

Chapter Four – Five New Songs

Days 10-12



Strangely enough, Eliza found herself in a boxing arena, with Tom Westman as her opponent. This was weird, as she was currently stuck on a deserted island, but she accepted it as fact.

Before she could even deliver her first punch, more Tom Westmans started to appear, all wearing ridiculously large red boxing gloves, all ready to strike. Eliza was ready as well. She took down the first Tom Westman with a single blow, and then the second one, and the third, and soon, eight of them were lying on the ground, unconscious. Out of nowhere, Martha Stewart appeared to crown Eliza as the winner. But when she lifted Eliza's arm in victory, something bizarre happened, even considering it was, after all, a dream: all the Tom Westmans were gone, and instead, Eliza found herself

surrounded by eight Wanda Shirks spread on the floor, all singing happily to the same tune:

*"Oh my knees,
She took us all out,
Loser she's not,*

*But she is,
Without any doubt...*

Exactly what?"

Even though it was a very cold night and no shelter was there to protect them from the wind, Eliza was covered in sweat when she woke up from her dream. She couldn't remember what it was about, but the bad taste in her mouth was evident. She looked around, and noticed she wasn't the only one awake. A short distance from her, a dark figure with dreadlocks was sitting with her head in her hands, crying silently into the night. Eliza couldn't help but wonder if Courtney had just woken up from a bad dream as well.

Bird noises woke the tribemates up on day ten of the game. People started getting up on their feet immediately – it wasn't like their sleep was deep anyway. In a few moments, Cirie was the only one to stay lying on the ground. Cirie didn't feel like getting up at all.

It didn't matter if she got up or not, it felt like. It was all random. They establish an alliance, and then the alliance is broken, for no apparent reason, with no one benefiting from it. What's the point of playing a game, if the people playing with you don't act rationally? At least on her season, she *knew* people were dumb, so she could act accordingly. But this was supposed to be an all-star season, goddamit. The only explanation Cirie could think of was that people are, after all, people.

Thirteen thirsty people were sitting around the fire, waiting for the water to boil, so they could drink it, hot and dirty as it was. This was the opportunity Eliza and Yau-Man were waiting for. They had decided the previous night that they should talk to the group as a whole, and this was their chance.

"Can... can I have everyone's attention for one minute?" Eliza said hesitantly.

Everyone looked at her, some with raised eyebrows.

"I'm sure some of you wondered who the two people that caused the tie last night were. Well, it was me... and Yau-Man." Nobody was surprised when she admitted to voting against Tom, but when Yau-Man's name came up, some actually opened their mouths in surprise. Dreamz was one of them.

"You have to understand", Eliza was looking at Ami as she said this, "that we did what we thought would be best for us, in the time we thought would be the best time for us. You might disagree, but in the context of the game, it was a strategic move, and only that. We had no intention of screwing anyone over, to hurt anyone's feelings. It wasn't like that at all."

Yau-Man looked at Eliza, wishing she would finish her speech before going over the top. Unfortunately, his alliance-mate had a tendency to talk a little more than necessary.

"If you're mad", she continued, "you really shouldn't be. If you ask me, this is the one season where we shouldn't be mad at each other for making strategic decisions. We shouldn't be mad at each other for playing the game the way it's supposed to be played."

Nobody had anything to say, not out-loud anyway.

"It's not a bad feeling to have, now, is it?" Katie said

On the way to the top of the hill where tree-mail was waiting for them, Cindy, Katie and Julie couldn't keep their excitement inside. They took Tom out. They were not in great danger of going home anymore. They had a chance at this game, finally.

"We should still be cautious", Julie said. "Just like we turned the tables last night, the tables can be turned on us. Although – ", she smiled, "-it *is* a great feeling. We're in this. We really are."

It was nice to know. Both Cindy and Katie had almost gotten picked off at the last two tribal-councils – it was nice to be safe for a change, even if the circumstances could change soon, as they had changed before.

"It's kinda makes you wonder, though", said Cindy. "I know it's in our best interest, but why would three people decide to switch alliances this early in the game? Why would they risk it?"

"In a normal season, you're right", Katie said thoughtfully. "But since everybody's already played before, I don't think anybody will take it personally anymore if someone decides to place themselves in a better position."

"Dreamz looked like he took it personally", said Cindy. She couldn't quite wipe away the image of Dreamz's dangerous expression when he had found out Yau-Man turned on his alliance.

"Well, that's Dreamz's problem", Katie said. "He should've known what he signed up for when he decided to play in all-stars. I mean, people aren't going to wait until they're picked off this time. It's a different game."

"Let's hope so", said Julie. After all, it was easier for them to accept the turn of events, since they were the ones to come out of it on top.

"You did the right thing", Jonathan told Ian confidently. "Look at her", he pointed at Courtney, sitting not far from them, looking thoughtful. "Wouldn't you rather have *her* on your alliance than Tom the invincible? Well, I guess he's not literally invincible, or he would have still been here..."

Jonathan stopped. It might not be the best idea to remind Ian that he just had a hand in taking out his best friend.

"Look at the bright side", Jonathan tried a different approach, looking at a somber Ian. "you can now be in the same alliance with your true love, Katie."

"She's not my true love", said Ian quickly, "we're just friends. But it is good to know that we don't have to worry about taking each other out anymore."

"Not until later on, anyway", corrected Jonathan.

"Yeah", said Ian.

"And then what?" asked Jonathan, as innocently as he could. "You're just gonna go your separate ways?"

"What?" Ian was not ready for this question, a question so direct only people like Jonathan could ask it. "Well, yeah, I guess, I haven't really thought about it..."

But has Katie thought about it? Ian found himself wondering. Or does she have other plans already made?

His fears weren't nullified when Katie returned, accompanied by Cindy and Julie, holding a piece of parchment, looking delighted. "Shower!" she announced to her tribemates. "Or at least, that's what it sounds like." And she read the writing on the parchment.

*'Faster, faster you must run
Legs in water, heads in sun,
If you succeed and catch your prey
Then you can wash the dirt away.'*

"Running challenge?" said Terry, genuinely surprised. He could not believe it – an actual physical challenge. Up until now, it was always picking rocks, reading a compass, breathing through a snorkel. But now he finally had a chance of showing what he was worth, and hopefully getting a good shower out of it.

Katie, Ian and Jonathan were all taken back in time when they saw a huge circle marked in the sea where their next reward challenge was about to take place. Jeff was waiting for them, as usual, with a covered-up reward at his side.

"How are you guys feeling?" he asked the thirteen survivors now trying to catch a glimpse at their reward.

"Shelterless", said Cirie. Six of them had just been reminded last night what it felt like, sleeping on the ground, after getting used to a normal sleeping area.

"Well", said Jeff, "this might change, as today you have the opportunity, once again, to earn your tribe a machete. If you give up on your reward, that is.

"Today's challenge is similar to a challenge we've first done in Palau. In it, you're going to be racing around a huge circle, knee-high in the sea. You'll be running clockwise, with the intention of catching the person running before you. After you're caught, you're out of the game, and that means that the person you were supposed to catch now becomes the new target for the person that caught you. The challenge ends when only two people remain, and one of them succeeds in catching the other."

Ian looked at the sun, now in the middle of the sky, and remembered just how grueling this challenge had been when he had first taken part in it, with the goal of catching only one person. His thought process was quickly interrupted by Jeff.

"Want to know what you're playing for?"

Their assumptions turned out to be true, as Jeff removed the cover from the object at his side to reveal a huge portable shower, with a towel, soap, and shampoo.

"Who's the smelliest out of you lot?" Jeff asked, smiling.

Ian raised his hand, to which no objections were made.

"Still haven't showered since Palau ended, have you?" Jeff asked, bemused. Ian laughed, thinking: *'In a few minutes, I'll show you how well I can shower.'*

They all went to take their marked places around the large rope circle

"Survivors ready?" asked Jeff from afar, with dry and warm legs. "GO!"

At once, they all realized how difficult it was to run with your legs in the water – it was like being a part of a slow-motion scene. Terry looked at his first target – Cirie – and knew he had no problem of winning this challenge. Then again, he had also known this about previous challenges, and so far, he won none of them. He missed his winning-streak in Exile Island, and decided to start a new one. His legs suddenly moved much, much faster in the sea.

Cirie noticed this. She looked behind her shoulder and saw a determined Terry running towards her like a bull ready to strike, and soon, it was over for her, no matter

how fast she had tried to escape. Defeated, she left the circle and went to watch the race from land.

Terry's next goal was to catch Yau-Man, and this proved to be an easy one. Yau-Man was very good in challenges involving some form of a mental task, but as this was a simple running challenge, he had no chance against fitter, faster guys. Terry caught on to him in less than a minute. Terry decided that if he keeps up with a nice steady pace, it'll pay off in the long run, as a straight-forward sprint would wear him off too quickly.

Meanwhile, Ian wasn't doing so badly himself. Catching Jonathan was his first achievement, and catching Eliza – his second. But now, he was facing Terry's back. Terry seemed to be focused on his prey, which was Katie at the time – so focused, in fact, that he haven't looked backwards even once the entire time. This gave Ian an advantage – if he could give it all he has, and run faster than he had ever run before, maybe Terry wouldn't notice him coming from behind and... and...

It worked. Terry felt someone touch his back, and looked round. Ian was there with his hand outstretched, smiling his big smile. Terry took himself out of the running, literally, and Ian proceeded to easily catch Katie, and then Courtney in front of her. Ian looked behind him, in order to assess the situation. He quickly realized that Dreamz was his greatest competition. He had already taken Julie out, and was now approaching Rafe with huge steps. Rafe, who was supposed to catch Ian, looked like he already knew he didn't stand a chance.

