

American Mustelid Alpha
Episode 4, "Tooth And Nail"

Part 2

The whole group is huddled around the medical team assisting Crispin, the massive otter still passed out after losing his consciousness underwater during the team challenge. The contestants' faces betray extreme concern as Dr. Paul proceeds to administer a rescue breath, everyone fully grasping the severity of the situation.

Juan Carlos looks up in shock as he takes off his fins. "I saw him going limp after pulling close to Arron, dunno if he got a kick or anything but he was already stretching his limits down there..." he says.

"He's got a pulse, but his lungs are filled with water," the Kuvasz dog hastily says, pulling up Crispin's head and motioning to the young goat who treated the otter's wound earlier. "Jason, keep him down..." he says, starting to push down on the lutrine's tattooed chest in rhythmic contractions. Some players avert their eyes or walk away from the scene, cameras following from a good distance to not disturb the medics.

**the otter looks away* "This is exactly what I didn't want to happen. I do not want Cris to lose this chance because of this and all in all, he was in track of winning this. Out of everyone possible, it had to happen to him?" *camera focuses on Kenneth* "Just... shit."*
~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

"Fucking... Call someone!" Eddie shouts to the medical team.

"Just let the doctors work, guys. An ambulance is already on its way here," Ludwig steps in, the giant otter looking down with a scowl.

"On its way? Don't you see he's fucking unconscious?" Eddie presses on.

"We're trying our best," Jason retorts. Just as he says that, Crispin lets out a gasp and starts to awaken, pool water gurgling out of his muzzle as Dr. Paul readily sits him up - propping his back for support in order to let him breathe freely. All contestants breathe a sigh of relief at the sight of the lutrine regaining consciousness.

"Guys...w-what..." Crispin wheezes between heavy gulps of air, his voice raspy and hoarse from the water in his lungs.

"Quiet, Cris," Ludwig says as he crouches down, his muzzle inches from the lutrine's. "You passed out while underwater. Luckily, Juan Carlos managed to spot you before it was too late."

Crispin's eyes pop open at the revelation. "B-but... the cha...chal-" he utters between convulsions.

“Crispin, we will update you on the challenge later, the first thing we need is to get you to a hospital for observation. An ambulance is on its way, and I promise you will be fine,” the host steps in. “Rest assured no one’s holding this against you. You laid it all on the line to push your team forward, and I’m sure everyone here is commending you for this,” he says, softly patting Crispin’s thigh. “Now stay quiet and rest up as much as you can, we will do our best to help you.”

Soon the ambulance stops just outside the complex, medics carrying the injured otter on a stretcher and inside the vehicle. As the group huddles around the rear door, Eddie gets closer to his friend. “Get well, dude,” he whispers into his ear, Crispin barely nodding. “We got a way to go here, and I need ya at your best.”

“So, I guess we will update you on that situation soon enough. In the meantime, Arron, Eddie, Chayne, Zakee and Andrew, you guys have scored an important win and a huge reward, with immunity to boot and a thousand dollar tip for the winning captain,” Ludwig says, Arron nodding in agreement at his words. “And remember, this week, you all will compete in the individual challenge alongside the losing team. No one will be at risk, but there is something special on the line for you five. Go back to the hotel, and we will see you soon, alright?” the host nods, as soon as the ambulance has left the pool complex.

“It is bittersweet that it happened this way, but I finally found my redemption in this game. The future will hold what it will, but I needed this to lift my spirits; it will really help my chances in the long run. In the meantime, I’m sending my prayers to Cris.”

~Arron, 28, Honey Badger, Firefighter

Meanwhile, the losing team stands dejected and dripping in front of Ludwig - the stoat host turning his gaze towards the group, a bit of a scowl on his face after the big scare he’d just experienced. “William, Kenneth, John, Michael, we will see you at the individual challenge,” he says. “Water Week ain’t over yet, and one of you will soon face their swan song. Go rest up, you’ll need it...”

*“I don’t know how this is going to play with Crispin being out, but if we’re down to nine, that means one less mustelid in the fight to the big prize. It’s unfortunate to say, but... that’s the fact, can’t do much about it...” *shrugs**

~John, 36, Stoat, Jailer

It’s late in the afternoon, the sun starting to set as the mustelids walk back into their motel. “Have fun, kid...” William nods to Andrew, the polecat gelling his dirty blonde hair into a fauxhawk and his body into a graphic t-shirt and a studded vest.

“Out of all possible rewards, I’m really excited for this one. I’ll take anything, literally anything, to get out of here and unwind, and to do so in party Tampa? Rocking!”

~Andrew, 22, European Polecat, Roadie

Chayne walks out of his room, his bleached hair styled and flowing, decked with a sharp dress shirt and skinny jeans that accentuated his toned shape altogether. "Looking hot, guys..." he winks at Andrew and Eddie.

The lutrine nods back, his muscles squeezed into smart fitted chino pants and a dark denim shirt - a couple buttons opened over his barrel-like chest. "Don't stare too hard or you'll strain your eyes, dude," he chuckles.

"Who knew that darn pretty boy here had it in him to get prettier?" Zakee opens the door behind Chayne, slightly ruffling the marten's hair. "Those pants ain't letting your jewels breathe, Chichi..."

"Aw, Z stop, you'll mess up my 'do!" Chayne protests, trying to get away from the hog badger's grasp. "And look at you...where do you even think you're going?" he says, pointing to his weird choice of attire - a dark, western-style shirt with designs embroidered all over the shoulders. "This is a modern nightclub, not a Texas rodeo fair..."

"Hey!" the hog badger snorts. "This is fancy in Texas, tell 'em Drew!"

"Yep, your corner of Texas - Buttfuck, Texas, which is like a hundred miles away from any civilization!" the polecat perks up with a snort. "By the way, where's Arron?"

"Right behind you," the honey badger joins the group.

"Wait..." Chayne gasps, taking in the sight of the cleaned-up firefighter - him having donned a pristine white, long-sleeved shirt and black trousers over black-and-gold loafer shoes, his dreadlocks let down and a few jewels complementing his nightclub look. "You gonna break many hearts out there, dude! Who knew you were this hot?"

Arron scratches behind his neck, visibly uncomfortable with the marten's playful avances. "I'm a married badger, brother..." he shakes his head. "Guess I'm just leaving you and the boys the easy pickings..."

"Yeah, after you reject them!" Andrew quips.

"Alright guys, y'all ready?" Ludwig walks into the hallway, beckoning the winning team closer. "I see this bunch of Alphas is ready to prowl all over the Tampa dancefloors..."

"Bet your ass we are!" Z loudly speaks up.

The host nods, then addresses the entire group. "Now listen up, guys. Before we head out, I got some news to give you..."

"Is it about Crispin?" Eddie interrupts the host, immediately concerned about his friend.

"Yeah, thought we'd give ya a little update about his situation. As you all know, Crispin suffered a fainting spell as a combination of staying underwater too long and being dealt a heavy blow to his chest. We've been monitoring him up close, and we're grateful to tell you

he's already doing a lot better, and will head back here to the motel soon enough," he says, the entire group letting out a sigh of relief at the news. "Now as you all know, tomorrow we'll be playing out the individual challenge and the duel. Dr. Paul left Crispin the choice whether to take part or not, according to how he feels. Just know that however it goes, the challenges will go out as planned," he says. "Now you, go out and have fun, alright?"

*"I won't lie, I feel so relieved after hearing Ludwig's news. Crispin is a born fighter, and if he's been given a choice to stay in the competition, I'm sure he'll take it and make the most out of it." *the whole group is shown boarding a minivan, getting ready for their night out* "As for me? Well, clubbing is a good distraction right now, and I can't wait to show these youngsters a move or two..."*

~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

Timelapse. The black minivan stops in the nightclub's front parking lot, the middle-aged panda driver jumping out to open the sliding doors. Soon after, the five mustelids get out of the vehicle, shaking their limbs as they get ready for a night of clubbing.

"Who of y'all's is ready to let loose, you musky fucks?" Z loudly exclaims as he strides towards the building's front door, putting his arm around Andrew.

"We gonna take Tampa by storm..." the younger polecat strikes back, clearly excited at the thought of getting inside such an exclusive club. "With five big, loud, cocky Alphas coming their way, these furs are so gonna lose their minds..."

