

# A American Canine Alpha

## Episode 8, "A Good Dude's Game" Part 2

June 7, 2021  
3:30 PM

Nickolas and Jaxton are out enjoying a large barbecue spread, consisting of several meat dishes, a few sides and a cooler full of ice cold beers to wash it all down. Both don't waste time in digging in, serving themselves bits of everything before sitting down and starting to eat.

"So, was that the craziest shit you've ever done in your life or what?" Jaxton excitedly asks.

"Definitely top three," Nick concedes, taking a bite of his pulled pork sandwich. "Was scared shitless until the chute opened, but I am glad I can say I did that, and I am FUCKING glad I can say I survived!"

"Shit has to go real wrong for something to happen, and it tends to be calculated to the finest detail," Jaxton grins. "With the instructors glued to our backs... I mean, c'mon!"

"You say it because you already did it before," the coyote scoffs. "Try coming to the plains and ride a wild horse bareback, or hunt down some game with an oldass bow and arrow. See if you're a pro at first go!"

*"I gotta say I'm growing pretty fond of Jax, and like... I'm glad I picked him for this reward. He can be a bit loud and boisterous at times, but he's really encouraging me to take a bite into whatever crazy stuff this game throws at me." \*the coyote is shown taking a big bite of his babyback ribs\* "Without him, doubt I'd have jumped off that plane."  
~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach*

"I tell ya, between good barbecue and a day of thrills, I can definitely see my dad enjoying this if he was my age," Jaxton smiles. "He might be all businessy and stuff now, but he has always encouraged me to do all of this. Maybe there's that impulse in him still."

"Yeah..." Nickolas replies, ears folding back.

"See, he was the one who introduced me to mountaineering. We went on hikes all the time, and I got so many memories. Won't ever forget when he took me to climb Mount Washington

when I was ten... it wasn't that long or hard of a hike to start with, but for a pup like me it felt like being on top of the world!"

"I mean..." the coyote looks away for a second. "I guess Dad *would have* loved this too..." he comments.

"Oh..." Jaxton realizes. "Sorry, like, didn't mean it like..." he reluctantly stutters.

"It's fine, it was a long time anyway," Nickolas tries to dismiss the conversation.

"How old were you?" the bull terrier asks. "If you wanna talk about it... or?"

The coyote lets out a small sigh. "I don't talk about this often, but okay," he says. "Like, you know I grew up in the rez, and my family didn't have much to start with. It was me, Mom, Dad and my three brothers living in this janky home running on thoughts and prayers. Us four slept on two bunk beds just across our parents'..."

*"When I was little, my parents were my everything. Generally, where I'm from, a lot of fellas don't start with a lot. Rundown houses, desolate spaces, and plenty of things many would say create a miserable way to live - but what we do have is each other, and we learn that as long as you've got family, you're gonna be okay."*

*~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach*

"And like, the vast nature, this whole experience other 'yotes couldn't get. All of that happening makes me think of Dad," Nickolas sighs. "We were pretty close, but he was... battling with addiction, alcoholism, and it went on for a long time. And living under the same roof made shit a ton worse, because when stuff went bad, we couldn't escape it," he says. "Fortunately, it never came to the point of being... terrible against any of us when he was on his benders, but I remember at some point he began not coming home for dinner, and for better or worse, Mom always knew where to find him. She'd send Max out and he'd bring him back home, then she'd shoo the rest of us off to bed and just... forget about it until the day after, and so on."

*"That's all things we could forgive and forget and just keep on trekking, until one day, we just found him unresponsive in the middle of the backyard, and... that was it. Alcohol poisoning. I was eleven and started my life without my dad right there... Sorry." \*looks away, cradling his muzzle on his elbow\**

*~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach*

Nickolas wipes his tears and trying to keep composed. "To just see him there, knowing he'd never wake up... he'd never be with us again, it's just... Jaxton, I..." he fumbles in his words, obviously struggling to avoid breaking down.

"Fuck, dude..." the bull terrier squeezes the crying coyote's hand. "You didn't deserve to live through that..."

"Guess... it has to happen to some of us...ugh..." Nickolas continues, more calmed after being reinforced by Jaxton's gesture. "It's not like we haven't heard of that happening, but we

never think it can happen under our roof. From then, all of us just took more charge in order to help Mom around," he says. "We were all so damn lucky to have Max there. He'd just graduated from high school, and he sacrificed a ton to make sure we didn't go down the same path Dad did. He was the one that convinced me to get into lacrosse, and the one that pushed me to go out to Maryland and get on that scholarship and university."

Jaxton begins to tear up. "I just can't imagine, like... shit," he steps up, going over to hug Nickolas. "Dude, I'm so sorry. Didn't mean to bring this up..."

"It's fine..." the coyote repeats. "I've grown okay talking about it with people I trust, but I didn't wanna make a show of this in front of the guys, you know?" he says. "Stories like this are... way common in my community. And I guess that's part of the reason why I'm here, why I became part of the tribe committee and all. I wanna show people you can take all of that and still thrive."

*"Shit like this makes me an emotional mess..." \*sighs\* "Kids from my town, sherpas, now Nick... I know and have seen fellas that make everything out of not much, and it just makes me realize how good many furs have it on average. The fact that Nick can continue to go by and soldier through is amazing, and when I think stuff goes bad, it's something worth remembering."*

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

"You gotta teach me some Lakota things now. We got time!" the bull terrier grins.

Nickolas nods, still visibly moved after retelling his story. "Oh, huh, where to begin..." he mutters. "If you were to come to the rez, people like to greet each other with a soft, fingertip handshake. Here, like this," he says, extending his paw to Jaxton with two fingers out and showing him how to practice the greeting. "We don't really have a word for 'hi', or 'hello', but between men, we greet each other with *háu*. Or *háu, kǎolá*, 'hello, friend', if it's really formal. Now try it..."

"*Háu...*" Jaxton repeats, slightly bowing his head as he returns the handshake. "That seemed obvious from... assumptions," he chuckles awkwardly. "And how do I introduce myself?"

"Okay, say, someone asks 'what's your name?', *táku eníčiyapi he?*" the coyote responds. "To which you answer... *Jaxton emáčiyapi*, my name is Jaxton."

"Jaxton ema-chee..." the bull terrier stutters.

"*Emáčiyapi*," Nickolas slowly repeats, drawing the foreign word as much as he can. "All dogs we call *šúnka*, and all male dogs are *šungblóka*, which is a weird word because you can also use it for a stallion," the coyote continues. "Actually, there's a number of sayings about dogs in Lakota culture. One thing Grandpa always told my brother Toby when he was younger and fooled around with girls up and down the rez... *Šúnka čhiŋčá yukǎé šni yo*, 'don't make children like a dog'. Don't be promiscuous, stick to one partner," he says, chuckling under his whiskers.

"Don't be a ho, or at least use rubbers?" Jaxton asks curiously.

"Pretty much!" Nick answers, shaking his head. "Least he heard the last part, cuz no children that we know of, and he's just landed a pretty cushy resort job. Not bad for a *šunġmáritu*," he says. "That's how we call 'yotes. 'Dog of the place away from where furs live'. Not a perfect translation, but you get it."

The mountaineer leans forward on his chair. "Huh, cool. Everything's got a description," he says. "Course you don't have a word for bull terrier?"

"No, not really. They aren't that common to the area," the coyote shakes his head. "But... Lakota for 'bulldog' is *šúŋka ité pšunġhá*, which literally means... 'dog with a round head'."

"You shitting me," Jaxton playfully glares at the coyote. "It's bad enough that I get called egghead pretty much all the time..."

"Well, that one's more about Lance than it is about you!" Nick laughs in response, raising his paws. "But really, I wasn't joking before. If you wanna get a real life experience, you're always welcome to visit us in Wagner. Just head out to Yankton Country and ask about *Wahínġke Wiyákpa*, 'Bright Arrow'."

"Huh? Who's that?"

"Me," the coyote points at himself. "It's the name I was given by the tribe upon becoming of age. Not every Lakota fur has one, but me and my brothers do. Max is *Wahínġke Záptaŋ*, 'Five Arrows'. One for each member of the family after Dad passed."

Jaxton nods along. "It's crazy cool you got one, and gotta say... given how you performed in the challenge, I'd say it's pretty fitting," he says. "Shoulda told the guys before we started! 'They call me Bright Arrow back at home' and then you shoot. Woulda been gold!"

"Eh, I don't really like to make a show out of it. And everyone calls me Nickolas anyway, so..." the coyote shrugs. "But of all people, I'm glad I got to share all of this with you. Didn't really realize how big it could be to share this part of me in such detail, huh?"

*"I'm pretty touched that Jaxton is so eager to know more about me and where I come from. As a Lakota fur having a platform as big as this, I feel I forgot that to be a spokesperson for my tribe, that you got to... speak." \*chuckles\* "But nevertheless, I'm proud to be a Yankton 'yote, and I want to take that energy, those stories, and that strength in order to go to the very end of this competition."*

*~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach*

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June 8, 2021

11:00 AM

Six of the seven remaining competitors enter to the side of an intricate-looking arena, the set-up harking back to the Stone Age, with crude, but clear demarcations of the next ordeal they were about to face. The seventh one, Nickolas, heads up a set of stairs to a bench that overlooks the entire scene.

"Welcome back, competitors," Ludwig greets the group. "Ready to take on the next Team Challenge?"

All six contestants roar in approval. "As it was determined yesterday, Nickolas earned immunity, going straight into the next phase in the game," the mustelid nods, looking up. "How's the weather up there, Nick?"