Ian decided that if he wants to win this, he has to focus on what's ahead, and that was Cindy. He ran faster than before, which was tough, as he was already running as fast as his legs allowed him to. Cindy also seemed determined as she was running towards Ami, slowly closing the gap between them.

It was funny to watch from the sidelines, as Ian touched Cindy's back at the exact moment Cindy touched Ami's. Both Cindy and Ami were out, which left the ground clear for Ian to catch Dreamz.

Rafe was running for his life. Dreamz was right behind him, about to take him out of the game at any moment, but Rafe wasn't about to give up. He thought about what it would feel like to win two challenges in a row, and that thought kept him running. But it wasn't enough – Dreamz was faster than Rafe could ever be. With that, two people remained at opposite ends of the circle – Dreamz and Ian.

Even though he thought it might be impossible, Ian increased his speed, his legs stumbling in the water, the sweat from the sun entering his eyes. He badly wanted to win this, he wanted to have something clear in his mind, after the previous night's tribal council, which left him completely puzzled – and a challenge win, and a shower, would do the trick. So he ran as fast as he could, faster than he could, and it seemed to work – the gap between him and Dreamz was getting smaller – it was now only a third of the circle –

But now Ian realized just how tired he was. He was running at full speed for more than ten minutes, and it was starting to get to him. His head was a bit dizzy, and he found it harder to control his feet – they were becoming extremely clumsy, and every small rock he set foot on seemed to throw him off guard.

Dreamz, on the other hand, felt none of these things. He wasn't running as fast as he could – he was running at an unchanging pace, and he felt like he could do this for as long as it took. For a moment, he was nervous, as Ian seemed to be closing in on him, but that moment passed, and now Ian seemed to be struggling, and was losing his advantage. Dreamz just kept on going at the same speed, taking calculated breaths.

"It's been twenty minutes", Jeff said from the shore, looking at his watch. The other survivors were watching the scene, making bets as to who would win – worthless bets, as the next time they would be able to hold some cash in their hands was twenty nine days away.

Ian was finding it hard to keep going. The sun and the lack of water in his system were getting to him. In order to catch his breath he tried walking instead of running for a bit – but when he tried to resume his running, his legs barely moved. He was absolutely exhausted.

Dreamz did not miss this turn of events. He seized the opportunity and started running at full speed towards Ian, who had no choice but to run, no matter how hard it was. It was a desperate attempt to gain distance from Dreamz, who was now a few feet from him – but it was too little, too late. Dreamz gathered up all the strength he still had in him, and jumped forward, outstretching his hands. He fell headfirst into the ocean, but the mission was accomplished – the tip of his finger touched Ian's back as he did so. He won.

Back on land, Jeff was waiting for Dreamz by the portable shower. When he arrived, Jeff said: "Congratulations, Dreamz. You can use the shower, if you want. But before that, you still have-

"I'm choosing the machete", Dreamz cut into Jeff's words. "Back in the beginning of the game", he turned to look at the others, "we all decided we would pass on the rewards if we had a chance to take some'ing for our tribe. Well," for some reason, he now looked at Yau-Man, "I'm gonna stay true to my word. Unlike some folks."

Their camp was different when they returned to it - not only because they now had a machete in their possession, but also because a huge, wooden sign was stuck in the middle of it. They all hurried to read what it said. Ami was the first one to reach it, and immediately started reading the words for her tribemates:

*'Often times, camplife means unity-
But unity sometimes is reckless.
In order to win this immunity
You must search your camp for the necklace.'*

Katie laughed – she couldn't think of any other reaction to this. "Jeff really is tired of seeing our faces, isn't he?" she said. "Now, instead of hosting challenges, he just puts up signs."

"So does that mean" – Terry thought out-loud, "the return of the immunity idol?"

Yau-Man smiled, and said: "Only now, it completely replaces the immunity necklace."

"It *is* the immunity necklace", Rafe corrected him. "Earlier today, when I was giving a confessional, the producer interviewing me asked me to give him the necklace. Back then, I didn't understand why, but I guess it needed to be hidden while we were away..."

It was a little nerve-wracking for all of them, standing there, staring at the sign: they wanted to start searching for the necklace, but none of them wanted to be the first one to do so.

"So", said Ian, breaking the silence, "since I didn't get a shower today, I feel like washing the sweat in the sea. Anyone care to join me?"

"I'll come", said Julie, and the two of them started walking towards the sea.

"We'll come too", said Yau-Man, seeing this as an opportunity to talk to someone from their new alliance, and dragging Eliza along in the same direction.

"I'm glad you decided to join us", said Julie gently a minute later, entering the water, "and I don't mean now, joining us in the ocean. I mean joining the alliance."

"Of course you are", said Yau-Man bluntly, "we gave you guys the majority. But I'm glad too; I think it opens the doors to many opportunities in the future."

"You didn't give only us the majority", Julie corrected him. "You're in the majority as well. We all are."

Eliza decided to try and dig in. "But you must have some sub-alliances already made up."

"Not really", Julie shrugged. "What's the point of a sub-alliance if you don't have the majority to back it up?" She hoped she sounded convincing enough.

"It's a whole new game then", said Ian. This made him feel a little better. He took some sand from the bottom of the sea and started scrubbing his back. Julie almost offered him some help, but stopped herself at the last minute. Three years ago, she would've done it in a heartbeat, but now she was in a different place, a place where flirting wasn't part of her strategy anymore.

"So, who do you guys feel should go home next?" asked Julie, genuinely interested.

"From my eyes", said Yau-Man, "we can't afford to have big immunity threats still in the game. That's why I think that right now, Terry and Dreamz are the two most dangerous."

"But Yau-Man", said Eliza, "look at the challenges we have had so far – most of them weren't exactly physical. Cindy, Shane, Rafe – they weren't the strongest out here, but they all managed to win something already."

"Yes, but we have no guarantee it will keep being this way. We must make no assumptions, and perform the safest move possible right now. We don't want the last person standing in the minority winning immunity – then we'll have to turn against each other sooner than necessary."

Ian laughed. "Like that wasn't already done."

"For what it's worth", Julie said in a comforting tone, "as far as alliance-switching goes, I think you've made the right choice. The people you were in an alliance with are the exact people you need to get rid of. Terry and Dreamz are obvious – but also people like Cirie, who are guaranteed the million if they make it to the end, are not the best alliance-mates to have. In your current situation, you have a much better selection to choose from."

Katie didn't know she was being talked about in the ocean. She was walking between the trees, examining them closely, with Cindy at her side. These two decided to search for the necklace together, and decide together who should wear it in case they find it.

"Your season was the one they first introduced the hidden idol", Katie suddenly remembered.

"Yeah", Cindy said. "It was hidden inside a tree-trunk. I doubt they'll reuse the location."

"Why not?" asked Katie. "They've buried the idol in the ground three seasons in a row; it's not beneath them to use the same hiding place twice. But, come to think of it, it seems unlikely they'll just hang the necklace on a tree, next to a sign saying 'wear me'. It's much bigger than the idol they had hidden on your season"

Cindy sighed. "Where *could* they put it, then? Our camp's completely empty!"
"Not for long", Katie said. "We have a machete now. That means shelter. Hey, maybe they looked into the future, saw where we're gonna build our shelter, and buried the necklace under that spot!"
"Everything's possible", said Cindy. "Not what you have just said, though."

Back at camp, no one had to look into the future to see where the camp will be built – it was being planned at the moment, by Ami, Terry and Jonathan.

"I still say our best bet is to build the shelter under the tree", Terry said.

"There's no arguing there", said Jonathan, "but the tree can only serve as one supporting pillar; we need more than that."

"Not the way I'll build it", Terry said, and it was the end of the discussion. Jonathan felt like it's a win-win situation for him. If Terry succeeds in his plans, they'll have a good shelter to sleep in. If Terry fails, then it will put an even bigger target on his back.

And so they set out to cut branches and tree-trunks that would, hopefully, become their shelter soon enough. Dreamz had the first round on the machete, and he had no mercy for the trees standing in his way. Everyone else, lead by Jonathan, Terry and Ami, collected the chopped-up wood and started building the shelter around the *Cordia Lutea* tree.

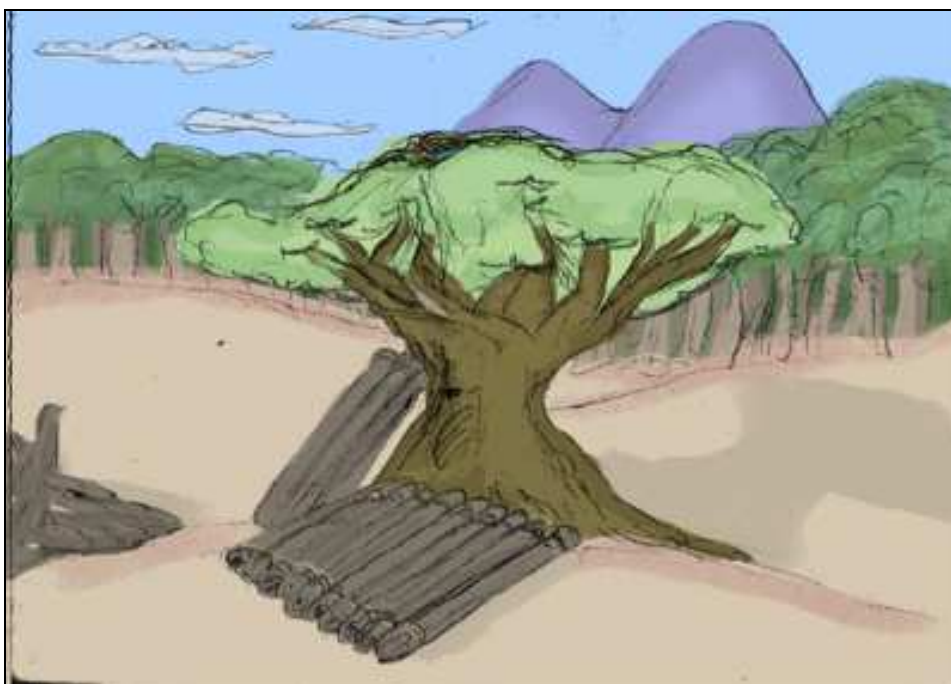
First, they started building a floor, with a few layers, so that the insects would have a harder time getting to them, and so that it wouldn't be as cold as sleeping so close to the ground surface.

