

Chapter 3 – Comfortably Numb Days 7-9



"So who did you vote for last night?"

The fourteen all-stars expected a challenge that day; they just didn't expect it to be so early - First-thing-in-the-morning early. Not that it mattered – it wasn't like they could get much sleep, anyway, lying on the naked ground with insects crawling all over them. Before the sun was even rising, Dreamz got a nasty sting from an ant and couldn't get back to sleep after that. He got up, yawned, and was instantly grabbed by a producer asking him annoying questions. Most of them were unimportant questions about unimportant subjects, like finally eating last night and being underwater for five minutes. But now came the questions that actually made Dreamz think – the questions about his alliance.

"My vote was for Shane, and –"

"Can you please give an answer with the question embedded in it?"

"Right, right. Last night, I voted for Shane. I was cornered by Jonathan the moment before we went to tribal, and he kinda threatened me, said there're seven people voting for Shane tonight, and that it'd be a tie if I didn't vote with them. That's a risk I

wasn't willing to take, being on the block myself, so I just went with it, y'know? Don't know if I chose right, but it wasn't worth the trouble, risking myself so early. It was not worth it."

"So where do your loyalties lie right now?" The cameraman asked, and he sounded truly interested in what Dreamz had to say.

"They're with me, my loyalties lie with me, and that's it. But I *did* give my word, I gave it to my alliance of nine, and unlike last time, I'm playing for the jury as well, so I have to think about that stuff. It's not for second anymore, only first, you're looking at the first right here."

"Do you feel like you have a good chance of winning it all?"

"I'm trying not to become too comfy, but yeah, there's a chance, an alright one. Once we get to nine, people will want to get rid of the big ones, of Terry and Tom and whatnot, they'll just forget about me. Right now I'm labeled as the guy who can't win. That's a good place to be in a game like that."

"Who do you feel your allies are right now?"

"What, you're supposed to have allies? Why don't nobody telling me those things?" This was not exactly a joke – he really didn't have any true allies, not last time, not now. "But strangely enough, I found myself a little close to little Eliza of all people – maybe because we're both in an alliance with survivor giants and we're feeling out, maybe because we both don't have any filters when it comes to our mouths. On the first vote, we decided together to vote with the block, and this time, I have a feeling she voted against it just like me. "

"And who else voted for Shane last night, in your opinion?"

"Beats me. Maybe Shane himself, he's such a wacko. I'm glad we got rid of him, that's why I didn't argue with Johnny boy, that lunatic had to be out. He had potential to get into people's minds, with all that craziness of him. Now the minority is made mostly of quiet people, it shouldn't be any trouble picking them out one by one."

"And what can get in the way of achieving that?"

"Only ourselves. Us nine, we gotta have self-control. We gotta be patient. To stay in our place. That's not a bad place to be, and we gotta keep it. Or else we'd be replaced."

On the way back to camp, Dreamz made a detour to pick up tree-mail, and found out that all of them had to arrive immediately to an island nearby to participate in the reward challenge.

"Ian! Wake up!" he decided to first jerk awake the one who was snoring the loudest.

"Get up, man! We have to get going!"

"Hmmm?" Ian let out, and continued to snore. A funny idea came to Dreamz's head at that moment.

"Ian?" he muttered in Ian's ear, "do you have a secret alliance you wanna tell me about?"

"Yeah", Ian muttered, "but you mustn't tell anyone, you promise?"

"Hell yeah, I promise!", said Dreamz, now actually getting excited.

"It's with..." Ian began and then whispered something too quiet for Dreamz to understand.

"Didn't catch that", Dreamz said patiently, moving closer to Ian's mouth.

Ian again mumbled something incoherent. Dreamz got closer still, holding his breath.

"What was that? Who do you have a secret alliance with?"

"It's with you, silly!" said Ian loudly, wide awake and pointing at his cheek for Dreamz, who was inches away from him, to kiss it. "Came to wake me up with a kiss? That's so considerate of you!"

Giggles could be heard from where Cirie was lying – apparently she had just woken up to the image of Dreamz and Ian. From that moment, people started to wake up all around: It was hard to avoid Cirie's giggles. Dreamz backed off quickly, looking at Ian in disbelief.

"You had it coming, trying to milk me for information", Ian said, smiling.

"Be sure I won't be trying to milk you for nothing anymore", Dreamz said, trying to muster up a smile himself. It was harder than expected.

At this stage everyone was wide awake, as it was hard to come up with a good sleep on the hard ground anyway. They all walked to the beach and stepped into a large canoe that was waiting for them there, with instructions ordering them to head out to the nearest island.

"Why this early?" Courtney was wondering out-loud.

"Maybe they've decided we need a shelter to sleep in, so they're just gonna give us one!" said a puffy-eyed Eliza. It was clear to everybody that she didn't get much sleep.

"Yeah, that must be it", Jonathan rolled his also-puffy eyes.

"Maybe a twist is coming up?" suggested Terry. "Maybe they're finally going to divide us into two tribes?"

Ami frowned. "Jeff said no twists, remember? He said we're one tribe 'till the end. I'm guessing he wouldn't lie about something like that."

"So what is it?" asked Rafe. "What was so urgent that they couldn't let us *not* sleep a little more?"

"We'll find out in about two minutes, won't we?" said a rowing Tom as they got nearer and nearer to the beach on which Jeff was waiting for them, holding two small objects.

"Welcome guys", Jeff smiled at them. "How were the few hours you've spent since I've seen you at tribal council?"

"The feeling of nearly getting voted out was more comfortable than trying to sleep tonight, to tell you the truth", answered Cindy.

"Well", said Jeff, "this challenge might change this - for some of you, at least". Ami noticed that no covered objects could be seen anywhere near Jeff – where was their reward?

"For today's challenge, you will be randomly divided into two teams once again. Your team's goal: get to a certain destination. As simple as that. How do you get to that destination? By using a compass." He now showed the tribe the objects he was holding: two small, golden compasses. "Each time, you will be given a direction. You must follow that direction until a sign will lead you to another. I must warn you now: every small digression from the route can cause a big problem. You should stick to what the little arrow in your compass has to say if you wanna be sure you're on the right way."

The two teams were selected. At first glance, it seemed to Jeff that they were completely unmatched – with both Terry and Tom on the same side – but then he realized Cirie and Katie ended up on that team as well to balance things out. The other members on that team were Rafe, Ian and Ami, while the other team had Dreamz, Courtney, Yau-Man, Cindy, Eliza, Jonathan and Julie. Jeff turned to those seven and asked: "Who should I give the compass to?"

Eliza pointed at Yau-Man at once. The others played along, and he accepted it. Eliza's reasoning behind it wasn't only because he was used to finding his way in the wilderness, as, after all, this is what his childhood must have looked like.

"And you?" Jeff asked the second team. "Who wants the compass?"

Two voices said "me" at the same time: the voices of Terry and Ami. The two looked at each other for a moment. They both volunteered because they thought no one else would take the lead, seeing that it was almost never a good idea to take the lead in a game with about sixteen leaders. But they were both wrong.

"Let her have it", Terry said with a weak smile, and the compass was given to Ami, who was still eyeing Terry somewhat suspiciously.

"I'll be waiting for the winning team in your final destination, along with the reward.

"Now, if you please, come with me."

They walked with him for a few minutes on the unknown beach until they reached what looked like a large, covered road-sign stuck in the sand.

"This sign will show you the first direction you must head in, until you reach a new sign, just like this one, giving you a new direction."

It was time for the teams to get started. "Go ahead, point your compass to the north so we'll be ready", whispered Jonathan in Yau-Man's ear, and he did so. Ami observed and did the same. Her compass told her they were facing north right now.

"Survivors ready?" Jeff asked, just out of politeness, as he was going to start the challenge anyway. "GO!"

And he uncovered the sign, which was actually a drawing of a compass, with its arrow pointing north, ahead of where they were standing.

The air was filled with movement as fourteen people first watched to see where their compass-holder was heading, and then sprinted in that direction.

"Ian, a bit to the right!" shouted Ami as she walked as fast as she could with her eyes both on the compass and on her teammates, to make sure they stayed on track. This was not an easy task.

Soon, it was getting clear that it was no use running as fast as possible, as the navigators could only walk at a certain pace. Yau-Man tried to run while looking at the compass – but the movement shook the little arrow so badly the direction was unclear. It was essential for them to know where they were going at all times.

They were all half-running, half-walking on the beach for a few minutes, with the compass-holders yelling directions a few times, when the ocean was finally seen from afar. A minute later, when they could examine the sea in more detail, they noticed two things in it – a small boat and a shabby-looking raft, both with oars already on them.

Ian, who was now leading the pack, thought things couldn't have been clearer: The first team to get to the boat gets the boat; the second team is stuck with the raft.

Up until then, Ian ran as fast as he could; now that he's seen what's ahead, he ran a little bit faster. But he wasn't the only one: Dreamz was now at his side, apparently just as eager to get to the boat first.

With the boat a few feet from them, Ian realized this battle was lost. Dreamz threw himself on the boat, in what seemed like a painful gesture, and Ian was outrun. He now had the option of confronting Dreams, of getting on that boat and refusing to let the other team have it, insisting that it ain't over until all seven members of a team arrive, but he felt it wasn't right. Dreamz arrived first. Ian didn't run anymore when approaching the raft.

Soon the others arrived, with Ami and Yau-Man bringing up the rear: they were both running, understanding that looking at the compass wasn't much use until they reached the shore. Dreamz's team was quick to realize they were lucky enough to be handed the better vehicle. They settled in the small boat, each of them holding an oar except for Yau-Man, who placed himself at the front in order to see where they were going.

Ian's team wasn't feeling as grateful. It was hard for all seven to get on the rickety raft, as it seemed ready to fall apart at any minute. Once somewhat settled, six of them took six oars from the middle of the raft while Ami looked at the compass, trying to stop it from moving with the waves and find the north. When she took a second to look away from the compass and observe the other team, she saw the boat already getting further and further away. This was not a good sign.