"Fairly good," the coyote nods from the winners' bench. "Can't wait to see who's joining me up here... and who doesn't," he chuckles. "Break a leg!"

"It was a bit shocking, one can say, from seeing you on the verge of going home twice in a row and being named by some of your competitors as one deserving to leave, to earning your keep with a bang," Ludwig says. "It's a pretty peculiar way to turn it around, yeah?"

"Well it was shocking to me too!" Nickolas concedes. "But after some days of just being put down, it was just what the doctor recommended. I feel that me being on the bottom of the totem pole and an easy next boot is a matter that's always being talked about in a hush-hush way, but hey... it's better to be talked about than to fade into the background."

The stoat host turns towards the rest of the group. "So, basically we have a case of the perceived likeliest bootee, so to speak, having already found his way through the next round," he says. "Is that true, Dionte?"

"I ain't gonna lie, if you have two bottom placements, it's third strike and you're out, huh?" the Rottweiler defensively adds. "Ain't bein' mean, it's just the logical way things go. But with him safe, guess the next one gotta be one of these five," he points with a thumb down the line.

"Ewan did amazing and then he got cut in a snap," Edge adds. "It just means that this game will always throw curveballs and you just gotta make sure your tail is not on that specific spot. Not even winning a challenge ASAP, just don't be the next boot, whatever it takes," he says, casually pointing at the coyote. "He's out of the equation, but no big deal. I gotta focus on Edge right now."

"Alright, then... with a whole lot on the line, I guess it's time to get down and dirty. Today, we're playing Mud Ball," Ludwig says with a flourish. "This game is a modern repurpose of a well-known, Mesoamerican ball game called *ollamalitzli*, which was played by the ancient Mayas--"

"How many times you rehearsed saying that?" Jaxton jokes, cracking others up.

"Got it at first take, son! Learn!" the stoat rebukes, without missing a beat. "As I was saying, this game was played by the ancient Mayas for both recreational and ritualistic purposes. In

our Alpha version, you'll be facing three-on-three in this small, muddy court..." he points to the arena, which has been fully filled with thick, brownish muck. "Your goal is to toss this rubber ball through that suspended ring before the other team. First one to reach three points wins. You can do so through whatever means, hands, feet, elbows... but so goes with the physical contact. Short of choking and pulling any cheap shots, everything goes."

*"I got mixed feelings at the moment, not gonna lie. Kyle from 20 years ago would be like 'YES, LET'S FREAKING GO!' but Kyle today is more like 'Well, now hold on there...'"*  
*\*chuckles\** *"This is football on steroids, and while I got the knowledge to pick up this situation easily, I know I'm going to feel this in the morning, win or lose."* *\*the shepherd is shown peering at the arena\**

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

"So, are we ready to cast our votes on who'll be leading the teams?" Ludwig nods, pulling out the usual clipboards and pens and starting to pass them around. "Nickolas, you will be casting one as well. The rules are the same as usual..." he says. "No talking to each other, and you can't vote for yourself. Just pick the canine you feel is the best fit to lead your team in this challenge."

The contestants don't waste time in choosing their pick, making themselves some room to jot down a name on their respective clipboards before facing the host once more.

*"So it is a three V three, AND it's a vote."* *\*huffs\** *"Someone will be mad, but gotta shake that off and do what I feel will save my tail."*

*~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed*

*"I haven't had the chance to become a captain yet. I know this is the right time to kick the door open and cause an impression. I have been doing steadily well over the last couple of weeks, but my moment to make a splash is now."*

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

"Alright, time to reveal your choices," Ludwig says. "Danny, who did you pick?"

The personal trainer flips his board, showing his answer. "No brainer, it's Kyle. I feel he deserves a chance to lead," he says.

The stoat turns towards the German Shepherd. "Kyle? Did you return the favor?"

The veteran laughs, looking at the malamute. "Well, the feeling is mutual, and for the same reason! I did vote for Danny."

"Edge?"

"Well, I ain't joining that train, but I will admit there is one challenge I did lose..." the Catahoula shrugs. "And I'm a dog of my word, so I went with Robbi."

"Wait, hold on... what?" Ludwig's ears twitch with curiosity, his interest clearly piqued.

“Aw, he can’t play pool for shit,” Robbi replies, laughing loudly. “We had a game one night and nothing to wager, so we threw a vote to captain on a later challenge. And the later challenge is now, huh?”

“Uhm... okay?” the stoat turns towards Edge, dumbfounded. “Walk me through this. You’re voting Robbi as team captain because you lost a game of pool? Seriously?”

“Look, we all gotta pick someone, right?” the spotted dog defensively puts his paw forward, pointing at Danny and Kyle. “And I wasn’t ever voting for those two, so that leaves the mutt, ain’t it?”

“Alright, let’s move on,” Ludwig says, walking down the line. “Jaxton, who did you vote for?”

“I-I gotta show this dog that what happened yesterday wasn’t on purpose and give him proof that this time is deliberate,” the bull terrier sheepishly flips his clipboard. “I went with Edge.”

*“Well, well, well... that was unexpected.” \*chuckles\* “Jaxton’s taking me for a walk around with these mixed messages he’s throwing at me, huh? I’ll MORE than gladly take your vote, bully, but gotta make sure you ain’t just butterin’ me up for nothing.”*

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

“Dionte, who did you vote for?”

“Voted for someone that’s yet to prove himself on the field,” the Rottweiler nods, looking at Danny. “The other D-dawg, you gotta go out and show what you made of.”

Edge raises his brow at Dionte, then turns towards Robbi.

“Robbi, who did you vote for?”

“Aw, Luddy, listen,” the mutt chortles. “I got to spread the feeling of what being a cap was like! That’s why I had to vote for a dog that didn’t get a chance yet,” he flips his board. “Went with Sarge Kyle over here!”

*“Eh, dude, I can’t pretend I don’t feel bad about this, but like... what can you do? Everyone’s playing the game, and I either join or be left actin’ the fool.” \*the camera shows a confused Edge\* “Plus, it is the truth, the dads gotta cap and either win or fail, it’s fair!”*

*~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed*

“Did Dionte do that?” Edge whispers to himself before turning to Robbi. “Did you do that?”

“Sorry, bruh...” the mutt folds his ears. “Had to make a decision.”

The mustelid host looks up at the coyote. “Nickolas, it’s up to your last vote. We will head for a revote if you voted for Robbi or Edge. If you haven’t, then our captains are settled. Who did you vote for?”

"Well, we won't have to, Ludwig..." the coyote shrugs, turning his clipboard and showing Jaxton's name written in his peculiar handwriting. "Bonded a lot with Jax during the reward. He pushed me to really have a go at this skydiving thing, and I just felt I had to give back somehow."

"So that's one Robbi, one Jaxton, and one Edge. But with two each for Danny and Kyle, they are our two captains!"

*"They might want to sell this as 'they haven't been captains yet', but there's part of me that feels we're getting kinda set up?" \*both the malamute and Kyle walk to the stoat\* "It sucks that I'm unable to be on a team with Kyle at this point, but for both our sakes, it's better this way to ensure we have some assurance in case someone loses. Right now, my focus is on the victory, pal or not."*

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

*"Well, nightmare scenario activated." \*huffs\* "I can't figure out if I'm getting played or they genuinely wanna throw a bone to the dads for having been shut out from captainship this far in the game." \*the camera focuses on Dione and Robbi\* "I don't know what's their plan, but if it is to kick me out of here, they got a reality check coming at them, expedited."*

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

Kyle and Danny bump fists and hug as they get in front of Ludwig. A quick coin flip settles the first pick in favor of the German Shepherd, who decides to choose blue as his team color and leave red to his friend and rival. "Won't make much difference once we get in the mud, but still..." Danny ponders, tossing the small pile of jerseys in his big paws.

*"I need to make sure this stint is a successful one. There's a high chance that I need to play less physically than I truly want to, mostly 'cause I can get down and dirty but I can't get up as quickly as others if I'm taken down." \*looks over at the waiting canines\* "A fearless team and a strategic leader will be a pretty deadly combination."*

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

"Kyle, who will you select first?"

"This is a physical challenge, and I need the one that'll fold the other team quick and manages to compete with... this," Kyle gestures to Danny. "So it has to be Dione."

The Rottweiler walks over, happy to be picked up first. "Oh, you better be ready to wreck their shit, dawg!" he says as he bumps fists with the shepherd, not failing to detect a hint of disappointment on the malamute's muzzle.

Danny frowns as he studies the three dogs left out, ears folding a bit as he turns towards Kyle. "You evened the odds, buddy..." he mutters, pondering some more before finally making his pick. "Small, but rowdy," he succinctly says. "Jaxton, you two-by-four cinderblock, come over."

"Hell yeah!" the bull terrier laughs, stepping forward to pick the red jersey from the malamute's paws. "We got this, dude!"



*“Every team challenge we’ve played this far, I’ve been picked before the end of the first round.” \*jumps on his spot, loosening his shoulders in anticipation\* “No matter the task or the terrain, it seems like everyone wants Jax to turn it to the max, and he’s always ready to do so!”*

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

“Kyle, last pick, Edge, Robbi. Who will join the blue team?” the stoat asks.