*"Sure, we're out here to have some fun and unwind with the team, but I wouldn't be lying if I told ya there's some degree of... I'd say, wanting to prove ourselves to each other on a way different field." *Andrew and the rest of the group walk into the elevator, heading towards the VIP floor* "A big part of being Alpha comes with being assertive and in control in all situations, and I can't wait to see how my fellow mustelids do it on the dancefloor."*

~Andrew, 22, European Polecat, Roadie

*"Of course, there is this... 'virile' quality we all desire and work for, even if mine works a tad different..." *the marten shows a rainbow-patterned leather bracelet* "It's all about being your own guy, let loose and be free, you know."*

~Chayne, 28, Beech Marten, Bartender

Despite being rather early in the night, the nightclub is already bustling with energy as the party of five walks in. Coloured strobe lights fill the room as dozens of furs of different species fill the wooden-floored dancefloor, a black bear with big flashy headphones already pumping in house beats from the DJ booth.

The group is quickly directed towards a pre-booked table, the mustelids accommodating on the plush disco sofas and immediately laying out the first round of orders for the night. Soon enough, they're all sitting with drinks in hand, Chayne raising up the glass of his cocktail only to be joined in a collective cheer.

It doesn't take long for the group to move onto the dancefloor, getting to mingle with the local crowd and joining the slowly-filling fray of rowdy dancers. Predators and preys alike hang out next to the bar, some distinctly ogling the group of newcomers as they tear through the mob. Only Arron remains at the table, clutching his beer as he spectates over the scene with a bemused look on his muzzle.

*"I look away for one second and the other kids are already getting it on. Andrew's letting loose, Zakee's drunk and flirty with the girl next to him, even Chayne managed to find someone, to my surprise. I'm happy for them and for me winning this, but I'm choosing to use this time to chill the sore muscles and tune out." *Arron leans on a couch in the VIP area**

~Arron, 28, Honey Badger, Firefighter

"Come on, Fireman, join the fuuuun..." The red-mohawked, worked out hog badger sits next to Arron, slightly tussling with him. "I know ya got somethin' burnin' up in there wantin' to head out, amirite?"

"Lay off Z, I'll be fine..." the honey badger protests. "Don't think my wife would love to see me rubbin' against a skimpy-dressed honey, now do ya?"

"Fair, fair..." Zakee replies, looking next to him at Andrew and Eddie as a shapely lady otter approaches the pair. "Aw look, Eddie's gonna get some!" the hog badger snorts. But his smile changed to surprise, as Andrew was the one who got up with her to dance.

Eddie sits down with the other mustelids, looking at the whole scene, visibly scoffing in disappointment. "Two hundred twenty pounds of pure, grown-ass male otter on display and they goin' for the unripe fruit. Things ain't like they were before."

"I mean dude..." Greasy Z smirks. "Andrew's taking to this like a darn natural. No wonder those chicks are all over the cute slick one and not your ugly mug..."

"Psh, fuck you too Z. Wait until she finds out he drier than salted cod..." Eddie taunts. Back on the dancefloor, though, the atmosphere is all but dry as Andrew and her dance partner are grinding against each other - the young polecat not missing a beat as he puts his paws on her hips and snugs her backside tight against his body. "Woah, they gettin' it on!" Z cheers excitedly, his tone just a bit too loud, the table howling as Andrew lets the otter lady wrap her rudder around his leg.

"Well, he droppin' her rudder like an anchor, brother!" Arron elbows a miffed Eddie. The lutrine does his best to put on a smile, but he's clearly a bit irked with the turn the situation is taking.

"I hate that I'm coming off as the 'old man' when I'm actually just a few years older than people like Arron or Z. I'm moving at my pace here, and by the end of the night I'll be sure to score a few points on all of 'em."

~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

"Ayo, crowd!" Z slaps Eddie's bicep, directing their gaze to the other side. The blonde marten was effectively grinding next to an attractive Australian Shepherd in leather pants; Chayne wasn't shy in proving his flexibility, letting loose and dropping to the floor.

"You know it is bad when the gay guy gets more tail in a regular bar that's 50% ladies than the two of ya put together..." the honey badger playfully chides the mechanic, averting his eyes from the rather lewd display as he draws a long sip from his glass.

With his back to the canine, Chayne leans his head back to the dancer's shoulder, their gazes locking for a brief moment as the marten pecks his companion on the muzzle. The dog is quick to dig his nose into the bartender's fur, whispering something in his ear as they take the center of the dancing floor.

"There he goes..." Z comments with a laugh, watching intently as the two furs grind together some more - their bodies pressed tightly against each other as they move in time with the percussive beat. "I say he's getting into the shep's pants before the night is over, wanna bet on that?"

**the marten flashes his rainbow-colored bracelet to the camera* "In situations like this, it's always good to indicate to others that you're open for an invitation. I'm not shy to say so, and if they're cute, they don't need to be either!" *laughs* "Before the group says anything, it's just two fellas having a blast! It is just euphoria from the win, adrenaline from the music and tequila from... my third serving, hah!"*
~Chayne, 28, Beech Marten, Bartender

The marten walks back to the VIP table, a pleased grin plastered on his muzzle as he sits next to the group. "You having fun, guys? I know I am..." he says between pants.

"We can tell," Eddie chuckles. "You were all over that dude, buddy... did you even trade numbers or is that business as usual?"

"A gentleman doesn't tell his secrets..." Chayne nods sagely, taking a sip of his cocktail. "But heh... I dunno what kinda ideas you got of gay guys on a night out, but it ain't that different that you guys with girls anyway, so..."

Zakee takes a swig of his beer as he puts a muscular arm around Chayne. "Hey guys, let a bro be, ladies or dudes is all the same if you enjoy-"

"Z, DUDE!" the marten immediately shifts away from the hug, as the hand Zakee got around the marten was the one he was holding his beer with. It is too late, though - the tipsy hog badger realizing he's spilled nearly a quarter of his glass on the blonde fur just a second too late.

"Oh, huh...sorry, dude," Zakee looks at Chayne sheepishly. "I-I forgot about the glass..."

"Z, come on..." Eddie chides the mechanic as he stands up and picks a napkin, patting the marten down. "You got it all over his shirt..."

"Porky's tipsy, huh?" Andrew walks to the group after his long dance session, amused at the situation.

"You can tell, feels like he's downed fucking half a pitcher on my sleeve!" the marten lets out a laugh, letting both otter and polecat pat his body dry to help him minimize the damage, trying to soak in the liquid with the serviettes. "You know what... I'm honestly okay with this, guys. Thanks, Z..." he smirks, earning a laugh and a shush from the mustelids.

*"I'll say, I'm perfectly happy being here with these guys instead of a certain few that are presently stuck at the motel. Imagine Z spilling the beer all over John or Mike, we could as well call the night off..." *chuckles* "Everyone, me included, is taking it in stride. And you bet we are coming back energized for the big challenges that may come."*

~Chayne, 28, Beech Marten, Bartender

As the night goes on, more drinks are poured, more shots are taken and it doesn't take long before the mustelids take another hit at the dancefloor. The DJ throws on a compulsive, sophisticated R&B mix, the horde of tipsy furs scooting closer under the low lights as the thumping beats fill the club. After much prodding, even Arron takes to the floor - the honey badger fitting right into the crowd as he displays his own skillful dance moves, all too careful to show off solo and not do anything to upset his wife at home.

Meanwhile the rest of the group is quickly pairing off, the local crowd being taken aback by the "VIP" mustelids, often mistaking them for some kind of celebrity. Greasy Z is chatting up with some younger ladies on the side of the track, the three girls openly laughing at the hog badger's cracking jokes. Chayne is cozying up with a short, twinkish ferret, while Eddie is in the middle of a heated dance with an older tigress - his close-shaven head inches from the feline's as they move seductively to the music, eyes glued to each other's.

*"This is like the fucking Star Wars bar up in here." *laughs* "A lotta he and she, she and he, he and he, Chayne obviously, I don't know what time it is, the music's getting louder... Overall, ten out of ten! Arron, thank ya for winning us this."*

~Andrew, 22, European Polecat, Roadie

The cameras follow from a distance as Andrew and the otter girl from earlier are chatting against the counter, the polecat's tail wrapped around the barstool.

"So, Paige..." the young mustelid asks, one paw resting about his companion's waist. "Not sure if I even asked ya, but you from around here?"

"Nah, just here on vacation. I live just outside Houston," Paige chuckles.

"No way, you're Texan too?" Andrew grins excitedly. "Well I'm from Austin. Reckon you coulda told from the accent," he says. "So, Houston, you say? And whatcha doing for a living there?"

