



## **American Mustelid Alpha**

# **EPISODE 10 "The Gauntlet Of The Century"**

## **PART 1**

It's the break of dawn. Host Ludwig Logemann stands in front of a massive military hangar as the sun rays blanket over the landscape. He's clad in a grey camouflage vest over a black shirt, dark combat pants with knee pads and leather boots. He turns towards the operator, ostentatiously looking into the camera as he gets ready to give his spiel.

"Thirty-two days ago, over forty mustelids from all across America arrived here in Apopka, Florida, with something to prove, something to showcase, and all with a common goal to stand above everyone else as the true Alpha Mustelid around," he says. "Twelve resilient ones survived the selection process and became our finalists, earning the right to live at the Burrow and go through some of the most intense challenges and grueling duels, fighting fang and claw to survive another day, and clear their path from the toughest obstacles: each other. After defeating Omar, J.J., Michael, Crispin, Chayne, William, Arron, John, Greasy Z and Andrew... two remain ready to face off in the Gauntlet of the Century."

The camera cuts to a montage of the two finalists. "Eddie Caprio, a 32 year old Navy SEAL veteran and demolition foreman from Garfield, New Jersey." The giant otter is shown as he handily defeats Michael in the trench, tosses the football in the net during the underwater football match and slams his paws on the table after swallowing the last bit of the pig's heart.

"Ever since we began this journey, Eddie has been a force to be reckoned with and he's been singled out as the one to beat. From commanding respect for his background and knowledge, to proving his worth on the field - stepping in as one of the most vocal and leader-like personalities in the house."

*"Come on... they respect Eddie Caprio around here." \*grins\**

~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

“Over the course of the season, Eddie has shown his grits and mental prowess in the challenges and duels... and out of them, no matter who dared to get in his way.”

*“When the moment comes, they band and they gonna take it out on Crispin?” Eddie asks out loud, before throwing his glass to the floor with a resounding smash, making John and William’s ears stand up in shock. “That’s my response...” the giant otter says in a calm rage, patting the spilled water off his arms as he gets up.*

*“What the FUCK, Eddie?!” Arron raises his voice, uncharacteristic of the honey badger. “You fucking told me, that you were game in getting John out of here if we couldn't get Andrew and Z out!”*

~Arron, 28, Honey Badger, Firefighter

*Andrew scoffs at the otter. “Eddie, maybe try not lying for once, it may stop you from being in the fucking duels!”*

~Andrew, 22, European Polecat, Roadie

“As the journey progressed, most contestants ended up targeting Eddie. That forced the lutrine to get through by sheer willpower, surviving a grand total of four duels - more than anyone else in the competition.”

*\*montage of Crispin, Chayne, Arron and Andrew’s eliminations\* “This is the fourth motherfucker I’ve bested in a duel in this journey...” \*huffs\* “They threw me everything there was in their hell, and I came back standing stronger, prouder, and ready for more.”*

~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

“Can this 6-foot-2, 222 pound behemoth prove once and for all he’s got what it takes to conquer the title he so covets, or will he stumble on the final hurdle in his quest to mustelid glory?”

The camera follows Ludwig as he turns to his left, the familiar shape of the Burrow appearing in the distance behind him. “Kenneth Geib, a 24 year old roofing technician and CrossFit instructor from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.” The American badger is shown quickly winning the baton beach challenge, pushing the giant ball into the goalpost of the opposite team and celebrating with the white team in Squaw Valley as the results were read.

“One of the youngest candidates in the running, Kenneth performed one of the most notable feats of prowess, reaching the end without ever stepping foot in a duel. He’s also the only mustelid to win two Team Challenges as captain, establishing himself as a competitor to fear on every terrain.”

*“I’m on one hell of a hot streak, and you better believe it ain’t ending here!”*

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

“However, it took a while for this badger to find his footing in the competition. At first, Kenneth struggled to earn the respect of his peers, sometimes coming across as too cocky... and as some have even put it, a spoiled brat.”

*“This is the fourth time I lost the team challenge. Fourth fucking time. I can’t even process how shitty it feels....”*

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

*"No one came thinking Ken was an ass, he's just proven himself as such."  
~Crispin, 29, European Otter, Bouncer*

*"Dude's here with the competition living in his head rent-free..."  
~J.J., 25, Sea Otter, Construction Project Manager*

"Along the way, Kenneth learned to count on his closest allies in the Burrow - namely Arron, the firefighting honey badger with whom he struck an inseparable friendship, and John, the stoat jailer, whose talents came handy for the badger. A couple of smart decisions? Or were sly, shady moves at play? The fact of the matter is the badger turned his luck when push came to shove."

*"I'm two for two, baby!" \*smiles\* "No matter how these people will keep throwing spanners in the works, I'm gonna steamroll through 'em until I'm on top."  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor*

*\*Kenneth holds paws with Cassie as they walk down a pristine sand beach after his reward victory in the Bahamas\* "Just a few more hurdles, and this mustelid kid that didn't have direction in his life at one point can claim the pinnacle of this competition. There's a lot riding, and I'm way in too deep to bow out."  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor*

"Is the growth across this Alpha journey of this Crossfit prodigy enough to withstand the final test and get the big prize, or will it prove too much for him in the end?"

The stoat host looks straight into the camera. "It's no secret that Eddie and Kenneth have hardly ever seen eye-to-eye. Ever since the beginning, a fierce rivalry has developed between the two, strengthened by the elimination of their respective lieutenants - otter bouncer Crispin, who lost against Eddie himself after the entire group targeted the two, and honey badger firefighter Arron, bowing out just before the semifinals as the group flew to Nassau, Bahamas. The feud between otters and badgers was one of the driving points of the season, leading to major infighting and one-upping within the house."

*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..."  
~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

*\*Kenneth sinks his javelin into Crispin's last surviving dummy\* ""This ain't the marines anymore, captain. No one's gonna bow down and suck it to you, not with this prize on the line."  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor*

*"Let everyone else know this: If there is an easy way, ignore it. Go to the hard one, and get ready to make a statement." \*camera focuses on Arron leaving after his duel loss\* "And finally, the dynamic in the Burrow has changed for good. The best setting for me to conquer it, once and for all."  
~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

*"I think Eddie's the least deserving. Nobody here went to duel twice in a row but him. And I think that he's not adaptable enough... one small nick and he's lagging behind everyone else. We need to be up to par when push comes to shove, not struggle."*

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

“After nine episodes and more than a month of grueling challenges, strategies, alliances and betrayals, it all comes down to one final battle between these two unrelenting foes. The Alpha Gauntlet will test their talents and determination to the most extreme level yet, in the utmost show of domination ever seen on national television. A set of six challenges and a jury formed out of the eliminated contestants will decide who will be able to boast the title of American Mustelid Alpha.”

*“I’m ready for this. Really, I’ve never been more ready.” \*the badger beams at the camera, clad in the golden challenge shirt representing his status in the competition\* “What more can they get us to do? Lock us in a cage and see who survives the longest? I’m up for that too.” \*rubs his paws together\* “This is my shot to kickstart the life dream of making my way into a scene I’ve always respected and strived to be a part of. That rudder’s just an obstacle in between, and I’m gonna conquer it the only way I know.”*

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

*“Many have tried to drag me under, and to be frank, many of those better than pretty mane here.” \*chuckles\* “Whatever this big Gauntlet entails, I’m sure I am ten times more conditioned than him, and history is on my side. I’ve beaten the badger in every head-to-head situation we had... and this won’t be any different. Kenneth Geib needs to fold and make space for the actual winner of this competition.”*

~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

“Forty-five mustelids tried, twelve got the chance to be part of it, two managed to dominate all others and fight their way all the way to the final. But only one will succeed in his quest to become... the American Mustelid Alpha.”

\*\*\*

The sun has fully set down across Apopka as Eddie and Kenneth come back into the Burrow, having showered and changed into their house clothes after the grueling effort they both took earlier on in the day.

“Forty something fuckers...” Kenneth breaks the silence between the two, his voice now echoing around the empty mansion, as if it was a luxurious cave. The badger scoffs as he fixes his long hair.

“None stood a chance, as it should...” Eddie replies with a smirk.

*“To have a goal in your mind is one thing, to see it realizing before your own eyes is.... shit, I can’t explain it!” \*smiles, laughing\* “I do consider rooming with this lug by ourselves the opposite of a finalist’s treatment, but hey, I’m in the top two and sometimes winners can’t be choosers.”*

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

The badger continues to muse until Eddie cuts him off, his features focusing as he sniffs the air. “You smell that?”

“You dipped in chlorine water? I mean, since we got in, wasn’t it obvious?” Kenneth points out with a slight jab.

“No, dumbass...” the lutrine shakes his head, pointing a claw past the communal area. He’s the first to reach the dining room, his eyes popping open in shock and disbelief as he notices the table already set for two and several dishes filled to the brim with tasty food - a huge bowl of pasta, an entire tray of roasted beef tenderloin with wine demi-glace, big fillets of grilled salmon with lemon garlic sauce and different kinds of vegetables to accompany the meat. A couple bottles of champagne sit on ice buckets, chilled and ready to be served.