Terry was trying to keep it all together, but at the same time, he was looking for an escape route, so he could go and look for the immunity necklace. After a few hours of working on the shelter, he said: "I'm off to the... bathroom. You guys keep up the good work."

He scurried away, hoping it wouldn't be too obvious of an excuse.

"Went to look for the necklace", Jonathan said matter-of-factly.

"Yep", Ami agreed.



Terry didn't choose the best time to start searching for the immunity necklace. It was getting darker by the minute, and soon, the immunity hunt and the shelter building both had to be stopped for the day. The bright side was that starting from that night, they no longer had to sleep on the ground. They now owned a high, semi-comfortable wooden floor.

"It's almost like sleeping on a bed!" said Eliza excitedly, once they all took their place on the wooden surface. "Only it hurts. Hey, it's kind of like a torture bed!"

"Well put", said Terry. He really wanted to get some sleep without Eliza buzzing in his ear.

Jonathan, however, wasn't in a hurry to fall asleep. He laid there in the darkness, waiting until nobody spoke, until it sounded like everybody was fast asleep.

He then signaled Katie, who laid right beside him, to come with him for a walk. Katie was ready for this.

It was now an on-going tradition for Katie and Jonathan to take their midnight walks along the seashore and discuss strategy together. They found it easier than to sneak away from the others during the day.

"I have a bad feeling about this new mega-alliance", Jonathan said thoughtfully. "I think it's about to explode in any given minute."

Katie frowned. "Couldn't you just enjoy the fact that our alliance is finally in the majority for at least two minutes before worrying that it might not last?"

"No", was Jonathan's answer. "We have to worry about things like that right now. We don't want the joke to be on us, we don't want another power-shift."

"Of course we don't", said Katie, "but we don't want to overthink things either. Right now we have the upper hand – let's not rush into anything that might change it."

"I'm not suggesting it", said Jonathan, a little irritated. "All I'm saying is, we have to make sure the eight in our alliance is actually the final eight fifteen days from now. And then we have to make sure us two are in the final five. And then – in the final three."

"No objections there", said Katie. "But we'll have a hard time making everyone believe they're in a good position, when in reality, *somebody* has to go once we're down to eight."

"That's the fun part", said Jonathan, smiling to himself. He thought in silence for a minute. The original alliance contained himself, Katie, Julie, Cindy, and Courtney, after Shane literally took himself out of the game. No sub-alliances were made until now – none that he was aware of, anyway – probably because everybody felt doomed by the larger alliance. But now, the leftovers weren't leftovers anymore – in came Yau-Man, Ian and Eliza, and now they were making the decisions. Now they could feel comfortable enough to start making deals that might actually last – or, more likely, deals that are fated to be broken. And he decided to start making deals right at that moment, in the darkness, with only the sound of crashing waves in their ears.

"Katie, what about going to the final two together?"

Katie was caught off guard. Up until now, they've discussed getting to the final three together, at best. Of course, it was in Jonathan's best interest to take her to the end – he would probably win hands down. But was it in *her* best interest? She thought about Ian, now sleeping in the soon-to-be-shelter, probably snoring loudly. He switched alliances, partly because she asked him to. He probably expects her to be with him until the end, just like last time. Was she willing to play the game exactly like she played in Palau? Would Ian understand if she decided not to?

She realized Jonathan was waiting for an answer, and quickly replied: "Let's... let's decide that on our next midnight walk, shall we? It's a tough one."

"Sure, take your time", Jonathan said.

They kept on walking, each of them thinking about what the other might be thinking.

When Ami opened her eyes the next morning, it was to see wood instead of ground beneath her. It took some getting used to. One of her goals was to make sure she would also sit at her sides and above her when she waked up every day. Another goal of hers was to make sure that she was safe at the next tribal council, and the only way to do that, as she was one of the five targets, was to find the immunity necklace. As she was the first one up that morning, she decided to take a stroll to the sign and read it carefully, in case it held some hidden clues.

But when she got to it, she couldn't believe her eyes. Sure, she was looking at a sign, but a completely different sign than the one that was there the previous day. New words were written on it:

*'The one with the necklace may live,
The person without it may leave.
In order to find - you must ask things that grow,
For dead things will tell you the answer is "no".'*

Ami looked at the sign for a few moments, mostly thinking that the person who wrote it must be insane. Things that are dead probably wouldn't tell her anything, seeing that they are, after all, dead.

After thinking it over a bit, she decided it was probably a very clumsy way of saying the necklace is hidden inside a plant.

She reckoned the clue was most likely talking about the big tree in the middle of their camp. Problem was, their half-shelter was to be built around it, and everyone was sleeping under it at the moment. She decided she would go and look closely once they all waked up. Meanwhile, she just hoped no one would notice the sign had changed.

"Today is gonna be the day we finish building the shelter", Terry announced once all of his tribemates were up. The previous day, he had tried finding the necklace – he looked inside bushes, under rocks, he had even tried to see if he could find sand that seemed dug-up – but with no results. Therefore, he decided he should put that precious time into making sure they have a place to sleep in.

With the shelter floor as comfortable as a shelter floor can be, the survivors continued to build the rest of the structure. Terry and Jonathan took the lead that day, with Ami half-helping them, half-looking for an opportunity to get rid of the others and look for the immunity necklace by herself.

"Ian, that log is too long," Terry said decidedly. "Go over to Dreamz and have it resized so it can fit here." He pointed to a gap between two other logs.

Ian merely looked at Terry, then walked away. He thought about working with Tom – how different it was from working with someone like Terry, who likes being right, and in control. Maybe Tom liked being those things as well, but when you worked with him, you felt like an equal, like a partner, like you had someone to talk to. Now he had no-one to really talk to, freely and honestly. Katie probably had other plans that didn't involve him – they've played a separate game for the first ten days, and now who knows what she was really thinking. He had a new alliance, but it was like going to a new school – the other kids already know each-other well, they probably

have things planned out, and where does he fit in all of this? While dragging the heavy log through the jungle, looking for Dreamz and the machete, Ian wondered if he made the right decision. *Time will tell*, he decided. And it didn't matter anyway. It was not about making the right decision. It was about making the decision he would feel better about. And even with Terry ordering him around, and even with an alliance he wasn't sure about, he felt he had made a decision he could live with.

Terry was a dictator, but at least he was up-front about it; Tom, in this game, was a puppet-master disguised as a genuine friend. He had tried to control Ian's every move, to make Ian follow him blindly, and deciding to vote out Katie, even though it wasn't in their best interest, just to test Ian's loyalty was a perfect example of that behavior. Tom had that special hold over him, and Ian couldn't truly play this game with Tom in it. It was best this way.

Outside of the game, he had no problem with Tom – he wished for them to remain good buddies. But this wasn't the real world – this was Survivorville. And Tom was holding him back in Survivorville. He would understand. If anyone could understand, it would be Tom.

Ian finally found Dreamz chopping a big tree not far from camp, watched by an interested-looking Katie.

"Now, you gotta come at it at full force, and always at the exact same spot, or all your energy just goes to waste. Keep an eye on that spot right there and never look away until that tree's down on the ground." Dreamz handed Katie the machete, somewhat unwillingly, and watched her at her first try.

It wasn't by any means a pretty sight.

The machete Katie was holding didn't stay in her hands for long. When she aimed it at the tree, it missed, fell from her grasp, and on the way down, brushed against her leg, digging a small wound in her knee, with blood slowly dripping out of it.

"Not as easy as it looks..." said Katie, trying to muster up a smile.

"Are you all right?" asked Ian, dropping the log he was holding.

"Fine, fine", said Katie. "That's what you get for trying to do something you suck at. I'm going to find the emergency kit, I think I'd better wrap this up, and leave the machete with people who actually know how to use it."

Katie quickly walked away, not making eye contact with Ian and Dreamz. She was so embarrassed. *What's wrong with me? Why can't I be a normal human being, with average skills? Why do I need to be a complete failure? Why can't I be just a mediocre failure?*

Through the trees she could see their camp from afar. It seemed like the shelter-builders were having a break – they were all sitting by the fire, with the pot full of boiling water, laughing together. She could hear their voices carrying to the woods. "I guess some people never learn", Ami was saying. "Working hard's like the first page of 'Survivor for Dummies'! And yet, when it's time to build the shelter, everyone sort of disappears. It's not that we need more help, we have plenty – it's just that it's stupid on their part – why would you want to appear lazy?"

"They're not *lazy*, per se", said Jonathan loudly, "they just don't like to *do* things. They would totally work harder if it wasn't so much hard work."

Terry laughed. "Katie amazes me the most. Did she not have enough with the jury hammering her during her season? Does she really want to go through it again?"

"From the way things seem to unfold", Ami said, "it's very likely. Almost inevitable, when you think about it."

Katie stood there, hearing the blood dripping from her knee, drop after drop. She wasn't going to return back to camp. Instead, she turned around and slowly went towards the sea.

She entered the ocean with her clothes still on. Salt water was entering her wound, but the pain Katie was feeling did not come from her knee.