"Row!" yelled Terry, and the team did as Terry ordered them to, struggling to get the raft away from the shore. "Row!"

The raft was making its way very slowly, with the waves bringing it backwards whenever they had made any progress. It seemed like they were moving at a pace that was getting them nowhere.

"It's fine, guys", Cirie tried to encourage them, "once we pass the big waves, it'll be a smooth ride."

"Ami", Terry asked, "are we moving in the right direction?"

"Yeah", she answered, "if you call that 'moving'."

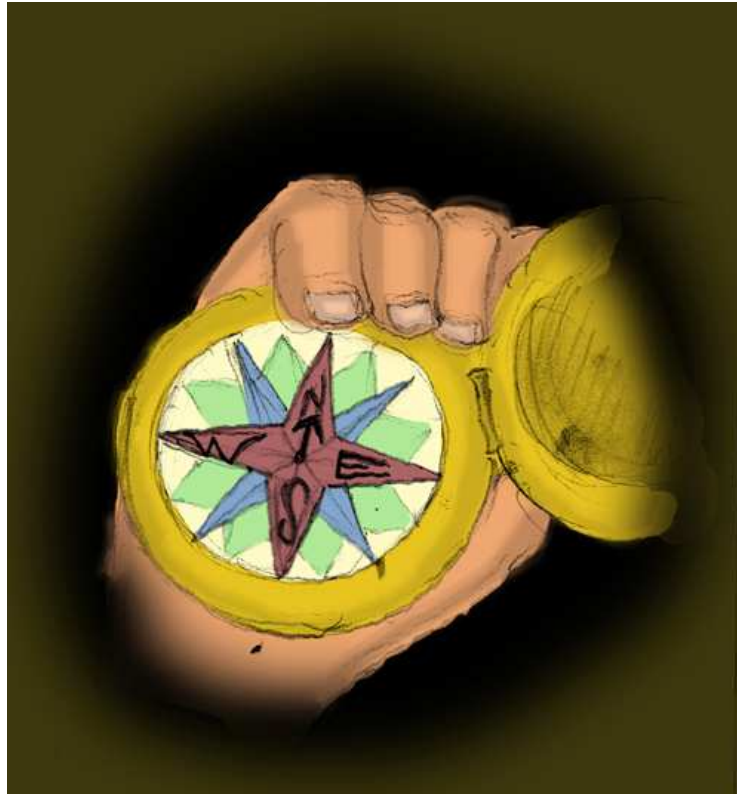
The team that got the boat did a lot better. For one, they weren't in peril of drowning in the middle of the sea. Their boat seemed steady enough to carry them safely to their destination. "The current is trying to take us a bit too much to the west", Yau-Man pointed out, and the right side of the boat, which contained Cindy, Julie and Dreamz, all rowed a bit harder to straighten the boat.

"We got a system working over here!" said Dreamz happily. Things were looking bright.

When they noticed a round shape in the middle of the sea, things were looking brighter. "I think it might be our next direction!" announced an excited Jonathan. And indeed it was. When they got near enough to read the sign, they saw that the drawn compass' arrow was pointing to the east. "East it is!" said Yau-Man. "Courtney, Jonathan, Eliza, stop rowing for a second."

They were now heading east, with Yau-Man making sure they were staying on track. It wasn't an easy task, as the boat was moving constantly with the waves, but still, they were pretty sure they were doing better than the other team. With the sun in front of them covered with clouds, and the morning breeze in their faces, it was hard not to enjoy the challenge they were doing so well in. The endless surface of the sea was interrupted by a large, dark dot right in front of them – a dot which grew bigger and bigger until it became apparent that they were about to land on the sands of another island. This was not the case, however. When they got even closer, they weren't facing a beach they could anchor in – they were facing –

"A frigging cliff", said a shocked Dreamz.



Ami's team was rowing as hard as they could, but still, they could see nothing but water all around them. The sun and the compass were the only signs telling them they were heading somewhere – otherwise it was very easy to believe they were lost at sea. "It's – so – unfair", said a rowing Terry between intakes of breath, "giving one team a yacht and another team a bunch of sticks barely attached to each other – what were they thinking?"

"It's not unfair- it's just part of the rules", argued Ami. "I bet you wouldn't have been complaining if we had received the boat."

"That doesn't matter right now", Rafe tried to calm things down. "We need to take advantage of the fact that the other team probably feels comfortable in their place. We need to translate our frustration into determination, into action."

"You're right", said Tom, who saw no reason not to act as though they were still in it.

"Ami, will you give us rowing instructions, to make sure we're in sync?"

"Sure", said Ami. It was weird, feeling a bit like a leader again. This was not something she had planned on. "And... row! And... row!"

They all did as they were told. They were tearing through the sea as fast as possible, given the circumstances. It was suddenly an advantage to feel like they're losing – 'cause when you feel like you've already lost, you've got nothing to lose.

"We have time, guys, let's think this through", said Eliza. They were standing in the boat, facing a stone wall about twenty feet high, with the compass suggesting they should walk right through it. They could see something on top, presumably a direction sign, but they couldn't see it from there.

"What's there to think about?" asked Jonathan. "We need to get to the sign, and the sign's on top of this cliff, so we need to climb the cliff. Pretty simple, isn't it?"

"Do you see a way for us to climb it?" Eliza asked back. "There aren't exactly marked places where you can place your feet. It's an impossible task."

"So what do you suggest?"

Julie took a practical approach. "We really have no choice but to walk around the island until we find a place we can climb. This is certainly not the place to climb, if we wish to remain alive."

"Let's head out, then", said a frustrated Jonathan, "I just hope we can find our way back to this point once we climb up there."

"There shouldn't be a problem, we just have to walk back with the shoreline to achieve that", said Yau-Man, and they turned left and began to walk.

"We're walking for – what seems like – half an hour and – nothing", said an exhausted Cindy after what seemed like half an hour, when the lack of sleep was really starting to affect her. "I hope we'll find some – way to climb – soon-"

"Have faith, Cindy", Courtney assured her, "we still got plenty of time." They didn't.

"And... ROW!" yelled Ami. You'd think that with time, the team sitting on the wooden raft would get tired of fighting their way in the sea – but the opposite was true. The more they struggled, the more determined they became. The sea was moving under them like silk, and soon enough, the beach that was their next destination was starting to come into view. But something else was coming into view as well- the other team's boat.

"Well, that's encouraging", said Katie as the cliff that was facing them, along with the sign on top of it, became visible. "Should we fly to the top or just ask the sign to come to us?"

"Neither", said Rafe, "we'll just have to walk around the island until we'll find an acceptable place to climb, won't we?"

Cirie nodded. "We need to do it fast, though, if we want to catch up with the other team. They must've already moved on from here."

"Wait just one second", said Tom. He wanted to see if he could buy his team some needed extra time. He saw a few cracks in the rocky cliff, and wondered if he could place his feet in those cracks in order to reach the top...

"That's suicide, Tom!" Cirie yelled as Tom started to climb, holding on to every bump and hole in the rocky surface, "just get down so we can find a safe way of doing it-" But he was already up there, gasping for air but victorious nonetheless. "North-west", he said as he read the sign visible to him, "we need to go north-west."

"North-west it is", said a smiling Ami, looking at her compass, "god, it's helpful to have a super-hero on your team."

"I'm no super-hero", answered Tom from above, "just a normal hero, that's all."

"You should have seen that one time in Palau", Katie said to Ami, "when he saved a cat from a burning building while at the same time helping an old lady cross the street. It was pretty impressive."

"It was nothing", joked Tom.

"While this is all very amusing", Terry interrupted, "don't we need to get going? We're still behind, remember?"

"Well", said Ami, pointing to their right, "north-west is that way."

"Let's go, then", Terry said, and they all hurried in the direction Ami was pointing at, with Tom walking in the same direction, only above them all.

The second team had finally found a safe and moderate way up, and so they made their way back to where their boat was, only now, they were twenty feet higher than before.

"That's weird", pointed out Julie fifteen minutes later, when they were back on the same spot and noticed the raft there. "How come we didn't see them arrive if they're already here?"

"Maybe they just went the other way", suggested Cindy. "In any case, let's hope they haven't found a safe place to climb yet. Let's hope we still have the advantage."

"I think it's safe to assume we do", said Jonathan. "You see the footprints down there, in the direction opposite to the one we took? They're probably still looking for a way up. We have nothing to worry about."

Dreamz was now looking at the sign. "Yo, Yau, I think we gotta head north-west, it's what's shown here, right?"

"Yes, according to the compass, we're in the right direction already, we just need to keep going", Yau-Man said.

"Let's keep going then", Jonathan said, "Not to be over-confident, but I can't wait to meet Jeff and see what our reward is."

"That's pretty over-confident", Julie said.

It didn't take long for Tom to rejoin his team, and now Ami was leading them deep into the island. The sand under their feet was quickly turning into ground, and the trees around them became bigger and thicker, until they were facing what seemed to be a thicket of plants they had no chance of going through.

"That doesn't seem right", said Rafe. "How are we supposed to pass through all this?" They tried to find a way in, but the entanglement was so thick, there was no point. They were stuck.

"Wow, that's great, Ami", said an annoyed Terry, "you know, you could have told us earlier that you have no idea how to read a compass, it would've saved us a lot of time."

"I'm sure you would have done a much better job, Terry", snapped Ami back, "just like you led your tribe to victory on your season." She didn't need to take this from Terry; she had no patience for people like him, not right now.

"What's the point of bringing a majority to the merge if you're just gonna eat each other later?" said Terry.

"I bet you enjoyed watching that", laughed Ami, "I bet you were so happy to see a bunch of women betraying each other."