"Trying to survive, like everyone else. Swimming teacher, singing, club assisting, you name it..." the girl smiles. "You? Wait, don't tell me, I wanna guess..." she says, as Andrew opens

his mouth to answer back. "Like, this is gonna sound silly, but you totally look like a rockstar. I can picture you with a rock band on a big stage, a singer or a drummer... Are you one?"

"Close enough," Andrew laughs. "I'm a stage technician, I set up stages for concerts and stuff. Not as glamorous, but just as wild, and ask me and I might know your faves!"

"That's pretty cool! Me and a couple friends went to Coachella last year and we had a freakin' blast. Maybe next time you can slip us a couple tickets," Paige says, leaning closer to the polecat. "Still begs the questions though, what are you doing here in Tampa?"

"Can't really say much... contract," the polecat sighs. "Maybe once I'm free in a few days time we can... know each other a bit better?" Andrew flicks his tail.

"You're moving quite fast," the girl retorts, still smiling.

"Well I'm attracted to you and the night's ticking," Andrew says matter-of-factly. "And I reckon the same goes for you, right?"

The otter lady blushes slightly, her smile seeming to widen as she lets out a giggle. "No need to be embarrassed," the polecat prods her on. "It's kinda obvious."

"Let's do this," Paige says, fixing her hair. "I'll give you my phone, we'll see later once your business is up, and we can enjoy the rest of tonight... deal?"

"I'll raise you," Andrew beams. Suddenly he leans over, locking his muzzle with hers in a deep, passionate kiss. The girl's cheeks light up even more, flushing with heat as she kisses the polecat back - tongues intermingling and tasting each other's before parting with a sigh. Smiling despite himself, Andrew lets his own tail wrap around Paige's thigh, just as the girl takes the polecat's paw into her own. He leans forward, feeling the eyes of his teammates on himself even though his own are totally lost in the lutrine beauty's. "My number is a go, but let's enjoy the night first and see where it gets us..."

Chayne looks at where the Texan and the otter were huddling up. "Guess y'all got outdone, huh?" he grins to Zakee and Eddie.

"Speak for yourself, dude," the giant otter retorts with a smirk, unable to avoid smiling at the display. "But yep, the young kid's been teaching us all a thing or two," he says, looking intently as Andrew leads Paige across the dancefloor and towards the VIP area. Mere seconds later they're sitting in a corner, making out like a couple of hormone-riddled teenagers. "Ah, young love..." Eddie snickers jokingly.

"It's cute and all to have a nice time, but bet these guys have forgotten we do take place in this upcoming individual. Dunno why or how, but I better keep in the lucidest shape I can."
~Arron, 28, Honey Badger, Firefighter

11:30 PM

Back at the motel, the losing team is mostly minding their own business, huddled together in Michael's bedroom for lack of a better alternative. Suddenly, the sound of a car stopping in front of the main entrance snaps them out of their apathy.

"Hey guys, someone's coming," William speaks up, John and Michael perking up their ears.

"Go clubbing until just before midnight? Lame..." Kenneth scoffs.

The weasel peeks out of the window, trying to distinguish the lone tall form getting out of the van. "Wait... is it Crispin?" he asks, squinting in an attempt to see better in the dim light.

"Guys, I think it is him..."

A minute later the otter pokes his head in, clad in a rather scruffy black tracksuit and white sneakers. His features are clearly showing exhaustion as he walks into the small room, only bothering to give a small nod at the group.

"Tell us you're fine, Cris," William pats the lutrine's back, concerned.

"Yep, I'll live..." Crispin shrugs, sitting down on his bed. "Takes a lot more than that to take me out..."

Kenneth doesn't fail to shoot a skeptical glance to the lutrine. "So you competing tomorrow?" he asks Crispin, paws crossed over his chest. "We've picked you outta the deep end once, don't need to go for a repeat..."

Crispin shoots a leer at the badger. "They gave me the choice, and I'm in it to win it," he replies before shooting a loud cough.

"I know many of these guys look at me like I got three heads now, but you just can't explain that drive, that push to keep you going. I'm not 100%, I'm not foolish to believe so, I'm hurting and I don't know what turn it will take - but the thought of giving up now hurts way more than pushing through this pain. I will do whatever it takes to stay in."

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

"Dude, like, you know you don't need to prove anything to us or everyone..." William says, the slightest hint of concern in his voice. "I get you, no one wants to be taken out by an injury and end this on a low note."

"Will, I'm good," the otter waves to the weasel more dismissively than intended.

"But the thing is...the line between proving you're Alpha and coming out as brazen is pretty thin as is."

"I said I'm g-" Crispin loudly coughs, bowing over.

"It sucks to have to go this way, but eventually in the larger picture, it may be what's best for all of us. He rests, the other advance. We can't afford to have him risk his well-being again."

camera shows John and Kenneth waving goodbye, going back to their room

~John, 36, Stoat, Jailer

"Tell you what, dude..." the weasel gets up, pacing around the room. "Don't make any rushed decision now. Sleep over it, see how you feel tomorrow morning, and then see whether it's worth the effort," he tells the lutrine. "I know this is your big shot, but remember... putting your health in jeopardy is the dumbest move you can attempt. Just don't make things worse only to prove us a point..."

"Don't nag, ok?" Crispin interrupts the personal trainer, clearly annoyed despite his good intentions. He takes off his top, the white band-aid mark of where he got his blood drawn contrasting with the dark hues of his tattoo sleeve. "I'm in 100%, I don't need to think over it or any kinda BS..." he spits. "See you at individual, y'all..."

"Alright," the weasel shrugs, trying to diffuse the situation. "I guess I'll just head over and wait for the young kid to show up all dazed and tipsy... See you tomorrow, guys," he says as he walks out and into the corridor.

*"In a sense, Crispin and me got something in common. We're two stubborn motherfuckers, and we aren't going to give up on this competition until our bodies give up on us." *lets out the hint of a smile* "We might have not talked a lot since we began, but I respect him a lot for taking this stance. Will can say whatever he wants, but I'm sure he feels threatened and he'd rather not go against Crispin in the pool if he has a say." *chuckles**

~Michael, 35, Wolverine, Blacksmith

"He made you mad, huh?" Michael asks his roommate, the lutrine lying down on his bed in just his T-shirt and boxers.

"It's fine, dude... I'm not here to get babied," Crispin shrugs. "I've gone through worse shit in the past, I know the limit I can push myself to and I'm definitely not giving up on this opportunity cuz I got some goddamn water in my lungs."

"We still likely swimming up next, Lud said water week and all," Michael replies. "You know I ain't the swimming kind, but I'd watch myself if I was you..."

"Does it bother ya that you got stiffer competition now that I'm back in?" the otter sneers.

"Just checkin' you not gonna flatline on us," Michael taunts back.

Crispin turns on his right side, giving his back to the hulking wolverine. "You wish, dude," he says, before curling over and shutting off the talk.

"As much as I feel my back's against the wall, I'm here to fight until the end and I'm gonna seize on anything to further my stay in the game. I might be the weakest swimmer of us 10, but I'm not afraid to get my fur wet. I can be civil to Crispin and wish him well, but tomorrow

he's just another opponent I gotta defeat, medical issues or not."

~Michael, 35, Wolverine, Blacksmith

*"You ask me if I'm concerned about tomorrow?" *looks away* "Look, some of these guys are doing great for themselves in their daily lives. I'm not that kinda guy - I know this is my one shot, and my only way to prove I'm not the slacker everyone's painted me as ever since I was a teen. I haven't left Brockton home for a month to head out in the back of an ambulance." *clutches his necklace* "Tomorrow is another day, and I'm gonna swim all the way to victory."*

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

February 28, 2020

12:30 PM

65° F

The camera pans over the swimming pool, heavy clouds looming across the sky. Ludwig is standing on one side, leaning against the flagpole as the ten mustelids walk in. "Good morning, guys..." he says, the entire group stopping in front him and parting in two groups.

The losers of the previous day are wearing the dark blue shirts usually given to those who failed to win immunity, while the winning team is clad in light blue.

"So far I have been on the right side of history, the right circumstances to let me stay safe and steady. But now, sitting here at risk for the first time, it all comes crashing down, I need to get back in the game and never step foot in these damn individuals ever again."

~John, 36, Stoat, Jailer

"I see a couple of someones are coming over from a night of partying..." the stoat host snickers. "How was the evening, Andrew?" he asks, a few people chuckling as the young polecat's name is mentioned.

"Oh, I feel I should endlessly express my gratitude, Lud," the polecat grins. "This was the one reward I am thankful to have gotten."

Ludwig lets out a knowing grin. "Uh? Care to expand on that?"

