

Chapter two – Impressions and expressions Days 4-6



That morning, each person's expression reflected what information they've been exposed to.

Rafe, Tom, Ami, Cirie, Yau-Man, Terry, Eliza, Ian and Dreamz wore a calm, satisfied expression.

Jonathan, Courtney, Julie, Shane, Cindy and Katie, however, wore a confused, defeated expression, the kind of expression someone who has a lot to learn might wear.

Twila would've probably been the first one to be up that day, but as she was no longer there, it was Cindy who got up first. The fire was, of course, out, but all it took was a few blows and the help of some twigs for Cindy to get it started again. She then took a trip to the well, the location of which Katie showed her the day before, while they were talking about Tom being the easiest first boot. How terribly wrong they were. And what *did* go wrong, now that she came to think about it? Why did eight people besides Tom decided collectively to act so stupid, to let the biggest immunity threat slide by, to minimize their chances of winning so dramatically? She got to the well and lowered down the tied-up bucket, filling it with dirty water. Surely there was a

missing piece of the puzzle, some crucial fact she didn't know about and that would make sense of it all. What was going on and why wasn't she a part of it? Now that she thought about it, the first day of the game, Tom *did* say something to everybody on the beach, while Twila wasn't there, and Cindy was dumb enough to follow some silly bird instead of paying attention to what was really important. But that wasn't about to happen again.

And what was it that they talked about that day? She had a feeling it might have something to do with Tom deserving to stay over Twila. **Deserving.** She hated that word. It reminded her of Gary talking to Stephanie, Danni and Judd in that reward trip, about how she and Lydia didn't deserve to stay in the game over them. It reminded her of the day she watched her boot episode on television. How Rafe talked behind her back, criticizing her decision regarding the car, proclaiming that she should've given it up and that he couldn't believe she didn't, because that was the 'right thing to do'.

It all reeked of self-righteousness, of Rafe feeling he's better than she is, more deserving. She suddenly had the urge to confront her fellow Guatemala contestant, to see where he was standing. They had been really close before the car fiasco two years ago, and then... something went off. She felt like it was the right time to check into that. Plus, he might be able to give her the details about what went on last night. After all, he *was* in the thick of things all during their season.

She finally reached camp and placed the pot full of water on the still-alive fire, which was reflecting in her determined eyes. She thought she needed to lay low in the first few days of the game, but obviously, it was time to fight for her life if she wanted to succeed. It was time to focus on what's really important, which was winning. She needed to put environment-loving, people-trusting Cindy aside and maybe start thinking like other people think, maybe start using other people's terms – like 'deserving'. Maybe she needed to start believing she *deserves* it.

One by one, the rest of the tribe woke up under that big tree in the middle of camp. It didn't take them long to remember what happened at the last tribal council – for some of them, it meant things are going their way, and for others, it meant obstacles are coming their way. But for all of them, it meant the season was on. Jonathan talked to everybody like nothing happened. People *did* lie to his face about Tom being the one going home, but so what? Didn't he himself changed his initial plan several times during Cook-Islands? He didn't feel like the game was over for him. On the contrary; he felt like it just became far more interesting.

It got even more interesting as people started disappearing: It reminded Jonathan of some cheesy thriller, in which all the victims say "I'll be right back" just before they're axed. It began with Yau-Man saying he wanted to see if there was something to eat on that island, and walking away into the distance. It continued with Ami and Eliza excusing themselves to go to the "ladies room". One by one, people left camp until Jonathan, Cindy, Shane, Julie, Courtney and Katie were the only ones left.

At first, no one at camp made anything of it at all. But when none of the others returned half an hour later, Katie, leaned against the big tree's trunk, counted out-loud. "So... Tom, Ian", she raised a finger for every name she mentioned, "Rafe, Cirie, Yau-man, Eliza, Ami, Terri, Dreamz. Gee, that's nine right there! If I didn't know better, I would've guessed that these were the nine responsible for Twila leaving the other night!"

The six of them smiled, the kind of smile you might wear when you realize that not only you're in the minority, but the majority is having a secret meeting right now, planning just the right way to vote you off.

"So that's the alliance to beat, I guess", said Jonathan. "It wouldn't be that difficult, nine huge personalities, there's bound to be some internal conflict between them before long."

"This is so random, though!" Courtney said. "We shouldn't be on the outs, there's no reason for that to happen! It's just so random; we didn't even get a chance to play!"

"Don't count us out yet, Courtney", said Julie. She was quiet up until now, thinking it all through. "And I don't think it's random, I think there's a pattern going on – notice how all the big names are in that alliance – people like Yau-Man and Terry and Cirie. If Tom was gone after that last tribal council, who do you think would've gone after him? Probably one of those that aren't here right now. It's only natural for them to band together."

"As it is for us", Cindy said quietly. They all looked at her. "Well, it does make sense. We'll be picked off one by one, by the looks of it, if we don't do something about it. But if we decided to stick together, and bring at least two other people to our side..."

Shane scoffed. "You make it sound easy, but how exactly will we achieve it? Do you think people are just gonna bail on an alliance they joined yesterday?"

"I don't know", admitted Cindy, "but let's give it a shot. It's better than waiting to be ousted, ain't it?"

"Of course it is", chimed in Courtney. "With a little faith, anything is possible". Shane scoffed again.

"Oh yeah? Your new pal, Jesus, will just come upon us from the heavens and work everything out in our favor? Aren't you paying attention? All the survivor-saints are on the other side of the fence! Jesus wants *them* to win, not you!"

"Shane, enough!" intervened Jonathan. He couldn't believe his eyes; His new alliance had been formed and then nearly crumbled in about 40 seconds. "If we do form this pact, we need to make sure all six of us are on the same page. Personally, I don't think we really have a choice – it's this or nothing."

They all looked at one another. None of them planned this kind of alliance going into all-stars – They imagined themselves surrounded by fan-favorites and strategic masterminds, not leftovers. But, considering the place they found themselves in, this was their best chance, better than to be a tenth wheel, at best. Jonathan stretched his hand forward, and Katie put hers on his, and then Cindy, and Courtney, and Julie, and finally Shane. It wasn't ideal, but it'll do, for now.

Yau-Man was well aware of the strangeness of the situation. But he was also aware that the situation invited the strangeness. This never happened before, a single tribe made of sixteen contestants, and thus, an alliance of nine was not a necessity up until now. But it was the best move for most of them, as long as they stuck together. This was the tricky part – sticking together. If they manage that, it was only a matter of placing yourself at the middle of that alliance, so that when nine remained, you'd be a part of the ruling five; and when five remained, you'd be one of the core three. And when three remained, the other two contestants would prefer to take you to the final two rather than each other.

But there was still time until that part of the game becomes relevant – right now it was important to make sure the alliance of nine will become the final nine. And in order to achieve that, all of them needed to feel comfortable enough in the alliance, like they were making as much impact as the rest, like they were an integral part. And in order

to achieve *that*, meetings like the ones held a few minutes ago in the woods were necessary, even-though it was very dangerous to draw the lines so clearly, because without meetings like this, people were bound to question the others' loyalties, people were bound to jump ship.

So one by one they left camp that morning, and almost an hour later, one by one they returned as though nothing had happened. Yau-Man was the last one to return, informing his tribemates that he did not find any edible fruit out there, but he did bring back a few edible leaves to experiment with. The tribe-members were each given a handful of leaves in different colors and shapes. Ian felt like a fattened calf – but as he weighed about five pounds four days ago and hasn't eaten since, he trusted Yau-Man and shoved the leaves down his throat, hoping for the best.

"Wow, Yau", he said, "these are...those leaves are really..."

"Horrible", Shane summed up what everybody was feeling. "Even Courtney's poisoned apples probably taste better, and are less poisonous."

"I admit it is not a delicacy", said Yau-Man a little apologetically, "but in my mind it is better than starving. It *is* nutritious enough to keep us going a bit more, although we need some substance in our food for the long-haul."

"Well", said Julie, remembering the tree-mail Ian and Tom came back with (as it was their excuse for leaving), which said that the next reward challenge will take place later that day, "there's that bag of potatoes Jeff offered us in that last challenge. If it comes up in the reward challenge as well, how about we make a pact saying whoever wins that challenge, no matter who it is, gives up his reward, no matter what it is, so that all of us can get those potatoes? If that's even an option, that is."

"Sounds fair", Tom said and everyone nodded. Julie felt it was the right thing to do – the people playing the game this time weren't socially-challenged enough to make the mistake of keeping the reward to themselves, so that hopefully, in a few hours they'll be walking back to camp with food, actual food, in their hands. Best case scenario? For someone from the minority alliance to win that challenge. It made Tom look heroic last time, there's no reason it shouldn't work once again. And then it would be much easier to pull a few people in. It wasn't the best plan in the world, but it'll do, for now. With those thoughts in mind, her leaves tasted a little better.