No matter how she looked at it, her fate was sealed. She was the person who is lazy, who is mean, who is worthless, pathetic, and she could not escape those titles. This is who she is, this is who she will be for the rest of her life, in this game, out of this game. She can't even hold a machete for two seconds. People are working on the shelter at the moment, people are helping each other, and she's not a part of it. She can't be.

"Nothing is important to me as long as it's not food, right?" she yelled at the cameraman taping her breakdown. "The shelter means nothing to me because it's inedible! Don't you get it?!"

She sunk her head in the sea, her salty tears blending with the salt water. She felt ridiculed and hated, like she wasn't even in the same league as the other contestants. Like no matter what she did, or how much she tried, she would always be the same fat, worthless bitch.

'But you haven't really tried', said a small voice inside her.

She quickly took her head out of the water. She remembered her talk with Cirie three days ago. How she envied Cirie, with her popularity, with her humor working for her and not against her. Why can't she be loved like Cirie?

'You can't control that', the voice said. *'Remember what she said to you: you cannot control what other people think of you. You can only control what you think of yourself.'*

She hated herself at the moment. It says something about a person if nobody likes them.

But that wasn't the case. Outside this game, people did appreciate her, and her sense of humor. She had people close to her in real life.

And even on this island, she had people she got along with. She had, above all, Ian. She had Cindy and Julie, who she was friendly with. She had Jonathan and their midnight walks. And she had Cirie, who knew exactly where she was coming from. *'So some people don't like you'*, now she wasn't sure if it was the small voice talking, or if it was her talking to herself. *'It certainly won't change if you just sit in the water and sulk over your situation.'*

Katie was suddenly angry at herself. When did she start taking things so seriously? She was more than capable of making fun of others – why couldn't she just treat herself the same way? It was hardly news that people thought she was lazy – or that she wasn't an expert when it came to dealing with a machete.

It was the stress of being on all-stars, of trying to prove herself "worthy" when surrounded by people who were much more of an "all-star" material, that made her feel so useless. But it needed to end – it wasn't doing her any good to pity herself. Because if she believed them to be right about her, how could she prove them wrong? She got out of the water, trying to understand why she was smiling all of a sudden, why she was so excited. At a quick and steady pace, she walked confidently to the place she knew she should be at the moment.

"So, Dreamz", she said, still smiling, "let's have another try with the machete, shall we?"



"Look at them", Cirie said to Rafe, pointing at Julie and Yau-Man, barely visible behind a bush. "How did this happen? How are they suddenly in control?"

"The same way *we* were suddenly in control", Rafe answered. "The same way we suddenly lost control. It's just the way the story goes."

"Well", Cirie said, slightly irritated, "whoever wrote this story is not a very good writer. Everyone knows betraying your alliance this early in the game is suicide."

"We all knew it", said Rafe, "and it would hold up in a normal season, but we're in a completely different situation, Cirie; this time we're surrounded by people who are actually good at this game, who actually appreciate a bold move instead of punishing whoever made it. I bet if Yau-Man, for example, gets in the final 2, he'll be rewarded for his flip-flopping, even if it did not make any sense."

"It's good to know we live in a logical world", Cirie sighed. She was frustrated as hell, but she wasn't going to let it bring her down. The game just got complicated? Great. That means she'll need to start playing it, at last.

Terry and Ami came to join them, after they had decided to take a break from working on the shelter. Ami, who still didn't get a chance to search the tree for the necklace, was hesitant to miss on that opportunity at first, but she quickly realized she had no choice. It would've been too suspicious had she said to Terry: 'You go and have that important meeting that might decide our fate in the game while I continue to stand by that tree.'

"You came just in time", Rafe smiled at Ami. "We're working on our final words. I don't know what I'm going to say, but I have a feeling it would involve the word 'prematurely' a lot."

"You have nothing to worry about", said Terry, "it's me they'll be gunning for – it's not like they need me for the challenges. The opposite is more likely – they need me not to be there for the challenges."

"Well..." Rafe said, trying to hide the loathing in his voice and sound as innocent as possible, "I *did* win more challenges than you so far..."

"It doesn't matter who they'll vote out first", said Ami, sensing animosity between Rafe and Terry. "A strike against one of us is a strike against us all. We need to think of a way for all of us to stay in it."

"That'll be easy", said Terry. "Why don't we just ask them politely not to vote us off? I'm sure it'll work."

Ami wanted to shoot a comeback at Terry, but she honestly didn't have any. She had no idea how to get out of the corner they had found themselves in.

"They're probably deciding right now which one of us should be going home", Cirie said, looking again at Yau-Man and Julie.

"Let's hope they're talking about the weather", said Rafe, wishing he was talking about the weather as well.

Dreamz came out of the woods, alone and machete-less. He noticed his alliance members – the ones that didn't jump ship – all huddled together in a corner. He wasn't surprised he wasn't a part of that meeting, and he didn't really feel like being a part of it, either.

The others didn't feel the same way. "Dreamz, come over here!" Terry half-shouted, half-whispered. Dreamz did as he was told, but he didn't look exceptionally patient.

"We were wondering what our next move might be", Rafe explained to Dreamz, looking somewhat fearful, "you know, as a...shrunk alliance."

Dreamz looked at him for a few seconds. Didn't these people get it? He had tried being loyal in this game, he really had, but what good did it bring him? What was the use of alliances if they're easily broken at one's convenience? What was the use of promises if people break them without looking back? He had really tried to give it a shot, but he was done with it. He was officially back to his old ways of giving information away, giving misleading information away, telling different stories to different people and above all, not caring what others think of him and of his strategy. "Didn't ya'll noticed?" Dreamz said finally. "There ain't no 'shrunk alliance', or whatever. There ain't nothing anymore- the rules broke. How many people's running round the island? 40 or so? Five people voting together just won't cut it!"

"We *know* five people won't do", said Cirie patiently, "and that's why we need a new plan-"

Good luck with that", said Dreamz, and simply walked away. He knew it wasn't the best move on his part, to brush off people who wanted to be aligned with him, but he also knew he had had enough of people saying they needed him, they relied on him, and then turning their back on him. That wasn't about to happen again, no way, not if he could help it.

Rafe smiled out of embarrassment. Terry, however, wasn't even close to smiling. It wasn't the fact that he was in a doomed situation – he had already experienced this kind of situation before. It was the people he shared this situation with: He looked around from the black woman, to the lesbian woman, to the gay man. Last time, he was in an alliance with three straight, white men. It wasn't a coincidence. This was the kind of people he knew back at home, with whom he had the most in common, with whom he shared an 'understanding'. But now he found himself in a spot in which he had no idea what to do, how to behave. He felt like he was surrounded by and aligned with aliens; or, more accurately, he felt like *he* was the alien.

Cirie, who up until now had her head in her hands, straightened up and said: "Correct me if I'm wrong, but right now we have two options left: Either we pull over at least two people to our side until tomorrow night –"

"Three", Ami corrected her.

"Right, three", said Cirie, "*or*, we convince Dreamz to at least vote with us this tribal council, and then try to split the other eight into two voting blocks, so we'll be the ones with the majority."

"Sounds like a piece of cake", said Rafe, "a really big, impossible piece of cake."

"Yeah," Cirie agreed, "sounds that way to me too. We'll have to go with the first option."

"That leaves only two questions", said Ami. "The first one is, who do we target? Who would make sense?"

"Jonathan tends to get on people's nerves", pointed out Cirie, "so he would be a logical choice."

"But everybody knows he's untrustworthy", said Rafe, "so he isn't really a threat to any of them. We need to target someone they'd want to get rid of, someone they could see is an immediate danger for their game."

"Look at the one over there, charming Yau's ass off", Terry pointed at Julie, and they all watched as she was looking Yau-Man straight in the eyes, telling him something they couldn't hear, and the outcome was clear – Yau-Man has fallen for Julie's spell. Even from the distance, it was obvious Julie had some influence over him.

"It doesn't take a genius to realize how much power Julie has over her alliance-mates", Rafe concluded. "If some of them see it, it would be easy to convince them Julie has to go, for them to make it further."

"But that brings us to the second question", said Ami. "Who do we want to pull in? Who would be suicidal enough to jump ship five minutes after they've established a ruling alliance?"

As she quickly realized, the answer was right in front of them.

"Dear god", Courtney began. She was situated on a rock overlooking the sea, a short distance from their camp, and a cameraman was two feet from her, intruding on her private moment – but she did not care. This was between her and god, and no one else could understand anyway.

"I'm trying really hard, I really am. I voted out Shane, like we agreed I would, and now I'm in the majority somehow, and this is going to be the first time that I'm not in any real danger of going home. But still..."

She found it hard to continue praying. Even though she knew it was a silly thought, she couldn't help but wonder: if she tried to explain, would god understand?

"But I still feel so lost. I know it should be the opposite, now that I've found you, But I can't lie, not to you, you know everything. Why can't I find peace within myself?

Why can't I be enjoying all this, having a great time, why am I so miserable?

"I look at the people around me, and through their eyes, I see contempt and disrespect towards me, like they don't think I should even be here..."

"Is it just your way of testing me? Or is there really something wrong with my personality? Shane told me I was only brought back for the bickering between us, and I didn't listen to him at first, but now... It's just really hard. I feel like a walking joke, and I know that you work in mysterious ways, but I really need some kind of proof. It's a lot to ask, obviously – but I really need some kind of sign, I need you to tell me somehow that I'm O.K. and that you're there for me and that you...approve..."

She hated herself for saying those things, she hated herself for not trusting herself more, for not trusting god more, but at the place she was in at the time, nothing seemed certain. She desperately needed something that was solid, something that was real.

"Katie, are you all right?"

Cindy was looking for Katie, she hasn't seen her for hours; she just didn't imagine she would find her in the center of piles upon piles of cut wood, working determinedly with the machete.