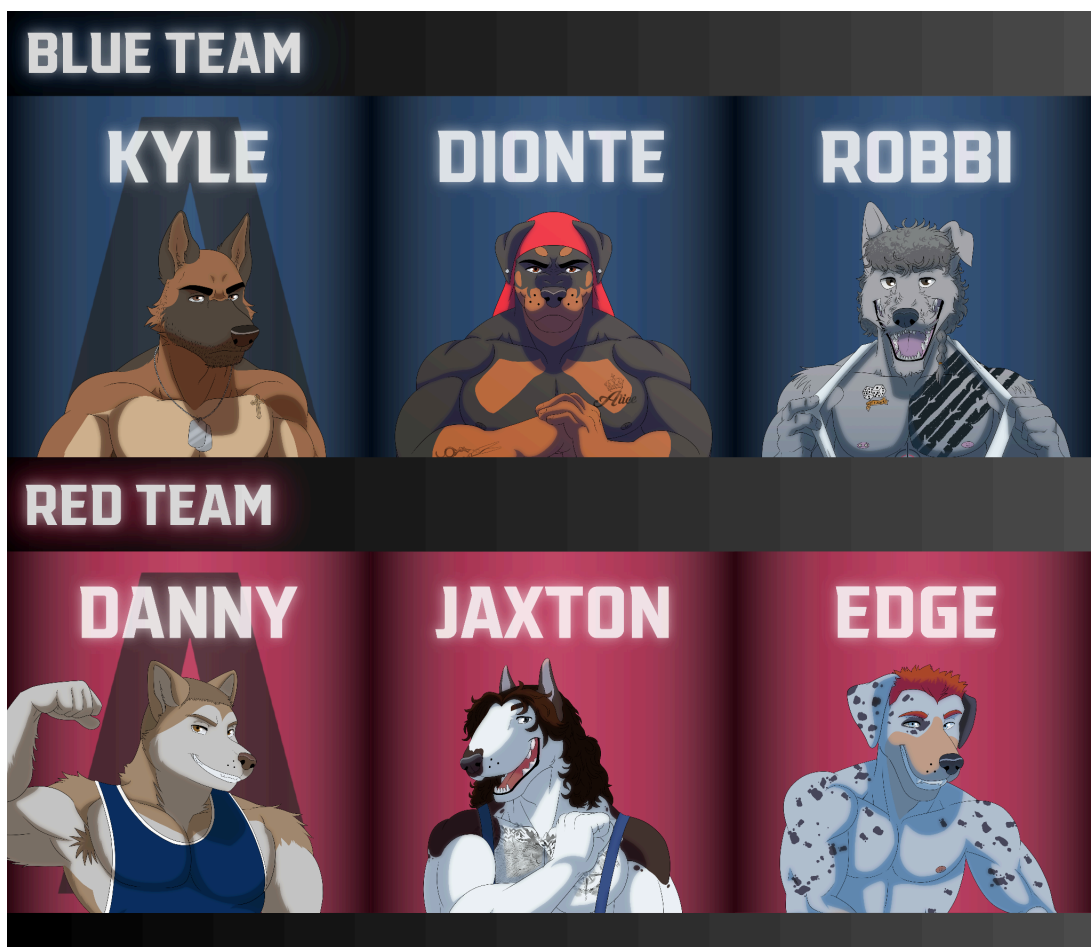
The veteran tents his fingers. “It honestly was a hard choice, cuz I do need to drive us to the win first and forem-”

“Should I just head over to Danny’s?” Edge interrupts, raising his eyebrows quizzically, making a face.

“I WAS SAYING I want someone who’s proven his worth in combat, and is also quick and nimble and able to think on the fly,” Kyle says, annoyed at the Catahoula’s remark.

“Sometimes, dedication triumphs over anything else, and there’s no one who tries more than Robbi right now.”

“Yep, I’ll just head over to Danny,” the spotted canine chuckles, as the mutt cheerfully walks over to Kyle and Dionte.



*"Yo, this game is pretty much street basketball in a muddy field, so it shouldn't be as tall an order as learnin' to ride a horse or walkin' down a rocky wall, innit?" \*the mutt roughly throws on his blue jersey\* "I'm no stranger to playin' ball. I tried out in freshman high and stuck with it until I left school, and even now I spend most summer nights playin' hoops at Barry Farm. Plus, we got old sports glory Kyle over here and Dionte who can easily down these other dogs for brekkie. We're golden!"*

*~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed*

"Alright... Now that we have our two teams, we can get to the nitty-gritty," Ludwig says, rubbing his paws together. "We'll play best of five, with all three players on the court at all times, and whichever team gets to three first wins the challenge," he adds. "Of course, the winning captain will earn a \$2,000 cash tip, and the whole team will be moving on to the coveted final six... while the three losers will all face a vote to determine who will go to the sixth Duel of the season. Y'all ready to go?"

The entire group roars in approval, then scatters off to get changed and ready for the challenge to come - the camera panning out as they walk away.

*"I am fucking pumped like you cannot believe!" \*the camera focuses on the barber, hands on his knees, leering at the other team\* "It's bad dawg o'clock baby, it's throwin' hands past ten." \*moves his fingers to the camera before balling his fists\* "I gotta get to the next stage, period."*

*~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner*

*"I've never even seen what the bottom is like, and I don't intend to start now. A final six without Jaxton will be a disaster, so consider this challenge won and the bull terrier on his way to Panama."*

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

Ludwig joins Nickolas on the upper ledge, from where he can spectate the entire challenge area: thick mud covers the entirety of the small, rectangular field, a circular goal suspended at about 15 feet off the ground demarcating its outer area. "I let Eddie do the honors last time. Would you, Nick?"

"You know it, Ludwig," the coyote nods, getting up from the bench as the two teams step into the field - all quite hampered by the wet, sticky mud immediately gripping at their heels. "Damn, this thing is heavy," he comments, taking the rubber ball from the stoat's paws and palming it between his own.

The stoat shrugs his shoulders. "Well, in the ancient version of this game, it is said the ball was heavy enough to physically hurt players. They'll be okay with this one, it doesn't weigh more than a small medicine ball. What, worried you won't toss it far enough?" he taunts Nickolas as he gets ready to throw, all six canines on the court tensing up and waiting for him to call the first round.

The coyote furrows his brows, squinting his eyes at the field. His voice drops as low and imposing as he can muster. "PLAYERS READY?"

“YEAH!” Jaxton shouts back, slapping his thighs.

Just as Ludwig sounds his airhorn, the coyote brings the ball over his head with both paws and tosses it forward with all his might - the players following its trajectory until it falls in the center of the arena with a loud splat. “GO!” Nickolas yells as the entire group sprints forward, all canines aching to be the first to snatch the ball and start the play.

Jaxton is the first to get to the ball, picking it up from the ground and instantly trying to toss it towards Edge - the bull terrier’s mouth instantly opening in shock at its sheer weight, which falls a few feet short from the Catahoula and is instantly snagged by Dionte. Danny goes to tackle the Rottweiler, putting his paws on the ball and trying to wrestle it away from his grasp - his tenacity prevailing when the barber’s right paw slips on the bottom of the arena, making his grip falter for a second as the malamute tugs it away with a grunt.

*“We’re all heading out and thinking this was like a volley ball or something and then the sheer weight just hits us.” \*the malamute attempts to maneuver around Dionte to defend Edge\* “On this field, everything could be used to hurt you, so we need to be the most alert we can.”*

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

The malamute tries to wrestle his weight through the blue team, using his frame to play keepaway from the rest as he scoots closer and closer to the hoop. He blindly tosses the ball towards the goal, misjudging the shot as it gets a few feet short and falls back in the mud - Kyle being quick to scoop it up yet getting violently tackled by Edge before he can shoot.

The Catahoula pushes the German Shepherd into the mud, falling on top of him as he blindly tosses away the ball. The two hit the bottom of the arena with a loud thud, struggling to get back on their feet as they wade through the impossibly thick mud.

“Dionte, the ball’s loose!” Kyle barks as he gets up from the fall.

The Rottweiler slobes towards the ball, picking it up and instantly throwing it towards the hoop in a jump shot. His attempt is better than Danny’s, but it still bounces against the wall and back into the field - the malamute being quick to scoop it back for the red team, keeping an eye on Robbi behind him, who fruitlessly tries to lunge to retrieve it.

For a while both teams trade blows, attempting fruitless shots from afar but struggling to get close to the hoop. It is hard for both teams to set up plays and get anyone to shoot the heavy ball unguarded, the mud gradually impeding their motions and making the game more strenuous as they struggle to wade through. “Ten minutes of play and we’re still tied at zero!” Ludwig announces. “Can anyone put their team onto the board?”

*“This is literally the closest thing to ‘just fucking kill each other’ Ludwig is allowed to orchestrate, like damn.” \*scoffs, eyes wide\* “If there’s a definition of ‘we won but at what cost?’, I’m sure it’ll be this challenge.”*

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

As the time passes, Danny figures out the advantage given to him by his larger frame. Guarding the ball with his back to the goal he scoots forward, shouldering Kyle with his left arm like a football linebacker. As he stands a few feet from the hoop he powers through, Robbi fruitlessly tries to stop him before he can line up to shoot.

“OWWWWWWWWWW!!!” The mutt yowls in pain, falling backwards into the mud as Danny viciously steamrolls him, losing his footing but launching the ball underhand to Jaxton who has managed to free himself and get right under the goal. The bull terrier tosses it upwards with all his might, managing to get it through the vertical hoop and score the first point for his team.

“AND JAXTON SCORES! Red is up, one-clip!” Ludwig raises his paws while the bull terrier celebrates his shot, Danny and Edge surrounding him as he falls to his knees into the mud.

Both teams head back to the starting spot, when suddenly a loud yelp makes people turn around. “GUYS, SHIT!” Robbi calls out, stumbling down to the mud and rolling on his back after trying to get up. “PEOPLE!”