"Come on in!"

Jeff was waiting for them on a little island nearby. As he watched the fifteen of them taking their place on the golden mat laid down for them, beaming, excitement started to build up inside of him without him being able to control it.

"So. Day Four, and all of you managed to not be the first all-star voted out. That's quite an achievement in itself, don't you think?"

The fifteen men and women raised their hands and applauded themselves for making it. When they came to think about it, the worst was already behind them.

"So, for today's challenge, we're doing something a little bit different. A *lot* different, actually. Since this is all-stars we're talking about, we thought we might step it up in terms of challenges from just collecting puzzle-pieces and putting them together, to something that actually tests your survivor skills – and in this challenge's case, your mental survivor skills.

"Each time, two of you, which will be randomly selected, will sit face-to-face –" he pointed to two enormous stone chairs facing each-other, "and play a little mind game, which goes like this: One of you will pull a little rock from this bag", he showed them an old sack, retrieving two little stones from it: a white one and a black one. "That person's goal, after seeing what color the rock is, is to convince the other person that

he or she has the *other* rock. Then, the other person will have to guess what the rock's color is. If he or she is wrong, then they're eliminated. If they're right, however, the person holding the rock is eliminated. Thirty seconds will be given to each round.

"Makes sense?"

They all nodded, even though it made very little sense. Couldn't they just dive into the ocean and collect some puzzle pieces instead?

"Wanna know what you're playing for?", and when they all responded with enthusiasm, as expected, Jeff revealed the covered objects resting at his right.

These were three sealed plastic boxes, marked 'BREAKFAST', 'LUNCH' and 'DINNER'. "The winner of this challenge", Jeff told the drooling tribe, "will get to eat properly for a change. These boxes contain, as the names suggest, three meals, kept fresh in special containers. They will be taken back to camp with you and will suffice the winner with twenty-four hours of nutrition. I'm sure all of you guys really need it. No sharing though", he added, reading their minds.

"Worth playing for?"

This was an unnecessary question. "Let's get started then."

Jeff had his own sack of rocks, with the participants' names on each one. This was used to determine who will be facing who on which round, and in what role.

"First up are Rafe and Katie, with Katie as the rock-puller."

Rafe and Katie settled themselves on the big uncomfortable chairs, eyeing each-other with big grins on their faces. Jeff came over to Katie and let her choose one of the two stones in the bag he was holding.

"Hmmm..." Katie wondered how to approach this kind of game. She found it hard to take it seriously though – she was, after all, holding a small rock and was about to lie about its color.

That's why she wasn't able to sustain a laugh when saying: "The rock I'm holding is black, Rafe! You believe me, right?"

"It's White, Jeff", said Rafe, grateful to be facing Katie of all people.

"Katie, show us what color it is", said Jeff, although it wasn't really necessary. It was white, as expected, and Katie was still laughing as she went to sit at the bench that was brought there for the losers of this challenge. Now fourteen remained, surrounding the two stone chairs. Jeff called the next two players' names – Julie and Yau Man, and they both sat down with Julie picking the rock.

Yau Man tried digging into Julie's eyes, but with no success. They were completely blank. "The rock is white", she said simply. This was clearly the game for her.

Yau Man didn't have a clue. He didn't know Julie all that well, and he wasn't sure if one could actually know Julie well enough to get a good read on her.

"I'll guess it's black", said Yau Man finally.

"Well, you'll guess wrong then", smiled Julie, showing him the white rock in her hand.

Yau Man joined Katie on the loser's bench, and Dreamz came to pick the next rock, facing Courtney.

"This is gonna be easy, Jeff!" said Dreamz with glee, getting a glimpse of the rock.

"Dreamz, what color is it?" tried Courtney.

Dreamz said nothing.

"Is it black?"

"Oh", Dreamz was delighted Courtney had caught his bait, "so you just assume that the rock is black just because I am?"

The others laughed as Courtney was pushed into a corner. "It's... white."

Dreamz revealed the black rock. "Not everybody and everything is white in this world, y'know."

Next up were Rafe and Ami. It was Rafe's turn to be investigated, and he decided to confuse Ami as much as possible. "The chances that I wouldn't not have the white rock are equal, if not higher, than the chances I have the black rock if the colors were reversed, and the rock that I have in my hand was actually the rock lying in the bag Jeff is holding".

Ami looked pleasantly baffled. Behind Rafe, Dreamz looked as though his head was about to explode.

"I'll say... it's the black one?"

Ami was out as Rafe showed the rest of them the white rock he was holding, looking a little confused himself.

It was Terry's turn to be interviewed by Dreamz, who was delighted- he could read Terry like an open book.

"It's white, Jeff", Dreamz declared after Terry had been trying to convince him it's black for fifteen seconds. Terry moved over to the bench, missing dearly the physical challenges he felt so comfortable competing in.

Dreamz's name came up again before he even managed to get up from his chair, but this time he was to mind-battle Shane, who was looking at the rock he was holding and smiling to himself.

"Dreamz, I'm holding the black rock. Really, would I ever lie to you?"

He wants me to think, 'yes, you would lie to me', bro, thought Dreamz, so he tells the truth just to throw me off... maybe...

"You're holding the white one", decided Dreamz finally.

"Not everybody and everything is white in this world, you know", said Shane, Returning the black rock to Jeff.

It was Rafe's turn to be put on the spot by Cindy. Cindy wanted to talk to Rafe for a long time; she just didn't imagine that it would be about a color of a rock.

"What is it you're holding there, little Rafe?" she smiled.

"Well, Cindy", he answered her brightly, "would you believe me if I told you it's the white one?" Rafe agreed with himself this round shouldn't be too hard. Cindy was a very trusting person.

"No", Cindy ruled simply, and Rafe was shocked to find himself on the bench.

Now it was time for Ian and Julie to square off. Ian picked the white rock, and already started to become nervous- evidently, lying was not his specialty.

"It's the – I mean –" he started. Julie laughed- this was going to be too easy.

"It's the white rock", he said finally. "It's definitely the white one."

"Well, you're right, it is", announced Julie, and she was right – not only was Ian unable to lie, he was also unable to tell the truth while pretending to lie. Tom laughed as he was reminded why having Ian as a partner is such a good, and a bad, thing. Julie looked over at Jeff, hoping for some kind of response from him – but nothing came. It was like looking at a freezer.

Cirie was finally allowed to play, as she was to be interrogated by Cindy.

"Is it white?" asked Cindy.

"Absolutely", said Cirie confidently. And then, as Cindy was about to give her final answer – "absolutely not."

"What is it gonna be, Cindy?" asked Jeff. He had no idea himself.

"Hmmm... White?" guessed Cindy – and the guess was wrong. The black rock was shown exactly at the moment Cirie's white teeth were shown in a big smile. This was actually a competition she was good at!

Shane's name came out of Jeff's sack again, this time head to head with Eliza. By this point, it was clear to Eliza she didn't stand much of a chance against Shane the performer. She tried, though: "Shane, the rock I'm holding is black."

"No it isn't, it's white", argued Shane, and he ended up on the winning side once more, while Eliza was sent to the bench to sit besides Yau Man.

Tom finally was included, and was now sitting opposite Cirie, waiting for her to pick a rock.

"Believe it or not", Cirie finally addressed Tom, taking a peek at her rock, "I'm going to say the truth this time. My rock is white."

"I believe you", said Tom warmly.

"Damn it!" said Cirie and joined the other losers. They were now down to four – Tom, Shane, Julie, and Jonathan who didn't get to play yet. This was about to change.

"I'd be lying if I said I have the white rock", Jonathan said when it was his turn, looking aggressively into Julie's eyes.

"No, you wouldn't", she said calmly, "you're lying right now". And Jonathan was out on his first try.

The semi-finals were between Shane, the rock picker, and Tom, the investigator.

"C'mon, Shane, we're both adults here. Just tell me what color it's not, so I can call you on your lie."

"Fine by me", Shane played Tom's game. "It's black."

"Jeff, I also say it's black."

"Well, it isn't", Shane said, "I did what you asked me to do – I told you what the color's not. you should've been consistent."

"I guess so", said a humbled Tom, taking a sit on the bench and clearing the way for Julie to take on Shane in the final round. Shane was picking the rock once more.

"It's white!" shouted Shane. "No, wait – it's black! I mean white! Yes, it's white! It's definitely white."

Julie took her time. When Shane was insisting it's white, was he simply lying? Or was he hoping Julie would think he was lying when he was actually telling the truth? Or maybe he was lying, thinking Julie would assume he was telling the truth to make her think he was lying? There was just no way to know what Shane was thinking, his mind was so messed-up. It will come down to a guess – and the odds were fifty-fifty.