“Are you KIDDING me?!” Kenneth shouts, clapping amusedly. “Holy shit, look at all of this fucking food!”

“Well, I definitely wasn’t looking forward to cooking tonight...” Eddie chuckles, immediately taking a seat on his favorite chair. “We better lay into that before it goes cold, aight? I’m fucking starving...”

*\*camera pans over the decadent trays of freshly done food\* “After all the shit I had to go through, this was just what the doctor ordered!” \*the otter lets out a low chuckle\* “I may be sittin’ down to dine with the enemy, but at least the food’s good and I don’t have to take him to a motel afterwards!”*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

As both mustelids fill their plates to the brim, Eddie notices a small white envelope sitting next to the champagne bucket. He slices it open with a claw, picking up the letter inside and extending it in front of Kenneth to read it.

“Eddie and Kenneth, congratulations... you have made it to the Final Gauntlet of American Mustelid Alpha,” he reads. “Well, no shit Sherlock...” he says, cockily patting himself on the back and earning a raised eyebrow from the badger.

“I bet it reads Kenneth and Eddie in that order, but you’re taking poetic liberty...” Kenneth jokes.

“Oh shush... The Gauntlet is a challenge like none you’ve faced before here. Not only you need to reign supreme over the other in a set of many straight duels, but you also need to impress special jurors that will measure you and your journey to the most minute detail...”

*“This jury thing will change everything. I don’t know who it will be or how will we even be measured to account for whatever pointage. I mean, if it’s the fittest, I mean, duh...” \*snerks\* “But something tells me it ain’t going to be that simple.” \*the badger leans his elbows on the table, glaring at the lutrine\**

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

“You’ll have to earn six points out of eleven across the totality of the Gauntlet to crown yourself the first American Mustelid Alpha. It will last thirty-six hours from start to finish, with little opportunity to rest and recover between each event - so we suggest you make the most of the protein-rich meal and extra pampering we set for you. Bon appétit, and may the best mustelid conquer!” Eddie finishes reading with a flourish. “Well, that sounds quite ominous, yeah?” he tells Kenneth, starting to tackle his portion of pasta. “Wasn’t expecting a walk in the park, but like... six challenges in less than a day and a half will destroy us.”

The badger doesn’t bother to finish his mouthful of juicy steak before replying. “I wonder if...” he swallows. “I wonder how we gonna be judged,” he points his silverware at Eddie.

"I got no idea, but like... if we talking Alpha credentials, and the letter sorta mentions it, I know I got a leg up in that department," the otter shrugs.

"You wish..." Kenneth scoffs, grabbing an unopened bottle of champagne and tearing the foil from its cap. "But like, we've been through a ton of shit, a ton of scrapes, liftin', social challenges, team challenges, duels... one more than the other..." he can't help to point out in a pause. "So what even is there left for us? Literal knife fighting or what the hell..." the badger inspects the bottle, sort of puzzled.

"Well that's something I got quite covered," the lutrine gets up from his chair, running a finger across the jagged battle scar crossing the right side of his stomach. "You get what I mean though. Do you really feel you can match up with all I did out of here? Be real, man. We don't have to go at each other's throat yet, but call a spade a spade..."

The badger leans on the bottle, unwittingly toying with the cork. "I know my shit, and you know yours. In the end, we'll see what... the Gaunt-"

\*CLANK\*

The sudden bang of the cork flying to the ceiling and hitting a light fixture startled both finalists, with the badger flattening his ears in shock, the bubbly beverage spilling on the floor from the side of the table. "MERDA!" the otter screams, silence hanging as the bottle spills. "Kenneth!" he calls the badger, incredulously laughing after the surprise subsides.

"Holy shit..." Kenneth shakes his head, laughing and serving himself a glass once the bottle calms down. "Now THAT'LL wake ya up!"

"You're fucking up the only decent drink we've gotten in thirty days! You're not supposed to like, claw at it, cuz then it goes flying!" Eddie points out, his voice tone rising up in annoyance as he gestures. "You gonna shoot my eye out!"

The badger playfully sneers, pointing at the other bottles chilling to the side as he mockingly raises his glass to the lutrine. He takes a long swig from his flûte, before leaning back on his chair. "Calm down, dude..." he says. "We'll have a whole lotta time to go at each other's throats, but I'd rather enjoy this dinner now..."

Eddie grabs another champagne bottle, putting his napkin over it, and twisting the cap to open it without hassle. "Take note, frat boy. I know classy drinks are foreign to ya, but still..." he says, before raising the bottle to his mouth, tilting it up and chugging the liquid in greedy gulps.

"There's a lot of shit I don't know, okay?" Kenneth raises his paws before rising his glass towards his lips. "Like duels..." the badger can't help to mumble under his breath.

"Well that'll be useful as you go up against me for six of 'em," Eddie says, matter-of-factly, as he serves himself another portion of salmon. "Not that I mind, but you're about to run outta luck with me..."

*"Kenneth has not known what a real challenge even is..." \*the camera focuses on the badger as he steps up from the table, Eddie following him suit and gathering the empty plates\* "So I believe I'm in*

*a prime position if push comes to shove and shit becomes direct. There's no hiding behind honey and assholes this time, my good bitch! I'm here to claim this title."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

"I ain't gonna tuck you to bed, you know, no matter how much you ask..." Kenneth comments on his way upstairs.

"And you're not getting a night light to sleep, tough shit," Eddie curtly replies with his own taunt.

*"Going against someone who is full up their own ass might just be the most annoying way to have any sort of equalizer." \*the badger is shown as he brushes his fangs, running a paw through his hair to straighten it before bedtime\* "Truth of the matter is, I've managed to best not only Eddie, but everyone else on occasion, and while he won't say, I know it eats him up from the inside. He's soon going to know what I can really do on a Duel."*

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

\*\*\*

A few hours before the start of the first challenge, both Eddie and Kenneth are instructed to head to the communal gym area where two therapists are waiting to administer them a deep tissue treatment. "This must be the extra pampering they talked about..." the otter shrugs, greeting his masseur with a nod of his head.

"You only see this shit if you ultra premium in Planet Fitness..." Kenneth chuckles, quickly taking his top off and not wasting a second to flex his muscles towards his rival. "Must say I'm looking more forward to this than the challenges... even if it means these guns full out blazin' at you."

"Oh, is that so?" the giant otter snarls, shedding his own clothes and claspng both paws in front as he contracts all muscles in the classic crab pose right as Kenneth is climbing onto his massage bed. "Yours are good for a gun show, but this is what you want to take on the battlefield..." he growls in his opponent's direction, his lutrine features not breaking composure as he flexes hard.

"And yet the thickest part ya got is the skull..." Kenneth shrugs.

Eddie lets out a small chuckle, entertained at his own attempts to mess with the badger's head. He lays face down on his own table, beckoning the masseur to start working.

*"People out there might feel all this macho shit is dumb and will end up playing against me, but like... half of the game is won here." \*points at his own temple\* "The stakes are the highest I've ever played for, and I'm not gonna leave shit to chance. I'm gonna own him like an Alpha."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

"And to think two years ago, I could just dream of affording this..." Kenneth chuffs, feeling the pressure melt away as the therapist's paws run over his back - slick fingers running across his short fur, warming his muscles with oil and light pressure before starting to dig in further.

Eddie grunts in response, his eyes half-closed. "Whatcha think you gonna do first when you come home?" he asks the roofer, almost slurring, slightly shifting on the mattress as his thighs are worked on.

“Prolly see my mom, she must’ve been dying cuz of me leaving for this... long!” Kenneth flinches in surprise as the masseuse loosens the knots in his back. “I mean, gotta surprise her with the big check, right?”

“You wish, buddy,” the lutrine retorts, biting his lip to suppress a grunt. “As for me, after I win... well, I know I’m gonna spend a couple weeks somewhere at a beach,” he says, slyly casting his eyes towards the badger to gauge his reaction. “Disappearing for a while to like... the Keys, or Panama, sounds quite alright. No other souls in sight, and plenty of time to keep working on my tan after the Bahamas...” he ponders. “Speaking of, buddy... ain’t you looking forward to meeting again with your gal?”

“Don’t be afraid to go deep...” Kenneth instructs, feeling the stress in his muscles starting to get alleviated by the therapist’s skillful touch. “I mean, of course. Between gettin’ the cash for the box and other things, she is the next one I’m gonna report to. I’ll say... she coulda beat like half of the cast here by herself, even winning this whole shit.”

The otter snickers under his whiskers. “Sure she could,” he huffs, his breath slightly picking up as the masseur digs into the valleys of his sculpted upper back. “I just hope she doesn’t turn you down for good when you return to Philly as a lovely American Mustelid Alpha... runner-up,” he chuckles at the badger’s direction.

*“The sun is shining, the birds are singing, the water’s flowing down the river, the mountains stand tall and Eddie STILL tries to make everything into a dick measuring contest...” \*Kenneth breathes in and out as the therapists hits a hard spot under his shoulder blade\* “I ain’t going to fall for that game. He can tease and taunt all he wants, I’m gonna nod, play nice and tune out, let him go all out in that fucking... tongue cardio he always does. We’ll see if he dares running his mouth again after the Gauntlet.”*

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

Eddie starts openly purring once his therapist takes a hold of his muscular rudder, kneading it back and forth with strong tugs of his paws, Kenneth looking over in curiosity.