*“We’re here all celebrating our point and then we hear someone screaming bloody murder, like what the fuck happened?”*

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

Kyle is the quickest to get to the mutt’s side. “What’s going on?” he asks, visibly concerned.

The wolfhound winces in pain through gritted teeth. “My... my fucking foot...” he mutters, pointing towards his lower leg. “I can’t fucking walk...”

“MEDIC!” the shepherd is quick to motion towards the stand-by crew, Dr. Paul instantly getting into the frame and walking through the mud to tend to the injured dog. The Kuvasz is quick to examine Robbi’s bruised foot.

*“Robbi was in the way of Danny’s charge, so he must’ve stomped on that mutt.” \*cameras focus on Robbi wincing as the doctor checks his foot\* “That must’ve been when Danny made a false step and fell down too. And this boy ain’t light, so Robbi must’ve completely fucked his limb up!”*

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

“The good thing is that nothing seems broken here. Looks like a foot contusion,” Dr. Paul says, motioning towards his assistants to help him bring the injured dog out of the field.

“Won’t take much to heal once we get to it, but he’s done for this challenge.”

Kyle and Dionte stare at the scene worried, then look at each other. “What happened?” the veteran mouths to his teammate.

“I dunno, I just saw Danny slam through him and then he was on the ground,” Dionte shakes his head. “What the fuck we gonna do?”

"Okay, contestants. Listen up!" Ludwig commands from the top bench, next to a stunned Nickolas, looking as Robbi is carried on a stretcher and taken away. "Robbi can't keep on participating in this challenge, but we will carry on as planned. Which means we will face each round as a two versus two," the mustelid concludes, the teams looking shocked.

*"So, Robbi is down, but we still have a challenge to play and I'm not in the mood to give it up to Red just because they're a man up over us." \*the German Shepherd is shown nodding determinedly to Ludwig's spiel\* "Dionte and I need to be in perfect fucking sync for the rest of this ordeal, and we still got a chance to punch our tickets to Panama."*

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

"Red team, you need to pick someone to sit out in between rounds," Ludwig instructs.

"Danny, you'll be in charge of who'll go and who'll stay. You can't sit the same person out twice in a row. Understood?"

"Yes sir," Danny nods.

"So, who will sit out round two?" the stoat asks.

The malamute shakes mud off his blonde pelt, trading glances with his teammates. "I'll go with Edge," he responds, the Catahoula nodding along. "Go take a breather, we need you next."

*"I don't wanna make it look like I'm shying away from my cap duties in this next match-up. I gotta get on the ground and see what they'll do before I make the rest of my calls." \*Danny and Jaxton are shown bumping fists as Ludwig gets ready to call the next round\* "I need Jaxton on the court because he's got energy to spare, and we need to exploit our numbers and tire Blue out."*

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

"Dionte..." Kyle motions to the Rottweiler. "Need you focused, need you listening, and need you to keep a lookout and be a wall when it's called," the veteran nods. "Let's do this for Robbi, aight?"

"For Robbi," the barber answers, clutching his paws together.

As soon as the airhorn sounds, the four canines scurry forward once more - Danny being the first to reach the ball, but getting tackled by Dionte before he can get a hold of it. The two behemoths roll in the mud, growling at each other, just as Jaxton picks up the ball and faces Kyle - trying to exploit his superior bulk and lower center of gravity to make way towards the goal.

The German Shepherd doesn't let himself be intimidated by the bull terrier's progression. Instead of simply defending the goal he pushes forward, violently shouldering Jaxton and making him lose his balance as his foot slides on the mud. Exploiting his advantageous position, as Danny and Dionte are still locked in their tangle, he has an easy game in stealing the ball from the mountaineer's grasp and lining up for the shot.

*“As weird as it seems, when I get under the goal here, I kinda feel like I’m back in high school, varsity, trying to get my team to the State finals. It also helps Dionte’s as large as some of the fellas I worked with years back!” \*chuckles\* “Mentally, I gotta tell myself that I’m still capable of that and much more. There’s no room for self-doubt.”*

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

Spotting Jaxton getting up and about to tackle him down, the Army veteran bends his arm back and explodes his shot, managing to see the ball pass through the hoop a second before the energetic bull terrier sends him careening through the mud.

“KYLE SINKS IT, WE’RE TIED ONE TO ONE!” Ludwig yells as Dionte firmly props Kyle up with a tug of his arm.

“You good, chief?” the Rottweiler asks.

“Yeah, just gotta make sure this stays put...” Kyle mutters, rubbing his knee where the suction of his prosthetic leg connects.

Danny instantly gathers up his team. “I’m out this round, we need your speed, and we gotta score fast,” he intently says. “Just make sure to not leave any of them open, ‘cause they can shoot.”

“It’s hard to figure out a plan,” Jaxton mutters, his features almost indistinguishable after several dives in the thick mud. “I can try taking Dionte on, but that leaves Edge and Kyle, and it’s hard to use speed to our favor out there.”

“Tire Kyle out,” the malamute succinctly says. “Take him down as many times as you can, drag the game so he gets tired from pulling himself up. That way, Dionte won’t be able to keep up.”

“Roger that,” the bull terrier nods. “Guess I’ll take care of it myself. Edge, you feel comfy against D?”

“Shorty, I’m taking care of the coot. You can weasel around the big boy,” the Coastie disagrees. “Let’s do this.”

*“If Jaxton thinks he’s going to take away the fun part of this challenge for me, he oughta think again.” \*grins\* “He’s small, he’s slippery, he can easily distract Dionte. I’m out for the kill.”*

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

“Take positions, people!” Ludwig says. “Team Red, who’ll sit out this round?”

Danny raises his paw. “Me,” he motions to the stoat, letting himself slump on one of the sandbag heaps marking the field’s borders. “Guys, just remember our plan!”

“After all this time complaining you’re invisible, you sit out? Alright...” Nickolas says under his breath.

“GO!”

The four competitors are quick to make their way to the center of the arena, dashing forward despite the muddy impediment. Jaxton scoops the ball and targets the goal without hesitation, Dionte instantly changing direction and moving to block him as he sees he has no chance to put his paws on the ball first.

*“Please, I can body Jax any place, any time. Not any reason, however cuz I try to be chill, but this time he’s asking for an ass whoopin’.” \*laughs\**  
~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner

An impossibly loud splashing sound resonates throughout the arena as Dionte forcefully pushes Jaxton to the ground, adding a fresh coating of mud to the smaller canine’s pelt.

“Wow, Dionte came to PLAY!” Ludwig roars, watching raptly as the Rottweiler wrestles the ball from the terrier’s control and tosses it towards the hoop. “Aw, just a foot short! But Jaxton, like it was nothing, swoops the ball back!”

*“As quick as he goes down, Jax gets back up. You’d swear he’s made of rubber. Meanwhile, Edge and Kyle are solving their tensions, so to speak. The sharpshooter’s out of commission, and Dionte can’t reply on being lucky to shoot.”*  
~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner

“Not this time!” Edge dives in order to grip Kyle’s hips and make him plummet down. The veteran grunts, surprised by the sudden attack, but instantly retaliates by pushing hard against the Catahoula’s back to prop himself up. His opponent manages to get a hold of his healthy leg, pulling on it to make him lose his balance and fall down face-first into the mud once more.

“They’ve fully skipped the scoring part and gone straight to the mud wrestling...” Nickolas comments, gritting his teeth as the Army veteran and the Coast Guard officer keep grappling not that far from the real action. Jaxton attempts a shot, but Dionte manages to block it with a paw and immediately scoops the ball from the ground - turning around to shoot himself, but only managing to hit the outer rim of the goal.

“Another unlucky shot for Blue, but they’re figuring it out!” the stoat host comments, his attention divided between the failed attempts and the brawling match going on nearby. “And Kyle takes another NASTY fall, courtesy of Edge, who isn’t letting go! Can he get back on his feet?”

For a second, it seems the Catahoula has managed to get rid of his opponent. He rushes under the goal, making a sign to Jaxton in hope for a pass as the bull terrier struggles to get past Dionte. However, just as the ball reaches his paws, Kyle manages to prop himself up with his healthy leg and stealthily works his way behind the spotted dog. “Edge, behind you!” the bull terrier shrieks, but to no avail, as the German Shepherd is quick to circle his long arms around the Catahoula’s waist and bring him down with him, the ball slipping from his grasp and rolling just a few feet from a stunned Dionte.

"Let me go!" Edge protests, turning belly-up in order to deflect Kyle's blows. Just as the veteran sees the ball, he quickly composes himself and gets in position to throw it to Dionte, Edge loudly yelping at the older canine's movement.

"Dionte!" Kyle yells, throwing the ball to the Rottweiler up high in order to avoid Jaxton's interference. His teammate manages to catch the pass and works his way under the goal pretty much unguarded, tossing it up and letting out a triumphant growl as it goes through the hoop.

"AND DIONTE SCORES! BLUE IS UP, TWO TO ONE!" Ludwig exclaims, Kyle pumping his arm in celebration while Dionte clenches his fists and flexes his muscles with a loud growl.

*"Kyle and I fuckin' figured out this game and now ain't a goddamn rival that finna stop us now!" \*the Rottweiler and German Shepherd are shown exchanging a muddy hug\* "Show me that green jersey and those flight tickets already, 'cause this train is goin' at full speed!" \*pounds his chest\**

*~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner*

The dogs get back into position, except for Edge, who's still laying on the ground and coughing. "Edge, are you okay?" Ludwig asks out loud.

"This bitch stepped on me..." he breathes heavily, slowly turning and getting in a crawling position. "I'm fine!" he waves at a concerned Jaxton.