"He cares, he does care..." Greasy Z interrupts the pair, the winning team howling with laughter. Andrew looks around, slightly taken aback from the reaction, then addresses the host. "Let's just say it was one hell of a night and leave it at that," he says, trying his best to sound confident despite his teammates' obvious mockery.

*"Come on. No one REALLY needs to know. A little mystery adds some spice to the situation." *cocks his head, laughing**

~Andrew, 22, European Polecat, Roadie

"What about you, Arron?" the host turns his attention to the honey badger. "As a married badger and father of one, was it tough to get back into the club groove?"

"Not really, Ludwig," the firefighter answers. "Like, I haven't had an all guy night out in a few years now, so maybe yes, it takes a bit of time to shake off the cobwebs..." he says.

"Cobwebs?" Z cuts Arron off. "Come on Arron, if you were shaking it off and showing what your mama gave ya like nobody's business, Honey B!"

Arron elbows the hog badger much harder than he intends, making him squeal in protest. "I mean..." he tries to regain his composure, then turns towards the host. "See Ludwig, it's easy to mistake furs having a good time for being disloyal. But I don't really have to prove anything to anyone but Dominique, and again, I'm thankful I got to win my team such a night out."

*"Say your point, don't smack it." *pouts**
~Greasy Z, 29, Hog Badger, Automobile Mechanic

The host turns to the losing team, a more solemn expression in his face. "Crispin, we had a big scare yesterday. How you feeling now?"

"Ready to go," the tall otter says without a hint of hesitation. "Yesterday was... rough, there's really no way around that. But c'mon... this is Water Week, this is MY week. I'm not gonna go down without a fight, or actually, I'm not gonna go down full stop."

"Now, two different stories in front of me," Ludwig says, turning towards two other mustelids. "Kenneth, third time in a row fighting for your life at Individuals. John, first time you find yourself here. What's the assessment? Did the milk and honey run dry?"

"To be honest, Ludwig..." Kenneth perks up. "I don't think our record in team challenges should weigh on our Alpha credentials, especially since there's a lot of circumstances adding up to that," he says. "The important thing is that I always put all I got when it counts, be it with others or by myself..."

"Excuse me," Eddie interrupts the badger. "Are you saying winning or losing in team challenges doesn't matter shit 'cause you're the best anyway? Big words from someone who was already defeated THREE times going head to head with this otter..."

Kenneth steps out of his group, finger pointed towards the lutrine. "And I will always keep coming back, so you better watch your damn maw."

"Just keep talking, badger," Eddie scoffs, paws crossed over his chest. "A day will come where your big mouth won't save ya, y'know... I just hope I'll be the one dealing the final blow."

"It's all about how this ride will finish. I know once we get closer to that end goal, it's where I will truly take this by storm. Sit pretty on your laurels, Eddie, I'm counting on that."
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

"Well, can't win them all, even if we should have," John shrugs. "They better don't plan to miss me anytime soon..."

"We ain't doing so, anyway..." Chayne whispers to Z.

"...and in the end, well, all of us are gonna get through this at some point. I know I can back up my words, as I've always done here, let's see if they can do the same." the jailer nods.

"Alright, since you're chomping at the bit, let's just cut to the chase. As you see, guys, there's no winner bench today," Ludwig motions to the grandstand. "Everyone will compete in the individual challenge and will get a shot at the reward." He then points towards the pool, now demarcated into lanes by red plastic dividers - a heavy barbell and a pull-up bar have been set behind each lane.

"This challenge is called Dead In The Water. Each of these barbells have been loaded with your body weight at the start of this game..." he says, some of the heavier mustelids openly flinching at the thought. "On my go, you're gonna give me ten back squats, then put on that weighted belt and dive in. You're then gonna swim four lengths of this pool, jump out, walk to that bar and give me five muscle-ups... and be careful there. I want to see your arms fully extended on your way up, otherwise it won't count as a rep." The contestants nod, some already shaking their limbs in anticipation. "And for the winning team asking why are you doing this? What possible reward requires your presence here?" he asks. "Those who post the three fastest times, no matter if they're with the winning or losing team, will get the right to captainship for the next team challenge."

"Wait, three fastest times?" John cocks his head.

"Yeah, you heard that right..." the stoat host chuckles, reveling in the contestants' shocked looks. "Three captains, three teams of three. Less chance to hide behind your strongest hitters, if you want to think of it like that..."

"I know these people don't want me in the captainship row, so putting it in a pure physical trial up for grabs will throw all that cliquy bullshit out. It is my one shot, I can't miss it."
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

*"These guys may be friendly to me, but they will always resort to voting whoever's the flashiest or who is the cock of the walk back in Nowhere, New Jersey." *camera focuses on Eddie, grinning confidently* "If I get that captainship nod, I have a shot to make a statement."*
~Andrew, 22, European Polecat, Roadie

"No coin flip either. Best of all gets the first spoils, and so on," Ludwig points out. "So if you want it, you better give this challenge all you got. And remember, this applies to everyone on both teams... whoever's fastest gets the right to stake his claim on this game," he says. "Any questions, guys?"

Michael raises his paw. "When we get to the muscle-ups, we got to do all five in a row or can we rest between reps?"

"You can perform the series however you want - jump down after every rep if you so wish," the host answers. "Is that it? Alright, Arron's team will kick this off. Go ahead, get in your swimming gear, and we'll get started..."

"I got my sights set on winning this round and being the first back to back captain. The only swimmer I gotta worry about is Eddie, so if I can hang on to his rudder until the final station, I reckon I got this in the bag and I'll also be building the best team next time around."

~Arron, 28, Honey Badger, Firefighter

*"C'mon, guys... when ya pair me with this bunch, not getting in the top three is impossible. No sir!" *Z is shown adjusting the swimsuit Andrew lent him, absentmindedly scratching his thigh as he stands behind the squat rack* "These people have pinpointed me as the jokester of the Burrow, and that's a perfect spot for me to be in. They can keep getting tangled up in their chickenshit slapfights while I skate through and give them a taste of how an Alpha darn does it!"*

~Greasy Z, 29, Hog Badger, Automobile Mechanic

"Alright, winning team, you can take your spot inside the rack..." Ludwig motions to the group, the five mustelids positioning themselves under the barbell and testing the heavy weight. "We're looking for the top three times. You guys ready?" the host asks, ready to blow the airhorn. "GO!"

The crowd loudly cheers as the contenders step forward, bars on their shoulders, immediately getting into their squatting routine under the watchful eye of Ludwig. Doesn't take long for the five mustelids to get into a rhythm, muscles throbbing with the strain of the weight as they drop and rise, barely pausing between reps. Other than Chayne, less used than the others to heavy-duty weight lifting, the heat looks pretty even - contestants matching each other's pace, not trying to outdo each other but staying close to a perfect form.

"Arron is through!" Ludwig exclaims as the honey badger is the first to rack his weight, hastily throwing on the weight vest and immediately diving in. "Andrew is through! Eddie is through! Z is through!" One by one, all contestants jump in the pool in the firefighter's pursuit - polecat and hog badger wasting a few seconds to strap on their goggles.

*"So, muscle-ups are not my strong suit, since I got the extra weight of my rudder to drag along." *Eddie is shown immediately starting to make ground on Arron* "I need to give all I got in the swimming section, 'cause I don't know if I can keep up with 'em when it gets to the last part at the bar."*

~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

With a heavy sigh, Chayne manages to pull up from his tenth and last squat, immediately stepping back to drop the weight into the rack. "Chayne is through!" Ludwig announces, as the marten shakes his arms before jumping in the water.

"If I can make it to the muscle-ups in time, I can do those in a snap. However, I'm not going to go breakneck and tempt fate, as I want to arrive at the next challenge fresh, and ready to bag bigger prizes. Thinking about the future, fellas!"

~Chayne, 28, Beech Marten, Bartender

Meanwhile, Eddie has managed to reach Arron - the honey badger being slightly hampered by the added weight of the soaked vest, which his opponent is clearly not minding. The lutrine performs a perfect front flip, zipping past the firefighter as he starts his fourth and final lap. Z and Andrew are falling further behind, their swimming technique decidedly weaker than the leading duo's. Chayne himself manages to close in, gaining ground enough to be within striking distance of third place.