"What does that supposed to mean?" Terry said, "I have nothing against women, ask my wife, ask anybody, I don't have a sexist bone in my body –"

"That's not what Cirie told me."

A shocked Terry looked from a victorious Ami to Cirie, who avoided looking back at him. So was that what it's all about? That's why Ami gave him the cold shoulder all along? Was she talking to Cirie about him? Was she going to confront him about it, right now, in front of everybody?

"Look!" said Ian, and everyone turned to look. Leaning against the tree nearest to them were two machetes, shining in the daylight, there for anyone to see. They were all so focused on the problem that they didn't see the solution lying right in front of them.

So Ami was leading us the right way, thought an embarrassed Terry. He did not like the idea of apologizing to her, but it seemed inevitable. Just not now. He would get to it later.

"I guess we need to... chop our way into this mess?" asked Katie, pointing at the thicket.

"Guess so", said a relieved Ami. "Tom, would you do the honors of saving us once more?"

"It would be my pleasure" bowed Tom, and he took one of the machetes and started clearing their path into the woods.

"Does that mean that we're... ahead of the other team?" asked Rafe. He couldn't believe it.

"Looks like", said Katie, "unless they replaced their machete right here, after they already used it. And re-grew the vegetation they had cut. But that seems unlikely."

Not long after that, the other team arrived on the same spot. "That's weird", Julie said, looking at the narrow path made through the trees and plants, and then at the one machete still resting on the tree-trunk.

"What is?" asked Dreamz. "It's damn obvious we should go through here, ain't it? I mean, it's an easy one."

"So why give us a machete if the path's already cleared?" wondered Julie. "Is it going to get harder to pass along the way, or can it be..."

"You don't possibly think that..." started Cindy.

"Would you two like to share?" asked Jonathan, "or just continue to talk in half sentences while we all wait?"

"You're right", said Julie, jumping at the chance to torture Jonathan for a bit, "We should just say..."

"Yeah", Cindy said, catching Julie's eyes, "we mustn't continue to..."

Jonathan didn't find this to be funny. "Get to the point, will you?"

Julie explained. "It just seems like the other team got here first."

"That can't be", Dreamz said decisively. "We woulda seen them on the way."

"Probably", Yau-Man thought out-loud. "But I can still think of a couple of instances where we could have missed them going past us. It is not out of the question."

Courtney frowned. "We shouldn't think like that, guys, we should stay positive. It's not over until it's over, right? I still feel like we have the upper hand in this. The machete's probably for us to use later on."

"Let's hope so", said Jonathan. "It doesn't help us to debate it, anyway. We need to keep going and see what awaits us."

"Yeah, let's keep..." said Cindy.

"Let's get..." said Julie.

And when they were making their way in the thick mess of trees and bushes, they were a lot quicker about it. They were now presented with the option that they might not have it in the bag, like they had been thinking a few minutes ago.



Tom was cutting branches left and right. It was dark there, with treetops hiding the sky, and thorns were slashing through their clothes and skin, but they could feel that they were close.

"I can feel we're close", said a worn-out Cirie.

"What exactly are we close to?" asked Ian. No one even knew what they were playing for.

"Right now", said Katie, "I'll be satisfied if our reward is an end to this challenge. Not that I'm not having fun", she said, removing a worm from her shoulder and tossing it to the ground, "because I am. Buck-loads of fun."

Terry wasn't having fun himself. It wasn't the challenge- this wasn't a problem for him. It was the atmosphere. Now, because of what Ami had said, everybody was shooting glances at him – he could feel it even in the semi-darkness. He needed to talk to Ami the very first chance he got, because with seven women out of fourteen players, this might be a game-changing point for him – or even a game-ending one.

"Ami?" asked Rafe. "We're dead on, right? We're on the right direction?"

"As far as I can tell", said Ami. "The compass is pointing us this way. I really hope it's the right one."

"Well, if it isn't", said Rafe, "at least we experienced a little bit of the nature that surrounds us, looked at some of the local vegetation –"

"Rafe", said Tom, "I'm holding a sharp machete, and I'm not afraid to use it."

But, apparently, Tom didn't need to use the machete any longer. They reached a clearing, and on that clearing they found Jeff, and a sight they didn't expect to see. "Holy cow", said Tom, but there was no cow there, and certainly not a holy one. Instead, they found themselves in a camp – a camp which was everything their camp wasn't.

"Congratulations", Jeff smiled at them. "Come and have a look at your reward." The first thing that caught their eyes was the shelter. *A real shelter.* Not just a tree you sleep under – a built, comfortable-looking shelter, in which seven people could easily fit. Cirie smiled at the thought of sleeping without leaves falling all over her. But the shelter wasn't the only improvement from their former camp. A large bundle of firewood – actual firewood, not just thin sticks they could pick from the ground without the help of any sort of knife – could be found right in front of them. There was a fire pit, with a fire already burning, and on one of the rocks circling it – flint. No more rubbing two sticks together in hopes of getting a spark – at least for a short period of time. Flint would make things easier.

The best part, though, was the sight of two trees in the middle of the clearing. It was obvious that the Galapagos Islands weren't their natural environment – they were probably planted by the production crew – but even Rafe, who usually hated people messing with the environment, didn't mind those trees. A coconut tree stood at their left, full of big, hairy, brown coconuts. A plantain tree stood at their right, full of big, slick yellow plantains. Ian, who got used to the idea of living from one potato every three days, didn't mind getting used to some variety in the food section.

"This is your reward", Jeff stated. "For the next day and a half, you will be living at a normal camp, a camp where some things are given to you, unlike the camp you left early this morning. You won't have to struggle when starting a fire, or when trying to sleep – you will experience camp-life that is more similar to what you had experienced on your previous seasons."

Katie and Ian exchanged looks. Katie mouthed to Ian: "Where is the bathroom?"

At that moment, noise came from the path Tom had carved for them – The other team, lead by Yau-Man, had arrived.

Awkward silence ensued. Terry tried not to look too pleased at the look of the other seven realizing they had just lost.

"Come on in", Jeff welcomed the late-comers. "I'm sorry to tell you that all of this-" he showed them the camp with his hands, "is not for you to enjoy. You will return to your regular camp until the next immunity challenge takes place."

Courtney's heart dropped like an unreachable coconut falling from a tree. She had been sure that if they had enough faith in their team's success, they would prevail. But they didn't. They lost. Why was that? For some strange reason, Shane's voice came into her head loud and clear: *'isn't that sad, Courtney, that your new god didn't come and save you? He's not a very good god, that one, is he? Maybe you should pick a better one next time.'*

"Congratulations", Julie said to the winners, and the other six from her team tried to look as pleased with the outcome as they possibly could.

Jonathan said, a little more loudly than he meant: "remember to eat and sleep enough for all of us."

The losing team said their goodbyes and then went back through the jungle path, through the rocky beach, through the sea on their boat, the boat that was sure to bring them victory in the challenge. They were surprised to see the sun beginning to disappear into the sea. When they arrived to the island where the challenge had begun,

they didn't need a compass to point them to the canoe waiting for them at the other end.

"Who needs coconuts, or plantains, or a shelter, when we got each other?" Eliza said melancholy.

"I do", answered Dreamz.

"Who wants dinner?" asked Ami, lightening the fire easily with the flint. "That was just a hypothetical question, of course."

The mood couldn't have been more relaxed. They all tried their shelter, their comfortable, padded, spacious shelter, and it was all they could ever wish for – except for a bed, of course, but after six nights of sleeping – or rather, not sleeping – on the ground, they had already forgotten such a thing as a bed even existed.

"I can get used to this!" said a cheerful Cirie.

"We shouldn't, though", pointed out Ami, "get used to it, that it. In two days' time, we're back to our old shelter. We shouldn't get too comfortable."

"Too late", came Ian's voice from the shelter. "I'm not moving from this spot until a giant dinosaur comes crashing, looking for human meat, and even then, I'll have to weigh my options. This is just so good."

"I feel sorry for the people not here to enjoy it", said Tom seriously.

"No, you don't!" argued Ian.

"No, I really don't", agreed Tom.

Ami offered her tribe fried coconuts, which never tasted better, and then they all settled in the shelter for the night, even though it was still dusk.

"I wonder what it feels like to sleep", said Katie.

"Well", said Rafe, "we'll soon find out."

And in just a few minutes, they found out.

Tom and Ian were the first up on day eight. The sun was already halfway up.

"Best-" Ian yawned, "-sleep-" he stretched his hands and yawned once again, "-ever".

Tom was grateful for the opportunity to talk to Ian privately – he waited for this since the last tribal council. Ian, on the other hand, was dreading this.

"Let's go for a walk", Tom offered, or, perhaps, ordered Ian.

"Sure", Ian said meekly.

The two of them walked quietly for a long time. They left the clearing and walked through the path from which they came the day before, until they reached the beach. It was still very early in the morning, and everything was painted in bright gold. Finally, Tom spoke.

"I was quite surprised at last tribal's outcome, to tell you the truth", he said offhandedly.

"Yeah", Ian tried, "it was pretty intense."

"You probably know what I'm about to ask you", Tom said, wanting to get to the point.

Ian sighed. "You're wondering if I'm one of the alliance members who voted for Shane to leave instead of Cindy." He was quiet for a few seconds. Lying to Tom was like trying to fool a lie-detector. "Well, I did, but it was simply-"

"I don't need any explanations", said Tom, almost robotically. "I just wanted to know, so I could act accordingly."

When they returned, a plantain breakfast was in the making, and everybody was already up, with big grins on their faces.

"Good morning!" Katie welcomed her Palau pals. "What have you two been up to?"
"We were looking for the bathroom", Ian tried to smile at her. "Couldn't find it anywhere."

Katie looked at Ian, then at Tom, and understood. She couldn't help but feel a little guilty about the spot she put Ian in, but then again, it's not like he didn't do the same to her once. It was a different game, with different alliances, and in an all-star season, relationships, with all their importance, need to be put on hold. It's not what this game's about. She just wanted to find an opportunity to say all this to Ian.

