

## Chapter Five – "Close-up"

Days 13-15



Early morning of day thirteen. I open my eyes and see the roof of the tent above me. I wonder where I am. And then I remember. I cannot help it – the edges of my mouth unwillingly stretch into a smile.

It has been the same every single morning for the past twelve days. It is still too good to be true. I am sleeping, and then I am waking up, but it still feels like a dream to me. It is all dreamlike. That is because I am used to the sounds of honking cars and shouting people buzzing in my ear when I wake up, not the sounds of humming birds and swaying leaves. I am used to getting paid for filming weddings and Bar-Mitzvahs, not for filming the most awesome show in the history and future of television.

I am sitting on my bunk-bed, looking around at the rest of the crew, all still asleep. The night-shift people need to be replaced in a short while, and we will never make it in time, and that will mean angry and sleepy night-shift people. But I do not feel too bad about that – last night, Julio, a night-shift cameraman, was supposed to come and replace me at eight pm. He came at nine thirty.

To tell the truth, I am glad they came late. It gave me the chance to be present at Dreamz's rant, which was priceless. I wonder if it got him booted, or if Cirie was still the one that went home, as planned.

"Wake up!" I say to Russ, who is sleeping on the bed next to me, and who is also a cameraman. "The sun is almost up!"

"Shut it Donald, you fuck", he says to me with his head deep inside his pillow, but he does not really mean it. He only swears like this because he is from Australia.

Russ's job is to film the challenges. Today's challenge takes place at a beach close by. The challenge only starts in the afternoon, but they need to film the Dream-Teamers practicing it first, and that is why Russ needs to get up so early.

Russ's other job is to film the contestants' final words. He says he loves to do it because he likes to "see their asses gone for good", as he words it.

I do not have a specialty, like Russ does. I film everything – from camp-life, to challenges, to tribal council. That is because I am new here, and they want to test my abilities, to find what my strongest area is. After thirteen days, they are still not sure what it is.

Shirley, the producer that usually accompanies me – or the producer I am usually accompanying, I have not quite figured that out yet – comes into the tent, already fully dressed and covered in make-up. Why make-up on an island in the middle of the sea? Beats me.

"Donald", she says, "still aren't ready? Hurry up, you ass-hole, we need to be there in five minutes, and we need to grab something to eat first. Boom's already up."

She storms out of the tent, leaving me to dress up as quickly as I can. She also swears a lot, but she is not from Australia, so I am not sure what her excuse is.

"Coming, Russ?" I ask as I am about to leave the tent. His head is still buried inside the pillow.

"Fuck it, they can wait", he says and motions me with his hand to leave him alone. I do not think that he is aware of the fact that he possesses the best job in the world.

Shirley walks at a quick pace towards the contestants' camp and I am right behind her, holding a sandwich in my hand and trying to devour it as fast as I can.

Behind me is Boom. This is not his real name, but everybody calls him that, partly because nobody remembers what his real name is. He is the one holding the "boom" microphone over the contestants' heads, and that is why he is nicknamed Boom. It is not the most original nickname, but it suits him. He does not speak a lot, or at all.

Shirley insists on wearing those high heels, and I feel like she is going to topple over at any given minute, but amazingly enough, she just keeps going and going. When I am older, I want to be just like Shirley. I do not mean the high heels part – I mean the determination she has got. She always gets what she wants, because she does not let anything stand in her way. That is why I am always walking behind her.

"Listen up, twit", she says in a business-like tone, "we've been over this like a thousand times. You don't interrupt my interviews, no matter how tempting that is for you. If you have something to say, keep it to yourself. If you find it difficult to keep it to yourself, try harder. I've had enough of your 'inputs', it's not part of your job and it never will be. Your job is to film them, and that's it. Got it?"

"Yeah, sure", I say, and she keeps on walking towards the camp. From afar, we see Julio, the cameraman I am supposed to replace, taking a nap under a tree, with the camera lying at his side. Shirley is furious.

"That little punk!" she screams, and he has no choice but to wake up.

"What?" he asks just as heatedly when he realizes where he is. "I was just resting some until you are arriving! It took you long time, why always so late?"

"Don't even start with me, you worthless brat", she says, taking the camera from the ground and giving it to me, while Julio runs away from her, mumbling, "crazy woman, so insane", under his breath.