*"I know I've won enough time with the lifting, it's all about if Eddie or Chayne get swimming better than I." *the first two mustelids get out of the water, immediately going to dry up their paws before tackling the bar* "I really need that captainship spot, else I might never get it."*

~Andrew, 22, European Polecat, Roadie

"Eddie and Arron have started their muscle-ups," Ludwig announces as the lutrine pulls his upper body over the bar, the honey badger following him with a loud grunt. While Eddie wastes no time in dropping to the ground and shaking his arms in preparation for the next rep, Arron surprises the whole group by hanging to the bar after the first and immediately going for a second. "That's it, dude!" Kenneth screams excitedly, elated to see his friend and ally pull ahead.

Not to be outdone, Eddie jumps up and grips the bar overhand, hoisting his body up with tremendous effort. He tries to match Arron's two-in-a-row approach, but his arms falter as he tries to complete the dip. The crowd ooohs as the lutrine falls to the ground to a loud thud, right as Andrew, Greasy Z and Chayne complete their swim and climb out of the water. "All five contestants are on the bars, now we got a challenge!" Ludwig says.

"I see Eddie strugglin' to go up and all I'm thinking is 'this cap shit is as good as mine again!' Let's go get it!"

~Greasy Z, 29, Hog Badger, Automobile Mechanic

Arron pauses for a second at the top of his fourth rep, lats quivering under his thick fur as he glances over at the other competitors. Knowing he's well ahead of the curve, he resolves to take his time on the next one - Z and Andrew trying to go as fast as they can instead, knowing they're vying for the third, final spot. The two Texans are so enthralled in their feat that they fail to notice Eddie heavily struggling with the lift, even stopping to go wipe his webbed paws as the added sweat makes it impossible for him to twist his wrists as he performs the movement.

*"My everything's on fire right now." *laughs* "But it ain't over just yet. I know I can get that cap spot once again."*

~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

With a mighty grunt, Arron pulls his chest over the bar for the fifth and final lift. "Arron's first!" Ludwig says, the honey badger dropping down and pumping his fist in celebration. "We're

looking for two more!"

It's a race to the finish as Andrew, Eddie and Greasy Z are tied up at four reps, all three shaking their arms and psyching themselves for the last push. The polecat is the first to jump up, otter and hog badger following his lead in a bid not to get outdone. He's got enough energies left in the tank to pull himself up with relative effort, closing the challenge in second place.

"Andrew's our second place! It's up to Chayne, Eddie and Z!" The crowd watches with bated breath as Eddie and Z fight it out for the last spot, the blonde marten being a couple of reps behind the two. They tremble and huff as they rise, inch after inch, their chests strongly heaving as they glance at each other in a mute challenge. With one last push the hog badger locks his wrists, fully extending his arms over the bar just as Eddie freezes in motion - his triceps twitching with effort before they give up on him, the lutrine meeting the ground with all of his weight.

"Zakee's got it! That's our top three!" Ludwig shouts, the mechanic dangling from the bar for a moment before jumping down with a yell. Eddie and Chayne look at each other somewhat forlorn.

*"Yes, we gotta wait for the losers' bracket, but I made it into the top three and that's what matters!" *points at himself, then flex his biceps* "They might have written me off for good, but this Boss Hog is here to stay!"*

~Greasy Z, 29, Hog Badger, Automobile Mechanic

*"I gotta admit, watching Z beat Eddie is so fuckin' rewarding. With Arron taking #1, it's safe to say we badgers are taking back control of this game." *Kenneth chuckles as Eddie towels off his fur, a deep scowl on the lutrine's face**

~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

"Alright, here's where we're at," Ludwig recaps, once all players have rested off a bit. "Arron won the heat with 3:19, followed by Andrew with 3:30 and Greasy Z with 3:32." The winning trio nods along, slightly smiling as they get mentioned. "So far, those are our three winners. Up to the next five challengers to unseat 'em and get captainship," Ludwig says. "You need to do at least better than Zakee to gain a captainship spot. Eddie, Chayne... good effort, but you won't be leading a team next week."

Crispin's team is already taking position in the squat racks, some looking confident about the ordeal, others sporting rather worried looks. The camera closes in on Michael, the giant wolverine testing the grip of his bar with a scowl. Next to him, John is rubbing his paws and working some circulation into his limbs - his knee-length shorts making a peculiar swimsuit choice among the entire group.

*"Looking at who I'm up against, it's never been a matter of 'will I be safe', but more of 'can I earn that captainship'? Looking at piggy here, I know I can, maybe even knock out the teen while at it." *grins widely* "Once I get that nod, I'll have my shot to flip the Burrow upside down."*

~John, 36, Stoat, Jailer

“So, you are not only competing for the chance at captainship for the next challenge, but the bottom two of this leg will have to go to the Duel, where one of you will be eliminated. John, Michael, Crispin, William, Kenneth, are you ready?”

*“Am I the best swimmer? What do you think?” *shakes his head* “My strategy is just do the best damn muscle-ups and squats I ever done in my life, and with Cris here handicapped, I can hope someone else just whisks him away in the duel.”*

~Michael, 35, Wolverine, Blacksmith

*“I won’t lie, I wasn’t fancying such a grueling challenge when I woke up this morning. I warmed up the best I could, but I’m like at 30% of my strength and these guys are going Mach 5.” *the otter straps on his swimming goggles, making sure they’re tight enough* “I’m sure I can still smoke my team on the swimming part. I can only hope that’s enough to survive.”*

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

As soon as Ludwig’s air horn blows, the five mustelids take on their task - taking their respective bar out of the rack and beginning their series of squats. Four of them look confident in their motion, rising and falling with heavy huffs to punctuate each squat but seemingly in control - only Crispin is finding a hard time in performing the first part of the challenge, the heavier weight on his shoulders hampering him as much as the injury he faced the day before.

“John is through! William is through!” Ludwig exclaims as the stoat lunges into the water, followed by the weasel not long after. “Remember, you need to be in the three best times, else you will be on the Duel later on!”

*“I just know that the Duel is going to have more pool trials, I am sure of it!” *the weasel is shown quickly falling behind John as they tackle the swim* “I need to keep myself out of it. I’m a jack of all trades, but not quite an ace in swimming.”*

~William, 34, Least Weasel, Personal Trainer

“Michael and Kenneth are through!” the host calls out, most people on the winners’ bench gasping in shock as they realize the roofer is not doing particularly well in what should be his strong suit.

“That doesn’t look like a CrossFit pro, I tell ya...” Eddie can’t help but snark at the badger’s struggle.

“He’s just doing it slow, but he got great form,” Chayne replies to the otter. “I think he’s biding his time...”

*“More than anything, I’m worried about the swim. I need to avoid overdoing the squats and killing my thighs like these people are doing, otherwise I’ll be as good as done once I dive in.” *the badger throws on the weighted belt, jumping in the water feet-first and immediately starting to pad forward* “If I can get out of the water with third place remotely in my sight, I can smoke whoever is on the bars in a heartbeat, and I am sure I can knock Z out of his*

captain nod."

~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

Meanwhile, right as the top four are completing their first lap, Crispin is visibly struggling with the squats - hanging with the bar on his shoulders, his tattooed chest contracting into spasms as he fruitlessly tries to take in a gulp of air. Grunting out loud, he bends his knees and goes down for his tenth squat - thighs visibly seizing up as he comes back upright, his neck and upper back bulging with effort long after he manages to set the weight back in the rack. "Crispin is through!" Ludwig calls, Eddie loudly cheering his friend through as he deliberately puts on the belt and dives in his opponent's pursuit.

*"Soon as I dive in, I know I need to go all out if I want to escape the Duel. This is the segment where I can make a difference." *camera shows the lutrine swimming in a flawless freestyle, catching a struggling Michael within the end of his second lap* "I'm an otter on a mission, and I won't let yesterday's scare get the better of me."*

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

Crispin is clearly the quickest swimmer in this heat, the otter easily zipping past Kenneth with a perfect front flip and swiftly catching up to William in his fourth and final lap. Only John manages to keep him at bay, closing the swimming portion about fifteen seconds ahead of the otter and weasel duo.

The white stoat hastily pulls himself out of the water, shaking off the excess water stuck to his fur before walking under to the muscle-up bar. It takes some time for the jailer's body to get used to the change of activity, him taking some time to approach the bar for his first rep but still managing to complete it before his opponents even reach the platform .

*"Motherfuck, John is acing this!" *Chayne frowns at the stoat as he goes up for a second rep* "I really, REALLY don't want him to be a captain anytime soon, come on." *grunts* "Hoping hard that Zakee manages to hold onto his spot."*

~Chayne, 28, Beech Marten, Bartender

"Crispin is through! William is through!" Ludwig exclaims, as the two mustelids grab the pool's wall and jump out of the water. While the weasel is quick to towel off his paws and reach the muscle-up platform, the otter bouncer lets himself fall to the ground just past the pool's edge, his chest rising and falling in exertion as he lays supine on the pavement.