"I think I know where the bathroom is", said Katie to Ian. "You want me to show you?"

When Ian nodded, and they began to walk away from camp, Katie couldn't help but notice she had just used the worst excuse ever for two people to get away from the others. But who cares. She doesn't need to be subtle around people like Terry.

Terry didn't catch Katie's and Ian's exchange. He was too busy helping Ami in making breakfast, by bringing her plantains which he picked himself from the nearby tree. This was his chance to talk to her privately by the fire, as Tom went to sit with Cirie and Rafe in the shelter, out of earshot.

"Listen", he said, not looking directly at Ami, but rather at the frying pan full of raw plantains. "It's obvious you have some kind of problem with me. You didn't talk to me once during the past week. Now, I don't know what you've heard from Cirie..."

"She just told me certain things you said", said Ami matter-of-factly. "Things that sort of conveyed your opinions on women, *and their place*."

"Well", Terry stumbled with his words, "you needed to be there in order to understand, to hear the context it was said in-"

"It's not just that", Ami said, focusing on the plantains. "It's what I saw on TV **from** you. It's your behavior during the last seven days. I'm sorry if I've been tough on you yesterday, I really am. Ultimately, it comes down to the fact that we're just two very different people."

"Well, that's fine", Terry now turned his talk into a whisper, "but you don't understand what's at stake here."

Ami finally looked at him. "What do you mean? What's at stake?"

Terry signaled with his head the cameraman sitting at their side, taping their every word. "My wife will be watching", he said, now so quietly Ami had to lean closer, "and so will my co-workers, and my two kids. They can't know I've said those kinds of things. I beg you to help me here. You don't have to lie; just... don't mention it anymore. Please, Ami."

It was like looking at a little child begging not to be punished. Ami didn't know what to say. On one hand, she hated Terry's arrogance, his self-entitlement. On the other, she wasn't going to destroy his persona on TV, even if it's a fake one. Terry has a sexist side, but he probably doesn't show it in his day-to-day life. This is for him to solve, however; Ami didn't feel comfortable affecting Terry's personal life like that.

"Your secret's safe with me", Ami said at last.

Terry couldn't believe it. Was Ami really letting it slide by so easily?

Back in Exile Island, the same thing had occurred. Terry had made comments he shouldn't have made, and Aras had heard them, and shared them with Cirie. But back then, Terry had begged Aras to forget what he heard, to not talk about it, at least in front of the cameras. And he got his wish. And now, Ami agreed to do the same.

"I'm glad you came through with your vote", said Katie to Ian.

"Well", said Ian, "Tom isn't. He's furious."

They were walking deep into the woods, with **bird noises** all around them.

"He shouldn't be. That was your decision. You are allowed to make your own decisions in this game. You're *supposed* to make your own decisions."

Ian frowned. "Tom doesn't see it that way. He sees it as a betrayal of trust. I think he sees him and me as a two-headed person, as if we're the same being..."

"I think it's more than that", said Katie. It was uncomfortable to say, but she felt it was needed to be said. "You and I both know Tom likes to... play the lead role. He likes to take control, and he expects you to go along with him. The last tribal-council, you had acted on your own, and that scared him. It implies you have thoughts, feelings, god forbid. You shouldn't feel bad you have those, Ian. If anything, you should start thinking separately from Tom, to think what's best for *you* and you alone."

"And you believe it's best for me to jump ship", Ian said fiercely. "You think I should align with you and your alliance."

"It's only my alliance because it's the correct alliance to have in this game!" Katie said, frustrated. "Do you really want to be stuck in the end with Terry? With *Tom*? Do you remember what happened the last time we were stuck in the end with Tom?"

Ian didn't answer.

Katie continued: "I know jumping ship can be hard, especially this early in the game. But you'll have people in your alliance that you can beat. You'll have *me* in your alliance, and I think I proved to you last time that I'm willing to go with you as far as possible."

"You know I adore you, Katie", Ian said, "and I really wish I was in an alliance with you. But that's not how things turned out. This is just the way it is. To each his own." Ian didn't want to flip flop, not in this stage of the game. He had made an alliance, and he should stick to it. And yet, what was Tom's statement all about? *'I just wanted to know, so I could act accordingly'*? That did not sound too reassuring.

Tom was only half-hearing Cirie and Rafe talking. Mostly, he was thinking about Ian, and how much he could trust him. The answer to that question wasn't going to play a role in Tom's game – he was going to take Ian to the end, no matter what – but it was a thing of interest. Ian chose to vote out Shane, instead of going with the group consensus, and not only that – he chose not to share this with Tom, or with anybody, for that matter. Was he trying to show his rebellious side? To stand up on his own to (very large) feet? Or was he pushed into a corner? If he was, Tom had an idea about who was the pusher. And he also had an idea how to stop the pusher from pushing, so that the pusher will push no more.

"What do you think they're talking about?" Rafe asked, watching Ami and Terry exchanging words.

"Probably speculating about what *we're* talking about", speculated Tom.

"Seems likely", agreed Cirie. "It's so strange, the paranoia that's starting to sink in. You won't do that in your normal life – thinking about what goes on in other people's minds... and here, only eight days in, you're starting to lose it!"

"I'll tell you who's starting to lose it", Rafe said, in a gossipy manner. "Courtney. Did you see how she looked at us yesterday when she realized she lost the challenge? For just a moment, I feared for my life. I feared for *her* life."

"Maybe I'm not the best to judge", said Cirie slowly, "as I didn't have the best relationship in the world with Courtney, but she does seem... more mental than usual. And not even in a theatrical way, like she's used to – it's just her eyes. There's something off about them."

"I see what you mean" Tom said. "I thought Shane's departure would allow her to stand on her own two feet – but it just made it worse, from the little I've seen. She seems so lost."

Rafe jumped in: "I'm feeling a bit lost myself, to tell you the truth, after Shane's departure. How did *that* happen?"

"That's what I've talked to Ian about", Tom said, "not long ago. He was one of the votes."

Rafe couldn't believe what he was hearing. "And who were the others?"

"Couldn't tell you", said Tom. "But if I had to make a guess, it would be Dreamz. He seemed shady the moment Yau-Man and I approached him to join the alliance, and, depending on his past reputation, that shouldn't surprise us."

"So what does that mean?" asked Rafe, "do we just cut him off?" And then, it hit him. Not the answer to the question what to do; he didn't have the answer. It hit him that he was sitting in a shelter, talking strategy with Tom and Cirie. *Talking strategy with Tom and Cirie*. He had to say it a few times in his head to make it real. ***Talking strategy with Tom and Cirie***. He was sitting there, talking with those two giants like an equal. At this moment he decided – he wouldn't give this alliance, this situation, for the world.

"I don't think so", said Tom, "Not cut him off completely, anyway, that wouldn't do us any good. It's not like he voted one of us out- he just didn't agree with our decision." Cirie wasn't convinced. "But we do have enough people in our alliance even without him. We could pull it off, if we decided to."

"And what kind of message will it send to the others?" asked Tom. "People like Eliza, who I'm guessing feels out of place as it is, will only understand from this that the people at the bottom of the alliance are in danger, and will do something about it – we have to stay away from over-analyzing, from rushing things. As my old friend, Gregg, used to say – let's just stick to the plan."

"Yeah", said Rafe, "Yeah, we probably should, this early in the game. And besides, it's not like getting rid of Shane was such a bad idea, Dreamz and Ian and who-else kinda knew what they were doing – he was one of the most dangerous people here, if allowed to play long enough. Not one honest word came out of his mouth. He's a natural actor."

"It's kind of funny", said Cirie, "how one's profession can tell you so much about the way that person's gonna play the game. Shane will of course try to act his way into winning, as opposed to someone like you, Tom, being a fireman-"

"Actually, I'm in insurance now."

"Oh."

When Katie and Ian returned to camp, they all ate breakfast together by the fire. They continued to boil water from a well located near their camp (it only took Cirie and Terry five minutes to get to it), and everybody was so full and comfortable, they just continued to sit around the fire until lunchtime came. This was easily their best day yet out there – but you couldn't exactly say that the competition was stiff.

After lunch, they continued to sit there some more. They couldn't help it; they were too full, too tired, too relaxed.

"Who would have thought coconuts and plantains can be such a satisfying meal?"

Ami asked.

"Too satisfying", Cirie said, rubbing her tummy. "I feel like I have bricks stuck in my stomach."

"Feel like going for a little trip?" asked Katie. "Walk the food down?"

"Sure", said Cirie, getting up, which proved to be a challenging task.

"That's not very smart", noted Rafe. "Doctors advise to wait between food and exercise."

"Doctors also advise not to go through starvation and dehydration for thirty-nine days", noted Katie. "That just goes to show you we don't always take our doctors seriously."

Tom watched as Katie and Cirie disappeared into the trees, and then turned to the others. "This is our opportunity", he said.

"Is it?" asked Terry, confused.

"Yeah, I've waited all day for a chance for us to talk without Katie here. That's because I think we need to get rid of her next."

Ian turned to look at Tom so quickly his neck hurt. "We've talked about this, Tom", he said. "We have... other people to get rid of first."

"Why is that?" asked Tom. "It's a perfect opportunity. She's the only one from the minority alliance who's here with us on the reward – while the others have time to bond with Eliza, with Yau-Man, with Dreamz – right now, Dreamz is our weak link. We need to make sure he's on the same page with us, and I bet he'll have no problem getting rid of someone like Katie – unlike getting rid of someone like Cindy. He had proven that two days ago."

"It doesn't really matter who we vote for", shrugged Terry, "as long as it's not one of us. We shouldn't waver – if we decide to vote one of our alliance tomorrow night, who's to say it won't be us next time? So as long as it's not us, as long as all nine of us vote the same, there's really no stopping us."