"I'll say it's white", Julie made up her mind.

Shane smiled and showed Julie and the rest of the tribe the black rock he was holding.

"Nope."

"Shane wins reward!" Jeff announced. Shane was smiling from ear to ear. His first individual win, ever.

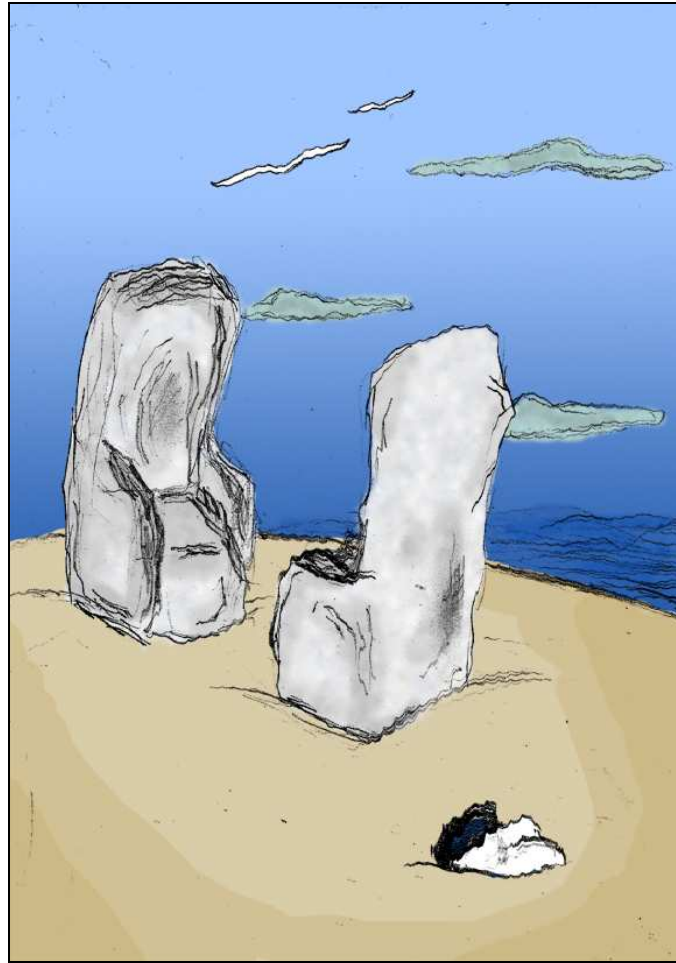
"There's one more thing left to discuss, however", Jeff said slowly.

The familiar machete and potato-sack were uncovered at Jeff's left side.

"Shane, I know it's a tough call, but once again, this tribe has a chance to get one of these items, *if* you decide to give up your reward."

Shane was beyond delighted. All this time his game was mostly in his head, and now he had a chance to really step it up, to really show people what he was made of, to make them feel strongly about him as a person –

"I'm keeping the reward."



The way back to camp was very awkward. It was already late afternoon, and the sun painted everything pink: The big tree that was their only shelter for now, stuck in the middle of their beach like a sore thumb; A short distance away from it, the dying fire, about to be relit by Terry; and at the end of the row of contestants returning from the challenge, Shane, looking smug and holding three boxes of food and drinks. The atmosphere was very tense even without words. The hunger was beginning to take its toll on them all, as they settled around the fire, exhausted from their short walk. It was clear they couldn't survive like that much longer.

Courtney looked at Shane and didn't even know how to feel about him: She clearly had a soft spot for him in her heart, and yet, he was just a despicable, obnoxious, juvenile person. He has gone so far in the wrong lane, even the lord will have a hard time helping him. And yet, there was some hidden good in him, she was sure of it. If only he would hear her in, opened up to her...

Yau-Man had disappeared the moment they arrived at camp, and returned fifteen minutes later with, yet again, an assortment of disgusting looking leaves and roots. They tried to cook them a bit in the pot, but at dinner time, it was tasteless as ever.

"At least we'll appreciate food when we get it", Ami said sweetly.

"If we get it", Jonathan pointed out. "Jeff didn't look too concerned with the fact that we're starving to death."

Jeff didn't look too concerned with me, Either, Julie thought. I swear, if he had taken part in that poker-face challenge, he would have such an easy win it would be ridiculous... She started to want her plan to fall apart just a little – just a tiny nod from him would be enough, or a wink...

No, it was best this way. The faster people forget about her and her relationship with the host, the better. And since it was Eliza that knew about the alleged break-up, it was sure to spread around like wildfire, if it hasn't already. It was best this way in the long run. She repeated it once more to herself – *it's best this way*.

Eliza, though, did not have much time to think about the relationship status of Julie and Jeff. She was occupied with thoughts on the conversation she had with Dreamz right before tribal council last night.

"We gotta save Twila", he said to her then.

"Of all people, you choose to approach Twila's nemesis? Dreamz, did you think this through?" was her response.

"Did you? Y'know we're at the bottom of this alliance, that we're just pawns used for numbers –"

"Of course we are, but we both agreed to it knowing that", she said to him. "Both of us are known for our flip-flop abilities, Dreamz, it's not a wise decision to use them on our very first tribal council. Be reasonable."

Dreamz caved in, and this was the end of their conversation. But Eliza wasn't sure of the truthfulness of her own words. It was a risky move to betray their alliance the first chance they got, but now they're 8th and 9th in the biggest alliance in survivor history, with no influence in it whatsoever. She didn't want to be voted out ninth, she wanted to win. She wanted to *earn* her win, not just be a number.

It seemed that Shane was waiting for the right moment to arrive. Just when people were giving up on their leaves, he opened up his dinner. He spread the contents of the first carton box on the laps of Ian, who was sitting next to him, like it was the normal thing to do. First came a thermos of tea, then a sealed bowl full of steaming onion soup, then the bread to go with the soup, and finally a chocolate pudding for dessert. People didn't even realize they were staring; the smell of the soup was too much.

"Bon... Bon appetite", said Tom, sounding miserable.

"Why, thank you", smiled Shane, and began eating. It was a very uncomfortable moment – or rather, half an hour. Shane made the best of every slice of bread, of every spoon of soup, and he made a point of doing it in front of fourteen starving people. If he were completely honest with himself, he would have admitted it didn't feel right. But it was all a part of his plan to be taken far over other more likable people, especially now that he was in the minority group, and it seemed to be working tremendously well.

"Hey Courtney", he barely managed to address her with his mouth so full, "As the provider of this tribe, why do they all seem so hungry? Can it be that you're slacking on your job?"

Courtney had had enough – she got up and left towards the seashore. She tried to see the good in him, she really did, but all she could see was Satan performing his evil deeds through Shane. He needed to see the light just like she did not long ago; he needed to understand there's a better life for him out there.

A few minutes later, she was joined by Julie, who had had enough of Shane as well, but also wanted to check why Courtney looked so upset.

"Are you OK? Is Shane getting to you?"

"He's just..." Courtney tried to explain, "A lost soul."

Julie held back a laugh. "To say the least", she said. "And you want to give him some... guidance?"

"If he would only let me! But he just relishes being the 'bad boy', I can't understand that..."

A thought occurred to Julie – a strange one. "Courtney – could it be that Shane has... feelings for you?"

"What? He hates me! I guess that's a feeling..."

"He doesn't hate you; if he did he would just stay away from you, but he makes a point of always attaching himself to you – on your season, didn't he choose you to be on the same tribe with him, didn't he make an alliance with you right after? And a few days ago, didn't he follow you to the beach? Doesn't he always bother you just to get a reaction? Courtney, if I'm not mistaken, he's kind of interested in you, in an unusual sort of way."

Courtney stared at Julie for a second with a disbelieving look. Shane said numerous times how he wanted her dead, how he couldn't stand to even look at her pathetic face, how he couldn't wait to get away from her. And yet he didn't. Not now. Not during their season a year and a half ago. And not in between, when, strangely enough, they kept ending up in the same parties and events. Was he just a little boy seeking her attention? Was she too rough on him all this time?

Julie smiled to herself. The alliance of six was already close to becoming a lost battle, as they didn't have the numbers; she didn't need Courtney avoiding Shane on top of that. Now that Courtney's perspective has changed a bit, the way was clear for more important things. And besides, they were perfect for each other. If it actually came to fruition, she thought bitterly as she was making her way back to camp, at least one couple would get a chance to be together this season.

Their fourth night was pretty much like the past three nights, with the same amounts of food and shelter – zero, that is. *At least we're drinking*, thought Ami to herself, *at least we are not dehydrated, that's something*. But it didn't feel like something as the sand on which they were lying touched their dry mouths.