“Is that big thing like... how does it work? A log you carry around stuck on your ass or is it more like a sack of putty, all bendy and shit?” Kenneth jokingly asks as he sees the masseur make work of the lutrine’s tail.

“Ughhh... just an extra set of muscles I gotta work out,” Eddie sighs, rolling over. “Least I can do something with it, as your buddy knows well...” he casually says, the badger flinching as he recalls how the Navy veteran managed to overpower Arron in his final duel. “It can be a hindrance at times, but-”

“Think it wasn’t when Cris went home...” Kenneth can’t help himself from retorting.

The lutrine frowns in the badger’s direction as the masseur drops a glob of massage oil on his chest, starting to rub it in with round movements of his paws. “Bitch, wouldn’t you?” he huffs. “Me and Crispin were clear from day one that we’d do whatever to go forward as a unit, yet neither would end up taking the fall willingly over the other. You? You didn’t even let Arron see his wife, that’s how much ya cared for him...”



Kenneth shushes Eddie with a flick of his paw. "In the end we knew we weren't married and competition is competition..." he says. "And here's the thing... Cris woulda busted both of your kneecaps clean if it meant he won the prize money."

"Yeah, and?" the lutrine retorts. "We knew from the beginning we both could end dueling against each other, as it happened. But we always made it clear that we wouldn't screw each other up for the sake of the game," he says. "I'm telling ya, when this is over, I'm dyin' to go and ask Arron if he was good with taking one for the team only to let you mend up stuff with Z."

"I'm just sayin', if you really are all that happy to give the title away to another mustie, maybe ya should give it to me!" Kenneth chortles.

"Dream on, Tarzan..." Eddie grins back, putting both paws behind his shaven head as his chest is worked on. "We can all be friends afterwards, but the title's mine. That's just how it is, buddy..."

*"I just know any respectable jury will look past Kenneth's accolades and uncover his fucking hypocrisy. He got here on the shoulders of people like Arron and John, and they deserved that spot in the finals as much as him if not more. Me? I did it all by myself, taking out the biggest threats by my own paws and navigating through a bunch of players who all wanted me out. In my mind, there's no doubt I'm the American Mustelid Alpha."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

\*\*\*

March 20, 2020

12:00 PM

90° F

The long-awaited time arrives for both Eddie and Kenneth to put on their challenge clothes and head out to begin the grueling Gauntlet. They change side by side in the communal locker room, barely giving each other a glance as they slip on their goldenrod-colored T-shirts. Kenneth pulls back his long hair and ties them into his usual man bun, while the lutrine takes extra care into loosening up his thighs and quads.

*"So, this is it. Fifteen years of training, a number of setbacks and complications, yet I'm here to prove once and for all what I'm made of." \*the lutrine is shown as he swishes his rudder back and forth, provocatively thumping the ground to startle his opponent\* "America's about to see who's the cream of the crop, the #1 mustelid in the country. Let's kick it off."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

*"This is just more than whatever ego trip or man-off there is. Winning this title means a whole new fucking chapter of my life and the ability to not just turn the page, but to write the whole damn book." \*Kenneth jumps on the spot, ignoring the otter as he gets ready to head out\* "This is my big chance, and I'm ready to seize it."*

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

Ludwig is awaiting the finalists in front of a huge pit of thick, brownish mud, a row of obstacles lining along its length. "Eddie, Kenneth... welcome to the Gauntlet," he announces with a flourish as the two mustelids stand in front of him, their eyes brimming with determination and eagerness to begin their task. "Any last words before we dive into the challenge of a lifetime?"

“You mean other than, like... let’s go get me that check?” Kenneth retorts with a grin, Eddie letting out an annoyed huff at his rival’s bravado. “There’s a reason that I have never been in a duel before and managed to reach this stage in the game. My whole journey here had me prepare for this moment and whoever was standing on my side is meant to be the one who truly will know what I’ve grown to be capable of.”

“Does it matter when, like, I’ve taken out every opponent along my path with these paws?” the lutrine retorts, flexing his webbed fingers. “I’ve had four Duels on my way here, big fucking deal. All that tells me is that I know what I’m dealing with, and you’re scared as fuck to go toe-to-toe with me,” he says, arms crossing over his massive chest as he turns to face the badger, their muzzles almost touching. The two rivals face each other for a while, neither daring to break eye contact.

“Eddie, and your own words?” Ludwig asks, having a feeling the retort to Kenneth was only scratching the surface of his insight.

The lutrine takes a step back, then takes off his T-shirt, walking back to the badger with a savage glint in his eyes. “I’ll let the battlefield do the talkin’, Lud...” he growls, briefly turning towards the host before baring his fangs in a menacing snarl towards his rival.

“Hope it don’t stutter...” Kenneth replies back, looking slightly up to lock eyes with the lutrine.

“Well, now that we’ve set the formalities aside, it is time to begin,” the stoat says, interrupting the vicious staredown. “Your first challenge is called Mud Master, and will test your agility, your speed and your ability to mark. This mud obstacle course is made of three low bars you gotta duck and wring your body under, and two tall structures you gotta climb up and over. On the other side of the course, you’ll retrieve five rings, one at a time. Once you’ve collected all five, you need to toss them to land on those suspended hooks,” he says, motioning towards the set of hooks dangling a few feet past the starting point. “First one to catch all five wins the challenge, and earns the first point on his way to the six that’ll win the Gauntlet and the title of American Mustelid Alpha.”

*“First challenge off and it’s a place where we’ll get down, dirty and outright physical...” \*chuckles\**  
*“Kind of giving me a déjà vu of those first days and we both know how those ended.”*  
~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

*“Agility wise, I know I have a leg up on Eddie. This looks easy at a first glance, but five laps of this is gonna be extremely taxing, and you know it’s a lot worse when you got that big of a rudder to drag.”*  
*\*the badger is shown as he takes off his own shirt and shorts, shaking out his limbs in preparation for the challenge\** *“My one goal is getting to the ring toss with enough margin on him that he won’t get a chance to catch up.”*  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

“Alright, y’all ready?” Ludwig raises his paw, both finalists’ steely gazes locked on the obstacle course as they roar their agreement in unison. “The first leg on the final Gauntlet. Ready... GO!”

Eddie and Kenneth spring forward, diving into the mud without hesitation as they throw themselves and writhe their bodies under the first low bar. They’re side to side as they attack the ladder-like tall structure, propping themselves up in a practiced fashion before slinging a leg over the top log and coming down only to jump back down in the mud. As they duck down under the next low bar, the lutrine violently shoulders the badger - making him lose his footing for a second and tumbling backwards in the muck as he slips under the log with practiced ease.

*"IMMEDIATELY Eddie starts with the physical shit and linebacks me into the mud. You know what? Fine, if that entertains you, I'll do the actual challenge and win the important shit."*

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

Without missing a beat, the badger recovers from the slip-up and rolls under the bar. He spits out a mouthful of mud as his front paws grab on the lower ledge of the second ladder structure, pulling himself up on the first rung as Eddie climbs over the top. The lutrine is quick in sliding down the ladder and under the final log, his low blow having earned him a slight lead upon his rival. Without hesitation he walks to his own station and retrieves his first ring, slipping it down his rudder before diving back into the mud pit to make his way back just as Kenneth is coming out to get his own.

*\*waves the tip of his rudder in front of the camera\* "Call it a natural advantage if you may. My hands are free to climb, to maneuver and to completely manhandle badgers..."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

The lutrine is making good use of his military training experience, slipping up and down the obstacles with practiced ease and little care for his safety. His webbed paws provide a solid grip on the ledges despite the mud having deposited there from the start, Kenneth struggling to keep up as he tackles the tall ladders in a rather conservative approach. It doesn't take long before Eddie resurfaces from under the last bar, immediately taking his plastic ring off his tail and tossing it in his basket.

"Eddie's got the first ring!" Ludwig yells. "Kenneth better hurry up if he wants to catch up!"

The badger huffs as he twists his body under the low bar, his features curling in a frown as he takes notice of Eddie passing him by on his way to his second lap. Pulling himself out of the mud pit, he runs towards the basket with a resolute expression and drops his ring without much thought - immediately diving back at the lutrine's pursuit. "And Kenneth ties the score up, he's going for his second ring!" Ludwig announces, making Eddie do a double take in his mind.

*"I know how Eddie performs in these kinds of situations. Since it's not a complete physical, he can't suplex or muscle his way through this. Out of the mud, this is pretty close to my element, so as long as Eddie doesn't even exist in my headspace, I am confident I can take this challenge. If I get my five rings before him, it is done for."*

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

Otter and badger are locked in their effort, working their way through the course and back at a breakneck pace. Eddie maintains his small lead on his rival, never bothering to look back to check his progress, but it's rather clear Kenneth is slowly closing up the gap thanks to his superior agility and lesser body bulk. The lutrine manages to bring back his second ring first, spitting out in disdain as he takes sight of his rival climbing out of the pit and nipping at his heels.