"Better than ever", said Katie between hits. She was cutting trees for what felt like a century, but she didn't have the slightest urge to stop. Drops were now falling from her brow, not her eyes, not her knee. She barely felt the pain from her bruise – she was too busy chopping wood.

"That's... a lot of building material", said Cindy, looking around. "Shouldn't we have people collecting all of this, for the shelter?"

"We probably should", Katie said, still focused on her task. "I just didn't have the time to call people over. I've asked Dreamz to do so. Didn't he tell you guys?"

"Nope", Cindy said. "Katie, I think we have enough logs, you can stop now. Let's start bringing those to the camp; I'm sure the machete'll be more useful there."

Katie looked around her, finally stopping the monotonous movement of her machete-holding arms. "Yeah, I guess that's... more than enough."

It was starting to get dark as Cindy and Katie made their way back to camp, each dragging two heavy logs behind them, with the machete tucked safely under Katie's arm. It was hard maneuvering those logs through the crowded trees as it was, but the thing that finally blocked their way wasn't the wildlife; it was Dreamz.

"Woah, didn't see you there in the dark", said Cindy, although it wasn't the most politically-correct thing to say.

"We all thought you two gotten lost", said Dreamz, smiling his big smile, "I came lookin'."

"Yeah, well, here we are!", said Katie. "But since you're already here, why won't you help us carry a few logs? They're stashed in that direction, not far off."

Dreamz nodded, headed in the direction Katie was motioning with her head (as both of her arms were more than occupied) and returned three minutes later with five logs leaning against his chest. "Let's get going", he said brightly.

"So what's happening around camp lately?" asked Katie casually.

"Nothing much", Dreamz said, now leading the pack through the forest. "Y'know, the usual buzzing, double-dealing shit."

"As expected", said Katie.

"It's like nothing's set in stone, everything can come to be", continued Dreamz.

"Everybody's like they about to loose or win the game at any second. S'like nothing's for sure."

"We *are* stranded with people who know this game back and front", said Cindy, trying to be as diplomatic as possible. Was Dreamz trying to hint at something? Was he getting somewhere with all this?

"I mean, the eight of you, you really thinking all of you'll stay loyal? Someone's bound to betray you at some point." Cindy nodded to herself in the darkness.

Dreamz's intentions became clearer. "In your group, you have Courtney, who's about to find a bunny and cook it at any second. You have Ian, looking like a little kid lost in a mall, and you have Yau-Man and Eliza, who flip-flopped so easily, there's not telling they wouldn't do the same to you."

"What are you getting at?" Katie asked bluntly.

"My point is, you got an alliance, but it's not a real good one- it's just a train-wreck waiting to happen. I say - jump off the train before it crashes and burns. Bring over

the people you wanna still have with ya, and we'll start an alliance that's strong enough to last."

"We'll... we'll think about it, Dreamz", said Cindy politely, "thanks for the offer."

"No we won't", Katie whispered to Cindy a few minutes later, when they continued to make their way through the trees with Dreamz in the lead. "We won't think about it – why would we think about such a stupid idea?"

"You gotta keep your options open in this game", said Cindy.

"Not *that* open, though", said Katie. "What he's offering is a random game of pick 'em. It's a suicide plan, not a strategy!"

"But in that suicide plan, he did have a grain of truth", said Cindy thoughtfully. "Our alliance *is* made of some explosive material. I truly have no idea what'll happen once we're down to our people only – and there's no guarantee we'll be able to manage even that..."

The moment the three of them arrived back at camp, Cindy found Julie and took her for a little conversation. Katie was still dragging her two logs when Ian came to face her out of nowhere.

"Where've you been? I've been looking for you for hours! Well, minutes, actually, but still..."

"Just out there in the woods", Katie said, feeling the words weren't really hers,

"chopping this wood for the shelter. Care to give me a hand?"

"Are you feeling well?" Ian asked, touching her brow.

"Never felt better", said Katie. "Except for that one time when I wasn't abandoned on a deserted island. Now, help me carry those logs to the shelter."

Even though she couldn't see Ian's face in the darkness, she could sense his shocked expression. She didn't know whether she needed to be flattered or insulted by this reaction – she just knew she wanted to be consistent enough in her new-found work ethic so that shock wouldn't be the proper reaction for it any longer.

"I know what your mantra is", Cindy said to Julie quietly; the silent night seemed to carry their voices louder than intended. "I know you think making sub-alliances this early'll send the main alliance crumbling. But I really feel like we could find ourselves in a risky spot eventually – how do we know we're not last on the totem poll? Don't we need to try and secure ourselves?" she looked at her final-two partner desperately, hoping she would come up with a satisfying reaction, and won't just dismiss her concern.

"First of all", said Julie after a moment's pause, "we're not the last on the totem pole. Think about it: Yau-Man, once we're down to eight, is the immediate target. He's a fish out of water in our alliance, if a fish means a popular contestant, and the water is filled with not-so-much popular contestants. Nobody will want to face him later on – he'll go home before any of us, I guarantee you at least that."

Julie stopped talking suddenly, thinking she had heard the sound of footsteps behind her, but when she turned to look, nothing was there. She continued to talk as if nothing had happened.

"But you're right, we don't want to be the kids who are last to be picked. I'll tell you what – If everything goes as planned, and we vote off Terry tomorrow night, we'll start looking for partners for the endgame."

"The thing is, I'm not sure Terry's the right choice", said Cindy, quieter than ever. "I know we've all decided this as a group, because he's an immunity threat, but how many immunities has he won so far? I feel like this one's a much bigger threat –" she

pointed at Cirie sitting a few feet from them, talking joyfully to Jonathan. "She's got killer social skills – unlike Terry – I almost wanna be in an alliance with her just so I could be in an alliance with her! And Terry? I'm not sure I'd align myself with him even if it would've saved my game."

Even though it wasn't the polite thing to do, Julie yawned in Cindy's face. "I'm sorry", she said, "but I'm just too tired, my mind's not working properly. Why won't we have another meeting tomorrow, and then we'll decide who our target is?"

"Sounds good", said Cindy. A sleep in the improved-yet-not-finished shelter didn't sound too bad. But was Julie truly too tired to go on, or was she avoiding talking about voting off Cirie? Cindy looked again at a laughing Cirie and wondered whether she was even a better social player than she had realized.

Terry was lying on his back, looking at the starry night through the branches and leaves of the tree. Hopefully, the stars wouldn't be visible 24 hours from now. They didn't finish building the shelter that day, but they were really close, and they had enough material to get it over with first thing in the morning. He was quite impressed with Katie for suddenly proving her worth. *People can surprise ya*, he thought, and suddenly felt like the doomed situation he was in wasn't really doomed – people don't always act the way you imagine them to act, and thus, anything can happen. He had given up on Rafe, Ami and Cirie without really giving them a chance; he had written them off without actually knowing what they were made of. Maybe he should try and get to know them before doing that. It wasn't the alliance he would have asked for, but this was what he had – and this was what he needed to work with.

Ami was also lying on her back, but she was looking at the tree obscuring the stars, not at the stars obscured by the tree. She craved for the chance to be alone by the tree, so she could look for the necklace, but that chance just wouldn't present itself. There was only one option left – She needed to lie there, awake, until every single one of her tribemates fell asleep, and then look for it as silently as she could. The moment she had decided on that plan, however, her eyes became heavy as hell; she was so used to wanting to fall asleep and not being able to, that now, wanting to stay awake had the opposite effect on her. *I have to stay awake for just a little more*, she firmly decided, looking at the people around her still talking amongst themselves in the darkness, some going to relieve themselves in the distance, two of them walking away towards the beach...

Before long, the only necklace Ami saw was the one in her dreams.

"I'm in", Katie announced to Jonathan as they were having their midnight walk. She had thought about it a lot during the day, and it made sense. Jonathan was one of the few people she actually had a shot against in a final-two scenario. A minuscule shot, but a shot nonetheless.

"Great", said Jonathan, suddenly excited at the thought of the perfect final-two partner at his side. "I think it's the signal of great things to come. Katie, we have this game under control, I truly feel that way. After we get rid of Ami, Rafe, Terry, Dreamz and Cirie, the land will be clear for us. I just have to take Courtney under my wings, and you just have to take Ian under yours-"

"First of all", Katie said, "I don't have wings. Horns and a pitchfork, now that's more of a possibility. And second of all, I'm not going to *control* Ian, our relationship doesn't work that way. He has his own mind, his own motives, I'm not in charge of him."

"You should be", Jonathan said. "You have some kind of charm over him, I saw it with my own eyes, and you have to maintain that charm, we need him as a number." "If he wants to go with us", Katie insisted, "he may. I'm not going to force him." "That's fine", said Jonathan impatiently, "but whatever you say to him, don't mention our pact, Katie. Don't mention it to anyone. It has to be a secret in order to work." "I know that, I'm not stupid", Katie said. "In fact I thought about maybe having a fake partner for each of us – so people wouldn't suspect." "That's a good idea", and they continued to talk for another hour or so, deciding who those partners should be, who are their threats and in what order they should be going home.

When they got back to the shelter, they made a point of sleeping as far as possible from one another – they didn't want anybody to associate them together. They were glad all the people there were asleep – but if they had counted the people lying on the shelter floor, they would have noticed there were ten sleeping people instead of eleven. That missing person was above their heads, trying not to move even a muscle.

Courtney was up just as the sun was beginning to rise from the mountains behind them – she took it as a sign.