Katie and Jonathan decided to go for a walk as they weren't able to get any sleep. The almost-round moon was completely visible as this was a cloudless night, as well as sleepless.

"Curios, huh?", Jonathan wondered out-loud. "How we ended up in an alliance with the insane person, his female sidekick, the host's girlfriend, and the person who gave up her winning chances for a car. And it's not even the ruling alliance!"

Katie nodded as though she was just processing how weird their situation was. "Think about the people back at home watching us in a few months. Think about how that's gonna look to them...they're gonna root against us, for sure."

"They're gonna *hate* us! Absolutely loath us! Even more than they did before!"

"You know", Katie said, "I actually liked you during your season, I thought you were entertaining."

"Well, no offense, but I hated you during your season. You seem like a nice person now, but I thought you were vile back then."

"Fair enough. It's not like you were the only one."

"It's O.K; I know what it feels like to be despised. You know, maybe it's got something to do with being in the majority - nobody feels sympathy towards the majority. Maybe now that we're fighting for our lives, we'll be more appreciated."

"Yeah, for like the two seconds that we're here until they vote us out."

"It *is* unfortunate."

"It sucks."

They continued to move in the darkness. It wasn't televised darkness, with shades of green – it was complete and total darkness, besides what the moon illuminated. Katie literally felt like she was in the dark – she knew she couldn't rely on Tom this time. After all, she was about to vote him off the other night. But why was Ian so secretive with her? She would have accepted it if he told her last night what he was about to do. "I think we need to step up our game", Katie said finally. "Tomorrow I'll talk to Ian, see if I can get anything out of him. Julie should talk to Eliza and Ami, Cindy to Rafe, and Shane and Courtney to Cirie and Terry. Use all the connections we have. Our goal is to bring in two other people, at least."

"I agree, there's really nothing else we could do. I think we have a chance- nobody wants to be the ninth person in the nine-person alliance. You'll just have to promise Ian a better place in our group. That's what the others need to do as well. Even if that promise won't be realized."

"I'm not sure I'm interested in doing that", Katie protested. "Jonathan, I know you're used to betraying your alliance members left and right, but I've had a not-so-enjoyable experience with alienating people along the way, and I think it would've been the same case with you, had you reached the final two. No offense", she added, realizing she was reopening some of Jonathan's old wounds.

"So what do you suggest? That we tell Ian and the others, 'come to our side, you'll end up worse than you were, but at least you'll switch alliances, that makes a great impression'?"

"No", Katie said. "I suggest we sniff around, find out who the two weakest links are, and offer them 7th and 8th places instead of 8th and 9th, and the benefits of playing against competitors like you and me instead of competitors like Tom and Terry."

"Wow, it sounds like an attractive offer when you put it like that."

"Well, Jonathan, could I interest *you* with an offer you can't refuse?" asked Katie with a wink.

"Katie", Jonathan laughed, "that's kinda disturbing, as I'm married and you're messed-up."

"I'm sorry, won't happen again."

"Right now we should concentrate on finding away to break this frigging alliance. We need to find its weakness...."

"Well, Jonathan, you can find *my* weakness any time you -"

"Katie."

"Yeah, I'll stop that."

Shane got up the next morning and realized he had breakfast waiting for him. He got to his feet, yawned loudly and went to open the second box. Inside it were boiled eggs, coffee, fruits and cheese, along with a loaf of bread just like yesterday. This was going to be a good day for him.

The moment that box was opened, people started waking up, intrigued by the smell.

The moment they discovered the source of that smell was a devastating moment.

"I'm really sorry I can't share this with you guys", murmured Shane with a mouth full of grapes. It was hard to believe him.

Cirie felt it wasn't completely bad that Shane was making such a big scene, however, as it served as a great excuse for people to leave the camp and head to their second meeting as an alliance. This one was held behind a huge rock, a great hiding place about half a mile from camp. She was the one looking over the rock to see if anyone was coming, while the others settled down and started planning their next move.

"It's still Cindy, right?" asked Rafe.

This was the conclusion of their previous meeting – Cindy had to go. The reasoning behind it was that if something unexpected happened and the alliance crumbled, they would much rather face the likes of Katie and Shane rather than Cindy or Julie, who would be dangerous in this situation as they were liked by almost everyone. Cindy had the edge as she would fair better at physical challenges.

"I'm a little nervous with Shane, to tell you the truth", Tom said.

"Why?" asked Ian. "It's perfect, the way he's been acting! Eating in front of everybody, he's digging his own grave!"

"He does it with so much glee, though", said Cirie, "almost *too* much glee. It's like he wants us to think everybody hates him, just so we wouldn't worry about him at all."

Tom nodded. "And did you see how well he did on that challenge yesterday? I'm beginning to think he's such a good actor, he does everything on purpose. It's all an act with him."

"Last time he had that nicotine withdrawal", added Terry, "so he wasn't able to control his actions as much. But this time we should definitely keep an eye on him. "

"Yes, he's playing the game hard", agreed Yau-Man. "He approached me for a final two deal on the second day, but I don't think his intentions were to stay true to it."

"He came to you too?" asked Dreamz, bewildered. "He took me to the side yesterday, said we could tear through this game together! Shook him off right away", he added, when realizing it was not a good idea to admit to eight other people that he said yes to Shane's offer.

Yau Man laughed. "Did Shane offer a final-two deal to anyone else?"

He didn't expect a response, but nonetheless, seven other hands slowly found their way into the air.

Back at camp, Jonathan presented Katie's plan to the other four, stopping only to allow Shane to burp once or twice. It was agreed that the moment the alliance of nine returned to camp, people were going to be pulled aside and the questioning and persuading would begin.

"It's time for the leftovers to start playing the game!" Katie summed it up.

"Leftovers..." said Julie. "I kinda like that name."

And their alliance was christened.

The sun was stuck in the middle of the sky when Ami and Eliza were pulled aside by Julie, Ian by Katie, Cirie by Shane, Terry by Courtney and Rafe by Cindy. Two out of six was the leftovers' goal.

"Cirie, think!" Shane shouted at her. "Once you're dwindled down to nine, do you really want to compete against Tom? Against Yau Man?! Come with us and be surrounded by *nobodies*! The way's already paved for you!"

"For me to get voted out by you six the moment you can! No thanks, Shane, really."

"Fair enough", Shane said, and changed his antics in an instant: "So... you nine going strong? With meetings and all?"

"I'm really not about to talk about it, Shane. You understand."

"Yeah, sure, but I mean – nine of you making the decisions, that's gotta be rough, I'm sure some people are feeling left out-"

"Not gonna happen, Shane."

"Fine, fine."

Meanwhile, Katie and Ian took a walk on the beach. This brought back old memories.

"You know", said Ian, "I'm not gonna get down on my knees and beg for your forgiveness this time."

"I didn't ask you to", Katie said.

"I don't feel bad about having an alliance. That's just the game."

"I know."

"And I'm sorry you're not in it, but decisions had to be made, and if everybody had brought all the people from their season, we would've had an alliance of sixteen-

"I realize that."

"And we said it, Katie, we said even before the game began, we said we wouldn't work together, that it wouldn't benefit either of us, that it would just be a burden-

"I remember. That's OK, Ian, don't worry about it."

"You mean it?"

"Yeah. I just wish you told me before the vote, that you didn't lie to my face..."

"I didn't lie to your face, I told you I'd vote for Tom before I got the in to the alliance."

"Well, it came off pretty sneaky."

"I'm sorry, that wasn't the intention."

They walked some more.

"And I want you to know", Ian added, although he shouldn't have, although it didn't help him in any way, "the fact that we're not in an alliance together doesn't mean I don't have your back. Because I do. I'll fight every time for someone else to get the boot over you. I want you to do well."

"That's good to know", Katie said, and it was. It was very good to know.

At the same time, whispering in camp while pretending to tend the fire, Courtney and Terry were deep in conversation.

"Terry, think how great it would be! Nobody will see it coming, and you wouldn't have to be stuck in an alliance with Tom, who is an immunity whore as big as you are..."

"I'm not afraid of Tom", Said Terry defensively. "I mean, he and I get along great. He's not a threat to me."

"Not yet, but do you really want to reach the point when the two of you have to square off?"

"That's not the point", Terry avoided the question. "The final answer's no, Courtney. I'm finally in the right alliance, I'm not about to give it up so fast. You probably understand."

"I guess I do."

"And besides... can I say something without hurting your feelings?"

"Depends on what it is", said Courtney, straightening up.

"I feel like the people in my alliance – with a few exceptions – all deserve to go far. I mean, we're talking about people who played the game hard, who did really well. And no offence, Courtney, but I don't really think of you as an all-star. And the same goes for the people you're aligned with. Don't you want to see a *true* all-star winning this all thing?"