"Start rolling, we have to catch up", she says, and I turn the camera on, pointing it at the survivors' camp, which is close by. We notice that Terry and Cindy are going for a trip in the jungle, and so Shirley signals me to follow them. I do as she says, just because it is safest to do what Shirley says.

"You are eight people", Terry says to Cindy. At first, I think he is wrong – Cindy is only one person. And then I listen to the rest of his sentence. "Eight people, Cindy. That's a lot of people to have in one alliance. What guarantee do you have that your place in this alliance is a good one? Why won't you take the opportunity to dwindle down the numbers while you still can? I'm not asking you to completely jump ship – just vote with us this one time, take out someone you don't want here – what have you got to lose?"

It looks like Cindy really considers Terry's plea. I hope she does not buy it. I really like Cindy, as she is smart and tough. But she is not my favorite out here.

"Let's see", she says at last. "What have I got to lose. My place in the game? My allies? My word? But other than that, you're absolutely right." It is obvious Cindy does not like Terry. I do not either. He is not even close to being my favorite out here. "O.K.", Terry quickly changes his approach, "so voting one of your own is out of the question. I get that. But even if you want to target one of us, you're choosing the wrong guy. I know that Cirie was your initial target and I know that, once you had discovered she had immunity, *you* were the one who voted for me." *What is he talking about?* I ask myself. Cirie did not have immunity. Terry did.

Cindy looks shocked. "How do you know that?" she asks.

"It doesn't matter", Terry responds, "the point is, Rafe and Ami should be on your radar, not Cirie and I. They are the ones with a tight alliance going on. You should be focused on separating those two."

"Thanks for the advice", Cindy says kindly, although it could not be more obvious that she does not buy a word that comes out of Terry's mouth. I don't either. I have seen Cirie and Terry form their final-two alliance with my own eyes. I even have it on film.

Terry and Cindy continue to walk for a bit without talking. Just as it gets boring, Shirley comes to me out of nowhere and pulls me aside.

"Come with me, quick", she says, "I need you for an interview."

I come with Shirley. I am used to her coming and going all the time – I am only one of the cameramen she is in charge of. She takes me towards the beach, where Yau-Man stands knee-high in the ocean, cleaning the cooking pot with sand and water.

"Yau-Man", says Shirley with surprising kindness in her voice, "Are you too busy or could we have a word?"

"It would be my pleasure", says Yau-Man with enthusiasm, and I am filled with admiration towards him. He is always so upbeat and nice. He is by far the nicest All-Star. But he is not my favorite out here.

"Now that you have finished building your shelter", Shirley asks him without pause, "do you feel like there's something missing for the twelve of you, or do you have it all?"

"I feel like, even though we have a shelter", Yau-Man says in his fragmented way, aware of the fact that people watching this at home in a couple of months will only see the answers from this interview and not the questions themselves, "we still lack the most important thing, which is food. I try to provide my tribe with the most nutritious leaves and roots available, but of course, that's not quite enough to sustain twelve adults."

"And what would be enough to sustain twelve adults?" Shirley asks. I keep myself from snorting. I could have done a much better job at interviewing Yau-Man.

"Fish", Yau-Man says immediately. "We see them in the water all the time, but without fishing equipment, there's nothing we can do, they are too fast for us. And of course, there are a lot of fruits and mushrooms on this island that can feed us very well, but I can't be positive which ones are poisonous and which ones aren't, so I don't bring them to my tribe, it is too big a risk. When I learned that we are to come to the Galapagos Islands, I immediately bought a nature guide exactly for this kind of stuff, and I even wrote it down as my luxury item, but of course, the luxury-items phase is long gone, and I hardly remember everything the guide says by heart."

"That's too bad", Shirley says in a tone that suggests it is not bad at all. "Now let's talk about the relationships you have built in this game. Who would you say is the closest person to you right now?"

"This is an easy question", says Yau-Man delightedly. "Eliza is the closest person to me here, and she is a remarkable young lady." I agree. I really like Eliza as well. She is so enthusiastic and anxious about stuff – she reminds me of myself. But she is not my favorite out here. "We have had a tight alliance from day one", Yau-Man continues. "At first, an alliance with her made sense to me, because I thought I could beat her in a final-two scenario, and because I was sure she wasn't going to betray me \_"

"Why were you so sure?" Shirley asks, and now I actually snort. Is the answer to this question not obvious?