"Yeah", said Rafe. "And Katie will be an easy sell. Who wouldn't want to get rid of her?"

Tom looked at Ian. "So... does everybody agree on this?" he asked. This will be his challenge. If Ian follows through, than Tom will know he can trust him as a partner for the next thirty-one days. And if he doesn't – well, that thought was for another time.

Everybody nodded, including Ian, who was the last one to do so. "Well, then", Tom continued, "we'll just have to inform the others, when we come back to camp."

Ian had his hands tied behind his back. If he continued to try and protect Katie from the vote, than it would start to become suspicious. But, on the other hand, this didn't seem right. He didn't imagine it would play out like this when he signed up for the season. Why, in order to satisfy Tom, did he have to get rid of Katie? Why did he have to choose? And why did he have the feeling he was making the wrong choice?

"That's not a bad view right there", said Cirie, and Katie nodded. They were both seated on a small hill, overlooking the entire island, and the ocean beyond it. Between the trees, they could clearly see five small figures sitting around a lit fire and talking amongst themselves – about what, they had no clue.

"Not a bad view at all", said Katie, still slightly panting, "but it took a lot of work to get here."

"You did all right", said Cirie. The way to the top of the hill was very steep. "Y'know, Katie, I couldn't help but notice, you've lost a lot of weight since I've last seen you."

"Yeah, well", Katie said, "it's not like I really had a choice, did I?"

Cirie looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Probably", said Cirie, "but go ahead, try me."

"It's..." Katie started. It felt weird talking about it, but if she had to share it with someone, Cirie was the right person. "The fact that I wasn't exactly... skinny on my season – I didn't think of it as a big deal when I signed in, but it proved to be. Suddenly I was the 'fat bitch', the 'mean pig', 'the only person to ever gain weight on the show'. Everyone in the media, in the internet forums, jumped at the opportunity to mock me – it was that easy."

Cirie kept quiet. She knew all this – it was something that almost prevented her from trying to get on Survivor herself. What if she, too, will be turned into a joke because of her weight? That's what she had been thinking back then, but of course, things turned out differently.

Katie continued. "It influenced me, a lot. Before Survivor, I wasn't even that bothered about my weight – it wasn't above average, it was normal for me. But after everything aired, there was a time I couldn't even look at a mirror. And when I looked, I immediately looked away. I wasn't the old Katie – every positive trait I thought I had seemed to vanish, seemed to be swallowed by the fat in my body.

"So I decided to make it stop. 'That'll show them', was my mantra. Or rather, 'that'll show me'. I changed my whole schedule, so it'll center on the gym. And I kinda succeeded. No one can consider me fat anymore.

"But what if it's not enough?" she looked at Cirie desperately. This was a woman who doesn't get held back because of her weight, a woman whose personality shines through it easily. "What if, after all my efforts, I'm still the same person? What if I'm mean, and lazy, and self-centered, no matter how much I weight? There's no personality-changing diet, you are what you are. What if I'm rotten from the inside? What if I finish this season just as despised as I was last time? I don't think I can handle that, Cirie. I think it'll be too much."

Cirie felt uncomfortable, and not only because she was sitting on an uncomfortable rock. "You won't be able to control what other people think of you", she said, "ever. That's out of your hands. But you will be able to control what you think of yourself. Last time, were you completely satisfied with how you played? You came out of it truly feeling you did your best?"

Katie thought for a bit. "No", was her answer. She could've acted differently on a number of occasions.

"Well, then", Cirie said, "then this time, your challenge is to play to your fullest, to make decisions you'll be proud of. That way, even if people still criticize you, you'll be able to be at peace with what you've done."

Katie nodded slowly. Looking at the beautiful view of green and blue, listening to Cirie's words, she suddenly felt at ease with the world, she suddenly felt like a person with power – the power to act the way she chooses to. Far in the ocean, she noticed a large shape – way bigger than a fish, coming to the surface of the water and than disappearing again.

"It's not about the weight", Cirie said. "It's about the way you look at it. It's about accepting what you are, or changing what you don't accept. It's the simplest thing, yet the hardest." Cirie knew what it feels like to be viewed critically, and to view yourself the same way. She wasn't always a popular contestant on Survivor. But it was part of her past now. Can it be a part of Katie's past, as well?

"What's that, over there?" Katie said, pointing at a spot near their camp. "It looks like a tortoise..."

Cirie looked. "But why isn't it moving?" she asked.

They both got up and quickly made their way down the hill, and to the place where they saw what looked like a tortoise to them.

But it was not a tortoise – it was a tortoise's shell.

"Tree-mail", Cirie said.

When they returned, Katie read the tree-mail out-loud, informing all seven of them that the next immunity challenge will be taking place on the island they were currently populating, first thing tomorrow.

"Somehow", Terry said, stretching, "With our bellies full, and with us having a good night's sleep, I feel like we have a slight advantage on the other team."

"Unless it's an eating challenge", said Ian. "They have a slight advantage in that type of competition.

"Or a sleeping challenge", said Katie. "Although it wouldn't be a very exciting one to watch, so I doubt they'll go there."

While most of them were speculating on what tomorrow will bring, Rafe motioned Ami with his head to come with him for a private chat. She came, without attracting too much attention, and they both sat in the shelter. **Behind them, the sun was beginning to sink. The cameraman following Rafe and Ami had a hard time filming without being blinded by it.**

"What do you think about voting out Katie?" Rafe asked Ami.

"It doesn't really matter", shrugged Ami. "We need to get rid of the remaining five in the other alliance, with no particular order. The important thing is to keep our current alliance intact."

"Yeah..." said Rafe. "That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. The thing that happened with Terry the other day? Your obvious dislike for him, in front of everybody? Not good. Like you said, we need to keep our alliance whole, and that just created unneeded cracks in it. Ami, if we want to reach the final two together, we first have to make sure we reach the final nine together."

"Don't worry", Ami explained, "I've talked to Terry, and we're fine. I just didn't like what I've heard from Cirie, that's all. I've told him that, and he begged me not to repeat it in front of the cameras, and I agreed."

Rafe suddenly found himself interested. "What was the comment about? Was it that offensive to women?"

"Not only to women. But believe me, you don't wanna know. And besides, I can't, there's a camera here."

"Then whisper it to me", said Rafe, looking at the cameraman, who also seemed intrigued.

"Well..." Ami thought about it, then agreed. If she wanted a lasting alliance with Rafe, she needed to confide everything in him, with no exceptions. She leaned closer to him and whispered in his ear: "On one of Terry's last days on the island, Aras overheard him telling Shane something along the lines of – *I'm glad they didn't include anyone gay on our season. Although sometimes, a few of the women here act like gay men, only with boobs.*"

Rafe didn't know how he should react, so he just laughed. He didn't really form an opinion regarding Terry up until that point, but now, he felt like Terry bought himself a new enemy without even knowing. And that enemy was a woman, only with a penis.

"Potatoes galore!" announced Jonathan. He just finished cooking fourteen potatoes for dinner – seven of them were supposed to go to the seven that were currently in the reward camp, but all the losers decided they probably had enough to eat over there anyway. They'll get by.

"Tonight, we feast!" said Yau-Man excitedly, taking one of his two potatoes carefully from the pot. "I hope they won't be mad at us when they return."

"They'll understand", said Courtney thoughtfully. "I'm sure they will."

"Who cares if they understand", said Jonathan. "They don't need to be pitied; I'll bet they're doing alright. If we want any chance against them in the challenge tomorrow, we need our strength. That's all there is to it."

"Yep", said Julie, looking at her potato. "That's all there is to eat."

They, too, received tree-mail informing them of the challenge taking place the next day, first thing in the morning. They all felt at a bit of a disadvantage, not being able to eat or sleep well. Two potatoes instead of one just wouldn't cut it.

"We should probably go to sleep right about now, shouldn't we?" asked Cindy. "The challenge's not far off, and we should try and gather as much energy as possible."

"I don't think I'll be able to sleep well anyway", said Julie. "Images of their shelter just keep hunting my dreams."

"I'm not your Dreamz, Julie", said Dreamz, "stop with the flirting already."

"Oh, Andre", Julie played along, "you tease me so. But I know I have no chance with you, now that Ian's in the picture."

"You won't let that go, ever, would you?"

"Probably not."

In the end, they all listened to Cindy's advice and tried to get some sleep on the hard ground. This was, after all, a very long day - A day that started before sunrise, when Julie and Cindy asked a yawning Eliza to come and have a chat with them.

"First of all", Cindy said as they walked towards the ocean, "I really appreciate your vote two nights ago. My ass would've been gone if it wasn't for you."

"Forget about it", smiled Eliza, "as much as Shane was a lovely presence to have around camp, I'd rather have you here than him. But you do realize this was a one-time thing, right, girls? I can't afford to help you any longer."

"Not necessarily", said Julie. This was the thing that Eliza feared: Julie can be very persuasive when she wants to. She can make you believe something is in your best interest when moments ago, you were completely against it.

"Think about it", Julie said. "Think about your alliance right now. If it makes it through, you're up against eight survivor giants. What makes you think they won't do what they already did, which is align with the other threats in order to make sure they're not the ones to go home? You'll be taken out the moment you reach the final nine."

"And let's say for a second that you won't", said Cindy. It was obvious she and Julie rehearsed this well-thought attack. "Let's say you make it through somehow. Then what? What final-two options will you have? Tom? Cirie? Yau-Man?" Eliza blinked. Yau-Man *will* be in the final two with her, if things turn out the way they should.

"What chance will you have against people like them? On our side, you'll have more options."

"Plus" Julie added, "you'll be making a move - sure, a risky move, but still a move - that you'll be able to take credit for in the end, which is something you won't be able to do if you just wait and see if your current alliance carries you through."

Julie had touched a soft spot with Eliza. Eliza was ready to play against the people in her alliance. She was even ready to lose to the people in her alliance. But she was not ready to sit by and let other people play. She wanted to make big moves, to be an influencing part of this season.