Courtney truly was lost for words.

Down in the ocean, Julie worked hard on the other two Vanuatu girls, but without much luck.

"You know we love you, sweetie", said Ami, "it really is nothing against you. It's just the way it went."

"I know, and I don't take it personally at all. You two play the game as hard as you can, and I'll play as well. But can you answer me just one question?"

They both nodded.

"Do you feel secure with your alliance? Do you feel like it could take you far?"

They both said "yes", but Eliza's was said with evident uncertainty. This was all Julie really needed.

Cindy asked Rafe to come with her and check for tree-mail, and so they both made their way quietly up the hill.

This was the opportunity Cindy was waiting for since the day before, and yet, there was such awkwardness in the air, she could hardly find the words. It was clear Rafe didn't really want to be in her company.

"Is everything OK, Rafe?" she finally broke the silence.

"Everything's great", he answered. "You know, except for not eating, not sleeping, drinking disgusting hot water..."

"But except for that, everything's fine?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't it be?"

"You seem a little off when you're around me."

Rafe sighed.

Cindy continued her questioning. "Does it have anything to do with what happened two years ago? With me not giving away the cars? Can it be that it's still bothering you?"

"Of course not", said Rafe. "It was your decision, who am I to question it. I would've done it differently, but that's just me."

"I still think I made the right choice, in case you're wondering. There are no guarantees in this game, you know that, and I won it fair and square, I didn't owe you guys anything..."

"If you're bringing this up, there are *some* guarantees in this game, and you getting a car even if you're giving away four others is one of them, as there *were* five cars standing there, after all. It's simple math."

"You try solving math problems when faced with such a dilemma-"

"But, see, for me it wouldn't have been a dilemma. For me there was only one option-to give away the cars. I guess we're just different."

"I didn't feel so different from you in Guatemala. I felt we were close back then."

"So did I."

Cindy felt pissed off at this point. She felt belittled by Rafe and his holier-than-thou attitude. At that time, her competitive nature wouldn't let her give up the car she had earned and needed desperately. And how does Rafe know how he would've acted in this situation? He had never faced it before!

But in spite of all this, she did feel a little remorse about making that influential decision two years ago. Maybe it would've been different. Maybe she would've been brought back to all-stars as a winner alongside Tom. Maybe she and Rafe would've been good friends like she once thought they would end up being...

"It did hurt, you know", she said quietly.

"What?" Rafe asked.

"To hear you talk about me like that on my boot episode. I didn't know you felt like that until I saw it. You acted all nice to me back there, I had no idea."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be, that's how you felt at the time. That's how you still feel."

They were getting nearer to the hilltop now.

"I do appreciate you as a player", Cindy said. "I wish you all the best in the game. You seem like you're in a good position right now to win it all, with that nine-person alliance you got there. If I'm voted out soon, I hope you'll win it, I really do. Bring some pride to our season."

Rafe smiled at her. It was weird hearing that, knowing that she's probably the one to go tomorrow night.

"It's hard to know how it'll turn out", he said. "You never know, you know?"

"I know", Cindy laughed. "But still, it must feel good, knowing you're nine strong." She hoped she wasn't too obvious in trying to milk information out of Rafe.

"Well, there's always that doubt", Rafe said. "Nine is a large number of people to have in one alliance. And with people like Dreamz, you never know what's gonna happen, I'm not sure he really feels a part of us as it is –"

Rafe stopped in his tracks. He has said too much. He let his pity for Cindy get the better of him. But it wasn't the end of the world. In two days, Cindy probably wouldn't be there anymore, and besides, what could she possibly do with the information? The minority was three people short; they'd be powerless even with Dreamz on their side. And anyway, Dreamz wouldn't be stupid enough to betray his alliance six days into the game.

They finally reached the tree-mail, which was sealed by a tortoise's armor.

"This is so exciting", said Rafe, pretending there wasn't any tension between the two of them. "You want to open it?"

"No", said Cindy, "go ahead, dive right in."

Cindy was amazed at her own prophetic skills, as under the armor were to be found fifteen diving suits.

When Cindy and Rafe returned to camp it was already afternoon, but it was only now that Shane sat down and opened the third and final box, marked 'LUNCH'. Courtney sat beside him as he wondered whether he should start with the mashed potatoes or with the lettuce salad.

"How's your lunch?" Courtney asked kindly when he decided to start with both.

"It was very enjoyable until you came along", Shane snapped. Why was that woman following him everywhere he went?

"You seem agitated. You know, whenever I'm on edge, I ask god to help me be at peace with the things I cannot change –"

Shane laughed at her face. Some mashed potatoes flew into the air when he snapped: "Still with that Jesus shtick, huh? How long is it going to last? A month? Two? Your new-age age didn't last very long, so why should your new-found Christianity be any different? I wonder what's next. Scientology maybe? Kabbalah? Whatever you'll latch on to, I'm sure that they'll be proud to have someone like you. It'll show the world they're not picky with their members."

Courtney just didn't understand why he was acting this way. Doesn't he see that she's just trying to help? That she's one of the only people to actually see the good in him, and he cannot afford to lose that? "Shane, you don't have to act like that around me, I can see through it. You don't have to push me off, it's OK."

"It's not OK! Don't you get it, Courtney?! I can't stand you! I'm not playing a game here – I truly hate your guts! Why won't you have a clue? It kills me how self-delusional you are!"

And Courtney understood. She stood up and left without another word. No words were needed anymore.

This was shaping up to be a very strange immunity challenge, for at least three reasons: one, it was taking place at night; two, they were ordered to get to the challenge beach dressed in the diving suits they were given; and three, when they arrived at the location, there was nothing there except for fifteen poles sticking out of the ocean.

"Welcome, guys", said Jeff, waiting for them with a mysterious look on his face. This was going to be a long night. "Everybody feeling alright? Embracing the fate that you're not going to get much sleep tonight?"

"It's not like we were gonna sleep anyway, with you depriving us of shelter equipment", Tom teased Jeff, and they all laughed, although it was a sad kind of laugh.

"Well, tonight's challenge is for immunity, so at least one person will be able to get a good sleep afterwards, knowing they're safe for three more days.

You're about to participate in a simple endurance challenge- the first of three we're doing this season. I'm sure you agree that the question of 'how badly do you want it' is central to why you're here. It only seems fair to test your enthusiasm for this game, your determination for winning, in the most basic sense.

"This endurance challenge is very different from what you're used to, though; you might've guessed it, based on what you're wearing. It's going to take place underwater.

"Each of you will be given a snorkel five feet long and diving glasses. Your goal is simple- stay under the water-surface as long as you can. You can hold on to your poll for comfort, but once any part of your body is sticking out of the water – you're out.

"Makes sense?" Jeff asked. "Let's get started then."

When they each held on to a pole and put on the diving equipment, it has started to sink in: they were going to voluntarily drown themselves.

"Ready?" asked a very dry and warm Jeff. "GO!"

They all put their heads in the water and started to breath through the snorkels. It was actually a nice experience – The water was a beautiful color of deep blue, here and there you could see a shadow of some sea-creature moving nearby, and the silence was priceless. Dreamz, however, didn't notice all this- he was too busy fearing for his own life.

This is not what I signed up for, he thought to himself without being able to voice his thoughts to others. It was less than a year ago when she first learned how to swim, and he was still terrified from everything wet. *Why is I have to be unfriendly with water AND black?*

Ian, on the other hand, was in his element. He felt like he was back in the good ol' dolphin days. This felt, strangely, like his natural environment. This was his challenge to win, he knew it.

Over at Ian's left, Shane's stomach hurt. It wasn't easy, eating so much, and then letting the ocean move you from side to side. Within a few minutes, he started to think it wasn't that much important for him to win that challenge- at least Julie, Cindy and Jonathan are bigger targets for the boot than him. And on top of that, people would resent him even more if he was the first one out of the challenge after all that nutritious food he just ate.

Dreamz couldn't believe his luck: right when he thought about getting out of the water first, Shane beat him to it. It was safe for him to do it now, when all eyes were fixed on Shane. He will not be remembered as the black man who quit the water challenge five minutes into it.

With Shane and Dreamz out of the challenge, very little movement took place over the next hour. People just floated there, holding their pole, a bit uncomfortable but very determined. It would've gone on that way, had Jonathan not made a fatal mistake – he was distracted for a moment when a huge fish swam by his ear, and in that time the snorkel's spout left his mouth and he swallowed a mouthful of salty seawater. That threw him off his game – he choked, lost his grip on the pole, and floated above the ocean surface. The leftovers were now down to four women.