"Because she was a huge fan of me", Yau-Man says, and he doesn't sound arrogant when he says it; he sounds genuine. "She seemed like she would never betray her hero. But things have changed since then."

"Changed how?" Shirley asks. I lean closer behind the camera.

"We are not superstar and groupie anymore, Eliza and I. We're equals. Now she knows that I listen fully to what she has to say. She wanted to switch alliances not long ago, and I accepted, even though it didn't benefit my game at all."

"So why did you do it?" asks Shirley, almost in disgust. It is obvious to me that a person like Shirley would have never done something like that.

"Because it benefited her" Yau-Man explains. "And if I'm in an alliance with Eliza until the bitter end, that means her game is as important as mine, and even more so. We are in it for each other."

"But that's stupid", Shirley says without thinking, and it seems like she immediately regrets saying that. "I mean... is it the smart thing to do, to sacrifice parts of your game for another person, when it's supposed to be an individual game?"

"It's probably not the smart thing to do," says Yau-Man, and he is completely serious right now, "but I believe it is the right thing to do."

Shirley does not seem convinced. "So who are some of the other people you're close to?"

Yau-Man thinks for a bit. He is the thinking type. "I really enjoy Cindy's company. She holds a lot of knowledge about the wildlife and our surroundings. She is very sharp. Julie is someone I've talked business with many times. She gets this game, and if Eliza and I wanted to move ahead in the future, Julie would be a good person to talk to.

Ian is a good natured kid. He means well, and it shows. Having him around is having a trustworthy person around – which would be quite better than to have deals with sneaky people like, for example, Jonathan."

My camera still points to Yau-Man, but my mind is somewhere else altogether. Yau-Man, Eliza, Cindy, Julie, Ian. Those are five out of the eight people in the ruling alliance. There is a pretty good chance Yau-Man had just named the final five.

We leave Yau-Man alone. Then, Shirley leaves me alone. "I have some business to take care of", she says and disappears, leaving me on the beach. I spot some people lying in the shelter and I walk towards them. They are laughing. The laughter is contagious.

"My fridge on a Thursday night", Cirie says, and everyone bursts with laughter. I do not get it.

"The Holocaust", Jonathan says, and the laughing keeps on coming. I still do not get it. The Holocaust is not a laughing matter.

"Eliza, come here!" Ian screams when he sees Eliza from afar, "come play with us – the goal is to come up with places with more food available than on this island."

"Like Nicole Ritchie's stomach?" Eliza suggests, and they all laugh, and I finally get it. They are laughing because they have not had a decent meal for a very long time.

This is their way to relieve stress.

"An African village", Katie says. "After a plague", she adds. "And drought."

"I've got one", Courtney says, and everyone turns to look at her. "Egypt, in Joseph's dream."

I smile, but apparently I am the only one. The silence is ear-splitting. Jonathan breaks it.

"Very spot-on, Courtney", he says. "I'm sure everybody here is beating themselves over not thinking of that one."

"Hmmm..." Ami evidently tries to change the subject, after taking one glance at Courtney's expression. "So when *are* they gonna supply us with some food?"

It works – the subject quickly changes into more serious realms, but I notice that while nobody is looking, Katie, for some reason, stands up and starts walking away, gently motioning with her head for Jonathan to follow her. Jonathan takes his time – after a minute or so, without drawing attention to himself, he stands up as well and heads in Katie's direction. I find it peculiar and decide to follow her myself.

I catch up with both of them in the ocean. They are an unlikely pair – I have never even seen them speaking to one another before. I get closer, wetting my shoes and my

pants. They both look at me suspiciously, but then continue their talk, probably deciding I should be considered a non-entity.

"You're giving it way too much thought", Jonathan says, and I am intrigued.

"No", Katie says heatedly. "It's you who's giving it way too little thought! She is essential to our plan; she is the key to our plan! You can't go around treating her like that."

"It's not like I'm the only one", Jonathan says. "Courtney is a joke around camp, and everyone's treating her as such – it would seem suspicious if I didn't."