Surprisingly uplifted, she made her way to the rock she liked to pray on, the one overlooking the sea. Halfway there, she noticed the sign with clues to the whereabouts of the necklace, and decided to have another look at it. Her lucky morning got even luckier when she realized the sign had changed (not for the first time, but she didn't know that):

*You may look around, you may look below,
But that makes your search more painful and slow.
What you must have is the sight of a dove,
for only she sees this gift from above.*

Courtney didn't even have to think about the clue – it was as if god was showing her the right path. She ran back to the shelter, slowing down only when she arrived, trying not to wake anybody up. In order to get to the tree trunk she needed to step carefully over Rafe and Julie, but when she reached it, it was a smooth climb. She knew exactly at what bumps to place her feet in, she knew exactly the branches she needed to grab. In no time, the treetop was inches away from her... Here she was, climbing through the last of the branches...

But when she finally reached the top, the leafy surface was necklace-less. She was sure she had it, it just made complete sense – but there was nothing. Much slower and less enthusiastically, Courtney made her way down to the ground, where she found Julie looking at her with an inquiring look.

"Bird hunting?" Julie asked her, smiling.

"No..." Courtney said sadly, and continued to tell Julie about the clue and about the lack of a necklace.

"But that doesn't make sense", Julie said at last. "There's nobody missing – look", she pointed at the cramped shelter, "thirteen people, asleep."

"One of them is probably faking then", Courtney concluded, "and already has the necklace under his head or something."

She was right.

"You know I'm right, Eliza", said Ami, "you just have trouble admitting it."

Eliza and Yau-Man were having a private conversation about their plan when they were cornered by Ami and Rafe, both determined to bring these two former allies back into the fold.

"Oh Ami", said Eliza angrily, "stop patronizing. I'm capable of making my own decisions, and not all of them are mistakes."

"I didn't say all of them were", Ami insisted. "I just said this one was."

"There is no need for the conversation to get heated", Yau-Man came to stand between Ami and Eliza. "Ami, Rafe, Eliza did the thing she thought was best for her. There is really no point in this argument."

"This is not set in stone", Rafe said. "You've changed your mind once, you can change it again."

"Think about it", Ami joined Rafe in their calculated attack. "One good thing about you two coming back is that now, with Tom gone and Ian no longer on our side, it'll be seven against six. That's much better than nine against four, as had been initially planned. You can tell your current alliance that you joined them just as a one-time thing to vote off Tom, as he was the biggest threat. It would make sense to them."

"That's not the only benefit of coming back", Rafe said, digging deep into Eliza's eyes. "Eliza, be honest with yourself. You didn't come here to play against the likes of Courtney and Katie. You'll feel much better about your choices if you return to play in the 'big boys' sandbox. Nobody would be angry – they'll understand it's just a game."

This was the subject that hit Eliza the hardest. Rafe worded it perfectly – she absolutely came here to play in the 'big boys' sandbox. She wanted to play the game against him, and against Cirie, and Ami, and Terry – and she would never get that chance if she just voted them off one after the other.

But as Yau-Man gave her one of his knowledgeable looks, she caught herself asking herself: *what am I thinking?! So big deal, I don't get to play against my favorite survivors. I'll be able to invite them to a round of Scrabble over at my home once this is over. Meanwhile, I'm here to win a million dollars. I'm here to prove that I can win this game. Being surrounded by my favorite players is just a bonus. And besides – I was responsible for Tom leaving the game! And I'll be responsible for the evictions of the other players I admire! Is there anything cooler than that?*

Ami thought she was ready for whichever way Eliza would react to this offer. She was not, however, ready for a smile coming from her. "Thank you for the offer", Eliza said kindly. "But from the place I'm in right now, I think I'll have to turn it down."

Ami looked at Eliza, lost for words. She felt like Eliza was their last chance to make some kind of change that night at tribal council. Rafe quickly recovered and turned to Yau-Man.

"Yau", he said, "Eliza may have found herself at a better position in this new alliance, but for you, a lion's den would be a better position. *Nobody* in your alliance will want to see you near the end! They're all deadly afraid of you. Do you really want to take that risk, for nothing?"

Yau-Man was smiling as well. In Ami's opinion, this was getting ridiculous. "Let's leave it as food for thought", he said simply. "We'll see what happens tonight."

Ami looked as though she was about to respond to this, but Rafe stopped her right in time; He took her aside, whispering to her: "Pressuring them won't help us. We've planted the seed; now let's give it a chance to grow without disturbance."

Eliza and Yau-Man were also exchanging words quietly. "What was that about leaving it as *food for thought*?" Eliza asked Yau-Man. "You didn't really mean it, did you?"

"Of course not", Yau-Man answered her patiently, still smiling. "But we don't want to tell them straight up that we're not interested in what they have to offer - it would just send them looking for other options."

At that moment, Eliza was beyond ecstatic that she had Yau-Man as her partner in crime.

Not far away, someone else was beyond ecstatic as well.

By midday, the shelter was ready. Terry stood there, admiring his work of art. He got one thing right that day. It was time for him to get another thing right. He spotted Cirie, with the boiling pot in her hands, going to get water from the well. He saw it as his opportunity.

"Yo, Cirie, wait!" he yelled, running to catch up with her.

Cirie looked at him, mildly surprised. He had never showed interest in talking to her before. "Is something wrong?" she asked, a bit concerned.

"No, everything's awesome", he said, trying to sound natural. "Just wanted to escort you to the well, so you wouldn't be lonely."

Terry was not successful in his attempt to sound natural. Cirie, however, was too tactful to point that out. "Let's go, then", she said lightly, wondering about Terry's true intentions.

"So", said Terry as they were making their way through the forest, "how are you holding up? It must be very stressful, being in the situation we're in."

Cirie eyed him, lost for words. Terry didn't know what kind of body language he should adopt. His goal was to show interest in Cirie, to show that he cared about her thoughts and feelings, but this did not come naturally to him. She just wasn't the kind of person he'd normally hang out with.

But it was essential for him to forget about his past, about his normal surroundings – if he wanted to do well in the situation he had found himself in, he needed to adapt.

"I'm doing fine", said Cirie in a high-pitched voice, amused by the whole thing. "And you, Terry? Everything's fine?"

"Oh, I'm OK", he said seriously. "I obviously don't like to be on the losing side – and after finally having a chance at this game, you can imagine how it feels for it to be taken away from you." Cirie had a hard time holding back a laugh. Terry was obviously trying to be considerate and kind, but it just wasn't his territory. Yes, she could imagine how it felt for it to be taken away from you – it *was* taken away from her!

"I'm just worried about you", continued Terry, remembering his goal. "I really want you to know that you can trust me."

"Not as easy as it sounds", said Cirie quietly.

"Cirie, stop walking for a moment", Terry reached out a hand to halt Cirie.

"You didn't really like me during Exile Island, did you?" he asked.

Cirie didn't have to think long before answering: "no, I really didn't. And you didn't really like me either."

Terry smiled. They finally reached some sort of understanding. "It seems like back then, we got off to a bad start. But I want to change that. I want you to feel like you can talk to me. I want to get to know you better. After all, we're all we've got – Ami and Rafe have their own thing, they're looking out for one another. We should do the

same – no one else is gonna look after us. That's why I want you to feel secure with me. If there's anything I can do to make you feel this way, anything at all..."

"Actually", said Cirie, suddenly appreciative of Terry's presence, "there *is* something you can do."

Eliza's job was to peel thirteen potatoes and throw them into the pot, while Ami's was to look over the boiling water and the fire. The two of them were very pleasant to each other, asking polite questions and giving polite answers.

Ami looked at Eliza closely, weighing her options.

The immunity necklace was out of the question – half an hour earlier, she had gone to see if the sign had changed again, realized that the necklace *must* be on top of that damn tree, climbed it while nobody was looking and had found nothing, understanding that someone else must have beaten her to it. Strangely enough, she started hoping that the necklace holder was from the opposite alliance – otherwise, with one of the four at her side immune, it would increase her chances of going home. Recruiting Eliza back was out of the question – she wasn't going to switch alliances and then switch right back in just three days. Even Eliza wasn't that unstable. Plus, although Ami was mad at Eliza, she wasn't blind; she knew Eliza had made the right choice. Eliza didn't stand a chance against any of her previous alliance-mates.

Anything else was not out of the question. In fact, anything at all that would make sure Ami was still in the picture would be very much in the question.

"You're furious with me", said Eliza quietly, sensing Ami was deep in thoughts, "aren't you?"

"I'm not", said Ami confidently. She really was. "I'm really not."

"It was just something I had to do", said Eliza, and the tone of her voice was begging for forgiveness. Ami noticed that. "But I really regret not ending up in an alliance with you. I fell like we would have made an awesome pair in this game."

"Maybe the third time around", said Ami. "Although we *do* have a tendency to vote against one another. We would need to work on that."

"I'm all for working out our little quirks", said a smiling Eliza, and she did not know it, but she had caught Ami's bait. Ami wasn't about to act like a vindictive bitch with an agenda – it would have brought her nowhere. Instead, what she needed to do was to befriend her enemy. She needed to slowly remove all of the enemy's protective shields, until the enemy is completely exposed.

When people are vulnerable, they are the easiest to manipulate.

"Quiet, people! We are trying to have a serious discussion here!"

Jonathan stood there, frustrated at the incompetence of his alliance. All eight of them were in the turquoise ocean, deep in argument. The meeting had started with Courtney telling them about the changing sign and the missing necklace, but it quickly turned into a debate over who should be voted out in a few hours.

"We had tried getting rid of Terry during our whole season!" said Courtney heatedly.

"But we didn't even have a single opportunity, with him winning all the immunities! We need to seize that chance, while he still hasn't won the necklace..."

"Exactly", said Cindy. "He hasn't won it even once. It's not a coincidence – this season's challenges are much less biased to favor men. Terry is far from being our biggest threat –"

"Then who is, in your opinion?" asked Courtney, not looking really interested in hearing the answer.