Cindy, although out of her element as a very earthy individual, had made up her mind: she was going to win that challenge, no matter what. If only other people had known that Cindy was set on winning it, it would've saved them all so much time. But as they were all mute at the moment, she needed to show them her decision with actions, not words.

Another hour went by, and although it wasn't a tough challenge, physically, it was very hard to convince yourself mentally to stay in it. Katie looked from Tom to Terry, and decided to be honest with herself- there was no way she's gonna win it anyway. She got out of the water and wrapped herself in one of the towels waiting for them on the beach. It didn't take long for others to join her, Dreamz, Jonathan and Shane- every fifteen minutes or so, people kept appearing out of the sea, until only four remained – Tom, Terry, Ian and Cindy.

"It's been nearly four hours", Jeff updated the people on the beach.

But underwater, time completely stopped. It was a surreal experience, being part of the sea, moving very slowly with the waves, not making or hearing any noise at all. The atmosphere, however, was very tense, even when all seemed so tranquil. But, when nothing happened after what felt like days, some began to wonder why exactly were they trying so hard to win it.

Terry was one of these people. Up until now, he couldn't remember an immunity challenge he didn't desperately want to win. But then again, he also couldn't remember an immunity challenge he didn't *have* to win in order to stay in the game. He was always fighting for his life in these competitions. But now, he couldn't for the life of him figure out what he was fighting for. Was it just winning? Was it worth it? No. On the contrary – it would remind people of how threatening he is. He didn't need this. He was fine in his not-so-noticeable state, thank you very much.

But still, it was so hard letting go of that pole. He never bailed on a challenge before; he didn't know if he even had it in him. It was like his hands were glued: one finger at a time, he let go of the cold metal, until finally the water lifted him slowly to the surface. It was a strange feeling, but a feeling he could get used to. The feeling of safety.

And then there were three: Tom, Ian and Cindy. Back on the beach, 12 bored survivors were making their predictions on who would win this challenge.

"I say that's not really a question", claimed Jonathan. "Any physical challenge that Tom's participating in, he's gonna win. That's like a rule of nature or something."

"I don't know", argued Katie. "Ian spent so much time underwater with dolphins he's started to become one. It's like his natural habitat."

Ami frowned. "Don't count Cindy out, though", she said. "That woman can be as stubborn as a mule."

"Yeah", Rafe agreed. "All during our season we were afraid an endurance challenge is gonna come up, just because Cindy would never quit – she doesn't have it in her. That challenge with the vases on the head?"

"The one you decided not take part in, and to eat instead?" asked Jonathan.

"Yes, that one..." said an embarrassed Rafe. "She stood there like a statue for the whole hour. She said she could stay there for days if it was just endurance." Down in the water, Cindy was nothing like a statue – it's been more than five hours now, and she was shaking from head to toe, she was so cold. She felt sorry for the cameraman in front of her – he doesn't even have a chance at the immunity necklace. She wanted to believe she had a good chance of winning, but with Tom and Ian on her sides not even wavering, it was getting harder and harder to keep her confidence. But then something miraculous happened – Tom left his position and disappeared out of view. Tom the invincible, not a part of this challenge anymore. Maybe she does stand a chance, now with only Ian as her competition. Tom dragged his legs through the shallow waters towards the shore. "What happened?" Dreamz shouted.

"I was just outlasted, I guess", Tom explained apologetically. But he saw in the others' faces they weren't buying it. Truth was, he didn't need to make himself even a bigger of a threat, and besides, he wanted to give his pal Ian a chance to win something against him. He knew how important it was for their friendship to stay strong. But Ian didn't look at it that way. Cindy was his alliance's target, and all other eight members just went out and got themselves dry, leaving it to Ian to make sure she doesn't win immunity. He didn't expect anything more from most of them, but Tom surprised him by just giving up like that. He didn't sleep for something like twenty four hours, his skin was dead and wrinkly, and he missed the feeling of being able to breathe properly and not through a pipe. It just wasn't worth it – there were other choices for the boot besides Cindy. He didn't want to do all the dirty work for his alliance – he already had this experience once, and he didn't want to go through it again. He looked at a shaking Cindy, a determined look on her face, and that determination carried on to him, but had an opposite effect - he has made up his mind. He was going to quit the challenge, and unlike Terry, he knew exactly how it's done - after all, it wouldn't be the first endurance challenge he had quitted.

It took Cindy a minute or so to realize she was the last one standing, or rather, the last one suspended in a weird position underwater. When she finally did, she was so happy she forgot to breathe through her snorkel and swallowed some sea water. She came out of the sea choking and coughing, but the applause that greeted her was all worth it. Considering her competition, and she faced some tough competition, she was never prouder of herself.

Jeff was waiting for her with the necklace. That ugly mess suddenly looked to her like a beautiful piece of jewelry. She turned her back on Jeff to let him put the necklace around her neck, but he didn't.

"There's still one thing left to decide, Cindy", he said, and Cindy couldn't believe she had forgotten. "You have the option of providing your tribe with potatoes to eat, or machete to build a shelter with, *if* you give up the immunity you won fair and square after over five hours in the water. What is it gonna be?"

How could she forget? She had five hours in the water, and she didn't devote one minute to thinking what she would do in a situation like this. But now that she was faced with this, she knew exactly what to do – there really was no other option.

She looked directly into Rafe's eyes when she said: "I'll take that potato sack, Jeff, if I may."



When they returned to camp, it was already dawn. Some of them were still wet, most of them still shocked, and all of them very very tired. Processing what had just happened, and adjusting their strategy accordingly, could wait until tomorrow. Or, more accurately, until later today. With no shelter to return to, they all collapsed under their beloved tree and instantly fell asleep.

It was early afternoon when Cindy, once again, was the first one up. Her initial thought when awake was, *I've made the right decision*. That was also her third thought, when in-between her second thought was, *I've made the wrong decision*. It was one of the six leftovers who was going that night anyway, so keeping immunity wouldn't have helped her in the long run. And the potatoes that she earned her tribe weren't going to do her any harm, either. *I've made the right decision*, she repeated, but in the end it didn't matter – she had already done it.

Julie joined her not long after. They decided to walk to the well together, to get some water for boiling potatoes – their first real meal in six days. "Cindy, you've done great in that challenge. You should be proud of yourself", she said.

"I am", admitted Cindy, "but we're still in the same situation as before – which is two people short. Did you make any progress, talking to Eliza and Ami yesterday?"

"I think so", said Julie with caution. "And did you make any progress with Rafe?"

"I think so", said Cindy with even more caution, "But it came from a different direction than I expected."

"Well", Julie thought out-loud, "I think we should have a meeting when we come back to camp, and find out if the others made any progress as well."

"Good idea. It'll also give the other nine a chance to meet without making lame excuses."

When they returned to camp with a full pot, everyone was already awake. Katie walked up to the two women the moment she saw them, and whispered that she thinks the six of them should have a meeting.

"I say we boil the potatoes at the same time", she suggested. "It'll give us a good alibi."

Julie and Cindy agreed, and started working on the fire, while Katie went to fetch Courtney, Shane and Jonathan. They returned, Shane and Courtney strangely keeping their distance, a moment later. It was time for everyone to give their updates.

"Well", started Courtney, "Terry wasn't really sharing his secrets, but I really got the feeling he feels right at home in his alliance. He feels all the people in it deserve to be there." Cindy shuddered a little. Here we go again with the 'deserving' crap.

"Ian too feels like he's found his place", Katie added. "There's no real chance of him flipping to our side. But he is a good person to be close to. I feel like he can help us along the way, if I keep him close."

Jonathan sighed. "Along the way's just not good enough, Katie, we're going down tonight if we don't do something about it."

"We just have to work with what we have", Katie said simply.

"Well, I have some good news", announced Julie, trying to light the mood. "Eliza wouldn't say it, obviously, but I'm pretty sure she's on the outs on her alliance – she didn't seem to feel that much comfortable being a part of it."

"And something Rafe said gave me reason to believe that Dreamz is kinda in the same situation", added an excited Cindy. Two is really all they needed.

"Well, that's great!" said Courtney.

"Why?" asked Shane. "Why is it great? It's not like they're gonna jump ship the moment you say 'please'. It doesn't work like that. Even a nutcase like Eliza wouldn't leave the majority alliance, especially this early."

Katie noticed two things. One, that Shane was calling Eliza a nutcase. Considering the source, she couldn't help but find it amusing. And two, Shane's tone when he said 'majority alliance' sounded craving, almost desperate. He was now eyeing the nine sitting under the tree, obviously having a little meeting of their own about who should be going home tonight. Shane's look was like that of a child realizing he's not in the right clique. Katie decided to try and bring him back to earth.