*"Somehow, Kyle decides to get his 30 pound metal rod and step directly on my stomach, and I can't even fucking breathe right now."*

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

"I'm good," he coughs, getting up with help from Danny. "I'll be ready for the next."

"No Edge, you're out," the malamute interrupts the Catahoula.

"The hell I am, Jax is grindin' four rounds in a row?" Edge asks.

Danny flinches slightly. "We can't let them score another," he says, crossing his arms over his chest in slight defiance. "We need fresh bodies in order to score. You're not fresh right now."

*"We got to have our healthier paws out there, and I am not going to let Edge make decisions while winded up and wanting to get back instead of score. We're down two to one and I'm not going to let the blue team get the win that I want."*

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

*"I'm only playing half of the challenge? Are you kidding me? If they hold this against me, they'll better be fucking ready to get what's coming to them."*

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

"Holding up, dawg?" Dionte asks Kyle, with his paws on his knees.



"I've been better," the shepherd frowns, slightly huffing. "It's fucking hard to get up each time they throw me down, and I don't want this to pop off with all the dirt and grime," he says.

"Only need one more," the Rottweiler reassures his captain. "C'mon, not gonna let your ass get all geriatric on me now. Not this time."

"How you see me's how you gonna end up, pup," Kyle scoffs in response, gritting his teeth as he gets ready for Ludwig to call the next round.

*"You know the feeling when you want something so bad, you can barely see straight?"  
\*briefly looks up\* "This win represents much more than moving to the next stage. Gotta show my family and all out there that when your mind's set, you can pull off what seems impossible. And right now, I'm craving to seal this deal."  
~Kyle, 40, German Shepherd, U.S. Army First Sergeant*

"Alright, y'all ready? Blue leads 2-1, they only need to score once more to win the challenge," Ludwig reminds as the players look at each other, now barely recognizable and covered in mud from head to toe. "Kyle, Dionte, Danny, Jaxton... GO!"

It's a mad scramble through the challenge field as all four dogs dive for the ball, Jaxton again being the quickest to reach it and scoop it for his team. Dionte dashes through the mud and gets a hold of the terrier's arm, roughly manhandling him and tossing him to the ground with little ceremony. He still tenaciously holds onto the ball as the Rottweiler tries to wrestle it off him, the two dogs snarling and huffing at each other as they fight over its possession.

Eventually, Dionte manages to exploit his dominating position and snatches the ball from Jaxton's paws. Briefly looking over at the field, he sees an opening to where Kyle is and attempts a hasty toss towards him - but unfortunately, the Army veteran is pinned to the ground by the much larger malamute.

"Get off!" the shepherd growls at the malamute nearly sitting on top of him.

"Jaxton, fetch the ball!" Danny yells to the nimble bull terrier while attempting to immobilize his opponent. Having gotten up after his earlier brawl with Dionte, he manages to get to the ball first and attempts a shot from a few feet out - but his attempt falls short, Dionte going for the rebound and catching the ball before it plunges into the mud. The Rottweiler goes to shoot unguarded, but misjudges his strength as the ball hits the back of the wall.

"Great opportunity wasted for Blue!" Ludwig says, watching intently as the red team gets possession of the ball once more. "Can Red get back in this?"

*"This game's physically strenuous. There's a lot of back and forth, we're eating mouthfuls of mud with each play, we forget about the scoring and we're focusing on just fuckin' surviving one another, and overall the winner is whoever isn't beat to a pulp in the end." \*the bull terrier is tossed to the floor by Dionte\* "We cannot let Kyle or Dionte even breathe if we want a chance at a win. "*

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

Meanwhile, Kyle is still fighting Danny, who doesn't waste any opportunity to push him into the mud. Each time the shepherd gets up, gradually struggling more and more as he has to lean onto his healthy leg, yet still yearning to get back into the action.

Spotting the malamute rushing over to block his path, the Army veteran waits for him with his guard up and smacks him in the middle of his chest with the back of his arm. Danny barely flinches at the contact and tackles his friend, sending him down before Dionte can pass him the ball.

*"You can say this hurts me more than it hurts you, but right now my aim's on the prize, and if I have to rough you up a bit, old pal, then consider it done all the times it's necessary in order to render you done for."*

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

The game seems to be getting at a standstill, the ball completely forgotten in the middle of the arena as Danny holds Kyle down and Dionte tries to stop Jaxton - all players exploiting the lull in the action to get some respite. "Seems like this round's pretty deadlocked," Ludwig exclaims, closely watching the two tangled couples. "Think anyone can get the upper hand?"

"What's going on?" Nickolas comments. "Who's even gonna... score, or try to or something..."

*"Shit won't get going unless we break these chickenshit scuffles. So, I gotta forget Jaxton and get Soviet boy outta my teammate's business quick. Let's see him fight someone his own damn size."*

*~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner*

All of a sudden, Dionte pushes Jaxton to the side, getting up and sprinting towards the other pair before the bull terrier can even react. With what little energy he got left, he hooks his arms around Danny's back and forcefully tears him off Kyle - the German Shepherd pushing himself off the malamute as soon as he sees his teammate coming to help, and rolling on all fours in a bid to get to the ball before Jaxton can get to him.

"GO, DAWG, FUCKING GO!" Dionte shouts, trading blows in the mud with the malamute as Kyle somehow gets upright and dashes to the ball, wincing each time his fake leg connects with the bottom of the arena.

*"My leg's not made to withstand a tussle with a 200-pound, overgrown malamute." \*shakes his head\* "Plus the mud's making shit all slippery, I can feel my holding sock squashing around and I'm doing my best to keep it together until the challenge is over." \*the camera focuses on the German Shepherd stumbling to the ball, picking it up and lining for the shot\* "I gotta sink it before it completely pops off!"*

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






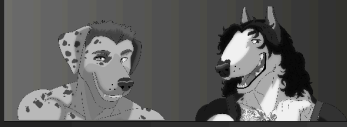
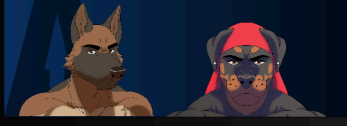

"Kyle goes to shoot!" Ludwig yells, the German Shepherd uncaring of his surroundings as he takes his time to aim at the goal. He launches the ball towards the hoop, instantly tossing both arms in the air as it leaves his paw, just as Jaxton tackles him down to the ground.

However, it's too little too late as the ball goes straight through its target, bouncing on the wall behind before falling down. "AND HE MAKES IT! BLUE TEAM WINS THE CHALLENGE!" Ludwig roars, awed at the veteran's perfect shot. "KYLE, DIONTE, AND ROBBIE MOVE ON TO THE FINAL SIX!"

The G-shep dry heaves from the efforts, still lying down in the mud after Jaxton's tackle. Dionte swiftly dashes towards his direction to prop him up. "YOOOOOOOO!! Ya did it!" he howls, helping him up before shaking his shoulders and pulling him in a rough hug. "Top six, baby!"

*"Often, furs out there have overlooked or dismissed me, but leading my team to this challenge win and scoring the majority of the points really validates my place and my reason to be here." \*beats his closed fist over his heart\* "I outlasted half of my competition and pulled myself into the top six Alpha canines in America. You may say that's enough - not for me. Not now that I know I can go out and take the whole thing."*

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

TEAM CHALLENGE #5 - Mud Ball					
RD	TEAM			SCORE	
1	 KYLE DIONTE ROBBIE	 DANNY JAXTON EDGE	0	1	
2	 KYLE DIONTE	 DANNY JAXTON	1	1	
3	 KYLE DIONTE	 EDGE JAXTON	2	1	
4	 KYLE DIONTE	 DANNY JAXTON	3	1	

"Fuck, man..." Edge frustratingly sighs by the perimeter of the arena. "Couldn't fucking gel it together for even a second."

*"I'm... really frustrated right now." \*the malamute is shown huffing as he walks out of the arena\* "We were three against two, we could have completely dominated this challenge, and it all went to bust. But no time to wallow, it's time to change sights and declare that I'm continuing on this competition whatever the duel would be, and either Edge or Jaxton won't."*

~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner

The canines huddle in front of Ludwig, their fur still caked in mud, all visibly battered and bruised as they face the host. Kyle is sitting on the ground with his prosthesis taken off, while Robbi has joined back the group and is sitting on a wheelchair, his foot bandaged to avoid further swelling. "They said I was fine, but hey, I ain't complaining havin' a seat!" the mutt laughs, Diente playfully messing with his hair.

"So, Kyle, Diente, Robbi, you have made it into the next stage of the game. I'd say you can stand tall and proud, but..." Ludwig points out, chuckling.

"Least one of us is!" Diente chortles.

"It's good, Ludwig," Kyle laughs back, hastily putting his leg back after cleaning it as best as he can. "This is a win to be proud of, no matter how much it took."

The stoat nods. "Indeed it is," he adds. "Blue team... as the winning squad, you get the chance to relax, take your time and reap your win before we head off to Panama. And yes, Kyle... as the winning captain, \$2,000 is in the way of your bank account."

"That'll cover the knee check-ups," Kyle jokes, leaning over Diente as the three make their way next to the coyote.

*"Sure, there's part of me that wishes I would have been more present in the game, but hey, I'm still damn proud that I made it to this next stage. I accomplished so damn much, and most of all, I'm glad my paw's gonna be in top shape soon enough!"*  
~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed

Ludwig then turns to the three losing canines, looking fairly dejected. "Edge, Danny, Jaxton... before we determine who'll be in the duel, know there's one more vote that you'll have to face. But this time, things are a bit different." The canines' ears perk in confusion. "The four safe canines will vote to actually save one of you, and send them to the top six. The other two will have to face the upcoming duel."