"I could name a few", Ian joined the debate, "with Cirie being the first one I could think of. Let me just ask this simple question – who *isn't* feeling bummed out Cirie is probably going home soon?"

Nobody said a thing.

Ian has proven his point: "Everybody feels sorry for Cirie. Everybody loves Cirie. No one wants to see her lose. If that's not dangerous, I don't know what is. It's certainly more dangerous than Terry's nonexistent winning streak."

"So", Jonathan tried to put things in order, "our decision is between Terry and Cirie?"

"Well", added Katie, "neither Ami nor Rafe are exactly unlikable. And Dreamz is just as strong, physically, as Terry; he had beaten him this last reward challenge."

"Thanks, Katie", said Jonathan, "this makes things much easier. You really cleared things up as to who should be going home tonight."

"Everyone needs to go at some point", said Julie. Even though she said it very quietly, everyone's eyes went instantly in her direction. It seemed like everyone was interested in what she had to say. "It's just the question of who is the most likely to ruin our plans to take them out one by one."

"It's obviously Terry", said Courtney. "What if he's the only one left from his alliance, and then ends up winning immunity? Who will we vote off then?"

Cindy shook her head in frustration. "Cirie has a way with people, unlike Terry. If we don't get rid of her now, there's no telling if there'll even be a later."

Eliza had a feeling this argument could last for hours. She decided to go check on Ami and the potatoes. Her departure had almost gone unnoticed; only Yau-Man sent her a small smile.

On her way to the bonfire, Eliza was pulled aside by Dreamz.

"What's up?" he asked her.

"I don't know", she answered, "you're the one who blocked my way..."

"Yeah", he said, "yeah, that's right. Listen, I's been thinking."

"Dreamz, if you feel like I've betrayed you, I'm really sorry, it was just something I needed to –"

"No", Dreamz stopped her. "No, that's not that at all. I wanted to talk to you 'bout Yau. I knows you and him got a thing going."

"Yau-Man and I?" said Eliza, trying to sound surprised. "I have no idea what you're talking about. He and I decided separately to switch alliances. I hardly know this guy the world. That's a serious mistake you're doing there, girl." –"

You don't fool me", said Dreamz, "it's obvious as hell you two aren't gonna split for

"Why's that?" asked Eliza, and then quickly added: "not that I'm aligned with Yau-Man, but if I were, why would it have been such a big mistake?"

"He's using you, that's why", said Dreamz sharply, "'Course he wants you there at the end, he's gonna whoop your ass when you get there. Remember what happened to me last season? I got whooped by Yau's *sidekick*! What you need is a partner you got a chance against. You need some folk who's at the same level as you are, who've made the same mistakes you did."

Eliza started to become amused. "And let me guess who that person might be", she said.

"You looking at him", said Dreamz unnecessarily. "We've played the same game, 'Liza, you know that. First off, we's both torn between Tom and Twila, and we end up voting Twila off, even though Tom's a much bigger threat. Then, we go against our own alliance and send Shane packing. The only reason I didn't switch with ya three days ago's because I gave Yau my word, but *he's* the one who ended up going with

you to the dark side! We two are always the swing votes, didn't you noticed? That's because no one knows what to expect from us. We might as well swing it together." Eliza knew that Dreamz was in an uncomfortable position, and didn't want to hurt his feelings, so she chose her words carefully, which was something she wasn't used to doing: "I'm sorry, Dreamz, but I really can't. I got other... commitments. I really wish you the best in the game, though."

Dreamz could feel his chances in the game slowly slipping out of his fingers. "That's too bad", he said, without really thinking. "I was really going to keep your and Yau's secrets."

He walked off before Eliza had a chance to react. Did Dreamz know something he shouldn't? Was he just playing games with her? Did she really want to give him the benefit of the doubt?

She walked over to Ami, who was smiling widely at her. "They're ready", she said brightly, pointing at the potatoes swimming at the boiling water. "Call the others over."

Eliza was about to make her way back to the seashore, when her eyes met Terry's. He was sitting in the shelter, packing his bag for tribal council. This in itself wasn't very suspicious; obviously he knew he had a chance of going home that night. What *was* suspicious was the object sticking out of the bag – a huge, ugly piece of jewelry, with something ping and star-shaped in the middle...

When he caught her looking at him, Eliza smiled weakly, pretending she saw nothing, then made her way to the water as quickly as she could without actually running.

When she got there, the other seven were still deep in conversation, and the two names that kept going up were still Terry and Cirie.

"Guys", Eliza tried to get their attention, "guys. I have something to tell you. Two things, actually. First, dinner's ready."

"Good", said Katie. "I read somewhere that it's important to have a meal every three days – no, wait, that was three meals a day."

"And what is the second thing?" Yau-Man asked curiously.

"Oh, just that Terry has immunity", Eliza said.

"Would you say you're full?"

Rafe laughed in the producer's face. That was a silly question to ask someone who had eaten a single potato during the last three days. But he understood why he had been asked this question; he was now supposed to gush about how very hungry he is. "No, I'm not full. I'm quite empty, to be honest. I didn't have much weight on me to begin with, although I had tried to gain some before the season started, without much success. I'm used to being skinny, but this – this is beyond skinny. I'm really lucky that I have some issues with my... hmmm... *faeces*, otherwise I'm not sure there would've been anything left of me."

"Tell me about the situation in the tribe", asked the producer, and Rafe could tell he didn't want the conversation to revolve around Rafe's excretions.

"I'm not in an excellent spot right now, as anyone can see", Rafe said somberly. "I'm probably out at one of the next five tribal councils. My luck is that I'm surrounded by much bigger threats. By my calculations, Ami and I will be the last two standing from our alliance, which is good, as she is the one I intend to take with me as far as possible. She's a great partner to have – she comes off as more aggressive than me, but she can get what she wants out of people. I think she's got Eliza wrapped around her finger, so when the right time comes, she can be beneficial to us."

"Besides, being the last one standing out of a dying alliance is a good position to be in – Danny can testify to that. Alliances can't last too long, especially when they contain eight people. In a way, this early in the game, it's almost better being on the losing side than on the winning side, 'cause things are sure to change. That's what I'm counting on, anyway."

Rafe finished the interview as quickly as he could, as it was almost time to leave for tribal council. He fetched his torch from the shelter, and then went over to Ami, signaling her to come with him for a second.

"Who are we voting for tonight?" he asked her as the others were getting ready to go. "I guess Julie", Ami shrugged, "like we've agreed with Terry and Cirie. Does it really matter, anyway? It's not like we decide who goes. Not anymore."

"Yeah, but it still means something. Maybe we should vote for Eliza just to put her on edge."

"No", Ami said firmly. "No, I don't want her to feel like we're against her. She needs to feel secure enough to come to us when it's time. But I *did* have another person in mind. Voting for him would sort of make sense."

"Who is it?"

"Terry."

Rafe laughed at first. When Ami didn't even smile back, he was starting to suspect she wasn't joking.

"Have you gone psycho?" he asked her after a long silence, as quietly as he could, because Dreamz was fetching his torch a few feet from them.

"You'll know when I go psycho, it's distinguishable", said Ami. "But I mean it; I think it would do us good to vote for him tonight."

"How exactly?" Rafe asked skeptically.

"It would show our good intentions to the other alliance", Ami explained. "It would show that we're not set in our old ways, that we're open for business."

"And it would show the complete opposite to Terry and Cirie", said Rafe, actually sounding a bit scared. "Not that I love Terry so much that I'm not willing to vote for him, ever, but now? It would be like declaring war!"

Ami didn't look too concerned with that thought. "This game is all about war.

Alliances are merely a temporary convenience, short pauses between one battle and another. Personally, I'm ready for war."

Cindy looked at Cirie as they were making their way up the rope ladder, their torches taken from them to be brought safely to the tribal council set. *She doesn't look too concerned*, Cindy said to herself. *She probably thinks Terry or Dreamz are going home tonight. She still doesn't know it's her.* Cindy suddenly had the urge to tell Cirie, to apologize to her, even to change the vote at the last minute – but she did none of those things, as they weren't part of the game she was trying to play this time. Climbing the ladder beneath her was Jonathan. She wished she could be more like Jonathan, who was always about business, and never seemed to waver when something needed to be done. But then Jonathan said: "this frigging ladder – I swear when this is over, I'm gonna find the people who put it together and make them climb this thing once every three days for the rest of their miserable lives", and Cindy wished to be nothing like Jonathan.

Jeff seemed to be in a good mood when they sat in front of him, ready to be questioned.

"Day Twelve", Jeff announced. "By tomorrow, a third of your time here will have passed. Julie, how does it feel to make it this long in the toughest season we've done?" Julie found herself in a state of shock. Like Jeff said, twelve days have passed, and he had barely thrown her a single word during all this time. And suddenly he was asking her encouraging questions like it was all completely normal? Why was he toying with her like that? And how was she supposed to respond?

"It feels strange", said Julie, and she wasn't necessarily referring to Jeff's question. "I'm sure everybody here had been sure they would be out of the running on day three, but here we all are, and it's remarkable. I'm thankful for every second I get in this competition. This is my last chance on Survivor, and I'm going to experience it to the fullest. Not that it ain't tough", she added. "We haven't had a decent meal ever since we got here. And we haven't really slept –"

"Let's talk about your sleeping conditions", Jeff cut her off, and Julie was even more shocked than before. "After an eternity of sleeping on the ground, just because you had nothing to do about it, we have a reward challenge, Dreamz wins it, he earns himself a shower, which he desperately needs – I think no one can argue with that. He doesn't take it, and instead gives all of you the coveted machete. Ian, this is not the first time a generosity deed is made, nor is it the second. Why do you think that continues to happen? Are you all just very good, giving people?"