"Shane?" she said carefully. "How did your discussion with Cirie go? Were you able to milk some information out of her?"

"Huh?" It took Shane time to realize he was being talked to. "Oh, No. Nothing. Nothing at all."

"That's great", Katie tested him.

"Yeah, that's... that's great."

Cindy rolled her eyes. She looked at Courtney and was surprised to see a pained look on her face.

"You know what?" said Shane finally, actually starting to walk towards the other alliance, "I think I'm gonna check on these guys, see what's going on with them."

"Shane", said Jonathan, "we're still trying to figure out what to do in order to save our asses, sure you don't wanna..."

"No, that's fine, continue without me" he said and walked away, and it really sounded like he couldn't care less. The other five watched him as he reached the ruling alliance, all of whom stopped talking the moment he had arrived.

"What is wrong with this guy?" asked a bewildered Jonathan.

"What is *not* wrong with this guy?" corrected Katie.

Cindy couldn't believe her eyes. 'Is he... trying to mingle with them?'

"Looks like", said Julie, as Shane was talking to Tom and pointing right to where they were seating. "Or to be more precise, looks like he's selling us out at this very moment."

Cindy still couldn't believe it. "Do you really think he'd turn on us so bluntly, just like that? Without even trying to hide it?"

"Sounds just like him", said Courtney, who was quiet up until now. Julie looked at her, and could tell that she was facing a victim of a broken heart. "Shane's out for himself and only for himself", Courtney said quietly. "It shouldn't really surprise us – it was obvious from the get go, and it became even more obvious at the reward challenge. The longer we trust him as part of our alliance, the harder his inevitable betrayal is gonna hurt us. I know we're pretty low on numbers as it is –" she looked at the four people staring at her – "but considering Shane a solid alliance member is just deluding ourselves. He's not on our side – he never was. He's on his side alone."

"So what do you suggest?" Jonathan asked her.

"Well", Katie was the one to answer, "Shane was right about one thing – nobody from the other alliance is gonna flip tonight. It's too early, or too late, whichever way you want to look at it. So it's one of us six that's going tonight, no matter what. And there are five of us sitting by the fire right now. If we trust each other, and decide to stick together, there's only one option – Shane needs to be the one going tonight."

"Well", Jonathan was quick to respond, "that's nice in theory and all, but we're not the ones making the decision – they are."

The 'they' that Jonathan was talking about were being visited by an unwanted guest. Shane was coming towards them with an unexplained grin on his face. They immediately stopped discussing whether they should get rid of Julie or of Jonathan after Cindy when he arrived, and announced: "I'm interested in being the tenth in your alliance."

When all of them just stared at him, he continued: "This game's about numbers, right? It never hurts to have more numbers, just in case". His subtext was – 'I'm a great go to have in your alliance, just in case'. He just hoped people would figure it out.

When no-one spoke, Tom decided to take the lead, once again: "I think I'm speaking for everyone, and you guys correct me if I'm wrong, but Shane – we really don't need a tenth. It's a huge alliance as it is now. But thank you for the offer, we appreciate it." A few people nodded in agreement. "Well, I just thought you might – well..." Shane was completely baffled by the sudden failure of his plan. Weren't they seeing what a great asset he can be? Was he completely surrounded by buffoons who were considered all-stars by some unfortunate accident?

Shane decided to not even mention the talk he had with the ruling alliance when he returned to the leftovers, now adding fifteen potatoes into the boiling water.

"I say we just vote for Tom and hope for the best", he sighed, looking gloomily at them all.

"Yeah, there's really no other option", Jonathan agreed with Shane.

It took about an hour for the potatoes to be ready – what seemed like the longest hour of the castaways' lives. They started to wonder what it feels like having food inside their stomachs, but it was so long ago they couldn't for the life of them remember.

When the potatoes were finally good enough to eat, none of them dared to take one and eat it. It was just too good to be true. Food. Actual food.

"Here's how they'd probably edit this scene for T.V.", speculated Katie. "A shot of the potatoes. A shot of me. Another shot of the potatoes. Then a shot of my hungry eyes. A shot of me licking my lips. Than, once again, a shot of the potatoes. A shot of the rest of you working while I devour the potatoes. Than, finally, a shot of the empty pot, followed by a shot of full me. That's some good entertainment right there, don't you

think?" she asked the cameraman, who just smiled politely, taking a shot of Katie staring at the potatoes.

"This is beyond great", Terry said as the potato he was holding touched his mouth. "I forgot how awesome food can be!"

"Yeah, I can get used to that", said Dreamz. "Starving ourselves is really starting to pay off, ain't it?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves", said Ami, "are we sure we have enough potatoes to keep us going?"

"I counted", said Eliza, "And, not taking into account the fifteen we're eating right now, there are 99 potatoes left in the sack."

"That's a whole lot of potatoes", Cirie said, impressed.

"Yeah, and according to my math, each of us could eat one every three days and it'd still last 'till the end. It's not enough to keep us full, but it's enough to keep us alive."

"Alive is good", Rafe said. "I like alive. Certainly better than dead."

"For sure", agreed Eliza, taking another bite. It was kinda nice to know they weren't about to starve to death.

"Welcome back", Jeff told them as they took their places an hour later in front of the tribal-council fire. "How were the last three days for you? Terry?"

"Certainly better than the previous three", Terry said. "For one, we were actually able to drink some water, thanks to saint-Tom over there giving up immunity. And only today he was joined by saint-Cindy bringing food to our stomachs, so I really can't complain. Things are definitely looking good right now."

"It's surprising to hear you so comfortable", said Jeff. "On your season, first you were frustrated 'cause your tribe kept losing, then you were frustrated 'cause you were in the minority. You never laid back and allowed yourself to just say, 'for the moment, things are looking good'".

"That's because they weren't, Jeff. They weren't looking good."

"But now?"

"Now they certainly are. In all aspects, things are looking good."

"Ami, do you agree? Are things looking good to you?"

"Well, at the moment, things are good, but you can't make assumptions in this game, certainly in a season like this, certainly with 14 other shrewd players planning on outlasting you. You can't feel too comfortable in Survivor, not for a second, so no, Jeff, things are not looking good. We'll wait and see if things are good when things come."

Jeff continued on. "Yau Man, do you think you could've carried on fine without those potatoes?"

"No, Jeff, we were going down!" said Yau Man enthusiastically, lingering on every word. "I tried to provide the rest of them with some roots and leaves from what the island had to offer, but it was essentially useless, as it wasn't going to satisfy the nutrition needs of grown men and women. We needed more, and now we got it. That means we aren't going to starve, we're just going to experience severe malnutrition!"

"That's a... unique way to look at it", said a smiling Jeff. He thought that the contestants would realize they weren't going to let them starve, but it was certainly good for the show, to keep them hanging.

"Let's talk about someone who certainly didn't experience severe malnutrition ever since the reward challenge – Shane. Tom, what do you think about his performance at that challenge?"

"To tell you the truth, Jeff, it scared me a little bit", Tom said. "You just stared at this guy and couldn't for the life of you figure out what he was thinking. It's certainly a trait that can help you in this game."

"Katie, do you agree?"

"Yeah", she answered. "I mean, I knew he was an actor, or at least an aspiring one, but I didn't know he was any good until two days ago. That's when I started to keep an eye on him."

Shane stared at her. What did she mean by keeping an eye on him? Was he just very good looking, or was there something else?

"And then", continued Jeff, "Shane does something else that might encourage you to keep an eye on him – when he wins three meals, he keeps them to himself instead of providing the whole tribe with food. Certainly not a conventional decision. Jonathan, what did you think of it at the time?"

"Obviously it surprised me", he answered. "It takes a whole lot of guts, and a whole lot of nerves, to come to that decision. It's clear Shane has both. And who are we to complain? He didn't break the rules; he acted within the game's limits."

"Shane", Jeff turned to him, "take us through your train of thought."

"What's there to think about?" Shane asked. "I don't get you people. This is an individual game, obviously if you have an option of eating a lot yourself or giving little to eat to the others, there's really only one option. It was the obvious thing to do. I sometimes wonder if any of them –" he looked around, " –know what they're playing at."

"Shane", said Courtney suddenly, "you do remember that during 'Exile Island', around this stage of the game, it was all any of us could do to keep you from quitting, right? Jeff, I hope people realize this is not a man who thinks rationally. This is a loose cannon we're talking about. You cannot trust this guy, and because of that, you cannot rely on him in any of your plans. You never know what he's really thinking, as the reward challenge showed. You never know where his loyalties lie."

This was an unexpected speech, to say the least, thought Shane, who looked at Courtney with his eyebrows furrowed in confusion. It certainly wasn't the smart thing for Courtney to do, selling out someone who's in the minority with her. But then again, he thought, this is Courtney we're talking about.