The roofer wastes no time in discarding his second ring as he closes up the gap from the otter, reaching him on the second ladder structure. His eyes glinting with determination, he extends a paw to grab the otter's left ankle as he climbs to the top, but can't keep his hold onto the impossibly slippery limb. Realizing the badger is catching up and getting ready to make a move, Eddie wastes no time in throwing his body over the highest ledge and down in the mud - his tail swishing above Kenneth without a chance for him to grasp it.

*\*groans\* "How am I supposed to reciprocate Eddie's dirty tricks if he's fucking covered in baby oil? You know what - fuck you, dude. One way or another, I'll find a way to get ahead."*

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

“And Eddie got his third ring, but Kenneth’s not far behind!” Ludwig announces, stepping back and forth along the pit to gauge both mustelids’ progress. As he comes back once more the lutrine is breathing with his mouth open, him clearly feeling the struggle of dragging his linebacker body through the thick, sticky mud. Fully aware of his rival’s discomfort, Kenneth doubles down on his offensive as they end up climbing the ladder side-to-side - him managing to get a hold of the lutrine by pulling on the back of his speedo, the yellow garment completely soaked with mud yet pretty much the only non-slippery thing on his body.

“Hey stop that!” Eddie manages to mouth as Kenneth pulls up to his level, still holding onto the otter’s swimsuit - the elastic band stretching in a painful wedgie right below his rudder. The lutrine turns towards the badger in disconcert, his progress halted for a second as his rival lets go of him and jumps on the other side of the ladder - using both hands and feet to climb down in the mud and dive under the next bar.

*“This asshole’s gonna make me pull an Andrew on national TV...” \*huffs\**  
*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

Once in the lead the badger is pretty unbothered, his advantage over the lutrine growing quickly through the fourth lap on the course. Fatigue is starting to take its toll on both competitors, the reckless pace of the beginnings now slowed to a crawl as they keep climbing over and crouching under the obstacles. “Kenneth is back with his fourth ring, Eddie’s just managed to retrieve his fourth ring!” Ludwig recaps, his eyes affixed on the battle before him. “Can he mount a comeback before the badger snatches the first event in the Alpha Gauntlet?”

Sensing his opponent is in trouble, Kenneth dives back into the mud pit and throws himself under the first bar, then climbs on the ladder with newfound ferocity. His eyes cross with Eddie’s as they face each other on the second low bar, the lutrine’s usual cocksure expression now betraying genuine fear behind the mask of mud covering his features.

*“It’s over, Eddie. I’m the one in control for this leg, and can’t wait to do so in the five that follow.”*  
*\*grins\**  
*~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor*

The badger lets out a loud grunt as his leg hooks up and over the ladder’s top ledge, hoisting his body up and hastily jumping down to retrieve his fifth and final ring. Without missing a beat he runs back into the mud, soon making his way to the start and shaking his limbs off in anticipation of his final task. Five hooks dangle a few feet past the shooting line, the badger taking his time to study the distance between himself and the target. “Kenneth has retrieved his five rings, can he hook all five before Eddie reaches the shooting platform?” Ludwig exclaims as the badger tosses his first, missing the row of hanging hooks by a couple feet.

Without much hesitation Kenneth tosses off his remaining rings, the fourth landing straight on the middle hook. “Kenneth got his first!” the host roars, as the badger goes over to retrieve the misplaced rings and runs back to the line for a second toss.

*“Distance is a bitch this time around. Plus this time the targets don’t have Eddie’s resemblance nor a javelin shape, so there ain’t much amusement this time around. But I know I’m hooking mine before Eddie, easily.”*  
*~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor*

All the while, Eddie's finally coming back with his fifth and final ring, utterly exhausted by the ordeal yet dead set on reaching the final section before the badger can land all five targets. The giant otter grunts as he slides under the last bar, getting back on his feet and finally reaching his basket just as the badger is engaged in his second toss. His whole muscular body resembles a statue of mud as he picks up a ring - a sudden cry from the host getting him startled just as he gets ready to make his underhand toss.

"And just as Eddie gets to start throwing, Kenneth sinks his second ring!"

The otter's focused expression gives way to genuine fear as he dares to shoot a glance to his opponent - the badger once more retrieving his rings with the faintest hint of a grin crossing his muddy features. With a sigh he begins tossing his own rings, immediately landing one on the first hook from the left. His joy is cut short, though, as Kenneth is quickly picking up on the throwing motion - swiftly nailing a third ring as he lines up for yet another toss.

"Kenneth with his third ring, two more to go!" Ludwig calls out, moving back and forth between the two contenders. "And Eddie has two... no, three!" he yells as the lutrine manages to tie up the count with his opponent - two of his blind tosses nailing the hooks due to both skill and utter desperation. "It's a race to the finish now!"

*"C'mon. I got the code cracked now, you're just lucking out. This'll be done in a snap."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

With everything on the line, the two mustelids take time on each throw - striving to make each count as they try to catch the remaining hooks. Eddie manages to land a near perfect toss, the ring bouncing off the hook and back into the mud much to his dismay. Seconds later, Kenneth mimics the otter's motions - his ring flying through the air in a graceful arc before landing straight on its peg. The lutrine nearly dives into the mud to recover his rings, hastily dashing to the throwing line just as the badger gets ready to make another toss.

"Kenneth, for the win!" Ludwig yells as Eddie stops in his motions, his gaze turning towards his rival. The badger closes his left eye, his arms outstretched down his body as he clutches his one remaining ring, preparing for an underhand toss. Without much thought he lets it fly, nodding triumphantly as soon as it leaves his paws - the ring catching the hook one second later with a satisfying clink.

"AND KENNETH WINS THE FIRST LEG!" Ludwig shouts as he sounds the air horn in his paws. The badger throws his paws in the air and lets out a roar in Eddie's direction, his rival looking over in a dejected way and crossing arms over his muddied chest, unable to muster a reply.

*"THAT'S HOW YOU FUCKING.... YEAH!" \*fistpumps\* "Step one is done, and I bet Eddie's feelin' pretty fucking salty now. It'll work wonders for me now!"*

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

"Kenneth, you scored one point up," Ludwig states. "Think'll carry on for the rest of the Gauntlet?"

"Man, Lud..." the badger can't help but grin in approval. "This is just a massive, massive moral boost," he beams, slightly panting after the strenuous effort. "I'm so fucking pumped, man... This is the best start I could fucking hope for. I promise it'll carry on."

The host turns towards the dejected lutrine. "What about you, Eddie?" he asks. "You've been talking a big game ever since you got down to the final two. Is this loss, like, the first little dent in your armor?"

"No fucking way it is," the lutrine spits. "Imma leave the scraps to this guy, but stay assured I'll get him good before the Gauntlet's over. The war has just started, buddy," he says, shooting the badger a look full of disdain.

*"Kid, if you want to gloat over getting one of the child's games as a win, go ahead. The taller you carry yourself, the worse the fall will be once I topple you over in the real strength feats."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

"Whatever it is, we're done with our first event, but we still got five challenges to go from here," the stoat points out, shooting a wicked grin at the two muddied, battered mustelids. "I suggest you go get cleaned up and rest a bit before the next challenge, because you'll need every single ounce of strength in your body to complete this one. Stakes have never been this high, so give it your all..."

"Will do," Eddie shoots back with a spiteful nod, breaking ranks with the badger before Ludwig can wave him off.

*"If I had it against Kenneth before this challenge, I'm downright seething now. Dude has poked one hell of a beehive, and man... he's soon gonna be nursing the stings all over." \*the otter flinches as he steps through a high-pressure water jet, washing the thick mud off his body in a matter of seconds\**

*"By all means, let him waste all his energies in the first event. Plenty more to come, and by the time this is over, I know he'll have a lesson coming in both experience and stamina."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

\*\*\*

4:00 PM

4 hours since the beginning of the Gauntlet

Sun is beating over the ground as Eddie and Kenneth make their way to the open field, fully recharged and dressed in their golden and black training garments. Ludwig is awaiting them in front of two massive Ford pick-up trucks, tethered through a long rope to a sturdy, wooden post.

"Eddie, Kenneth, welcome to the second event of the Alpha Gauntlet," the host announces. "This challenge is called Don't Truck With Me, and will test your strength, tenacity and stamina like nothing before," he says, both mustelids nodding in agreement as they glare at the two vehicles. "On my go, you'll roll each of those steel barrels across this 100-foot field, and load them on the back of your respective Ford F-150. Once you got all four stacked by, you'll have to put on the harness that's connected to the rope in front of your truck..." he continues, pointing to the set-up and instructing them on how to put it on and strap it tight. "Then, you'll have to pull your F-150 across the field, helping yourself by pulling on the rope. First one to cross the finish line with both paws wins the challenge, and the second point at stake in the Alpha Gauntlet."

"Man, I've seen this shit on TV all the time..." Kenneth comments, amusedly looking over the giant trucks.

"Well you get to do that today," Ludwig nods. "And I warn ya both, those trucks are HEAVY. We're talking about four thousand pounds, so yeah..." he says. "This is no everyday challenge, and as such, it requires a special reward. Who wins the truck pull gets to keep the F-150 and bring it home, no matter the result of the Gauntlet or whatever happens from now on," he chuckles, amused at the two mustelids' shocked look. "How do you feel about it?"