"But we need her", Katie tries a patient approach. "*You* need her. She's your... thing, just like Ian's mine. Both of us need a thing, a person who would be close to us – so that no one suspects we're working together. And Courtney is yours – Courtney is your thing. It's perfect. Don't ruin it all 'cause you want to crack jokes at her expense." Jonathan seems like he is about to respond, but then he closes his mouth, a pondering look on his face.

"I'm sorry", he says, "of course you're right. Of course we have to be careful when it comes to the people we need on our side."

"Speaking of", Katie says, "Yau-Man is another person we need to get close to."

"Yes, of course", Jonathan says in an exaggerated tone. "Yau-Man is the perfect goat. We can take him to the final three, and then whoever wins immunity takes Yau-Man to the final two and has this thing in the bag."

"Or", Katie points out, "he is the first out at the final eight. And he knows it, and he's going to do something about it. Unless we give him a false sense of security." I listen to Katie's suggestion and to me it sounds much more plausible than Jonathan's.

Jonathan seems to agree. "But how do we do it? What kind of bargain can we offer him?"

Katie begins to answer with "I've got an idea-", but is interrupted by a shout coming from the shore.

It is Ian, calling enthusiastically: "Yo, Katie, Jonathan! Tree-mail!"

The two of them look at each other, and immediately head back to shore. I am not really good at guessing people's true motives and trains of thought, but I'm pretty sure that at the moment, they both hope beyond hope that Ian does not suspect them of anything.

When us four get there, everybody else is already seated around Rafe, who is holding an old-looking book and is reading out of an even older-looking parchment:

*"You've dreamt of the smell, of the taste, of the touch,  
It's all you've been craving – don't crave it too much.  
Choose one of these items, but please, choose it well –  
Your dream can turn into a nightmare from hell."*

"Food," Terry says unnecessarily.

Everybody is excited. I am also excited, even though I ate a big sandwich not long ago. But it is like I can feel the taste of their favorite foods through their mouths as they flip through a huge book containing pictures of different delicacies.

"French fries?" Rafe asks when they reach a certain page.

"Yes", Cirie answers, "let's *do* choose potatoes when potatoes are all we've been eatin' since forever." I am startled. I did not know French fries are made out of potatoes.

"Ice cream!" Cindy screams as they flip the page. "Buck loads of ice cream! With coffee as one of the flavors! We gotta consider this, guys."

"But don't we want to choose something nutritious?" Rafe points out, and as he is the one holding the book, the page is turned once again.

"This looks kinda nutritious", Eliza points out as I zoom in on the page featuring a picture of a salad ball. Nobody responds as they proceed to look at the next option.

"This is it."

The page has a picture of a slice of pizza, the best looking slice of pizza I have ever seen. And I have seen some good looking slices of pizza over the years.

"This is definitely it", announces Ian, and no one has any objections. "It's got it all."

"Yes", Julie agrees. "It has bread. It has cheese. It has vegetables."

"It has it all", Katie says, looking directly at my camera. "That is why I always choose survivor pizza. Survivor Pizza, the best thing to eat after a twelve-day fast."

"So it's done?" Julie asks everybody else. "Pizza it is?"

"Pizza it is", says Ami, and everybody else makes noises of agreement and nods their heads. Pizza it is.

In all the excitement, I catch one exchange between two castaways, an exchange which goes unnoticed by everybody else sitting there – it is Cindy who whispers in Eliza's ear, very quietly but apparently not quietly enough: "I have an offer to make you." Eliza turns to look at her anxiously, and so she adds: "Later."

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Jeff Probst is standing not too far from me, talking with Shirley. He is always good-natured and kind. He is the perfect host. Too bad this is his last season on 'Survivor'. I am not sure that it is true – it is just a rumor around here, but I have heard it from more than one person, and I am starting to believe it. He looks a bit gloomy these days.

Shirley lets out a fake laugh. She is confident she is Jeff Probst's favorite, and that she will make it far thanks to this connection. I am not even sure he remembers her name, though.

The challenge is about to begin. The castaways have not arrived yet. Russ is holding his camera loosely, looking bored. It looks like the challenge concept is pretty simple: a big round table is just standing there, in the middle of the jungle, carrying countless Pizza trays. The table looks like it does not belong there. So does Russ.

"Donald, darling, come over here for a second!"

