. "What about ya, Kyle?"

The German Shepherd ponders the question for a little while, seemingly debating options in his head. "Heh, can't just ignore a plan that says 'Kyle, you're safe', despite my reservations..."

"It's you or them, army brat," Edge prods. "What kinda reservations you even talking about?"

"No, you've got me wrong," Kyle insists. "I'm just saying... if we strike, we oughta do it right. Nick wins or Robbi wins, we'll scramble and all goes to shit, plus you know it'll be a bad look for us if we get to the end with egg over our snouts and a boosted mutt or 'yote," he says. "I really wanna trust you guys, but..."

"What's 'but'?" Dionte presses on, slightly annoyed. "This is a free pass to four if ya wanna get it. You in or out?"

"Okay fine, yeah," Kyle shakes his head, addressing each canine on the porch. "Final four, here. Let's fucking do this."

*"I would not have expected my future in this competition to depend on a treaty alongside... him." *camera focuses on Edge, idly splaying his paws to see his webbing* "But it's a nice change of pace from always having a target on my back, admittedly. I just got to figure out if Nick or Robbi are the safer bets for me. And if one of them does win immunity, I oughta have a vantage point where at least I'm in the four and see who benefits me getting kicked out now."*

~Kyle, 40, German Shepherd, U.S. Army First Sergeant

Meanwhile, at the resort, the two couples are having dinner at the main restaurant - hanging out at a secluded table, far away from the few other visitors. Robbi and Chris openly marvel at the food, taking in every bite with loud appreciative rumbles - each serving and the added drinks loosening the conversation and helping the four to really get to know each other.

"It must be such a culture shock for you," Sammi comments, digging into her plate. "Like, Nickolas sorta told me of Robbi's situation, but still."

Chris lies back on her chair. "Well, for my first time outside the country, I reckon I've hit the jackpot!" she jokes. "Don't wanna make it sound like I wanna be pitied, or whatever. It is what it is, we here, let's have a blast."

"I kinda feel bad for the guys..." Robbi muses. "It feels unfair that we get all of this luxury while they're stuck at the barracks. Especially since both me and Nick have been on a ton of rewards," he says, taking in a big mouthful of his ceviche. "Not that I'd give up on this, mind you, still superfucking thankful!"

"In a sense, we're both like... the ones that grew up with the least of the ones remaining?" Nickolas wonders. "Neither me nor Sammi come from super wealthy situations, but that goes for most across the Plains..."

The wolfhound slightly cocks his head. "Guess it's just the universe's way to give back to those who could use it more," he comments, somewhat eager to change the topic. "Above all the other stuff I got, this is the one I could say is truly the best, and more so because I can share it with this MF'er," he says, reaching across the table to nuzzle Chris.

"I meant to ask, how do you two know each other?" an inquisitive Sammi curiously asks. "Robbi's 28, and Chris is..."

"20," the opossum girl chuckles, returning Robbi's nudge. "Let's say I come from a pretty bad family situation, and I ended up at a shelter in my early teens. Which at a certain point ended up being somewhat unsustainable, hence I moved from Baltimore to D.C. and headed out for another shelter, which is where I ran across him," she retells, winking at the mutt. "Might have been... a couple years ago, maybe three?"

"Nah, you definitely were 18. That is suuuuuuuure," Robbi replies, bluntly gesturing with his paws. "I did go to your teen shelter like, once years ago, but it was a quick fix job and we didn't even speak, I think."

Nickolas blinks. "And like, I don't wanna poke, but..." he begins, kinda fumbling for words and slightly blushing. "What's the deal? Are you two together, or..."

"Anything goes in the underbelly, honey," Chris winks, Sammi getting flustered. "Robbi's like... my best pal, my big stepbro, my ride or die, my bitch, everything. That we get to go down n' dirty on each other once in a while is just one of the many, many perks," she chuckles.

"Heh, same goes!" the mutt laughs, not at all embarrassed. "I ain't the kind to get hitched to just whoever, you know? But it's nice to share the bed with someone, and like, why can't your best friend also have some benefits in the combo, huh?" he winks. "Being tied up is boring, but tying up... well, I'm sure ya two know!"

"Robbi and Chris are... definitely a picturesque couple, yeah Nick?"

*"Don't look at me like that, he's the one with five wins in a row." *chuckles* "Whatever he's doing, I reckon it works for him, and I'm glad that he's enjoying his time... now if he'd only recognize that we're closed, then it's all good!"*

~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach

~Sammi, 23, Coyote, Nickolas' Girlfriend

"I don't mean any disrespect to you two and what you've got..." Nickolas says, tightening his grip around his girlfriend's hand, "But I can't imagine being with anyone other than Sammi. We started dating back in junior high, and in a way, it feels like we've known each other forever. Going off to college and leaving her behind for months? That was fucking brutal. But we made it through, and I think we're even stronger because of it."

Beside him, Sammi quietly sets her drink on the table, turning her full attention toward him.

"Damn," Robbi mutters, side-eyeing the opossum girl across from him. "Ya even put the wine down for this."

Sammi smiles, eyes brimming with affection. "You don't even know how proud I am of him," she says. "We've been planning our future together for so long, and God willing—"

"Fuck..." Chris mutters, cutting in just as both coyotes are lost in the moment. Her straw has slipped from her grasp, and now she's subtly maneuvering her prehensile tail, trying to retrieve it without drawing too much attention.

"Chris?" Robbi whispers.

"I dropped my... my thing..." she replies, maneuvering her prehensile tail so to retrieve her straw.

"...soon enough it might come to fruition. He could likely have gone pro in lacrosse and left the reservation for good, but..." Sammi suddenly stops, looking bemused as the opossum girl successfully fishes the straw back and puts it in her glass. "Chris, what are you doing?"

Chris grins unapologetically. "You were having a moment, didn't wanna interrupt." She lazily coils her tail around her glass, looking entirely unbothered. "Please, continue."

The female coyote incredulously looks at the opossum, stifling a giggle. "Anyway, like... we've been through so much, and even though I know this is a huge ordeal, I'm sure that he... that he's going to go through everything with his head held high," she smiles, turning at Nick. "Gimme a kiss..."

“Aw, you gonna give me cavities,” Robbi chuckles sarcastically as the two coyotes briefly lock snouts. “Get a room!”

“As if we didn’t have one...” Nickolas laughs. “And not like you weren’t eating each other’s faces a second after Ludwig called her in!”

“Least somebody’s not wasting tim—SHIT!” Chris suddenly yelps as the glass slips from her tail, crashing to the floor and splashing its contents all over her.

“HAAAAA!” Robbi laughs out loud at the startled marsupial. “I KNEW IT! I knew the moment you wanted to fuck around with that tail, I was like, ‘this dumb bitch is gonna spill EVERYTHING!’” the wolfhound howls.

“Shit, just gimme a paw, will ya?” the girl retorts, looking at the broken glass on the floor and the spilled drink on her top. “Don’t fucking laugh at me!”

“That was so funny...” the mutt says, trying to breathe from the laughter, as Sammi reaches over with some napkins for Chris to wipe herself.

Nickolas amusedly looks at the pair - the opossum fumbling with her shirt and trying to minimize the damage while Robbi’s still to recover from his laughing fits. “I take that’s the signal to get some rest?” he says, getting up from his chair. “I’d love to stay out and chat, but we got plenty to do tomorrow!”

“Hey Chris, do ya think they’re down to... yanno? Two times two...”

*“Robbi!” *the opossum slaps the mutt’s side**

“Aw, I gotta be courteous, am I right?!”

~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed

~Chris, 20, Virginia Opossum, Robbi’s Roommate