"Most likely", said Ian with a twitch of a smile, "but you also have to look at the similarities between all of these cases – Tom did it the first time, and he was a very likely target back then. Cindy did it the second time, and she was about to be sent home the next day. Dreamz did it now, and there's no denying it – he's not the safest person sitting here tonight. We're not naïve, we've all played the game before, and we all know that it's way harder to vote out someone who has just given you something you desperately needed."

"Dreamz", asked Jeff pointedly, "is that why you passed on a chance for a shower?" Dreamz said nothing at first; he just smiled broadly, like only he can. Then, with everyone's eyes on him, he answered: "Jeff, I do something nice for my peeps, and this is what you think of me? Shame on you, Probst! To be frank, I needed that dang machete just as much as them did. We all needed some'ing solid to sleep on. The opportunity came, and it couldn't have come at a better time – unless you's given us the machete right at the start, that would've been better. Anyways, I was honored to be the one who earned it for me tribe."

"Just as always", Jeff said, shaking his head, "I'm more confused after your answer than I was before."

"I try", said Dreamz.

"Katie", Jeff decided to address someone else, "how much has the tribe gained thanks to the machete Dreamz gave you, and is that a factor if and when you think about voting him out? Did he just make it harder?"

"He made it easier", Katie said, surprised by her own answer. "I'm thankful that he did it, don't get me wrong. It was very generous of him. Maybe even too generous. From now on, people are going to look at the shelter and think of the person who had made it possible, of Dreamz. In a normal season, this would have been a reason to keep Dreamz, as he had just made us all a favor. But this is not a normal season.

We can't afford to be nice and fair this time. We have to constantly think about jury votes, about our actions and how they're perceived, about others' actions and how they're perceived. If up until now I thought about keeping Dreamz here, as there are bigger threats to get rid off, he has now popped into my radar."

Dreamz seemed outraged at this. He did not wait for Jeff to ask him a question before speaking this time. "That's nonsense", he said. "The moment someone does something decent, you boot him off? Is that the way it works? That's bullshit. So people needs to be 'fraid of me 'cause I won them a machete? 'S that right? Then people also need to be afraid of some other folks."

Dreamz had a glint in his eyes, a mad glint Jeff had never seen before. When Dreamz talked, it was with unmatched intensity. "The peeps sitting over here ain't as innocent as they play up to be. I had my ears wide open recently. I got an opportunity to hear some stuff over the last couple o' days, stuff which reveal a lot. After they hear it, I'm not sure they'll remember the machete I given them."

Jeff looked at him inquiringly. "Would you like to... share those things you've heard?" he asked, just because he wouldn't have forgiven himself if he hadn't.

"If you insist, Probst", Dreamz answered. He took a deep breath, and then began.

"Yau, my friend, I don't know if you's already know it, but you are a tool. You the first one out once your alliance have to turn on each other, and that's no guess, that's just a fact. It's already decided. Just ask Cindy and Julie over here."

Yau-Man didn't take Dreamz words too seriously. Of course, he had already known he was a very likely target come self-destruction time, and that people had probably started talking about voting him out the first chance they would get. Cindy, on the other hand, couldn't believe her ears. Did Dreamz sneak up on them the other night, listening to their every word, looking for weapons he could use against them?

Dreamz seemed to be on a roll. "But you're not so innocent yourself, isn't it so, Yau? Ami and Rafe approached you and 'little 'Liza, and you shook them off, saying you'd consider their offer, but in all reality, you didn't considered it for one second, did'ya? That's what you told your sidekick, anyway."

Eliza, for once, was beyond words, and not just because Dreamz had just called her Yau-Man's sidekick. How did Dreamz know all this? Was he playing a bigger game than people gave him credit for?

"And speaking of Rafe and Ami", Dreamz continued on, "you two aren't playing real nice, are you? Planning to vote against your pal Terry, Now that's dirty of you!"

Rafe looked like a tortured puppy as Terry turned around to face him. It wasn't supposed to unfold like this.

Julie was deep in thoughts. After Dreamz blowout, it would have been wise to target him tonight, as obviously keeping him around would be setting the stage for more incidents like this. But of course it was too late to change their target. After they had discovered that Terry had the immunity necklace, the leftovers had decided collectively to vote out Cirie that night, with Dreamz as her runner up. She had the sudden urge to tell everybody right then and there to change their vote, but this was a suicidal move – at tribal council, you're supposed to keep your cards close to the chest, not put yourself out there, as doing so right before the vote is making yourself vulnerable, exposed. Julie's game was anything but putting herself out there.

And apparently Dreams hadn't even finished.

"And last but not least", Dreamz said enthusiastically, "Terry Deitz my man. You probably wanted to wait 'till right before the vote to reveal the nice piece of jewelry you recently purchased, to surprise everybody. But I can't wait any longer – why wontcha reveal it right now?"

To everyone's surprise, Terry didn't look too concerned with Dreamz's huge revelation. He actually smiled his toothy smile, reached out to his bag and from it, took the immunity necklace, with all its ugliness.

For Jeff, it was like waking up. After Dreamz took control of tribal council, finally Jeff had his job back. "The immunity necklace", he said, "as you all probably already know, had been hidden somewhere in your camp, and you received clues of its whereabouts in a form of a changing sign stuck in the sand on your beach. Terry, where was the necklace hidden, and how hard was it to find it?"

"The immunity was hidden on top of our camp tree", said Terry, still smiling broadly. "As to how hard it was to find it, I have no idea. You would have to ask Cirie that question."

Everybody looked with their mouths dropped open as Terry didn't put the necklace around his own neck, but rather passed it to Cirie on his left, who took it as if this was the natural thing to do.

"Why, thank you, Terry", she said cheerfully. "Thank you for carrying it for me."

Jeff looked at this development, a little bewildered, a little amused. "Cirie, do explain", he said simply.

"I found it last night", Cirie said. "The sign had changed, and from it I understood where the necklace was, and went to grab it while everybody was asleep." *Almost everybody*, she thought, but unlike Dreamz she wasn't ready to share everyone else's secrets, not yet. "I then asked Terry to hold on to it until tribal council." She didn't continue to explain the reason she had asked Terry to do so, as she felt it wasn't appropriate to admit it was done in order to throw the other alliance's plans off.

Cirie wore the necklace. Nobody said a thing; they were still processing what had just taken place.

Jeff felt that there was nothing else to add. "With that", he said, "it *is* time to vote.

Cirie, apparently, is the only one immune tonight. Everyone else is fair game. Rafe, you're up."

Rafe, feeling dizzy, stood up carefully and made his way to the voting booth. Maybe the other alliance had planned on voting off Cirie. Maybe they had no idea who to vote for, with her immune. Maybe their votes would be split, cast at two or three different people. And in that scenario, what good would it do to vote for Terry, to waist his and Ami's votes? As he came back to sit beside Ami, right at the second she was getting up to vote herself, he worded her without a sound: "*Julie*."

She nodded as subtly as she could, and then went on to cast her vote. Terry and Cirie followed.

It was Julie's turn, and she felt as though she was making her way towards her own execution. She wasn't stupid – she saw the way Terry and Cirie were looking at her, returning from the voting booth. She saw the exchange between Ami and Rafe and the one word that was passed from one to another – her own name. At least four votes were heading her way, and she wasn't sure she had enough votes to put up a fight against it – hell, she didn't know for whom *she* was going to vote. Terry, and Dreamz, and even Ami and Rafe, they were all possibilities. She stood there, images of Jeff snuffing her torch circling in her head, and she had absolutely nothing to do about it. But there *was* something she could do about it. It contradicted the game she had been playing so far, it was risky, and awkward, and some would say stupid. But she would never forgive herself if she didn't even try."

"Just for general knowledge", she said as casually as she could, facing her tribe, "I'm going to go up there and I'm going to cast my vote against Dreamz. Make of it what you will." And she did as she said she would.

Dreamz's fate was sealed. Courtney went over to vote for him, and then Katie, and then Eliza, and Jonathan, and Yau-Man, and Ian, and they all based their vote on what Julie had said – what else could they do?

The last two were Cindy and Dreamz. Cindy wrote five letters, not six, on the piece of parchment, held it up to the camera, and said confidently. "Two tribal councils ago, I had asked Rafe whether he could vote for me after I had given up on my win for him and the rest of the tribe. I'm not the righteous kind, normally – I did vote for Tom after he had given us all the cooking pot – but somehow, I can't bring myself to vote for Dreamz tonight. I don't know what that is. It doesn't matter anyway – by my calculations he already has enough votes." She put Terry's name inside the urn and returned to her place.

Dreamz was next.

He knew it was the last time he was voting in the game of Survivor. He knew who he wanted to vote for. He wanted to vote for the one he had trusted, the one who had disappointed him. He wanted to vote for Yau-Man. But he, too, found himself writing five letters instead of six. "Julie", he said, "I'm voting for you tonight, because I can't vote for Yau. I came into this game wanting to play it differently, to stick to my word. I promised I would never vote for Yau in this game. Even though he just voted for me himself, I want to keep true to that. I got no idea why."

And Dreamz indeed came out of the game without breaking his word. He wasn't a person with very high morals, and he wasn't even sure that what he did that night had any morality to it, but it was just something he needed to do.

As Jeff was snuffing Dreamz's torch, he was filled with admiration for Julie, and the way she had just saved her own ass. He was so tough on her, but he did it only because she had asked him to. He hoped she knew that.

Jonathan sat there, looking at Dreamz going out of the game, excitement washing through him like poison. Dreamz's attempt at creating chaos was a nice one, but it was overdone and not nearly focused enough. He was sad Dreamz wouldn't be on the jury. It would have given him an opportunity to witness how real, well-organized chaos is created.