It is Shirley, and she is with Jeff Probst, and she is signaling me to come over. I am about to speak to Jeff Probst. I am not sure I am quite ready for this. My armpits are wet all of a sudden. When I am walking towards them, the only thought that is going through my mind is: *'Does Jeff Probst despise wet armpits?'*.

When I get there, after what seems like forever, Jeff does not seem to take offence with my armpits. He smiles a genuine smile – after seeing so many fake smiles over the last twelve days, I know how to recognize a genuine one.

But it is Shirley who speaks to me.

"Donald, my dear", she says, and I recognize one more fake smile, "are you familiar with Jeff Probst?" This is foolish of her to ask me that.

"Yes", I answer, because that is what comes out of my mouth at that moment.

"Well", Shirley says, borrowing a sweet tone of speech, a tone that does not suit her at all, "we were just talking about the upcoming challenge, and about how it's not going to be pretty at all."

"What does that mean?" I ask, forgetting how nervous I am to be standing alongside Jeff Probst. I remember when he is the one to answer my question.

"Well", he explains, "We're gonna give the survivors a chance to eat their chosen dish. But we're not going to give them a chance to stop."

I am still confused. Jeff sees it.

"The person who is the last one eating will win reward. That means that once they do not finish a certain slice of Pizza in a certain time I give them, they're out of the game. That means, People are going to be sick to their stomachs."

"But we want to keep it dignified", Shirley jumps in. "This is, after all, a family show. That's where you come into the picture. When people start to get sick, start to vomit, do not focus on that. Focus instead on the least embarrassing moments. We do not want the viewers at home to feel disgusted. We do not want the castaways to be ashamed of what's shown. Let's do this thing with as much respect as we could."

I am even more confused. Since when does Shirley care about respect? I did not even know she had the words 'respect' and 'dignified' in her vocabulary.

I have nothing to do except nod my head and smile. Two fake smiles out of three.

The survivors are here. No one needs to tell them to stand around the big table – the Pizza serves as enough of a reason to do so. Jeff explains to them the rules of the game – that each time, they would have one hundred seconds to finish a slice of Pizza, and only the ones who finish it in time will move on to the next round. No one seems concerned. They are all too hungry to be concerned.

"Wanna know what you're playing for?" Jeff Probst asks them.

"Personally, I'm playing for the Pizzas included", Jonathan answers him.

"Well, that's not the only luxury you'll be getting", Jeff Probst says, and uncovers twelve items by removing a piece of fabric. He always likes to uncover things by removing a piece of fabric.

The castaways cheer as they spot their precious belongings. Out of these items, I can recognize a doll, two fire-dancing props, a book and a checkers game.

"Worth playing for?" Jeff asks them.

"Well, yeah, Jeff!" Eliza says.

"Then let's get started. Everyone get a hold of a slice of Pizza."

That is a sentence I have never dreamed of hearing from Jeff, but life surprises you sometimes. Eliza's eyes are even bigger than usual when she grabs her slice. I look over to Katie. She looks at her slice, but her expression is different from the others' – it does not convey anticipation. It almost conveys torment. I wonder why.

"Survivors ready?" asks Jeff, and my guess is they' have never been more ready for a challenge. "GO!"

Everybody digs in. That is, except for Katie. She puts her pizza back on the table, and goes to sit on the bench nearby. I do not understand her at all, but I film it anyway. I do not understand most of the things Katie does. She is often mean and lazy and not really good at anything. She is certainly not my favorite out here.

The others have a more active approach. Jonathan shoves the whole slice into his mouth like it was chewing-gum. In less than fifteen seconds, it is gone, and a huge burp announces that Jonathan wants everyone to know that it is gone.

Yau-Man has a different strategy for the slice he is responsible of. He measures it with his eyes, taking a calculated bite every ten seconds or so. It is obvious he tries to prevent himself from being choked from too much pizza at once.

Yau-Man succeeds in preventing suffocation, but his closest ally is not as lucky.

Every bite Eliza takes seems to put her in a death risk. It is hard to watch. So I do not. Instead I move over with my camera to Courtney.

Courtney has the most unique eating strategy, although, After looking at her for more than twenty seconds straight, I am not even sure that it is a strategy at all; She starts out like Yau-Man, dividing her pizza carefully and then, after one glance at Jonathan's rapid devouring of his slice, she starts to panic and eats away like there is no tomorrow.