Both Eddie and Kenneth gasp. "You shittin' me, Ludwig..." the lutrine shakes his head.

*"Now it's fucking personal, I want that damn truck!" \*laughs\* "Glad to see I got some extra incentive to really tackle this shit now, and I'm sure shorty here won't even be able to start it up!"*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

*"This is juicy. And the last thing I need for my victory to be perfect is a way to ride towards the sunset in style, and bet your ass I got a solution for that!"*

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

The stoat makes his way around one of the two vehicles, softly patting its side. "We're talking a relentlessly tough, high-strength, military-grade, aluminum-alloy body and torture-tested steel frame with new tech that'll help you work smarter and harder, as well as giving you that Alpha boost you need in your everyday life," he says. "This is definitely a truck worth playing for, so give it all you got and make it count..."

Both mustelids nod, soon stepping out to warm up their muscles and loosening up their limbs before taking position in front of their respective truck - Eddie picking the red one after a quick chat with Kenneth, the roofer content to settle with the black one on the left of the field. They both inspect the back of their vehicles, trying to gauge the best way to stack the barrels within the confines of its sizable bed. The lutrine decides to take off his shirt, while the badger resolves to compete in his black compression tank top.

Eventually, both competitors get in position behind the line, bending forward in a running stance as they wait for the stoat to call the start of the challenge. "For the second point and a new Ford truck in your garage. Eddie, Kenneth... get set..." Ludwig raises his paw, a pause lingering in the air. "GO!"

Otter and badger rush forward, covering the whole field in seconds before picking up the first barrel from their stack and starting to roll it back. Kenneth takes little time to jump ahead, his muscles considerably less strained than Eddie's after their early effort on the mud obstacle course. In no time he's back at the start, easily lifting his first barrel off the ground and loading it onto the back of his truck before running through for his second.

*\*brushes shoulder\* "Call me a Crossfit nut again, I'll show ya." \*grins widely\* "Just like the wheel flipping, this kinda task plays amazingly to my skills. I know how to shave off time and be effective in rolling it through."*

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

"Kenneth's building a good lead over Eddie!" Ludwig announces, as the lutrine effortlessly hoists his first barrel onto the truck's open tailgate and roughly pushes it forward. Meanwhile, the roofer is powering through the challenge like a machine, already coming back with his second and rolling it across the field with strong, steady pushes of his upper arms as Eddie storms across the field in a bid to catch up.

Kenneth's lead stretches as the two competitors keep running back and forth, taking time to load the barrels onto the back of their respective F-150s once they've brought them back. By the time he's coming back with his fourth and last barrel, the badger has managed to gain almost a full lap over the lutrine - him pushing loose hair off his face with a flick of his neck before inspecting the load's positioning and shutting the tailgate close. Satisfied with his job, he moves to the front of the vehicle and quickly throws his harness on - fastening the straps around his waist as the host had instructed before, his eyes fully focused as he notices his rival getting around to collect his fourth and last barrel. "And Kenneth's ready to pull - he got a sizable lead on Eddie, can he bring it home?"

*"All I got in my mind is 'hurry the fuck up!', I can't let this bitch run away with this Gauntlet, and I know once I get my barrels on that truck, it's done for." \*the otter throws the last barrel on the ground and starts rolling it in earnest\* "I got the brute force to annihilate you, Ken..."*  
~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

The badger leans against his harness, grabbing the rope with both gloved paws and starting to pull forward with all his might. He lets out a loud grunt as his body leans forward at an impossible angle, feet taking hold on the terrain and slowly beginning to inch forward. The camera hovers onto the black F-150's front tires, imperceptibly starting to move under the brunt of the badger's pull.

*"Have I seen this before? Yes. Have I done the really light, in-door version of this? Once or twice. Does that make this any easier?" \*the badger is shown struggling, trying to pull his truck as his veins bulge and his back spasms\* "Not really, no. Holy shit, guys..."*  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

"Guys... this is not a sprint, this is a marathon," Ludwig comments, looking in awe as Kenneth starts to build a good momentum - putting one foot in front of the other at a solid, steady pace while pulling on the rope with strong tugs of his biceps. He loses his grip on the rope for a second, picking himself off the ground with his left paw before resuming his effort. "The barrel section has turned into quite a blow out, Eddie needs to pick it up in the pull if he wants to win this!"

"Well, I still hauled ass!" Eddie yells, placing his last barrel on the trunk of his car and confidently shutting the tailgate before walking to the front and throwing on his own harness. His muscular, linebacker-sculpted body leans forward and his powerful thighs begin pushing as he starts to drag his truck, bent almost on all fours like a feral otter out of hell. His grunts come in sync with every pull on the rope, vascular biceps bulging with effort as he pours every drop of energy in his bid to reach the badger.

*"Sorry, Ed. But you comin' right after the ambulance on this race. You just way too behind, dude."*  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

It doesn't take long for both competitors to be beaten into a frenzy, lactic acid starting to course through their chests, legs and lungs due to the prolonged effort. Kenneth's leading by a few feet, but he's the first to slow down his motions - starting to wobble left and right as the combined momentum of his feet pushing forward starts to come disjointed. The lutrine pushes forward, heart rate peaking and sweat cascading down his front and back through the extreme exertion. An aerial shot displays the red truck starting to imperceptibly inch close to the black one, both mustelids having made great progress on the pull but still halfway through the course.

*"I briefly lift my head up and man... that finish line looks so fucking distant." \*the giant otter grunts loudly, his chest filling and emptying as he strains against his harness\* "My calves feel like they gonna explode, but I know I need to keep this momentum going because if I stop midway, I'm done"*



for.”

~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

*“My vision’s getting a bit blurry, but I try to keep steady on the rope and maintain that pace.” \*the badger’s features contract in a grimace\* “I want to win this, I need to win this. Eddie’s gonna go for a Hail Mary, but I ain’t in the mood to give up. Dude, I’m kicking your tail in a strongfur event, it ain’t getting much more Alpha than this.”*

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

The mustelid’s steady progress has slowed into a crawl, both badger and otter struggling to put their feet forward as every atom of strength in their bodies is fighting and willing to move the powerful vehicles. They’re almost side to side, Kenneth a couple steps ahead of Eddie, both leaning nearly flat on the ground - powerful necks and shoulders straining with inhuman effort as they charge forward on mere willpower.

The eerie silence of the afternoon is broken only by the grunts of the two beasts, locked into the pull like two draft horses. Even Ludwig goes silent, marveling at the contestants’ resolve as they keep moving forward - the two trucks steadily rolling behind them along the earthy terrain, pushed by the two mustelids’ brute force.

*“I can sense Eddie inching closer and closer, but I’m doing all I can not to mind that.” \*the badger inches forward with a newfound composure, nearly horizontal as he pulls on the rope\* “My entire universe is a rope and this goddamn truck I need to pull for a couple more feet. This is my dream, this is all I’ve ever envisioned being and growing into. This is my chance to prove myself and I ain’t gonna give up on it.”*

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

It’s neck and neck as Eddie and Kenneth near the finish line, the roofer still ahead by about a foot despite having squandered most of his lead to his opponent. The lutrine briefly turns towards the badger, his focus suddenly breaking as he realizes he’s still behind. With a painful growl, he leans forward in desperation and doubles down on his push - yet his calves don’t seem to be responding, aimlessly trying to climb forward but not making any progress.

All the while, Kenneth keeps up his slow, steady push, focusing on his low centre of gravity as his opponent strains to get into sixth gear. With a heavy sigh, the roofer manages to drag his right paw past the white line painted on the ground, then his left. A second later, the familiar sound of the air horn pierces the air - signaling his win in the Gauntlet’s second challenge and a second point in his pocket.

“AND KENNETH’S UP BY TWO!” Ludwig throws his hands up as the badger exhaustedly drops to the ground, heavily breathing and trying to overcome the gigantic ordeal he just endured. All the while, Eddie collapses forward in defeat, his legs giving up on him as soon as the challenge is settled.

*“This is really happening...” \*covers mouth with his paws\* “My dream’s so close now, I feel the title at my reach more than ever and LIKE HELL I will let it go at this moment. This Gauntlet is mine.”*

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

It takes a while before any of the two is able get back on his feet, the production staffers coming in with some sugar dextrose to get them to replenish their ATP stores and hydration levels. Kenneth greedily gulps on the sweet treat, his chest and thigh still contracting from the effort as he’s forced to sit down with his leg straight to take the blood and lactic acid out of his tired muscles. The lutrine

isn't faring much better, his right leg taken over by a sudden cramp with the intensity of a stab as soon as he lets go of the rope - forcing him to crouch in a fetal position as his stomach contracts and revolts from the lactate build-up.

*"Motherfucker..." \*the otter immediately goes to nurse his aching thigh, his back laying against the ground\* "I thought I'd seen and done it all, but man... this is the closest I've ever been to flat out begging for mercy. I left all I had on that field, and I almost had him. Fucking almost."  
~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

Eventually, the two competitors can stand before Ludwig. "Kenneth, you won the second event in the Alpha Gauntlet," he announces, the badger openly beaming at him. "You also win a brand new Ford F-150 like the one you just pulled, ripe for you to take home!" the stoat proudly states, jangling a pair of keys in front of the finalists.