The revelation quite shocks the bench of safe canines, the three looking up expectantly. "Like fucking that?" Danny mutters.

"Yeah, and we'll be starting right now," the stoat highlights, turning towards the safe dogs. "Remember, there are only two green shirts left at stake, and you're essentially awarding one of them right now. Choose carefully."

The four are taken down to face the three in peril. "In the end, strongest one gotta stay, huh?" Robbi whispers to Diente as the winning canines take their position.

"Huh?" the Rottweiler looks down.

"You always said so..." the mutt succinctly nods, looking pensively at the dogs at risk.

*"There are just so many things to keep track of. Who has done enough shit to deserve it? Who'll be a pain in the ass if they advance?" \*ponders his choice\* "I gotta say, I wanna*

*compete against the best dawgs all the way to the end, whatever goes. Let's just put the cards on the table and see if the rest think the same."*

*~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner*

"Okay, we will go with the three that just won this challenge first. If it's still a deadlock, Nickolas will follow," Ludwig calls for the attention of the rest, before facing towards the German Shepherd. "Kyle, who will you vote to save?"

"Danny," Kyle immediately answers, stoic and inexpressive as the malamute nods. "There's more he can offer, so I feel he deserves to go through, plain and simple."

"Well, simple it sure is..." Edge mutters, clenching his teeth.

The stoat moves on to the next canine. "That's one for Danny. Dionte. Who will you pick to save?"

"It ain't gonna be Danny, and I say this cuz you can take the facts, dawg..." the Rottweiler replies. "It's hard, cuz you wanna give it to the one that has done the best so far, and considering everything so far... I feel it gotta be Jax. He scored, he done well, and if the weakest one gotta go, the strongest one has to stay," the barber shrugs.

*\*flinches at Dionte\* "Dawg, you're killing me. Course Jaxton scored, I wasn't even allowed to be in half the challenge thanks to Captain Fluff here, c'mon!" \*flicks hands at the camera\* "If you going with that, you should have saved me cuz I've been the most fucked over in this situation when it comes to proving myself!"*

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

The mutt exhales, looking forward. "Robbi, your turn..." the stoat calls him out.

"I'm actually glad you guys voted how you did," he sighs. "Cuz really... no ill will against Jax or Danny, but I wanted to save Edge, and from there whatever goes goes. Plus, how Imma measure him if he barely played this time too?" he says. "I wish we all got to get them green jerseys, 'cause we all fucking deserve to. But well, pretty eyes there is a dog of his word, so oughta pay him back."

Edge grins at Robbi, bowing his head slightly. "So, we're in a deadlock, everyone voted for a different canine. Which means the one that'll determine who goes to the top six is you, Nickolas," Ludwig turns towards the coyote. "Who will you vote to save from the duel?"

*"Two days ago I was at my wits' end, and now the fate of these guys rests on my shoulders." \*raises his chin slightly\* "I am ready to take more heat because of my choice, but I am confident about it."*

*~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach*

The coyote stares blankly at the camera. "Long story short, I'm still here due to him, so... I'm going to save Jaxton."

The bull terrier takes his hands to his muzzle in surprise, looking at his fellow teammates.  
“Jaxton, you are safe from the duel, you may join the rest.”

The shellshocked mountaineer slowly walks toward the safe canines, instantly going to hug Nickolas and the other safe dogs. “You will never see me in the bottom again, promise,” he says, exhaling in relief.

*\*sighs\* “In this cutthroat game where everyone will say everything and then do the opposite, I admit there was a slight part of me that expected to be in the Duel, especially on this thin margin. But I’m glad to see that these people are willing to reward good deeds, and that we’re on the same page in keeping this a fair fight. Panama, here I come!” \*wags his tail\**  
~Jaxton, 26, Bull Terrier, Camera Operator/Mountaineer



“Edge, Danny, for one of you, this will be as far as you’re going to come,” the mustelid points out.

*\*camera focuses on Kyle looking at the malamute in the background\* “I’ve had my ups and downs in this game, but I truly feel I deserve to make the next phase as much as anyone.”*  
*\*peers\* “This Duel is a do-or-die for me. Edge has proven to be extremely competitive and well-rounded, so I gotta make sure that I come in with a plan and make this his last stop.”*  
~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner

“Whoever said the trip to the top was going to be easy? If anything, at least it’s set to be entertaining! This’ll make everyone watch out that I’ll be willing to leave it all on the battlefield to ensure my spot in this competition.”  
~Edge, 31, Catahoula Leopard Dog, U.S. Coast Guard Diver

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7:00 PM

Night is falling over Apopka and the American Canine Alpha premises as the two dogs at risk enter the challenge field, a grim look of determination plastered on their muzzles. Ludwig

waits for them in front of two massive walls facing one another, the safe bench having been set overlooking both walls, adorned with a large silhouette of the U.S map.

*"There's too much at stake for me to even consider going home a possibility. There's a family I got to make proud of, and there's plenty I got left to offer. I'm not leaving this place, no matter who or what's against me."*

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

"Edge, Danny, welcome to the seventh duel of the season," the stoat host says as the Catahoula and the malamute stop in front of him, clad in the black jerseys marking their status. "This is your last chance to save yourselves from elimination and punch your ticket towards the individual phase of this game. One of you will get to join the five safe canines in the next round, the other will have to leave the competition for good."

*"I've come too far to get the boot before the real good stuff begins. Sorry, Danny, but... your Pound wife oughta file for divorce." \*camera points to a preoccupied Kyle\* "Expedited." \*chuckles\**

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

"Both of you, second time around in a Duel. Danny, is this any different from the Fight Week duel some weeks ago?" Ludwig asks.

The malamute clasps his paws together. "I feel it's gonna be my set to prove how wrong people have been to underestimate me all along," he says. "I'm not scared of whatever challenge, I know I can beat Edge just like I beat Farid. Bring it on, Ludwig, will ya?"

"Soon enough," the stoat chuckles. "While Edge... you've been one of the frontrunners in this game ever since acing the selections. How confident are you that you can wrestle back your stature in the game?"

"Well for starters, this time my arm's not barely hanging from my fucking socket!" the redhead canine quips, a few of the safe canines laughing along. "But it's at a point where there are so many tickets to punch, and be it skill or luck, sometimes you just gotta punch it later rather than the sooner everyone prefers. If anything, I'm ready to give ya a show. I'm in peak shape, and I'm hungry for the title."

"Wow, some fighting words..." Ludwig rubs his paws, before directing everyone's attention to the challenge setup. "Today, you two will be taking on a Duel depicting something every canine worth his salt should know how to do. We're playing Mark Their Territory," he says, the duelists raising their brows, amused. "Each of you will face this big climbing wall, depicting the map of the United States and its territories. On my go, you'll have to climb up and down this wall to match the pictures of the canines taking part in this season with their respective hometown state - that is, the state where they currently reside, according to their official information."

"Huh, a memory test..." Kyle points out to Jaxton, sitting next to him. "It's more a matter of how much time you took to get to know others than simply being good at climbing."

The stoat heads closer to Edge's stack of pictures, where a button is placed. "To make it more clear for you both... once the picture matches the correct state, it will display on your respective counter at the bottom. For example, Benet's picture is already up on Puerto Rico on both of your maps," he says, gesturing towards the large display, slowly walking towards Danny's own stack and button. "Once you get all of your pictures up on your wall, you'll get to push this button to see the number of correct guesses you have. The first to push it and have all of the twelve canines on their pile correctly situated wins the duel, goes straight into the top six."

"I hope ya made friends! I know I did!" Robbi quips.

"Aw..." Jaxton huffs. "A climbing duel, and I can't be in it? You two had to bork it up for me..." he jokingly says to Nickolas and Diente on his side.

"You rather be in the bottom two, bully?" Diente replies, not missing a beat.

"No, not really, but still!" the bull terrier laughs back.

*"People are focusing on the memory part, but I feel like both Edge and Danny have it cut out for them. However, climbing can be a bitch if you have to constantly move up and down over a wall this huge." \*watches intently as the Catahoula and the malamute get fitted in\* "They oughta figure out a strategy to cover all bases as quickly as they can, and that's what will set the winner from the loser."*

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

"And just in case, you'll have earbuds to cancel yourself from spoilers..." Ludwig nods, shooting a side eye to the five safe canines. "Am I right, fellas?"

"Shit, if they dunno where I'm from, then bitches dumb!" Diente chuckles.

"Alright..." Ludwig motions to the two duelists, both having been secured with climbing ropes to the top of the wall. "For the last spot in the final six, and the last green jersey available... Edge, Danny... GO!"

As soon as the air horn pierces the air, both canines rush to the main table and start sorting out the pictures - Edge instantly grabbing one and dashing towards his wall while Danny takes his time in spreading them on the table, already trying to figure out how to stick all twelve in the quickest time.

*"It's obvious, you got to start with yourself, that's an easy point, obviously." \*the Catahoula hooks himself up with his own picture, climbing up towards North Carolina\**

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

*"I think the cleverest thing to do is to start from the upper states and move down, so I get to spare energies that may come in use later on. Once I get climbing up towards the East Coast, I'll sort that out. In the meantime, I'm going Midwest." \*Danny gets Kyle's picture and climbs towards Illinois\**

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*



The safe dogs anxiously watch the progress of both, gasping each time their grip fails and they lose their foothold. "It's a learning curve, and some sections are easier to climb than others!" the stoat host points out. "You gotta make the most of what you got!"