*"I've given all I had to recover a few positions, yet as soon as I get out of the water my body gives out." *cameras show the lutrine still on the ground as William, then Kenneth overtake him* "At this moment, I just want to disappear."*

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

With Crispin seemingly out of action and Michael still dog-paddling through his fourth and final lap in the pool, the top three seems to be set up for easy qualification. Kenneth is quick to prove his athletic skills, immediately going up for his first rep and adding a second to boot before jumping down. However, despite him taking his time on the bars, John's advantage he built during swimming is still paying off.

“John is at four! Can he win this heat and save himself from elimination?” The white stoat scoffs at the whole bench, then jumps up onto the bar - pulling himself up with relative ease, his forearms fully distending before he can let out a satisfied grunt. “HE CAN!” Ludwig yells, a couple of the mustelids on the bench groaning as John lets himself fall to the ground and briefly smacks his chest for good measure.

“He’s done it pretty quick, so we don’t know...” Eddie mutters to the others, the hog badger taking special notice.

William and Kenneth pull themselves up once more, the weasel still one rep forward than the badger. Looking around, both can see Michael just now tackling the final station, as well as Crispin still recovering from the hard swim. “It’s me and you, dude...” Kenneth motions to the personal trainer, jumping on the bar to get his fourth rep in. Not to be outdone and potentially lose on a captainship spot, the weasel mimics the badger’s move - displaying his practiced form as he completes the fifth and final rep, Kenneth following him a few seconds later.

“William came in second, Kenneth in third!” the host calls out, frantically trying to recap what’s going on. “Michael, Crispin, you can stop now...” he addresses the two remaining competitors. “Unfortunately, you have failed to place in the top three within this round. You’re heading straight to the duel.”

“So be it,” the wolverine spits, rubbing his paw together as he looks at the defeated lutrine still lying on the ground.

*“I survived Water Week! Man, like, it stings that I couldn’t do better than John or Will, but c’mon... I was this close of going to a duel again, and glad the effort paid off.” *pumps his fist in earnest* “I’m going back to Apopka safe, and I look forward to actually starting to book the wins on my resume!”*

~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

*“When Ludwig calls out my name, I’m like... duh, I know I ain’t winning anythin’ this week. This is just not my environment.” *Michael is shown toweling off his upper body, a broad scowl on his features* “Was really hoping Kenneth ate shit so I could save myself, but I struck out twice, instead. I’m not gonna waste the last chance I got. And I still overdid Crispin at this, so while I feel for him not being 100%, I definitely know I’m in with a fighting chance and I’m gonna exploit it to the fullest.”*

~Michael, 35, Wolverine, Blacksmith

Eventually, the five contestants are standing side by side in front of Ludwig, “Okay. John, you had the best time among the losing team,” the host points out, the jailer perking up at the news as he’s addressed. “But will it be enough to unseat Zakee as a captain for the next challenge?”

“I refuse to believe the pig got me in the swimming section. Besides Arron and the otters, I’m the best swimmer left in the Burrow - and given the advantage I had on Will, I’m pretty sure I managed to bump him out of the top three.”

~John, 36, Stoat, Jailer











“You need at least 3:31 to have done so...” the host nods, his gaze shifting between Zakee and John. “You had three minutes and... thirty-five seconds, which means-”

Zakee claps the air in reflex and pumps his fist, as the stoat’s previous confident grin fades into an indignant scowl. “...it’s not enough to win a captainship nod. Nevertheless, you are safe...” the host says, matter-of-factly. “Which means that Arron, Andrew, Greasy Z... you three will lead your own team in the next team challenge.”

*“Daaaaang, beating Eddie Awesome on his own game AND John Legend didn’t get my cap? Merry fucking Christmas to me!” *the hog badger shakes paws with the other two captains* “Whoever still underestimates me in here, his risk and peril. Z’s here to stay, give you a hell of a show, and head off into the sunset with a quarter million in his pocket!”*
~Greasy Z, 29, Hog Badger, Automobile Mechanic

*“Four seconds. Four fucking seconds. And we’re forced to deal with the pig leading again, come on!” *gestures with his hands* “If I don’t get a captain nod any time soon, this’ll be a disaster.”*
~John, 36, Stoat, Jailer

Individual Challenge #3, “Dead In The Water”

HEAT 1			HEAT 2		
	ARRON	3:19		JOHN	3:35
	ANDREW	3:30		WILLIAM	3:43
	GREASY Z	3:32		KENNETH	3:48
	EDDIE			MICHAEL	DUEL
	CHAYNE			CRISPIN	DUEL

				
JOHN	WILLIAM	KENNETH	MICHAEL	CRISPIN

“So, are you sure you will recover in time for the duel?” one of the on-site medical staff asks Crispin - the otter sitting on a bench far from the rest, a stethoscope placed on his tattooed chest.

"I'm gonna go on no matter what," the lutrine says, averting his eyes from the young goat. "The only way I'm leaving this competition is by the paws of one of those guys."

the otter sits on the bench, looking down at the ground* "The individual could not have gone worse for me, I could not even complete it. I don't know how this has... affected me, and as much as it was a freak accident, all I hear is how weak I've become... and honestly I just feel fucked." *groans, passing a paw through his face

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

"Ayo Eddie..." Crispin calls to the giant otter, pulling him away from the crowd.

The NAVY veteran sits next to the bouncer, passing an arm around his shoulders. "What up, dude? How you feelin'?" he asks, noticing Crispin's concern as the paramedic checks his blood pressure.

"Eddie and I have been tight since day one and I know he also had a similar experience before, so he's the only one in the house who I feel can get me right now."

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

"I'm..." Crispin starts to articulate, his webbed paws reflexively moving in a struggle. "...losing it. Big time."

"It's all good, dude. You've seen how slow Mike is in the water..." Eddie tries to encourage his friend. "Just get in with all the determination you got. He's gonna crack, and by the time we're back to Apopka you're gonna be doing great again..."

"It's more than t-that, Eddie," Crispin replied, his voice cracking. "If he loses, it's just an ego... kick, but if I lose it, it can be... my very last chance just flying out." The tall otter passes his hands through his face, his rudder twitching in anxiety. "I know about being bottom of the barrel, I've... been in the deep end before. Talking booze, drugs... hard drugs."

"You never told me about that," Eddie says, instinctively taken aback by his friend's confession.

"I never say so to anyone new," Crispin shrugs. "It's hard to be taken seriously when you open up about having been an addict. And believe me, I tried pretty much anything under the sun. Coke, pills, crystal, you name it..." he sighs loudly. "Guess I'm just happy I managed to stay clear from the big H. Everyone who I saw doing it is pretty much fucked or... you know..."

"Six feet under," the giant otter nods knowingly. "I could tell you had it tough, but that's not the kinda tough I imagined..."

"My old acquaintances would say I would be too much of a pussy being scared of needles," Crispin says with a dry laugh, pointing at his extensive tattooing. "Guess I proved them wrong, right?"

"I've been completely drug-free for the past seven years. I was lucky to be 'less addicted' than normal, trying to keep active and in shape has aided me to stay away from the deep end. Most times... it's all good with me. That chapter of my life is in the past, but I never thought how this experience and being away from my peers back home would affect that part of me. It's hard, man..."

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

"But like... it all changed when this guy got into my life. A fateful night, a lot of terrible fighting and a mother that would not give him the care he deserved, he arrived to change me up..." the otter pulls out the familiar dogtag-shaped necklace from his possessions, tearing up as he sees his son's name printed on the metal. "The first day I stepped in here, all I could think of was him. How this can change our lives for the better. I don't care about this stupid title, I want to... I want to better Brock's life."

"Wait... is it all on your shoulders?" Eddie asks. "Like, you're getting this one big shot and you're doing amazing at it. But you don't need to make it like your life begins and ends with this."

"I've... never realized how scared I am of failure. I don't want to fail my kid..." Crispin starts to sob. "All because of a fucking injury!"

"Who says you're failing him?" the giant otter asks in a soothing tone, pulling the bouncer in a hug. "I'm sure he's gonna be proud of his dad, making a name for himself, being a true Alpha..." Crispin doesn't answer back, trying to hold back sobs and tears as he leans in the hug.