And this was the perfect opportunity to do so.

"We'll see", Eliza said finally. Before anything happens, she was going to talk to her number one. And luckily enough, Yau-Man was seeking a word with Eliza himself. "We didn't have a chance to talk privately since the last tribal council", Yau-Man said to her fifteen minutes later, when they were the only ones sitting under the tree that was providing them shelter at night, or at least partial shelter.

"I know", Eliza said, "I've been wanting to talk to you ever since. I wanted to let you know that I'm sorry I didn't tell you about me voting for Shane that night. I know we've said we'd share every little detail with each other, make every decision together, but you have to understand this was a last-minute thing – Julie approached me right before tribal, I didn't have time – at all – to talk to you about it."

Yau-Man thought for a minute. "I understand", he said, smiling at her, "as long as it was just a digression from our plan that would not happen again."

"Well", said Eliza, a little apologetically, "I've thought about it, and I came to the conclusion that we might have to... rethink our plan."

"We've talked about this", Yau-Man said. "It is too much, too early, to make a move. We are not in a perfect alliance, but at least we are in a majority alliance – this should be good enough for us at this point."

"And then what?" Eliza asked him. She hated doing this, arguing with Yau-Man – she would much rather just listen to him and enjoy his company, without any complications. But what if they were making a mistake?

"This is not the season to just stand aside and hope for the best. This is the season where the best have to beat the best in order to be the best. So why are we not doing this? Why are we voting for people like Twila and Shane?"

"I agree with you on Shane", Yau-Man said pointedly. "Voting for him over Cindy was not smart. At least *his* dangerousness was obvious – Cindy is one of these people that can play it much smoother. Here is an example – you've been talking to her, along with Julie, and you suddenly insist on jumping ship!"

"I'm not a puppet", Eliza said, with apparent anger in her voice – anger that wasn't necessarily aimed at Yau-Man. "I make my own decisions. That's exactly why I'm contemplating this move. I know it's big, Yau – but that's exactly why it's so great. The others, they'll understand. Maybe not at first, but there'll come a time when they'll understand this game is not about sticking to your initial plan. This game's about adapting. In retrospect, we'd be able to say we've played the game hard, no matter the outcome."

Yau-Man did care about the outcome, but he also cared about Eliza and her opinions. The moment they forged that alliance on day one, was the moment they decided every decision they make has to be approved by both of them. And after all, Eliza wasn't in a great position in the nine-person alliance. She would be a likely target if the biggest-targets-need-to-protect-each-other mentality stays intact. And if that happens, Yau-Man's game will be damaged just like Eliza's, as they're essentially the same person now. Once they decided to stick together, there cannot be any changing of minds. No turning back.

Other alliances, however, were meant to be broken. On that respect, minds were destined to be changed.

Dreamz mind was set – it was not open for changes. Yes, he voted for Shane, but that was not against the rules – it wasn't like Shane was part of his alliance. Right when Eliza and Yau-Man had their talk that might or might not change up the whole game, Dreamz was taking a walk to the non-existent outhouse. He was followed, however.

"Dreamz, buddy, wait!"

It was Jonathan, who came running after Dreamz out of nowhere. Dreamz was annoyed. *Can't a man poop at peace?*

"I wanted to thank you, you know, for delivering, for voting out Shane."

"Nah, don't you even mention it", said Dreamz. "T'was the right move anyways. I weren't doing it for you."

"I know that. And the move I'm going to ask you to do is not for me either. It will be in your own best interest." Jonathan was about to enter stage two of the plan, as stage one worked so well. He was about to ask Dreamz to come over to their alliance. He knew for a fact that Cindy and Julie made the very same move with Eliza earlier that day. What he didn't know was that Cindy and Julie had much more success at it than he was about to have.

"Ain't gonna happen", said Dreamz, turning to face Jonathan.

"But you haven't heard my piece yet!" protested Jonathan.

Doesn't need to", said Dreamz simply. "I knows what you're about to sell, and I isn't buying. I'm good with things as they are - no need to change them. But thanks for the offer, means a lot."

And he turned away to search for a quiet spot that can function as a lavatory, and hopefully he'll be able to sit there without any parasites ruining his privacy. Jonathan's offer (if he had a chance to voice it) would have been tempting, but Dreamz had made a promise to Yau-Man. And this time, he was going to honor it, no matter what.

"Dreamz's not with us", Jonathan informed Courtney, Julie and Cindy back at camp as they were sitting around the fire, making potatoes for dinner. "He's set with his alliance, it's no use."

"Well", Julie said, "Eliza hasn't given us a lot of hope, either, but she also hasn't given us a final answer. Just a vague 'we'll see'."

"We *will* see, I guess", said Courtney. Julie looked at her. She was awfully quiet the last few days, ever since Shane left. She almost felt like Courtney ought to be a little more annoying than she is now.

"Alright then", Cindy said, "no point sitting on the subject no more. We did all we could, we'll just have to wait and see what happens at the challenge, and then – what happens at tribal."

"But it's just too frustrating!" said Jonathan. "I don't want to wait and see, I want to act! I want to do something about it!"

"Sometimes", Julie said, trying to calm him down, "doing nothing does more than doing something."

"That sounds..." Jonathan looked for the right word, "Boring."

And so they ate their potatoes, and went to sleep, and did nothing else. But Julie was right. Eliza and Yau-Man, without being pushed, had a lot of time to think about what they were about to do, or not do.

When everybody else was asleep, Yau-Man got up for a midnight walk – or, to be more precise, an around-midnight walk, as he had no idea what the time actually was. *It would be suicide*, Yau-Man said to himself, and, unexpectedly, smiled. *Yes, it would*, he answered himself, *but in this game, killing yourself while trying to stay alive is better than waiting to be killed.*

"Welcome to today's challenge", Jeff said. They were standing on the beach not very far from the cliff Tom had climbed two days ago, and the two teams were sizing each other up. Yau-Man was interested in the fact that the other team looked like they were not particularly worried about the upcoming challenge. Ami was interested in the fact

that the other team, although tired-looking, had a determined look about them – an all-or-nothing look. But all fourteen of them were interested in the fact that they were standing on two separate mats - wasn't the immunity supposed to be individual?

"Today" Jeff announced, "we'll be playing a traditional game of paintball."

He opened a large wooden box that lay beside him, and from it, he withdrew a large plastic gun.

"At first", he explained. "you'll be playing with your current teams – seven against seven. Ami, your team will be given guns with purple bullets." He picked a purple-colored bullet from the box and tossed it on the ground with force. It blew up into purple water. "Yau-Man, your team's bullets' color is gold.

"Each of you will be given a gun with fifty bullets. Your goal – eliminate as many people from the opposite team by marking them with your team's color, while not wasting too many bullets. Once all your teammates are colored – or once you've wasted all of your 350 bullets, whichever comes first – your team loses, the other team wins, end of story.

"Then, the winning team will be playing individually against one another, and the same rules will apply. Now, there's another element to this challenge."

From the box, he retrieved a machete. "You can still win the machete in this challenge, but two things have to happen for it to be available.

"First, the winning team must pass up the opportunity to play, and let the *other* team compete for individual immunity. And secondly, after that team competes and a winner is declared, that winner has to give up the immunity necklace, just like Tom and Cindy did once. But before all this, we need to see who the winning team *is*.

Sounds fair?"

Sounds complicated, thought Katie. *What happened to the old challenges, where the winner was the winner? Was this concept too simple for the producers?*

"Well, let's play, shall we?" said Jeff, offering the survivors fourteen protective suits, also from the box.

With a golden mask on, Eliza looked at the other team that was about to beat their asses, the team which had Tom and Terry, the team that ate and slept well for the last day and a half. What did *her* team have? She looked at the other six. They all looked skinny and unstable. But she also noticed they were all holding their guns like they were holding on for dear life. Her team, it was now obvious to her, had determination. But was determination enough to actually win?

"Survivors ready?" Jeff asked. They were standing about a hundred feet apart, with a few trees, a few bushes and a few rocks in between. They were ready. "GO!"

Like his team planned, Terry immediately ran forward, shooting as many bullets as he could. Their goal was to make the others lose concentration, so that they could advance towards them and find good hiding places to settle in.

"Hey, Julie", Cindy shouted, as she and Julie lowered their heads behind a bush, "want to take out Terry?"

"Sure", said Julie, and they both straightened up and shot a few bullets each towards Terry. One of the bullets got Terry on the shoulder, and he was out. It allowed Julie's and Cindy's teammates to advance safely. All seven of them found a sanctuary behind a big rock. Tom noticed this.

"They're all together!" he shouted to his teammates. "Let's advance on them – they'll have no chance!" And Tom's group did as they were told. People started appearing out of nowhere, running quickly towards the large rock with their guns aimed forward.

"We're dead people, looks like", said Dreamz.

"Most chances are", said Yau-Man. And then he had an idea. "But we might as well go out with a bang"

Through his mask, he looked at Eliza as he was speaking. "Let's all get up before they reach us, and shoot all of our bullets at them, at once."

"But Yau, that's suicide!" Dreamz said.

"Yes, maybe", Yau-Man smiled again, although nobody could see it, "but isn't killing yourself while trying to stay alive better than just waiting to be killed?"

As the other team was getting nearer by the second, and as none of them had a better idea, Jonathan said, "Alright, let's do this."

"On my go", Yau-Man said. "Three... two... one..."

Just as Tom and the rest were starting to circle them, ready to take them out, Yau-Man's team got to their feet and started shooting in all directions, emptying their ammunition as fast as they possibly could.

At first, nobody understood what happened. There was no shooting anymore – there were only people standing with guns in their hands, looking around.

Yau-Man's team stopped because they ran out of bullets. The other team, however, stopped because each of them was covered in golden-colored water. Jeff processed the sight, realized the last of the purple team was eliminated before the gold team finished their ammunition, and announced: "The gold team wins this round!"