The first round ends. Everybody has finished their share. Everyone, that is, except for Katie. Who has not even touched her slice since Jeff started the count from one hundred. She does not look worried; on the contrary – when Jeff gives her an inquiring look, she seems amused. "Let's continue", Jeff says, drawing his eyes away from Katie. "Everyone move on, with the exception of Katie. Grab a hold of another slice, the counting starts in five... four... three..."

It starts all over again. People are still eating enthusiastically. I am starting to fear that this enthusiasm will not last for long. Eliza's tiny body seems like it cannot possibly contain so much pastry. She stops for a second, gags a little, and then continues to eat as if everything is normal. This is not a pretty sight.

The eleven of them move on to the third slice of pizza. The excitement is much milder. When they pick up their slice, it is almost like they are picking up a nasty piece of homework, or a bundle of bills. "Ready?" Jeff asks, and starts the clock, not giving them time to get ready.

They are all doing alright, except for Eliza. Three times in a row, she brings the pizza close to her lips, opens her mouth – but each time, she does not dare to take a bite. She looks a bit pale – actually, she looks a shade of greenish-pale. Yau-Man notices this, but continues with his mathematical approach. Yau-Man is not the only one who notices Eliza's sickness. "Are you filming this?" I hear a voice from right behind me. I do not have to turn around to know that it is Shirley's voice.

"The challenge?" I ask. "Of course! What else would I be –"

"No, not the challenge, you halfwit", she whispers, and I get it. "Eliza is about to barf. I want you to get a close-up."

"But", I try, although I know that it is useless to try, "earlier, with Jeff Probst, you told me to –"

"Forget what I told you", she says from behind me. I can actually feel a cool breeze on the back of my neck, even though it is a very hot day. "Do what I tell you, *now*. Get me a close-up on Eliza, right this second, or this will be the last scene you ever shoot in your entire, miserable life."

I do not want to, but as always, I do as Shirley says, and I do it right on time – it is as if Eliza was waiting for the camera to capture her throwing up. It is the smart thing to do, to listen to Shirley's instruction, but it does not feel like the right thing to do at all.

Beside me, Boom is shifting uncomfortably. This says a lot, because Boom barely moves, ever.

Courtney, however, does not move at all. She is only halfway through her pizza, and the time is almost up, but she just looks at Eliza, simply unable to eat. Only when Jeff Probst announces: "fifteen seconds to go", does she shove the rest of the pizza down her throat, chewing fanatically. She makes it in time, barely. So does everyone else, except for Eliza. She is down on her knees, still vomiting, with Katie holding her hair out of the way.

"Ten are still in it", Jeff says, trying not to look at Eliza. I wish I could look away as well. "Let's go."

For the fourth time, this time with no enthusiasm whatsoever, they each grab a hold of a slice. By the looks on their faces, I reckon this is going to turn ugly.

I am right. The round has just begun, and already two people are looking like they have had enough. Rafe is looking away from his pizza, obviously disgusted by the whole concept. Julie tries to eat a certain piece from her slice, but it just comes out, like there is no more room left inside her. When she inserts the piece once more, she finally breaks down, and just like Eliza, she falls to the ground and vomits.

I point the camera at Julie without any instructions from Shirley, because I already know what she expects of me. I am feeling disgusted, not by the chunks of pizza flying out from Julie's mouth – I feel disgusted by my own actions.

I look at Jeff, interested in his reaction to all this. I catch him shooting a glance at Julie before turning to stare pointedly at the opposite direction. I realize that the two of them had broken up, but how can he be so cold towards her? I cannot understand.

Ian's mouth is beyond full. He pushes more and more pizza in, but there is just no more space left, and it is clear that swallowing what is already there is an impossible task for him at this stage.

I have the desire to leave this challenge, to leave this island, to leave this whole thing. I have the desire to run towards the table and to turn it over, to shout "STOP!", to put an end to all this. But instead, I continue to shoot.

The fourth round is over. Ian did not make it. Neither did Julie. Rafe finished his pizza, barely. The fifth round is about to start. I have not touched one slice of pizza, and still I cannot help but feel sick to my stomach.

"How is everybody feeling", asks Jeff Probst, noticeable unease in his voice. Nobody is able to give him more than a nod for an answer. Nobody with the exception of Jonathan, who says, "never been better, Jeff. Well, maybe once or twice."