Kenneth's smile doesn't break as he walks forward to collect the keys, his steps still a bit wobbly. All the while, Eddie stands by with a murderous scowl across his face, his mind still clearly processing what just went through on the challenge field.

*\*steely gaze\* "I'm pissed that it was so close and he still managed to take it home. This shit should have been mine from the get go. But the night's still young, and I'm sure this path has exhausted everything that went up his favor."  
~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

"We're about five hours in, fellas, and as you both know, there's plenty of challenges still to go through," Ludwig warns both mustelids, Kenneth slightly grimacing at the thought. "Go rest up and replenish your energies, 'cause your mental strength is gonna be put to the test real soon." The two competitors nod, visibly struggling with fatigue as they walk away from the field and back towards the Burrow.

*"I'm on the verge of passing out, but shit... I'm up 2-0 against fucking Eddie Caprio and I get to bring home a killer truck." \*proudly chuckles as he walks away\* "It doesn't get any better than this, and I'm gonna pull out every trick in the book to make sure it stays this way."  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor*

*\*scoffs at the camera, visibly angry\* "It's not over yet, Geib. I'm going to make sure you'd want to ride that new truck off a cliff when I'm done with you."  
~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

\*\*\*

The mood in the Burrow is distinctly sour as Eddie and Kenneth return home, too tired after the grueling challenge to interact or even be civil around each other. The otter throws himself onto the big couch without even showering, lying with his eyes closed and a permanent scowl on his lutrine features. All the while, Kenneth takes the chance to freshen up, gingerly making his way into the kitchen, serving himself a tin of white yogurt with some added honey to load on sugar and carbs. "This will do..." he mouths, pouring himself a generous serving.

*"No matter how taxing the first two challenges have been, I feel like I'm brimming with energy. Giving Eddie this one-two punch is something I've wanted bad, but as much as I've always felt I got the edge on the otter, I'm not stupid to believe he's an easy kill." \*the badger casually sits on a chair, scooping a spoonful of yogurt and gulping it down\* "I must stay focused on making it three-zip. Right*

*now Big Ed's destroyed..." \*the camera pans on the lutrine, still splayed on the couch in his gym shorts and unresponsive\* "...but not defeated."*

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

While the badger paces around the living room - confidently grinning as he downs half a bottle of an isotonic sports drink - Eddie's still lying face-up, not moving a single muscle, doing his best to ignore the badger's demeanor.

*\*sighs heavily\* "This is legit the last place I want to be in."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

Eventually Kenneth walks upstairs, striving to take a bit of a rest in his own bed. All the while, the otter keeps up his meditative state, his barrel-like chest rising and falling with each breath in a rhythmic motion.

*"The Gauntlet is not going according to plans. Most of these events are ending up stupidly close, but as it is, you don't get shit for getting second place by a whisker." \*frowns\* "This dude's gone on like, the fucking biggest lucky break there is. I need to bounce back, and my better conditioning will do the rest tomorrow."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

Eventually Eddie breaks from his trance, slowly getting up from the couch and padding towards the kitchen to serve himself a tuna salad sandwich and some iced tea. He then takes the same chair where Kenneth was a few minutes before, sitting down and taking inspection of his hands and feet for any damage he might have suffered in the first two events.

*\*the badger takes deep breaths, trying to relax\* "I don't think Eddie's really in a talking mood. No skin off my back, tho..."*

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

*"By all means, let the badger gloat. Let him believe he's got it in the pocket." \*the otter finishes his sandwich in a few greedy bites\* "This otter's not done, not now, not ever."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

\*\*\*

7:30 PM

*7 hours, 30 minutes since the beginning of the Gauntlet*

The sun has almost fully set as Kenneth and Eddie walk out, Ludwig waiting for them both amidst a path marked by torches. "Guys, welcome to the third event of the Alpha Gauntlet," he says, both mustelids nodding along. "How you liking the competition so far?"

"So far, so good, boss..." Kenneth snickers, oblivious of the otter's evident disdain, his side eye piercing through the badger. "Ready for whatever's up next."

"Well, I suppose Eddie's too," the stoat chuckles, not expecting a response from the highly focused Navy veteran. "As I announced before, the next challenge will be a battle of willpower and mental strength. You're up for Water Prison." At the mention of the word 'water', Eddie's expression gradually changes to that of a grin.

"You will be lying on your back in a chamber slowly filling with water, with your head under a glass plate with a blowhole in the middle. As the chambers fill up, it'll be more and more difficult for you to breathe - as you'll be pushed against the blowhole first, then fully cut off from getting air," the host says, Kenneth's paws unwittingly covering his mouth. "Who manages to stay in the longest without dropping out wins the third point in your Alpha Gauntlet quest. And if that ain't enough, there's another twist in store..."

"What kinda electric eel you releasing in?" Eddie asks, sarcasm in his voice.

The host can't help but snicker. "Nothing like that," he chuckles at the lutrine. "But you will not learn of this challenge's result. Your chambers will be separate and you won't be aware of the other's progress, before, during or after the challenge," he says. "You'll compete at the same time, but you won't see each other as soon as you head out. And you won't get to know for sure who got this until the winner is revealed."

*"Wow. This definitely changes things." \*the badger is shown nodding at Ludwig's words\* "It means that whoever takes this one challenge, he won't be like... able to go around and brag about it until the next begins."*

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

*"Oh, Kenneth..." \*the camera shows the badger's poker face\* "...get ready for a pretty long sit and wait, my man..." \*chuckles\**

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

"So before we begin, any of you got any questions?" the stoat asks.

"Yup," Eddie nods with a smirk. "What's the point of keeping it secret if we already know who's taking this?"

Kenneth rolls his eyes, turning towards the lutrine in a provocative stance. "Sure, sure..." he hisses.

"Guys, be serious," Ludwig warns the two mustelids. "I have to stress, obviously there's a number of failsafes in place in order to ensure your safety - but as you know, it all begins and ends here," he says, touching his left temple. "Give it all you got, but be mindful of your limits. We don't want to evacuate anyone at this stage of the game, and as easy it is to take yourself out from under that plate, be sure to alert if anything wrong goes and you need help. Understood?" Both contestants nod in agreement. "Well, now that it's cleared, let's head out and do this..."

*"The big difference, obviously, is that one of us was birthed for this..." \*shakes head\* "But if there's something I can be, is stubborn. And the scene in my head of me getting the scores 3-0 will keep me going for as long as I can, lutrine or not. Game on."*

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

The camera hovers on one of the rectangular chambers, lit only by the light of the torches reflecting in the few inches of water already poured in. Clad into his usual speedos, Eddie lowers himself into the diminutive space - shifting his rudder to the side as he wriggles his upper body under the glass plate. In a separate location, Kenneth's body curls up in a shiver at the contact with the cold water as he sets into position, paws tightly clutching on the side of the chamber.

Suddenly, as the two contestants are locked in and facing upwards, a small pipe begins trickling water into the diminutive enclosure - both mustelids jolting in discomfort as they realize their challenge has started.

“Your timer starts... NOW!” Ludwig signals the two finalists via a megaphone.

Initially it’s a game of waiting, the cold water creeping around ears and starting to block the mustelids’ senses - adding to the growing pressure affecting them both, despite the challenge having just begun. Mindful of his past experience in the Navy, Eddie tries to steady his breathing and focus on his lungs slowly filling and emptying with air - Kenneth looking decidedly more anxious, fidgeting under the plate as his thighs contract and tremble from the cold.

*“This is basically my worst nightmare turned into a Gauntlet challenge. The cold water, fuck... I’m literally on the verge of losing it, and the really challenging part is yet to come.” \*the badger repositions under the glass, his long hair floating by within the restrictive chamber\* “But I don’t want to show I’m a quitter. I want to give Eddie a real fight, and who knows what might happen. This could be a quarter million dollar challenge, you know?”*

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

*“There’s one specific drill in the SEALs training process that’s called surf torture, where you basically have to lie on your back, feet toward the shore and tops of our heads facing out to sea while the waves of the ocean wash in.” \*chuckles between himself\* “You’re cold, you’re freezing to death, you got sand pouring into literally every orifice of your body. Sitting in an empty tank that’s slowly filling up with... let’s say lukewarm water? Piece of cake.”*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

It doesn’t take long before the two contestants are forced to push their snouts against the round hole in the glass plate, the opening just big enough to make sure they can breathe through. Eddie coughs a little as he gulps down some water together with the air, pulling himself down a little before pushing his muzzle forward as far as it would go. Feeling the water level about to creep over the plate, he tries to relax his body and focus on taking in as much air as he can - fully knowing it’ll soon be down to a matter of himself against his lungs.

*“Any little mistake, any drop in concentration might do you in and force you to panic way, way before you are done. I know I can make it a few minutes in full apnea, so I’m like... let’s try and give it a good go for old time’s sake.” \*rubs his chin\* “I’ll be damned if I let a random roofer dude defeat me at something I was literally trained for.”*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

*“Now that like, the water’s standing at the surface level and you can feel you’re literally MOMENTS from going under... it’s pretty hard to stay calm.” \*the badger keeps fidgeting underwater, his muzzle gasping for air through the hole in the plate\* “This is literally Eddie’s bread and butter. I probably could stay down here until I passed out and he’d still be going. But the thought of me making him pay? Keeps me right here.”*

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

The camera hovers above Eddie’s chamber, then down at water level as it rises just above his muzzle - the surface being completely still for a second, before it gets broken by a few bubbles as the lutrine exhales his first breath.