Julie hugged Cindy, Dreamz jumped on Jonathan, and Eliza and Yau-Man exchanged looks that talked about things beyond this challenge. Courtney looked around, as though she just realized what went down.

"Now for your decision", Jeff said. "In order to have a chance at getting the machete, you have to decide to let the other team advance to the next level, and it has to be a unanimous decision."

They all contemplated their options. Four of them were leftovers, meaning they were in peril of going home later that day.

"I don't know about you guys", Jonathan said so that only his teammates could hear, "but I can carry on without a shelter. What if one of us goes home tonight? Wouldn't that person regret giving up their chance at immunity?"

"Of course they would", said Julie, "but that's not the point. The point is, only one of us seven can win immunity, but all seven of us can have the machete. It's a safe bet to take it."

"What is it gonna be?" Jeff asked them after another minute of quiet conversation.

"Jeff", Julie spoke for her team, "we'll give up our chance at immunity."

"Everybody agree on that?" Jeff asked, and they all nodded, with Jonathan being the last one to do so. "Well then, purple team, get ready for another round!"

Terry smirked. Every person who willingly gives up in a competition is a person he cannot for the life of him understand.

"Bring it on!" Cirie said. She was kind of enjoying the idea of legally shooting other people.

The seven of them took their places in different spots on the beach. Tom decided he didn't even want to try and win immunity – he felt safe in his position, and winning again would just draw unneeded attention to him. Therefore, he decided to play as stupidly as he possibly could. The minute Jeff gave them the permission to start competing he ran towards Katie – as he wanted to make sure she won't have immunity - and started shooting purple-colored bullets at her. Katie was out at the first few seconds of the game, but so was Tom – Ian had shot him from behind. Both Tom and Katie took a seat alongside the gold team to watch the rest of the battle play out.

Five remained – Ian, Terry, Cirie, Ami and Rafe. Ian weighed his competition, and figured he had a chance at winning. He looked at Terry hiding behind a large tree-trunk, and decided he should bait him out of his safe haven. He concentrated on a rock not far away, and ran towards it as fast as he could, guessing that Terry would jump at the opportunity and lose his hiding place. What Ian didn't take into consideration, however, was that Terry was a skilled sniper. He aimed at a running Ian and shot him right on the chest, almost without moving a muscle, let alone moving out into the open.

Now nobody from Palau was left in the game, and it was Terry's game to lose. He noticed that Cirie was kneeling behind a bush that a bullet could probably pass through; he decided to give it a shot, literally. It worked; Cirie's game ended before it had even begun. Cirie didn't show it when she walked towards the loser's bench, but she was upset. She wanted to play a little bit more. She wanted to shoot at least once. Behind a small sand dune, Ami didn't want to go out the same way as Cirie – she wanted to fight back. The trunk behind which Terry was taking cover was suddenly bombed with bullets from Ami's direction.

Terry did not waste time in returning Ami the favor. Terry's advantage was his ability to concentrate on one thing, and one thing only. He pointed his gun on Ami's hand, the only part of Ami's body that was sticking out of the dune, and fired. It worked. Unfortunately for Terry, his ability to concentrate on one thing, and one thing only, was also his biggest disadvantage. While he was focusing on taking Ami down, he didn't even notice Rafe coming silently from behind him, pointing his gun at Terry's head, and – *click* –

"Rafe wins immunity!" Jeff shouted.

The pain at the top of Terry's head was nothing compared to the frustration he felt. Rafe, on the other hand, was ecstatic – so ecstatic, in fact, that he completely forgot about the choice he needed to make. Jeff's job was to remind him, though.

"So what is it gonna be, Rafe?"

"What is what gonna be? Oh..." Rafe remembered. Jeff was holding the immunity necklace in one hand and the machete in another, and Rafe had to choose. Even though Rafe had been sure beforehand that it would be an easy choice, this wasn't the case at all. He just had a good night's sleep in a normal shelter, but he can live without one for another few days. The game isn't about sleeping well – it's about surviving, and he had a chance of making sure he would survive for at least three more days.

That's not an opportunity you just pass on. *I would never forgive myself if I get voted off tonight because I didn't keep myself immune*, he thought, and made up his mind. "I think I'll take the necklace, Jeff."

Cindy let out a small laugh – she couldn't help it. Nobody else laughed, though. They all looked at the machete Jeff was still holding in his hand, wondering when will they see it next.

It was weird, rowing back to camp with twice as many people.

"So how was it?" Julie asked the seven reward winners, trying to break the ice.

"It was... nice", Cirie said, and the others nodded. "Pretty comfy." If the last time they had played the game hadn't taught them that boasting about your reward is bad, Shane's eviction sure did. "How is life back at camp?"

"Same old, same old", Jonathan answered. This sense of awkward politeness could be felt by everyone there. Rafe looked at a silent, rowing Cindy and wondered what she was thinking. Could it be something along the lines of: 'I was preached by somebody to be less selfish only so that this person will sleep in a proper shelter for two nights

while I sleep on the ground, then will be given a chance for immunity by me and my team, and then will keep that said immunity and deprive me of a shelter for who knows how long"? Possibly.

When they reached camp, Yau-Man went to fetch them some leaves. "I hope you don't mind we ate your potatoes for these three days", he said as he walked away, "we thought it would be fine, since you had a few solid meals".

"It's absolutely fine", answered Ami sweetly. She looked around camp, half expecting to see a shelter, or a coconut tree, but only dry ground could be seen. And she was fine with it; this is the game she had signed up for. "You didn't miss a thing", she said to Julie who was walking beside her.

"Well, you didn't either. It was pretty quiet here. Almost made me regret sending Shane home. Almost."

"You think you've made the right choice then?" Ami couldn't keep herself from asking. "You think Shane was the right one to evict?"

"You shouldn't ask me", Julie said innocently. "You should ask the people in your alliance who voted for him. Eliza, for example."

Julie didn't know exactly what she was aiming at, but certainly, creating doubt can do no harm in this game. And doubt was created indeed – Ami decided she *will* ask Eliza.

Jonathan sat and watched. He looked at his rivals: at Yau-Man appearing out of the woods, at Terry and Cirie talking privately in the corner, at Ami having a conversation with Eliza in the water, at Ian, Dreamz and Rafe sitting by the fire and trying to relight it, and at Tom, the leader, the one to get rid of, picking up dry firewood from the ground.

He looked at his companions: at Katie, Julie, Courtney and Cindy all sitting under the tree, talking quietly, probably weighting their options at this point.

And Jonathan knew this was all about to change: maybe Dreamz wasn't going to flip, but somebody else would have to, eventually, as this season people aren't going to just wait 'till they get picked off. And when that happens, when a power-shift occurs, that's when Jonathan's game will truly begin. Right now, he has to keep to himself, to hold his tongue, to play nice, in order to gain the upper hand, in order to find himself in the ruling alliance. But when that happens – and it will happen, and soon – that's when he will actually follow his *true* game plan. He didn't come here to play nice, he came here to win. And in order to win an all-star season, a true all-star season, one has to give a hell of a performance. And that's exactly what Jonathan was intending to do. Right now, he was just biding his time until he had a chance to do so.

"You could've told me."

"No, I really couldn't, it was practically a last-minute thing!"

Here we go again, Eliza was thinking. *First Yau-Man, then Ami, all wanting to discipline me, get me back in line, make me promise I won't think for myself ever again.*

She finished her talk with Ami, then went out of the sea, squeezing water out of her buff, feeling exhausted. She didn't want this position. She wanted to play, with nothing holding her back.

Yau-Man was approaching her now. She prepared herself for another lecture.

"Eliza", Yau-Man said to her in a kind voice, "I think we should do it, tonight."

Eliza looked at him with wide eyes. Was she talking to the Yau-Man she thought she knew? Luckily, Yau-Man quickly caught on and made himself clearer.

"I think we should switch"

Eliza was so relieved, in more ways than one, that she hugged him. At the first day of the game, she didn't allow herself to do so, but now, she couldn't help it. She knew he did it more for her than for himself, and that meant a lot to her.

It didn't take long for the two of them to initiate a small chat with the leftovers, by the fire.

Once Yau-Man delivered the news, a smiling-from-ear-to-ear Cindy said: "so now we're seven out of fourteen. That's half."

"That's a tie", added Julie.

"So let there be a tie", said Jonathan, also smiling. "A tie is a start. Instead of being doomed, we're all standing on equal ground. We're back at the beginning. I like it."

"So we're voting for Tom tonight, right?" asked Eliza, wanting to make sure.

"Seems like the logical thing to do", answered Katie. "I mean, I'm a fan of him, but that's exactly why he needs to go. Everybody's a fan of him. He's what's holding that alliance together. He's their leader. And he's the biggest immunity threat – now that we know it's individual immunity from start to finish, there's no point keeping the strongest guy."

They all sat there, thinking about the huge step they were about to take, thinking what will come out of it.

"And now", Courtney said, "all there's left to do is praying."

Tribal Council was near, and Terry decided to finally make Tom the offer he's been planning for a very long time. He joined him as naturally as he could in his firewood hunt, and said to him as casually as he could: "things looking good, aren't they?"

"Never feel too safe, that's my motto", said Tom, "or at least, it should be, it's a good motto. But yes, things aren't looking too bad."

Terry was trying to choose his words carefully, which was something he was not very good at. "If we get... close enough to the end", he said, "I think it would be wise, for both of us, to take care of each other."

Tom didn't react yet. He knew, from experience, that letting others spill as much as possible is always a good move.

"It's kind of the same principle that brought our alliance together in the first place", Terry continued, "the two of us are the two huge immunity threats, and people are going to wake up and try to get rid of us sooner or later – why not decide to join forces? It's only natural, right? That way, if we're lucky enough to get to the final three, we'll know we're safe, no matter which of us wins that challenge. It's not a bad idea, think about it."