**the otter is shown crying as he clutches his friend in a tight hug* "This shit... has put all my struggles on blast and it's forcing me to come to terms with a lot of what happened now and what happened to the Crispin from the past. For most of these guys, a quarter of a million dollars and the title is the right to wank-off, but this is 'keep out of the streets' money for me. 'get a new job' money, 'save my kid from what I've been through' money... ugh. And to think all that can disappear is killing me."*

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

"Hey, Cris..." Eddie tries to console his friend. "We're a team now. We've been tearing through this since day one, and we gonna be the last two standing tall once everything is said and done. You hear me, dude?"

"I don't want to lose this. Not... like this..." Crispin dries his tears with a webbed paw.

"You won't," the giant otter says, matter-of-factly. "Michael at full health can't hold a candle to you at ten percent health. Especially if water is involved," the remark getting a chuckle out of the bouncer. "Now go out there, and do this for Brock. Here..." he says, getting the dogtag off Crispin's webbed paws and tying it around his neck. "Go there and crush him. I know you can."

Crispin flattened his ears, still looking dejected. "I really... fucking needed this."

"Heh, don't even say it," Eddie shrugs. "We'll pull this off, I promise..."

*"Crispin's experiences have put a lot of things in perspective. Being an Alpha is not just being on top of things, it's how you manage to tackle the toughest obstacles, and Cris here... man... he is going to go places." *Eddie is shown giving the last pointers to Crispin before he heads off to the duel**

~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

"Let's bring in our duelists..." Ludwig announces. "Crispin, Michael, come in..."

All eight mustelids are sitting on the bench, watching in anticipation, as the otter and wolverine walk in along the side of the Olympic pool to stop in front of the weasel host. In the deepest section, two floating platforms have been placed and moored to the ground with ropes about twenty yards from one another.

"I'm intent on returning to Apopka, and as sad as Cris' condition is, it just spells a leg-up for me. He could have resigned when it was safe, but he chose this path... that spells no mercy from me to him."

~Michael, 35, Wolverine, Blacksmith

"This is a matter of life and death for me, and my sights are set on conquering this Duel and defeating Mike whatever it takes. If water's involved, I got a huge edge, and even if I'm at 20%, I'm confident I can send him back to Montana."

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

"Guys, welcome to the third Duel of the season," Ludwig announces. "Water Week has tested all of you in multiple ways, and so far, eight of you have risen, earning the right to return to the Burrow..." he points to the winners' bench, some of the guys cracking a smirk, "...but there's still a spot to be claimed, and right now it's a matter of wills between you two," he says. "This challenge is called Pontoon Clash, and will challenge your agility, endurance and swimming skills like nothing before."

*"Wait a darn' second..." *the hog badger snorts pensively* "So on this water trial by fire, we got Crispy, who right now got the equivalent of a slashed tire and a blown piston, and Mike who got the swimming talents of a Chevy Colorado 2005..." *blinks* "This is gonna be a ruff ruff duel, I'll say, godspeed y'all." *oinks**

~Greasy Z, 29, Hog Badger, Automobile Mechanic

"You both will start on one of those platforms, where each of you'll find five floating rings spelling a word you should be very well acquainted with," the weasel continues. "On my go, you'll jump into the water and dive under a bar, then resurface and climb to the other pontoon. You'll put that ring on your respective hook, jump back in the water and do it again. The first contestant to complete five laps, place all of their rings and spell the full word correctly wins the challenge. All clear?" Both mustelids nod along. "Alright, swim out and we'll get started..."

As the two swim to their respective starting points, the tall otter starts to loudly cough and keel over. "I said I'm good..." Crispin reassures, rising back up, dismissing the host and the staff who asked to take a closer look. "I already... said I'm fine."

"I'm trying not to show it, but I'm legit worried Crispin won't be able to pull off the win he deserves. I don't want to give up on my closest pal so soon, yet the risk is always there when you go to combat. I did what I could to work some confidence back into him, now it's fully on him."

~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

The camera hovers both contenders as they strap on their swimming goggles. "Alright... Michael, Crispin, you ready?" Ludwig calls out, a hint of concern in his voice. "GO!"

Otter and wolverine dive into the water and start lapping as hard as they can to the opposite platform, propelling themselves forward with strong pulls of their powerful limbs. It doesn't take long for both to show signs of struggle as they take a dive under the obstacle set midway and resurface on the other side. Surprisingly, Michael is edging out Crispin as they reach the pontoon, pulling himself up and out of the water with a strong push of his biceps just as the lutrine takes the last stroke towards the platform. The blacksmith doesn't waste any time in grabbing one of the black rings from his own set, diving headfirst over a struggling Crispin as he's still trying to climb out of the water.

"Michael is kind of getting the hang out of it! Slow, but steady, and never stopping to struggle. I hate to say it, but... Crispin might be getting out-swimmied by big Mike."

~William, 34, Least Weasel, Personal Trainer

Finally, the bouncer manages to reach his set of rings, picking up one and immediately diving in Michael's pursuit. The wolverine is slightly ahead of him, resurfacing from his second deep dive and looking already depleted of most of his strengths as his strokes become more and more labored by the minute.

"Go Mike!" Kenneth yells, loudly whistling as the burly wolverine jumps on the starting platform and sets down the first ring on his peg. "C'mon, you got this!"

"Mike's got his first ring! Crispin's following in his steps!" Ludwig narrates, looking at both large mustelids as they give all they got in a bid to outpace each other. The lutrine is resurfacing from his own dive, his breath slightly labored as he comes up for air with every second stroke, but decidedly more in control than his opponent having now started the second lap.

"On any other day, I'd be three-to-one at this point, but I truly feel like I can't breathe."

**Crispin steps up to the platform to deposit his first ring* "Thing is, I know how to do this, Michael does not. Mind over matter, I'll win this duel."*

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

As the underwater camera follows Michael diving down, it becomes abundantly clear his water discomfort didn't really get solved all of a sudden. The hulking wolverine is struggling to swim deeper and work his way under the underwater bar, to the point he needs to grab

onto it and push his body under it before letting buoyancy propel him back up. A few seconds later, Crispin follows through - gracefully swimming down and clearing the bar in a single motion, his body coming up in a perfect arch just a few feet behind Michael.

"He's making ground," Eddie comments as soon as his friend resurfaces, failing to hide his obvious relief. "At this pace, Michael's got no chance..."

"It's still way too early," Andrew retorts. "Five laps are a whole lot, and those dives are gonna get them exhausted real soon..."

*"Crispin's making a comeback, and if he finds whatever he has innit to return to his old skills, then I'm fucked." *the wolverine is shown as he pulls himself over the pontoon, darting a look back to see where the otter's at* "But I know he can't keep this shit for long."*

~Michael, 35, Wolverine, Blacksmith

"Let's go, Cris!" Chayne cheers on. The tattooed lutrine is clearly starting to pick up confidence as he sees his gap from Michael slowly closing in. After picking up his next ring, he slips it onto his muscular rudder as far as it can go - taking a bit of a breather as he watches his opponent struggling again mid-dive. Getting in a huge gulp of air, he runs up to the edge of the platform and dives in behind the wolverine, his trajectory nearly perfect as he resurfaces even with him at just a few feet from the opposite platform.

"And Crispin is overtaking Michael as he comes back with his second ring!" Ludwig comments, looking over as the otter shoulders the wolverine and climbs onto the pontoon without giving him a chance to retaliate. Most of the group is cheering and yelling as Crispin immediately dives back after setting the ring on his peg, looking to put the most ground he can between himself and his opponent.

*"It's one hell of a lucky strike that I get to do this against the weakest swimmer in the Burrow. I'm trying to waste as little energy as I can, letting the water do most of the job with every deep dive I take." *the otter is shown as he swims again under the bar, arms extended forward and legs swinging in rapid dolphin kicks* "This duel is mine to take, and you know damn well I'm coming for it."*

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

By the end of the third lap, Crispin has put a ton of distance between himself and Michael. The wolverine is completely exhausted, unable to do much but paddle forward and use his brute strength to stay afloat. Seeing his opponent coming through is also taking a major toll on his morale, his ears clearly drooping in the water as he realizes his spot in the Burrow is slowly slipping away.

"Michael's got his third ring, Crispin is diving in to get his fourth!" Ludwig points out. The bouncer looks ahead before taking the dive, noticing his opponent jumping into the water from the opposite platform. Despite struggling to catch his breath, he immediately dives to his pursuit, his mind fully focused on lapping him before the end of the duel.