*"I'm trying to pull myself a little lower, to make sure I can literally get out a second after I'm truly done."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

Inside the other chamber, Kenneth coughs and gurgles - his paws tightly clenching on the side of the plate, him simply refusing to give up on his instincts and quit.

*"I can literally feel the water seeping through my nose. I'm literally kicking myself mentally, forcing myself to think, like... 'one more second, one more second and I win this'."*

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

The camera switches between the two at an ever growing pace, images blurring in the light of the torches and streams of bubbles floating through - until both Eddie and Kenneth pull themselves out and sit down, heavily panting, within the confines of their respective pool. They look around, eyes slightly dazed, struggling to get any hint of how well they've fared.

Eventually, once some time has passed, production instructs them to come out of the water, both immediately wrapping themselves in huge towels. The lutrine nods confidently as he walks out, his wet fur plastered against his body in the crisp air of the Floridian night. On the other side of the challenge area Kenneth does the same, psyching himself up as he feels the air flowing back into his deprived lungs.

"This has been challenge three of six..." Ludwig nods, motioning the finalists towards the Burrow as they meet up again in front of him. "I know it's been a constant this far, but... make sure to get as much rest as you can, because the Gauntlet's still young."

*"While we can't gauge time for each, I feel I naturally destroyed this leg. This feeling of rebounding just motivates me to go the extra mile now. I want to win this, and more importantly, I want to let Kenneth have it."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

\*\*\*

"Still a long way to go..." Kenneth comments indirectly to Eddie, the giant otter only huffing in response.

*"Even with the added mystery, there's no way that Kenneth won over me in the apnea challenge. And..." \*rubs his chin with his paw\* "Fellow SEALs, no need to worry, I still pass the two-minutes with no air bubbles test." \*chuckles\* "But even with that above him, I need to rest and gear up as if I'm 3 to 0 on this marathon. I know I need to completely turn the tables."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

Both mustelids rummage through the kitchen for water or food, a mix of disdain and exhaustion embedded deep in their beings. Despite wanting nothing to do with each other, both can't help but poke around and dish a taunt or three to their opponent as they sit across the main table to refuel after the end of the Gauntlet's first day.

Eddie chuckles, leaning forward towards the badger. "And tell me, Kenny... how long before you threw in the towel down there? Five minutes?"

"Then it would be a tie, and I know I went for more than that..." Kenneth replies with bravado.

"You wish, dude..." the lutrine doesn't relent, scoffing at his opponent as he takes a bite of the last remaining rice cake. "Least you got to go fully under before freaking out?" he says as he ruffles the badger's hair in a playful taunt.

"Hey, paws off!" Kenneth exclaims, staring at Eddie as he reflexively slaps the otter's hand.

"Aw, can't you take a little ribbing?" the Navy veteran responds, mockingly offended. "I'm just saying... you better stock up on those proteins, 'cause ya got a whole other otter coming at ya tomorrow," he says, leaning uncomfortably close to the badger's space. "You feel it, buddy?"

"I feel your ass violating personal space, like ya always do..." Kenneth sneers, getting up from the table and walking away to eat his portions in peace.

The giant otter shrugs in his shoulders. "Well then..." he says, finishing his cake in a couple bites and throwing the dirty plates and crumbs in the sink before heading upstairs. Back in his room, he quickly disrobes to his underwear - taking extra time to change a few finger patches before plopping down on his bed and immediately falling asleep, without even bothering to turn off the ambient lights.

*"Based on this last challenge, I feel things could take a turn for the worse at any second and throw me 12 Eddie-conditioned challenges in a row or some shit." \*Kenneth is shown laying on his bed, on top of the covers, dozing off pretty quickly\* "I might be up, but my guard can't be dropped at any second... I better sleep with one eye open even." \*laughs\**  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

3:00 AM

15 hours since the beginning of the Gauntlet

Some mere hours pass across the night, the two finalists trying to recover all the sleep they can. Or planned to, until it sounded off.

The fire alarm rings hard, resonating across the entire Burrow - both badger and otter springing from their beds in a panic, adrenaline rushing through their bodies. Kenneth runs out of his room, only clad in a pair of gym shorts, looking left and right for any sign of distress only to be met by the lutrine coming out of his own sleeping quarters.

"What the fuck is going on?" Eddie yells at the stunned badger.

"You tell me!" Kenneth screams back over the piercing sound of the alarm, looking around.

"KENNETH! EDDIE! Exit the premises as soon as possible!" a voice from a megaphone breaks the finalists' attention - both quickly sprinting towards the big entrance, clad in the scant garments they had on at that moment.

*"I've no idea what's going on. Kenneth, did you leave the oven on or what the fuck?" \*the otter runs behind the badger down the stairs\**  
~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

*"I didn't even manage through sleep well for a fucking second..." \*groans\* "Are we gonna go to Challenge four now?"*

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

"Hello, guys," Ludwig welcomes the two finalists as they stand in front of him, adrenaline still rushing through their bodies after the scare. "Had a good night's sleep?"

"I fucking wish!" Kenneth exclaims.

"What the hell's going on, Lud? Explain me!" Eddie asks, looking over his surroundings if he could find anything distinct.

Ludwig smirks, amused at the contestants' bewilderment. "Well, the Gauntlet doesn't stop and wait for anybody..." he grins. "It's 3:00 AM, and we're about to move to the fourth leg in the competition. Time for you to put your Mind Over Matter."

*"Ludwig..." \*the badger rubs his eyes, sighing\* "...did you just wake us up at three in the morning to go do our fucking SATs or what?"*

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

"As the name suggests, you'll have to use your wits in order to conquer your fourth Gauntlet challenge. You'll be taken to the hangar and face a ticking time bomb connected to a puzzle you need to solve as quickly as possible before it explodes. You'll be given sixteen codes you'll have to scan, one by one, into a digital reader. Every time you put in the code, you'll be asked a question that you'll have to answer correctly through the keyboard to retrieve a puzzle piece. The theme could be anything, but for your sakes... hope you've been paying attention all the way to here," he grins, both mustelids hanging to his every word. "Once you solve the questions and get your puzzle pieces, you'll need to figure out how it must be assembled. The first to complete the task wins the point."

*"So it is the smarts portion of the Gauntlet..." \*huffs\* "As confident as I am that Kenneth's head is full of wallpaper paste, I need to be as sharp as I am this early and with this little sleep. But I guess the business doesn't stop anytime soon!"*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

"Oh, one more thing... Those bombs are not just for show. Whoever takes this challenge automatically sets off his opponent's," Ludwig chuckles, to the collective jaw drop of both Eddie and Kenneth. "So yeah, you'll know who wins one way or the other..."

Even the usually stoic lutrine takes a big gulp. "Ludwig... when you say 'bomb', you mean..."

"Oh, you'll see what I mean when you get there," the stoat rebukes. "Now go get geared up with your finalist's clothes, head out to the hangar, and we'll get started..."

\*\*\*

Otter and badger are facing each other, wearing protective glasses as well as their golden-and-black challenge gear. In front of each mustelid, a menacing, round bomb-shaped structure with their name printed on stands before the table where they're asked to assemble the puzzle. Right behind them, the screen of the digital reader they need to scan their codes into is gently pulsating with the show's



logo. "Okay, guys, you ready to do this?" Ludwig asks rhetorically, both mustelids nodding in response. "Under your desk, you'll find the stack of sixteen codes you'll have to return to the machine to get access to each question. In order to unlock the corresponding piece, you have to type in the correct answer," he reminds the contestants. "Remember, there's only one way to assemble the pieces, and you'll have to figure it out by yourself once you got all of them. All clear?"

*"It's time to have your path blow up on your face, Eddie..." \*chuckles manically\**  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

"Eddie, Kenneth, you ready?" Ludwig pauses for a second. "GO!"

The two mustelids immediately reach out for the codes, undoing the adhesive wrap keeping them together before turning to the machine to scan the first. Eddie anxiously looks over as the screen flickers from the AMA logo to the first question.

"Who has been team captain the most times...?" the lutrine reads out loud. "Easy as pie..." he smirks, his lutrine fingers immediately going to type 'Greasy Z' on the on-screen keyboard. A second later, the first piece falls through the output device - a plastic square with Chayne's cast picture plastered on it.

*"So this is all about former rivals?" \*the otter places his piece where he intends to pile them\* "I feel I got about 90% of this as long as it ain't like... at what time did John Blake shit in the morning every day or something like that." \*laughs\* "Down to the memory lane it is."*  
~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman

"How many loved ones were parents?" Kenneth mutters to himself. "There was Andrew and... fuck who else?" the badger scratches his head. "Z had his buddy, Eddie had... fuck, it has to be just Andrew," he sighs, pressing the '1' key with the tip of his claw. Immediately, the first piece falls into his lap - the badger not even caring to look at it as he sets it on the table and goes to scan the next code into the machine.