"I have thought about it", Tom said almost immediately – and it was true, he *had* thought about it – "but I have to be honest with you. My alliance is with Ian, and that's the person I'm taking to the end. We might agree on making a final-three alliance with you, but I have to run it through Ian first, and that has to wait, because it's time for tribal council. We'll have that talk tomorrow, first thing in the morning, alright?"

"Yeah", answered a disappointed Terry, "sure, that'd be awesome."

"Welcome back to tribal council", Jeff said, looking at the fourteen people in front of him, "the last place you wanna be in."

"After camp", Jonathan said.

Jeff didn't expect a comeback. "Do you really feel like it?"

"I cannot stand the hard ground on the side of my face when I'm trying to get some sleep. I can't stand the winds blowing on me when I have no shelter to hide inside. I cannot remotely stand bugs crawling all over the parts of my body that aren't covered in leaves."

"So over all", Jeff said, "You really don't like your sleeping arrangements."

"You could say that", agreed Jonathan.

"Dreamz", Jeff noted, "you're shaking your head. Why is that?"

"Jeff, I don't get some of this people! Maybe because I'm used to sleeping on the ground, but what is it matter your conditions, you gotta look past that in this game! Didn't these folks learned it the first time around?!"

"I didn't say that I'm not ready to play in these conditions", Jonathan said defensively, "just that I would *rather* have better conditions, that's all."

"Which brings us to the reward challenge. Cirie, what was it like sleeping in a proper shelter for once?"

"Oh, Jeff", she couldn't contain her excitement; "You have no idea. Or, come to think of it, you do, you're probably sleeping in a four-star motel somewhere, but for us, it was the world. It was everything."

The talk continued about the shelter, the coconuts, the flint. Everything they've tried to downplay back at camp out of politeness, out of strategy, was now out in the open. Tom covered his face with his hands. Jeff, of course, caught on to it immediately.

"Tom, do you think it gave you seven somewhat of an advantage?"

"You might've thought so", said Tom, "but you've seen what went down in today's challenge. We slept, we ate, we drank, and still, we got our asses handed to us in the competition."

"Julie, why do you think that happened?"

Julie was caught off guard. For nine days, Jeff hadn't said a word to her, hadn't even looked at her. She was starting to get used to it, and now he was asking her questions like it was all normal? How was she supposed to react? And did her tribemates notice she was startled by all this?

"Maybe", she tried to sound unbothered, "it's because the other team sank into a false sense of comfort. These conditions are miserable, but they help you, in a way. In these conditions, you never lose your focus. It's dangerous to feel too secure, too comfortable."

"And yet, all of you gave up immunity so that the other team could play."

"We didn't do it so that the other team could play", jumped Cindy, "we did it because we thought the machete was in everybody's best interest. I guess we were wrong."

"Rafe", Jeff was eyeing the necklace around Rafe's neck, "*were* they wrong? Wasn't the machete important?"

"Of course it was", Rafe seemed a little offended, "it's still important. But how would a machete help me if I was out of the game? You don't just give your immunity away for the group, that's not how this game works."

I did, Cindy thought, *twice. And you think I'm selfish because I didn't give you cars instead of keeping one for myself?*

"Alright, we have a vote to get to, and if we go by what took place last time, everything can happen. Tom, after you received votes two times out of two, do you feel safe tonight?"

"Never", was his answer.

"Cindy, you almost went home three nights ago. How do *you* feel tonight?"

"Better than at the last tribal council, to be completely honest, Jeff."

Tom quickly looked at her. Why did she feel good about tonight? Did she know something he didn't?

It took a long time for Yau-Man to cast his vote. Up until the last minute, he had doubts. But it was the good kind of doubts – the doubts that come before doing something big.

Once everybody was done, Jeff started to read the votes. When the first and second votes read 'Katie', she observed a pleased-looking Tom and thought: *he doesn't know what's coming*. But then a second thought popped into her head: *What if she is the one who doesn't know what's coming? What if the trick's on her, and Tom knows something she doesn't?*

Before long, however, Tom's name started to appear and didn't stop until there were seven for him, seven for Katie. "We have a tie", Jeff said. And Katie, although in great danger of going home, smiled to herself. *Bring it on*, was her third thought. "We now face the tie-breaker rules", Jeff said, and Yau-Man shifted in his seat, a bit nervous. He was kind of proud of their move – but what if Jeff was about to pull a purple rock, and he would find himself out of the game, just like that? Would he proud of their move then?

"At first", Jeff explained, "we'll let the two vote-getters say their piece as to why they should stay over the other. Then, we'll have a re-vote, in which you can only vote for either Tom or Katie. You two-" he looked at Tom and Katie – "are of course not eligible to vote.

"If it's still a tie", he continued, "we'll go for a tie-breaker. I'm not going to tell what this tie-breaker is, but believe me, you're better off solving this amongst yourselves." Tom was unexpectedly calm. He looked at Eliza and Dreamz, and was *sure* that those were the two that voted for him, along with the opposite alliance. He wasn't angry at them; why should he? Things were going great for him, up until now; it was only fair that things will go great for others at well, even if it was at his expense. He just didn't realize, up until now, what a good liar Dreamz was. He did, after all, give Tom and Yau-Man his word on the second day of the game, and he sounded very convincing as he did so.

"Katie", Jeff said, "why don't you go first."

For a minute, Katie was lost for words. She thought about the people back at home, that will watch this in a few months' time. They would, of course, root for Tom to pull through yet again, just like in their last showdown. This thought petrified her; but then she remembered her talk with Cirie. She couldn't control what people will think of her in the future, so it was silly to worry about it. She could, however, control what she was about to say.

"We're not exactly on even grounds", she started a bit lamely, "Tom and I. For one, I'm a normal human being, some would say not even that, and he's a life-saving super hero. I won't say I deserve to stay over him, since he already won – because I don't. It's not about that – it's about which one of us benefits you the most by staying. And I think it's me. No matter how you look at it, how you turn it around, having Tom there near the end is dangerous. Believe me, I know. Having me there at the endgame, however, can do wonders. Just ask Tom, *he* knows."

She now looked straight at Ian, who was sitting to her right. "I'll be fine with going home tonight", she said, "as long as it's in everyone's best interests. But please, don't do what someone else wants you to do. Make the decision for yourselves."

Ian did not look back at her.

It was now Tom's turn. "You guys don't owe me anything", he started in his friendly, powerful voice and immediately, everyone was fixated on his words. "Katie's right – do what you gotta do. But I still stand by what I had said the first day on the beach – we have a chance to make this a true all-stars season. If everyone's who is considered a threat is gone, what are we left with – survival of the quietest? Of the least threatening? Is that what we're aiming at?"

Rafe listened to Tom and suddenly had the urge to be sitting in the final two with someone like him, with a true all-star. He just hoped whoever changed their vote might have the same urge, might change it back.

Eliza was half-listening. She knew of her ability to change her mind quickly, but she didn't want it happening tonight – she wanted to stick with her decision. Yau-Man, though, was listening carefully. He thought this was the opportunity for Tom to offer deals, to beg for his life, to make sure he stays – but none of that came. Things stayed as they were before, and they would probably stay the same after the second vote.

And then? Who knows.

"It is, once more", Jeff said, "time to vote. Ami, you're up."

Ami voted, and Cindy, and Dreamz, and Terry, and soon, they were all sitting, waiting for the verdict. Tom suddenly realized he might be going tonight. And, even more suddenly, he realized he was OK with it. Only a winner in this game can know how difficult it is to win it. And only a winner can know how, sometimes, it just comes down to sheer luck.

"Katie", Jeff read the first vote. "Tom", read the second one. Katie and Tom exchanged looks for the first time this evening. They were not going to sit in the final two together this time. They were both accepting of that fact.

At first, it was one vote Katie, one vote Tom. Then, two-two. Jeff made a point of reading the votes in the same pattern – Katie, Tom, Katie, Tom, until each of them had five votes. "Katie", Jeff read the eleventh vote, and then, as expected – "Tom." It was down to the last two votes, and Yau-Man did not see his own hand-written vote come out of the urn yet. Therefore, he was the only one, besides Jeff, to know about at least one person who will receive seven votes, if not more.

Jeff opened the thirteenth vote so that only he could see it, smiled, and turned it around. *Now* Yau-Man recognized his own hand-writing, spelling three letters – T, O and M. Tom's fate in this game now depended on only one vote. He still had a chance for a second tie, a good chance. He looked at Terry in front of him – could Terry change his vote to secure his own ass? Was it a mistake, not committing to a final-two alliance with Terry earlier that evening?

But when Jeff showed them the last vote, Tom knew it wasn't Terry's. He knew it, because he recognized the hand-writing all too well – it was the hand-writing of his best friend out there, of Ian. Ian was persistent in looking at the ground, and nowhere else. He couldn't look at the face of the person he had spent thirty-eight days on a deserted island with, the person he had quitted for, the person he adored, the person he now voted for... voted against...

"I need you to bring me your torch", Jeff said to Tom, and Tom, for the first time, brought Jeff his torch. "Tom, the tribe has spoken."

"Well said", he told his tribemates - his allies, his rivals, and the ones he wasn't sure about. But it did not matter now. Tom wasn't going to be bothered by his exit. For the short time that he was there, from the moment he first stepped on that beach, he played strong - and he finished strong. From his perspective, there was no other way of playing this game.

"It's time for you to go", said Jeff, and it was. Tom smiled at Ian – he hoped his young friend wasn't feeling ashamed of himself, because he shouldn't – and took the walk of the fallen. On his way, it became clearer to him that he had just lost – and that there was nothing wrong with losing. On the contrary – it was a relief; it was like falling from the sky, straight into a comfortable bed. A bed not unlike the bed he was going to spend that night in – and very unlike the shelter the others were returning to at that exact moment.