Initially, both Danny and Edge get some guesses right - their score keeping pretty close as they keep climbing up and down the wall, visibly labored but still focused on completing their task. However, it only takes so much before things start to become a bit more complicated.

"Oh, I don't live there..." Nickolas whispers towards Jaxton and points at Danny's map, where he placed the coyote's icon in Nebraska.

*"Sure, some people are easy as fuck. Dionte always yells A-T-L shit, and Tory's pure Cali surfer pup, but from there, shit can get messy." \*the wolfhound grins as Edge places Robbi's picture onto D.C.\* "It'll go down to the smallest detail, and if you can't figure someone out..." \*makes a slitting throat motion\* "Adios, baby."  
~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed*

"Danny's got eight to Edge's seven! But are they right in their calls?" the stoat yells. "Edge just put Don in Oregon, that's a big climb!" he comments as the Catahoula begins to descend from the far upper corner, pushing himself down the wall with the help of his feet.

"Wait, no... shit!" The redhead canine's heart jumps as he quickly backtracks and retraces his climb. Using the Rockies as a foothold, he pulls himself back up and moves the Afghan hound's pic up to Washington State, mentally scolding himself for the mistake.

*"See, I know it's expected to get some kinda memory test at some point in the game, and while I do have most of these people figured out, sometimes it does get fuzzy. Don's not from THIS wacky state, he's from THAT wacky state." \*rolls his eyes\* "I have absolutely no idea of how Danny's faring, but I feel confident in most of my guesses."  
~Edge, 31, Catahoula Leopard Dog, U.S. Coast Guard Diver*

"Edge just retraced back to put Don in Washington!" Ludwig comments. "While it seems Danny's climbing up to New York, not for himself, but for Ewan!"

"He's in trouble..." Kyle mutters, gritting his teeth. "Nick and Lance are wrong, and they might be a bitch to guess..."

"I mean, who told Edge Farid was from Arizona?" Jaxton chimes back. "Then again, where's he from? Shit..."

*"Dogs we lived with just for a few days... it's easy to discuss many things, even pretty deep, and the topic of where they live never comes up. Not to mention there's many people who moved across the country, and their 'home' is where they grew up and their family comes from, while others are more tied to the place they set their own life in." \*points at self\*  
~Kyle, 40, German Shepherd, U.S. Army First Sergeant*

"Edge has Jaxton's now! Will he place it right?" Ludwig asks, as the Catahoula looks down at the bull terrier's image, then up to the center of the map.

"Fucking... Hoosier!" the Coast Guard looks up, instantly pulling himself onto the lowest footholds and climbing towards Indiana.

"Yah, he does," Jaxton scoffs, deadpan.

The two duelists are both pretty close to filling their map, taking little hesitation between each climb though their motions are growing labored and more calculated. Danny picks up the last picture, the one with the Catahoula's muzzle plastered on it, and briefly looks at the map as he tries to figure out where to put it.

"Edge is taking his time, but Danny's close to putting his twelve!" Ludwig yells. "Does he got all right? The push of that button will tell!"

*"I'm looking at Edge's picture and I kinda realize... I don't really know much about him."  
\*frowns\* "He's not the kind to open much about his life at home, but if the video from Vegas is right... he gotta be Cajun through and through. So I gotta go with Louisiana and then see."  
~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

As the malamute sticks Edge's picture over the Pelican State, the whole group stares confused - the Catahoula's own guess of North Carolina giving away the correct answer. "Louisiana? Why the fuck?" Kyle mutters, making a face at the group.

"Shoulda seen his family video, tho..." Robbi chimes in. "His parents are from t was all boi, gumbo, juju, Mardi Gras kinda shit, I tell ya!" the mutt chortles. "I'd make the same mistake too!"

"Shit, if that's true, I don't know how Danny can figure that out..." the shepherd comments.

"And Edge is just going up to place his last one, Nickolas! But Danny's down and sprinting to his button. He can punch his ticket right here!" Ludwig roars as the malamute climbs down the bottom part of the wall dashes to the center table, where the large button of his wall is, pressing it down firmly, but no reaction is shown. "That is NOT going to work, Danny, time to reevaluate!"

"Fuck," Danny mutters under his breath, the display showing he had nine correct answers, dashing to the front of his wall and looking at it in its entirety. "Where even..."

"He's got Nickolas, Edge, and Lance wrong..." Jaxton whispers to Robbi, leaning on the rail, staring at the field. "While Edge got just Farid, and I doubt he's gonna figure out Nick, either."

However, the Catahoula seems pretty convinced, as he sticks the coyote's picture over South Dakota with little hesitation. "Shit, he got it," Nickolas jumps to his feet, quite surprised.

"Edge is running to his button now, and..." the redhead canine pushes it firmly, no reaction. "...that's not it either, back to the wall!" the mustelid points out.

"Who the hell I got wrong?" Edge loudly asks himself, anxiously looking at the display showing '11' on the screen. "Do we got two New Yorkers? Ewan is, but where's this fucker from?"

*"I know the one that's likely gonna trip him up, that's Lance, but where the fuck did I make a mistake?" \*the camera points out at Farid's picture in Arizona\* "My other guess is Danny's from New Jersey, so that's the move I'll try."*

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

The malamute ponders, mentally slapping himself soon after. "Lakota... Dakota, SHIT!" he loudly exclaims, running up the wall.

"It seems both minds clicked at the same time!" Ludwig yells. "Danny's going center, Edge is going East Coast!"

"Nooo, Edge, you dumbass..." Robbi stares intently as the duelist slightly shifts Danny's picture from New York to New Jersey. "I think he was right, there. Was he?"

"Yeah," Kyle nods. "It's hard to figure out who you are wrong on if you don't know how many are right. Maybe he was questioning Danny from the get-go, and now he'll likely get more stumped."

The stoat peers at the gym owner sliding again down the wall and rushing to the button, his display now showed a '10', which meant he did fix his Nickolas mistake. "Danny seems to have upped his score, but he still needs to fix more mistakes!" he comments, the malamute studying the entire map in search for more mishaps.

*"I'm at a loss. This is so hectic and tiresome, and I'm struggling to keep a clear mind the further I go." \*camera shows Lance's picture in Virginia, then Edge's picture in Louisiana\* "I am pretty damn sure of most, but this stress is now putting everything under question."*

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

"No, Edge, that's not going to be it!" the mustelid host points out at another failed button push by the Catahoula, frustrated that he regressed on his guesses.

"Think they're both 10 out of 12," Nickolas points out, as Edge quickly goes up to place Danny's picture back where he had put it in the first place. "Not sure about Lance, but Edge knew him better than anyone in here, so he gotta be right."

"Edge has Danny's mistakes right," Robbi nods. "He gotta know Lance and he gotta know himself, while Edge has one obvious wrong and one hard one wrong, but probably Farid's from Cali too."

The Coast Guard officer makes his way down to face the wall, planting both paws on his hips, biting his tongue as he tries to figure out his mistake. "Danny was from New York. Tory's Cali born and raised, Lance is Pennsylvania..."

*"I'm 100% confident about the dogs who are still in the game. It has to be one of the early boots." \*the camera zooms in on Farid's picture\* "And to think I roomed with most of those for the first few days, shit!"*

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

"Don's from up there... Robbi's sheltered in D.C... Farid worked... at... at..." Edge jumps, trying to literally jog his memory.

Meanwhile, Danny's already climbing up again, taking off midway and working towards the upper Midwest - his muzzle scrunched in determination, eyeing up Lance's picture which he erroneously placed in Michigan.

*"The only one I'm not sure of is Lance. I'm guessing he's around that area, so I'll just have to go up and rack my brain. I don't think he's from Michigan despite all of his motorsport shit, so I'll try Maryland, Pennsylvania, or New Jersey. I am sure it's one of those."*

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

"Santa... San something?" Edge asks out loud, before it hits him. "LONG FUCKING BEACH!" he says, bumping his forehead with the palm of his hand before running towards the wall and jumping on, quickly navigating to the lower Southwest and shifting the grey wolf's picture from Arizona to California.

"We got gears turning..." Ludwig boasts, as Danny heads down after placing Lance on Pennsylvania, dashing to his button, which does nothing whatsoever.

"Danny's missing one, but Edge could have it in this next run!" the mustelid points out, the spotted canine hastily dropping on his way down the wall. "Is he right?"

All contestants watch in anticipation as the Catahoula punches his button, his wall instantly coming alive in a flurry of red, white and blue lights and fireworks.

"AND EDGE BROOKHOUSER PUNCHES HIS TICKET TO THE FINAL SIX!" Ludwig yells, as the spotted dog raises both paws in celebration and slumps to the ground. Some of the safe canines cheer and applaud him on, while Danny immediately goes to check on Edge's wall, instantly realizing the one dog he got wrong.

"North Carolina, what?" the malamute says, fairly shocked at what ended up being his only mistake. "I'd never have that figured out. Never!"

*"Turns out being around for the Vegas reward did me in. I would have questioned most people on the board before Edge, that's how sure I was." \*sighs in disappointment\* "Eh, what can you really do? I can't help but feel slightly cheated on right now, but that's how it is. Props to him, really."*

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

"Congratulations..." the malamute says half-heartedly, helping prop the Catahoula up, which walked to the side. "It's been a fantastic ride, boss," he nods to the stoat.

"And it's been great to have you here," Ludwig answers. "Danny, you left a mark on this game with your sheer tenacity and imposing presence. Unfortunately, you've fallen short just before the final stretch."

"Even if I did, I appreciate all of this," the malamute nods, walking forward to shake paws with the host. "I really wanted to make the top six, and it kinda stings a bit that I got eliminated after losing as captain. But it's been an outstanding experience, I got to know some amazing people from all over the country..." he glances at Kyle, the German Shepherd thanking him with a nod of his head. "And I think I made my wife and daughters proud, which to me's the biggest victory in itself."