*"See, I would have kept all tabs memorized if I was cast on Big Brother instead!" \*shakes his head\**  
*"Now it's a matter of he-said, she-said, and I'm hoping I have enough questions right for it."*  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

Not all of the questions are equally easy. "From which states the top six hails from?" the otter reads. "There's just five spots there, it's the two Texans," he immediately guesses. "Ken's from Pennsylvania, John from Arizona, Arron... shit... he was named top firefighter where, he never shut up about it... You better not fuck me up from beyond, honey," he snarks, selecting 'Michigan' as the last state. Immediately the screen flickers to red, signaling the miss. "One minute penalty lock, return to the question after you finish the rest'? Fuck!" Eddie spits out, immediately moving to the next code in line.

"How many eyeballs did you have to eat in the Wolf It Down challenge?" Kenneth presses his temples trying to think. "I've been trying to forget that one for ages... Pretty sure it was... five?"

*"It's getting down to the most minute detail..." \*flashback of Ludwig instructing the top seven to eat six eyeballs, then camera focusing on Kenneth inputting his answer of five\* "So I best make sure to remember everything right..."*  
~Kenneth, 24, American Badger, Roofer/CrossFit Instructor

The badger looks incredulous at the flashing red screen the machine offered. "Now I'm locked out of shit?" He growls in disapproval, pacing back and forth between the table and the machine, waiting for his minute to burn out.

*\*the otter looks over his pieces, trying to make sense of the final puzzle\* "I'm not only trying to pick up the pieces, but I'm already trying to think ahead and make up my mind on what I oughta do next. Any second I can spend figuring this shit out is time I can use to make sure Kenneth loses."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

The challenge goes on as the finalists collect more and more pieces, adding to their growing stakes as they go. Ludwig checks progress as he walks from side to side, cautious not to distract them as he closely inspects how many pieces are left on each side.

"How many mustelids in the top 24 did not complete the obstacle course? It was four, easy..." Eddie says, collecting the piece and tossing it where his rest are.

"What is the profession of the third placed mustelid? Roadie, come on Drew, come ON Drew!" Kenneth fistpumps at the correct answer.

"Who defeated Omar in the first duel? Chayne, of course," Eddie inputs the name, getting a frame with Andrew's face on it as a result.

Eventually, though, both mustelids are left with the toughest questions as well as the few misses they had on their first go - now unable to cut off the waiting time by inputting another code as they're forced to get them right in order to retrieve the remaining pieces they need.

"How many mustelids in the top twelve have at least one tattoo? What?" Kenneth asks incredulously as the machine returns a red screen at his first guess of 'seven', immediately sprinting back to his retrieved set of pieces.

*"I might as well figure out how to build this thing..." \*the badger is shown extending the scant chains he got\* "I'm blanking at seven, but sure there was SOMEONE else..."*

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

Eddie frowns as he looks at the given question. "How many mustelids in the top twelve have at least a college or university degree? The fuck I'm supposed to know that?"

*"There's legit no way to figure this out other than repeated guesses. I know for sure I don't have one and Crispin does neither, so that's already two off. Does John... he's like 53, so he HAS to have one, right?"*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

The lutrine stands up, cursing under his breath after yet another miss. Before returning to his question machine, he takes a gander at the pieces he has, giving special notice to the frames with the eliminated rivals portrayed on them. "Final puzzle's gotta be the order of axing, I'm sure..."

Meanwhile, Kenneth is still struggling with his questions, five codes remaining unsolved out of the sixteen he started with. The badger goes back to the pictures of the eliminees, using them to help

himself answer whatever's left. "So I got... how many people have a tattoo, how many people have a degree, how many people started at 200 pounds or less and... shit, what the fuck is left?"

*"The more I go, the less of a clear mind I'm managing to keep. We're doing this on like, a couple hours of sleep at most? And I got a lot of things to juggle, the questions I can't remember, the puzzle I still ain't got a fucking idea where to start on, and this damn ticking timebomb ahead of me!"*

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

"Who did.. Andrew give an extra... life to... in the Last One Standing... challenge?" Eddie reads between his breaths, jumping on the spot and inputting his answer. "That bitch... gave it to Arron... I am dead set sure- YES!"

"First challenge ended six to three, I got that..." Kenneth huffs, focusing as he gets to his formerly wrong questions. "Now how many fucking eyes did I eat..."

Eventually, by process of elimination, the two mustelids manage to begin clearing their early misses. "Arron's either from Wisconsin or Minnesota, like... I know for sure it's the Upper Midwest..." the lutrine ponders, inputting 'Wisconsin' and pumping his fist in elation as the machine returns one more piece.

*"I legit keep getting locked out on the tattoo thing and the people who got into this at 200 pounds or less. It ain't an issue until I can switch back and forth between the two, and I know I got the puzzle down if I can get to it before Kenneth does."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

"Least I know this is a frame, and the hooks to the chains are here... now who got what degrees?" Kenneth spits, eyes affixed on the screen where the question read, sighing before answering. "... Can it be seven?" he asks in an insecure guess, his heart dropping a beat as the machine immediately returns the next piece. "YES!"

Eddie gulps, passing his last code needed to collect all the pieces of his puzzle, panting between the back-and-forth runs to the pile. "200 or less... 200 or... less... I'm fucking stupid... John's bulky at shit, but small, he gotta be the one I'm missing, come on..." he ponders, running the math in his head and coming back with a new guess. "It legit can't be more than seven, it gotta be seven..." he says, jumping on the spot with a gleeful roar as the machine lights up and returns the very last piece.

*\*the badger shakes a fist as he finally gets the eyeball question right, immediately moving to his last one\* "I'm still stumped on those darn tattoos. I got me, Ed, Andy, Arron, Will, Crispin, Big Mike and J.J., which makes it eight and is still wrong." \*grunts\* "I'm legit starting to wonder if Z got something hidden up on his ass or something..."*

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

"I'll be damned if it's more than nine..." Kenneth huffs, inputting the digit and huffing in satisfaction as the last piece falls through the opening. He immediately moves to the table and starts to sort the sixteen pieces at a feverish pace - ten pictures of the eliminated mustelids, four frame pieces and two sets of chain rings to hook the pieces together.

Meanwhile, Eddie quickly sets his frame up, hooking the chains inside of the apparatus. "So it's Omar, J.J., Mike, Cris..." he quickly puts in order the eliminated mustelids, faintly grinning as every piece seems to be fitting perfectly in the allotted slot. "I should know, I put most of these fuckers there by myself..."

On the other side of the table, Kenneth has managed to get down the basic structure of the puzzle, but is still wondering what to do with the frames representing his former opponents. By trial and error, he manages to get Omar in the first slot at the left, immediately realizing what he's asked to do. "Damn, it's the order of elimination..." he says under his breath, immediately confirming his suspicions as J.J.'s piece fits like a glove into the second slot. "Okay, now I got to--"

**\*BANG\***

As soon as Eddie fits in the puzzle within the inner frame in the table, a loud explosion echoes through the hangar and a jet of bright red paint splatters out of Kenneth's bomb, dousing his form entirely as he tries to regain his composure. "AND EDDIE WINS THE FOURTH CHALLENGE!" Ludwig exclaims, the lutrine letting out a satisfied roar as he takes in the sight of his rival completely covered in the red liquid.

*"Holy fuck, I made it!" \*the lutrine grins in elation\* "This challenge sorta tied up with my military roots, and I'm all too glad that I managed to prove my mental edge over the badger." \*grins widely\* "I don't think I can go back to bed now, my heart's fucking pumping and I just wanna move on to the next task. Kenny beware, 'cause I'm back into this for good!"*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

Eddie can't help to suppress his chuckles as he sees the badger smothered in the bright tint. "Z would be proud, eh?" he snarks, Kenneth not even attempting to retort as the paint drips off his front.

*"I'm freaking pissed right now. Being roused at 3 AM only to get... fucking humiliated by this otter?" \*the badger storms a few steps off, genuinely annoyed by the whole situation, before rejoining the ranks in front of Ludwig as soon as he's managed to wipe his face\* "Whatever, buddy. Have your little-ass gloat, cuz a faceful of paint's the least I'm willing to take for a quarter million."*

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

Ludwig chuckles. "I will say, it is a bit ironic that the demolisher defeated the construction guy in this puzzle challenge, but so's the way..." he nods to the two mustelids standing before him, Eddie puffing his chest while Kenneth tries his best to look stoic despite his ruined clothes. "Kenneth's still leading two to one, notwithstanding the results of Water Prison which are still classified. There's still two events to play for before we move to the jury part of the Gauntlet, so be sure to get across the finish line with all you got, aight?" he asks rhetorically. "I'll see you later for challenge five, prep up for that..."

Otter and badger nod in unison, barely looking at each other as they break the ranks and leave the hangar premises.

*"This was not my brightest showing, but I'm not gonna relent. Eddie might think he has this in the bag, but he has not yet known what I'm able to pull off."*

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

*"A rebound has never sounded so sweet, has it? Try to clean up all that mud on your face, but you still gonna be a big disgrace kid while I take over this Gauntlet for good."*

*~Eddie, 32, Giant Otter, Demolition Foreman*