*"I'm looking at these two going at it and really... there's no match, this is a full blown slaughter." *cameras show the wolverine diving in, then resurfacing in earnest as he mistook*

the timing of his breathing and didn't take in enough air "Crispin is diving in like a torpedo, while Mike is taking his sweet time to get under a bar that's like, eight feet deep."*

~Arron, 28, Honey Badger, Firefighter

"And Crispin's one ring left to win the duel!" the stoat exclaims. Yet as soon as Crispin puts his fourth ring into the stand, his body gives out, forcing him to lay down to take an extensive breather.

"Come on, Crispin! One more!" Eddie shouts at the exhausted otter. Crispin lays flat on his back against the platform, taking gasps of air in order to recover. His massive chest is heaving profusely, filling and emptying at regular intervals as Michael finally gets in his third ring and dives back in a dash for his fourth.

*"And all of the sudden, the six-four tall Crispin fucking dies. This is not how I'd picture him going, but lo and behold..." *John is shown looking with a scowl as the otter struggles to pick himself up* "If I was Mike, I'd know this would be my chance." *shrugs**

~John, 36, Stoat, Jailer

**Michael sets his fourth ring on the stand, showing extreme exhaustion, paws on his knees* "Crispin's body gives out. We're both exhausted as hell, but I gotta man up and take this opening. Who knows if I get any more than this?"*

~Michael, 35, Wolverine, Blacksmith

The entire bench is rumbling in concern as Crispin is still not getting up, Michael being on the verge of overtaking him as he swims back with his fourth ring in his paw. Ludwig looks over in concern, half wondering whether to call the medical team in once more. The lutrine manages to get on all fours, still panting, but looking determined to go in for one last dive.

"GET UP, CRISPIN!" Eddie's booming voice echoes around the pool, the SEAL veteran unable to sit down as he sees his friend in major distress.

"What the hell, even..." Chayne whispers to William and Kenneth next to him.

The long-haired badger gives the marten a side glance. "Looks like he's done," he whispers back, careful to not be overheard by the other lutrine on the bench. "He shoulda known this duel would make it worse on him..."

Across the pool, though, Crispin has managed to crawl to the edge of the pontoon just as Michael is climbing up with his fourth ring. Setting down his left knee, he uses it to give himself some momentum as he dives in headfirst - most of the contestants cheering loudly as they take in the lutrine's feat of willpower.

*"They're going to have to drag me out of here either kicking and screaming or dead." *the otter resurfaces, struggling to breathe, and coughing loudly* "I might not be able to breathe, I might be struggling, but what I won't do is throw this away. I'm going to stay for Brock, I got everything it takes to make it to the finale."*

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

Michael curses loudly as he realizes his opponent is again on the move, diving deep to clear the bar with room to spare and again up on the other side, swimming to the platform with slow, measured strokes. Huffing under his breath, he jumps in the water in his pursuit - trying to let himself sink as much as he can before starting to propel himself forward and under the obstacle.

"This has been the struggle wars," John whispers to Eddie and Arron next to him. "We coulda wrapped it up in half the time by now..."

Ahead of him, Crispin is climbing onto the platform, rolling on his back as soon as he manages to get a leg over the edge. He immediately gets on his feet, picking up the ring and clutching it in his paws as he dives back in, not bothering to take a second wind. The underwater camera follows him under the bar and back up, his features displaying utter focus and determination.

"Crispin is coming home with his last ring! Can he get onto the platform and figure out the word?" Ludwig yells. The lutrine tosses the ring onto the pontoon, then tries to hoist himself out of the water - his biceps visibly shaking from the effort, clearly threatening to give up at any moment.

"You got this, Cris!" Eddie roars. "Get your leg up!"

Heeding his friend's suggestion, Crispin pulls up with all he got left, lifting one of his long legs out of the water and getting a foot over the edge of the platform. A second later he's on top, immediately getting on his hands and knees and then on his feet as he starts to sort his rings to compose the word, just as Michael props his large body on the platform with his last ring. "A-L-P-H-A, ALPHA!" he spells almost immediately, tossing the rings on his pole in the correct order and raising his arms in triumph as soon as he realizes he's gotten it right.

"AND CRISPIN SURVIVES THE DUEL AND EARNS HIS PLACE IN THE TOP NINE!" Ludwig signals the end of the grueling battle, most of the group exploding into a massive cheer as Crispin bows down in order to catch up whatever air he could.

**holds back tears* "I did... what I came to do. And it feels... so fucking amazing to still be here. This is my one big moment, and I tell ya... nobody in the Burrow can take that shit away from me." *the wolverine joins the lutrine on the pontoon, immediately going to shake paws with him* "My mission ain't over, and these guys better know there's nothing I can't come back from."*

~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer

"Crispin, congratulations, you rose up from the ashes to defeat Michael and secure your place in the competition," Ludwig praises the otter, who's still sitting on the edge of the pontoon. "Swim over and reach your buddies now, you've earned it..."

The bouncer lets himself fall in the water, padding over to the shore and getting out of the pool only to be crushed in a bear hug from Eddie. "You did this, bud!" he shakes him back and forth in great relief, uncaring about his fellow lutrine dripping water all over his dry clothes.

"Easy, man..." Crispin warns his friend, leaning into the giant otter's chest as his throat tenses up in a painful cough. "I need every breath and then some..."

Meanwhile, a dejected Michael is dog-paddling towards the group, some of the mustelids politely clapping as the wolverine takes himself out of the water. "Fucking sucks..." he grumbles to Chayne and William, the first to make eye contact with him.

"Michael Marshall, from Whitefish, Montana," Ludwig nods, dejected as he has to formally address the next eliminee. "Been great having you here, man. You quite literally muscled your way into this cast with dedication, and you've shown your worth as a true leader within the community you represent," he says. "But sadly, your Alpha journey ends here."

"I'll say this, Ludwig..." the wolverine mopes. "I've had one hell of a time here. It just... sucks going out this way, on something that isn't my forte. I know I had a lot more to give, but I guess that's just the way it is."

*"It's painful to see people dropping out as is, but with Michael it feels like... this is a reminder than the axe can fall on anyone, anytime, anyhow." *some of the contestants are shown clapping at the wolverine's words* "This guy might be gruff, but he's been one hell of a class act through all of this. I wish him the best of luck."*

~Arron, 28, Honey Badger, Firefighter

A huge towel slung over his shoulders, Michael takes the time to shake paws with every single competitor left before leaving the premises. John is the first to talk. "You've been one of the real ones, Big Mike..." he nods.

"Man, I really don't wanna say this, but..." the wolverine says as he approaches Z. "I'm gonna miss y'all. Even this fucking flickering lightbulb..." he grumbles, the hog badger immediately responding to his paw shake.

"Aw, screw ya too, Rocky Mountain..." he replies in jest, laughing loudly.

"Y'all..." Michael tries to get the group's attention. "I got something for you to chew on tonight. Alpha got a lot to do with motivation and sheer will to dominate your peers, but there's another side to that... and that's to own a strong moral standing to justify your position as a leader, every day of your life. Some of you are there already, others... not quite," he shrugs, the camera hovering over the group. "Just keep that in mind, will ya? And if that still don't work.... just fucking muscle through, I don't know," he signs off with a bit of jesting irony.

"Well, what can I add to that?" Ludwig addresses the group as soon as the wolverine has disappeared in the lockers. "You've gotten a quarter of the road through, guys," he says, the whole group clapping and roaring out loud at his words. "The good news is that every single one of you has been proving why they deserve to be here. The bad news is that it's gonna get only tougher from here on, and all of you will have to push through the pain at some point along the road," he says, Crispin nodding along knowingly. "Have a good trip y'all, I'll see you guys back at the Burrow..."

*"I thought I could have gotten over these water activities easy to then kill the next round of challenges, but what can you do?" *the wolverine is shown as he steps under the shower knob, loudly sighing at the contact with the boiling water* "I don't, like, wanna come out as a sore loser. I'm proud of what I've done here, I won my team the flag challenge, I scored a point in underwater football, I've generally gotten over all my weaknesses... except for defeating a sickly otter on his turf. If you put it that way...." *scoffs**

~Michael, 35, Wolverine, Blacksmith

While the entire group is shown climbing up in the van, Chayne and Kenneth openly celebrating having survived another round, Michael is waiting just outside the pool with his bags in tow.

*"All in all, it's been a great experience and one I'd sign back for in a heartbeat. I've managed to put Whitefish on the map and score some huge wins for the people back home as well as my personal ego." *chuckles under his breath* "Not too bad from someone from the middle of the Badlands, yeah?"*

~Michael, 35, Wolverine, Blacksmith

Duel #3, Pontoon Clash