Jeff felt it was the right time to change the subject. "Let's look at someone who made an altogether different decision – Cindy. Cindy, did you really feel secure enough to let go of this immunity necklace?"

"Not at all, Jeff", was her answer. "But I did feel it was the right thing to do. First of all, we really are in a dire situation – when given the chance for some food, we have to jump at it. And besides that, Yeah, I could have maybe saved myself for another three days, but what's the difference if I'm voted out right after that? I have to think about how I'll fair in the long run, and I'd like to think giving my tribemates food is also going to give them food for thought – it sent the right message, hopefully."

"Rafe - did it? Did it send the right message?"

Rafe thought for a moment before answering. "Cindy proved today she's here to mean business. You might look at Cindy and think differently – you think she's here just for the experience, the wildlife, that she doesn't get it – but then you misinterpret her. She knows what she's doing. And because of it – she's dangerous."

"Is that right, Cindy?"

"Of Course I know what I'm doing, but I'm not unique in that aspect –this is all-stars, everybody here knows what they're doing. I'm not more dangerous than any of them."

Jeff wanted to ask Dreamz a question, but was interrupted by Cindy, who apparently haven't finished.

"I'd just like to address Rafe, if that's alright with you, Jeff."

"Of course, go ahead."

She turned to face Rafe. "Rafe, two years ago I was faced with a similar decision – and went the other way. You responded by voting me out of the game. Back then, you said you wouldn't have been able to do that had I given you the cars. Today, I gave up immunity to give you something a bit more valuable than cars, which you already had back home – I gave you food, which you desperately needed, which we all desperately needed. I'm not asking for your respect- I'm simply interested in whether you'll be consistent with your values or not. That's all."

Rafe looked almost angry at this. He didn't expect this, for Cindy to just flat out say what she said. Cindy didn't expect it herself, but she was, after all, in big danger of being voted off. She couldn't forgive herself if she didn't try anything in her power to stay.

Jeff also didn't expect it. It took him a moment to recover, and then he addressed Cirie with the next question: "Cirie, do you think it's fair to ask Rafe for something like that?"

"There are no innocent people sitting here tonight, Jeff", she answered. "We all learned our lessons in our original seasons, and we're all a lot wiser, but also a lot more cynical. So I don't expect Rafe to be a saint when it comes to voting. However, I do expect people to live up to their word, to be consistent with what they say, to be what they claim to be. I'll understand if they won't, but I probably wouldn't want anything to do with them if that were the case.

"This is unfinished business between Cindy and Rafe, so I'll not intervene, but in my very very humble opinion, people should stay true to their characters. Otherwise, what is left of us? "

Shane looked from Courtney to Cindy, and then to Cirie, with raised eyebrows. What was up with these people? What were they yapping about? He just wanted to get this over with - to vote a meaningless vote against Tom, to see another person from his doomed alliance get dropped, and to get it over with.

"Dreamz", Jeff said, "do you think consistency is important? That you should do something just because you said you'd do it?"

"You're asking the right guy!" Dreamz said proudly, and Jeff chuckled. "You should say what you'll do if you wanna do the things you say, for sure, but it's also alright to say one thing and do another thing, as long as you stick to this behavior, you know what I mean?"

"I really don't", said Jeff. He felt like this tribal council, although somewhat amusing, was going nowhere, with people saying everything except for informative stuff. This was, in his opinion, the right time to end it.

"So, let's get to the vote. Since Cindy gave up immunity – wisely or not wisely, that is still undecided – she's fair game, as are the rest of you. Eliza, you're up."

Eliza did as she was told, and the other fourteen followed. Courtney was the last one to cast her vote. When she looked at the camera, she imagined Shane standing in front of her, and said: "Tonight I'm voting you out. Out of my mind, out of my soul, and out of my tribe. Goodbye, Shane."

The voting urn, bigger than ever because it needed to hold up to sixteen votes inside it, was picked up by Jeff and placed between him and the survivors.

"I'll read the votes", announced Jeff, and he did.

Tom got a vote, as he well expected. He knew going into this game he probably won't have a chance of forgetting how his name was spelled.

Then Cindy got a vote. And another. And another one. And they kept on coming. Four, and five, and six. She looked at her name as though it was unfamiliar to her. It didn't matter. It's just letters on a piece of paper. It does not change the big picture. Cindy's streak stopped abruptly when Shane got a vote. He didn't expect a vote tonight, but he figured he should have expected it – With an alliance of nine, and the way he's been acting, some stray votes were only natural. But than two more votes came his way.

At that moment, each person's expression reflected what information they've been privileged to.

Tom, Terry, Cirie, Rafe, Yau-Man and Ami wore an expression of polite confusion. Shane wore an outraged, shocked expression.

The leftovers – Katie, Cindy, Jonathan, Julie and Courtney – wore a calm, optimistic-yet-cautious sort of expression.

And Eliza, Ian and Dreamz wore a nervous, anxious expression.

"If we trust each other", Katie said earlier that day, as Shane was making his way towards the alliance of nine, "and decide to stick together, there's only one option – Shane needs to be the one going tonight."

"Well", Jonathan was quick to respond, "that's nice in theory and all, but we're not the ones making the decision – they are."

"Not necessarily", Katie responded. "We don't need the other alliance as a whole to agree with us, we just need three of them."

A plan has been established, and assignments were given to Julie, Jonathan and Katie herself. First – they waited. They waited for Shane to return, defeated, from his discussion with the ruling alliance. They waited for the potatoes to be ready, and ate them. They waited up until moments before they were to make their way to tribal council – and then three people were cornered – Eliza by Julie, Ian by Katie and Dreamz by Jonathan.

"Listen carefully", said Jonathan to Dreamz, looking him right in the eyes. "The situation's like this."

"You're probably voting out Cindy or me tonight, right?" Julie asked Eliza. "Probably Cindy, because she's won immunity and gave it up?"

"Well", Katie said to Ian, "I'm asking you to vote out Shane instead. I think it'll benefit you."

"Shane's a wild-card, and you and I know how wild-cards are dangerous, how they can ruin one's game," argued Jonathan, "You never know what to expect from them. Cindy's not like that – you can get rid of her later. Shane's an immediate threat to you, to me, to everybody."

"Shane's tried to make deals with everyone", Julie insisted. "How do you know nobody took him on his offer? Everybody wants Shane in the final two with them – and that way, he's going to outlast everyone except one person – do you really want to sit on the sidewalks and watch that happen?"

"We can change this right now", Jonathan said to a listening Dreamz, "you won't be betraying you're alliance, as Shane's not a part of it – you'll just be making an individual move in an individual game, that's not a bad thing. You'll stick to your alliance *and* vote out a huge liability at the same time."

"Right now", Katie explained to Ian, "five of us are voting for Shane, and two more are being persuaded to as we speak. That's seven right there. Shane's voting for Tom

tonight, so he does not count. That leaves seven other votes for Cindy, if you vote with them. That's a tie, Ian. Ties are dangerous. We don't know what the rules for a tie are, not for certain, and that leaves everybody in danger. Everybody, including me, and including you. Is it worth it? Or would you rather see Shane go and feel safe?" "Think about it", Julie said to Eliza, "Shane's the logical boot anyway. Risking a tie to save him is suicide."

Jonathan looked at Dreamz sharply. "What is it gonna be, then?"

A fourth vote carrying Shane's name came out of the urn, and then a fifth. Shane began to laugh, it was so absurd. And people called *him* insane. But the sixth vote was less funny than the fifth. And the seventh vote had nothing funny about it. When Jeff announced: "The second person voted out of 'Survivor all-stars: Galapagos' – Shane", he wondered if he could ever see the humor in anything again.

But this quickly passed. As he carried his torch to Jeff, he smirked at the thought that he was brought back to all-stars as a comic-relief, but taken out as a threat. He supposed there are worse reasons to be voted off.

"The tribe has spoken", said Jeff, snuffing Shane's torch, "it's time for you to go."

"Don't you ever get tired of saying that?" Shane asked Jeff, and turned to face the fourteen people still playing. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do", he warned them, waving his finger at them all. Courtney looked at him, and without noticing, felt a little affection for that small mischievous kid getting thrown out without really having a chance to do some damage. He's like some kind of offensive joke, she decided - he really isn't that harmful if you don't take him too seriously.

Julie watched Shane disappear into the darkness, than looked over to Cindy who was still sitting there, looking thankful, and sighed with relief. Sure, Jeff ignored her in the past two tribal councils, and she was still in the minority alliance, but things could have been worse. They got rid of the right person tonight, and things weren't over 'till they were over. The situation could've been better, but it'll do, for now.