"Sure is," Ludwig agrees, returning the handshake. "You may say goodbye to the rest," he says, looking up to the safe canines.

Danny makes his way up to the benches where the five are, Kyle immediately standing up and dashing to him in a hard, tackling hug that rattled their mic packs, as others go to greet him farewell. "You got my vote," he whispers to the shepherd, chuckling, before looking at him directly. "Win this for the papas, yeah?"

"Deal," the Army veteran responds, visibly emotional to see his friend leave. "Say hi to the girls for me," he adds, slightly pulling back and letting others say goodbye to the malamute.

Displaying his usual courteousness, Danny takes his time to hug and share parting words with all the surviving contestants, then going back to shake paws once more with Ludwig. "Ah shit..." he stops, sighing before leaving the premises, paws on his hips. "All I got to say is... *Ya Alpha, navsegda. Spasibo bolshoe.*"

The whole group cheers and applauds as the malamute leaves, shaking his fist in the air as he walks out in the dark.

*"It sure is disappointing to have my time cut short. I was sure I was someone that could have gone to top four, top two, hell, win it all!" \*the camera shows Danny walking towards the Pound out of the frame\* "I do believe I deserve it more than some of the guys out there, but that's the way this goes. This is not going to stop me from improving in my craft, and I will use all of these teachings to become a stronger, wiser malamute. Lytvynchuk, out." \*taps his chest\**

*~Danny, 36, Malamute, Gym Owner*

The Catahoula nods, starting to make his way back to the rest.

"EDGE, WAIT!"

He stops in his tracks, staring at the stoat in shock. "We're not done. Need you to come right here," the mustelid says in the most commanding way he can.

"The fuck?" Robbi asks, as they all see the confused duelist make his way towards Ludwig, stepping face-to-face with the stoat.

With a swift movement of his hand, the mustelid gives Edge a new jersey, forest green in color.

"You need to change," Ludwig says, handing over the garment to the surprised Catahoula before beckoning the others to come pick theirs.

"AAAAAAHHH!" The Catahoula incredulously screams. "Ludwig, you got me fucked up!" he laughs, showing the jersey to the flabbergasted group that realized just what was happening.

*\*laughs ostentatiously\* "Well then! They made me fight for it, but I got it. No sweat." \*the Catahoula puts the new jersey on\* "And this jersey caps up a grueling, but epic night for me. I was the first finalist, and I won't rest until I am the last dog standing."*

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

The stoat quickly fetches another one, as the canines start shedding their shirts and tossing them to the ground in anticipation. "Nickolas, step forward!"

*"This just makes it real!" \*the coyote is shown accepting the green jersey\* "This is an actual, visual, manifestation of all the hard work I've been doing, and it feels amazing."*

*~Nickolas, 24, Coyote, Academic Support Coach*

"Kyle!" the stoat calls for the veteran.

*"I wish I could share this with Danny. We began this journey seeing each other right there in the end. And even if it didn't become a reality, I still feel great about advancing." \*the veteran puts on his jersey, smiling confidently\* "Make no mistake: I am in this to win this, no matter who stands in my way."*

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

"Dionte, come on down!"

"Daaawg..." the Rottweiler grins, firmly shaking the host's hand. "This is the good shit!"

*"I'm part of the green jersey elite!" \*thumps his chest\* "The boxing gloves are off, and these dawgs are not ready for the mayhem that's comin'!"*

*~Dionte, 30, Rottweiler, Barbershop Owner*

"Robbi, this one's yours!"

"Okay for this I gotta stand up!" the mutt grins, spreading his arms as he walks triumphantly towards the stoat.

*"People, I'm in a fucking green jersey!" \*pulls it and shakes it\* "Get your popcorn out, cuz it's gonna be the Robbi show on this whole shindig!"*

~Robbi, 28, Wolfhound (?), Unemployed

“And finally, Jaxton!”

“YEAH, BABY!” the bull terrier dashes towards the host, roughly bro-hugging him.

*“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” \*loudly laughs and pumps his fists\* “You know how many dogs wanted this? Roughly fifty outta the bus on Day One, and now there’s only five on my way to the title. I’m owning this shit!”*

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

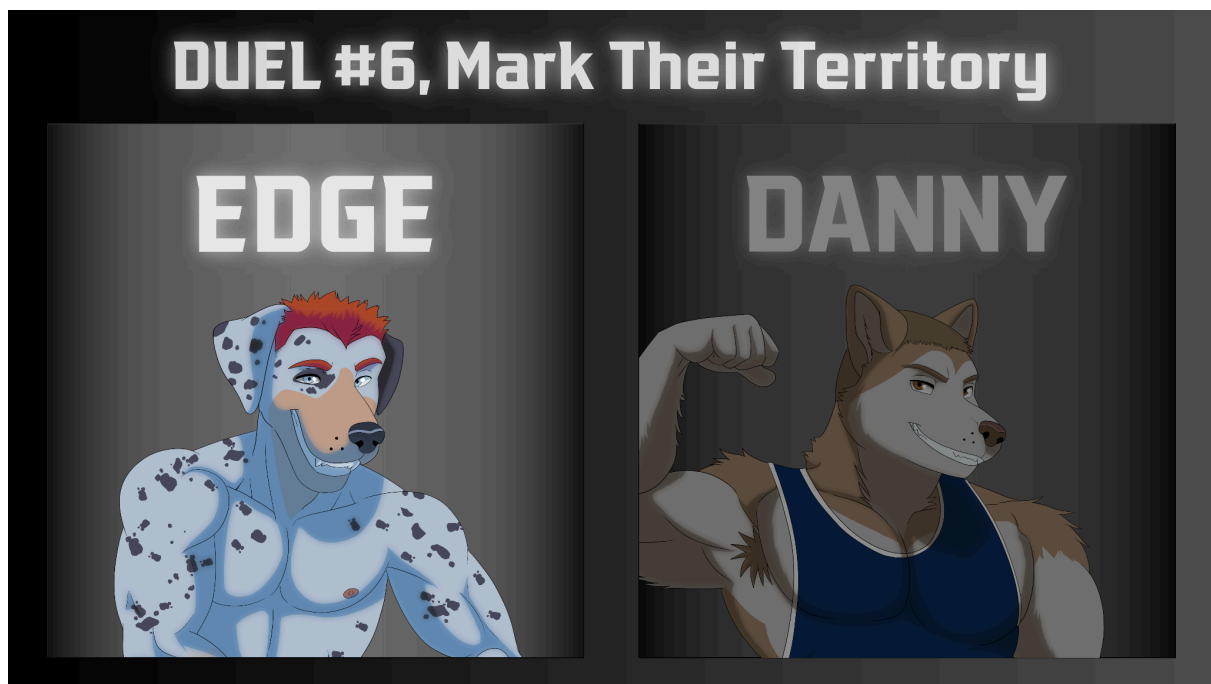
“ONE, TWO, THREE, GO GREEN!” the six shout and bark in unison, euphoric about their new green jerseys and the prospect of the impending road trip.

Ludwig smiles looking at the remaining competitors. “This may sound cliché, but I truly mean it. I see you six, and I believe any of you can win this title. I got no idea what’ll happen, but each of you got what it takes to be named the American Canine Alpha,” he says as the whole group stands in front of him, arms slung on each other’s shoulders. “Celebrate tonight, because tomorrow it’ll just get tougher, rougher, and more extreme.”

“Hah, just bring it!” Dionte responds, earning a chuckle from the rest. “We ready to rumble!”

“And I mean, after sweating our souls out in the desert, Panama will be nothing!” Edge adds, shrugging his shoulders. “Do your worst, stoat!”

“Just warning my favorite dogs,” the mustelid host grins. “Go pack your bags, and we’ll see each other soon!” he says, the whole group scattering and heading back to the Pound, still in high spirits and howling in celebration.



## DIONTE



3/5 TEAM CHALLENGES WON  
0/2 TEAM CHALLENGES WON AS CAPTAIN  
1/1 PUBLIC VOTE SURVIVED  
HAS NOT BEEN IN DUELS  
\$1,000 EARNED SO FAR

## EDGE



2/5 TEAM CHALLENGES WON  
1/1 TEAM CHALLENGES WON AS CAPTAIN  
0/2 PUBLIC VOTES SURVIVED  
2 DUELS SURVIVED  
\$7,000 EARNED SO FAR

## JAXTON



2/5 TEAM CHALLENGES WON  
2/2 TEAM CHALLENGES WON AS CAPTAIN  
1/1 PUBLIC VOTE SURVIVED  
HAS NOT BEEN IN DUELS  
\$4,000 EARNED SO FAR

## KYLE



2/5 TEAM CHALLENGES WON  
1/1 TEAM CHALLENGES WON AS CAPTAIN  
1/1 PUBLIC VOTE SURVIVED  
HAS NOT BEEN IN DUELS  
\$2,000 EARNED SO FAR

## NICKOLAS



0/4 TEAM CHALLENGES WON  
0/2 TEAM CHALLENGES WON AS CAPTAIN  
1/3 PUBLIC VOTE SURVIVED  
2 DUELS SURVIVED  
\$11,000 EARNED SO FAR

## ROBBI



4/5 TEAM CHALLENGES WON  
1/1 TEAM CHALLENGES WON AS CAPTAIN  
1/1 PUBLIC VOTE SURVIVED  
HAS NOT BEEN IN DUELS  
\$3,000 EARNED SO FAR