"Let's move on, then", Jeff Probst says. I watch with horror as the eight of them struggle to eat their slices; as Rafe pukes all over his shoes; as Cindy's pizza comes out whole out of her mouth, as if untouched; as Terry, the man who would not admit defeat, leaves the table with his hand over his mouth.

In the sixth round, Ami throws in the towel, or, more precisely, gives up, or, more precisely, throws up, which leaves Cirie, Jonathan, Yau-Man and Courtney to compete against one another. I want it over more than anything. I am sure they do, too.

Cirie seems to be close to tears, but continues in her own pace, midway through her pizza, midway through the seventh round. It is very likely that in a few months, people are going to be sitting at home, rooting for Cirie. I am, however, not rooting for Cirie. She is not my favorite out here. I guess it has something to do with her being everybody else's favorite out here. I guess I just have the tendency to root for the underdog.

It is Courtney who seems to have the most trouble out of the four. One minute, she is looking at Jonathan, and starts to shove pizza down her throat like a vacuum-cleaner; the next minute, she is looking at Yau-Man and at his calm approach, and starts to take measured-out bites. But when Jeff Probst announces that the round would be over in twenty five seconds, she starts to panic. In what seems like an impossible feat, she takes the half of the pizza that is left in her hands, rolls it into a ball of dough and cheese and tomato-sauce, pushes it into her mouth and tries to swallow.

"Fifteen seconds..."

It indeed turns out to be an impossible feat. The pizza ball just would not budge. The more she pushes it inwards, the more it comes out. I cannot look, but I look anyway.  
"Ten... Nine..."

Everyone else has finished their slices, not without great difficulty. It is now down to Courtney. She realizes that, and with enormous efforts, swallows the pizza whole. My hand reaches instinctively to my throat, as if I feel the chunk myself.

"Five... Four..."

But the chunk does not stay there. I watch with horror as it struggles up Courtney's throat –

"Two..."

I lower down my camera without realizing it. I want to run to Courtney and help her, I have no idea how, but I feel like I have to do *something*... Shirley seems to feel the same way. Courtney is lying there, vomiting her guts out, and Shirley yells at me:

"Film this, film this, you fool!"

I do nothing. I do not know what to do.

"Pick up the camera and film it," I hear, as though from miles away, "why aren't you filming it? Oh, for god's sake, give me this thing –"

She grabs the still-rolling camera from my numb hands, and she does it right on time. I have not eaten any pizza, and I have not been starving for twelve days, but I cannot help but to collapse on the ground and throw up the sandwich I had eaten earlier this day, and the steak I had eaten the night before, and I cannot stop, and I look at Courtney and she cannot either, and I know that I am doing it because she is doing it, because watching her suffer like this is too much for me, because she is my favorite out here, and I do not want to see her suffer like this, and I do not want the camera to roll while she is suffering like this.

It feels like hell, and it feels like forever, but somehow it ends, at last, and I get up on my feet, and Courtney is sitting in the corner, her head in her hands, and Shirley is fixating the camera on her, and Yau-Man is on the loser's bench as well, and Cirie and Jonathan are standing beside the table, and Jeff announces: "Jonathan wins reward!"  
"But I still feel like there's room in me for a few more slices", Jonathan says, and I cannot understand how he can be so cheerful.

Courtney stands on her feet. Everyone gathers around Jeff Probst and Jonathan, but the mood is not a celebrative one.

"Well", Jeff Probst says, "you can work on the rest of the pizzas in a minute, but before that, there's still one more thing to take care of.

"Due to your incredible devouring skills, you've won your luxury item-"

Jeff hands him a small book from the basket. "My lovely diary", Jonathan says – "But it's no fun if you don't have the ability to give two more people their luxury items..."

I instinctively look at Katie. Jonathan does the same.

"Who is it gonna be?" asks Jeff Probst. I do the same, but not out-loud.

"Courtney..." Jonathan says, and Courtney looks up, as surprised as the rest of us. I can see a sparkle in her eyes, something I am not used to seeing, even though I look at her eyes quite often. Jeff Probst gives Courtney two long sticks – her fire-dancing equipment.

"...and Yau-Man."

As Yau-Man receives his nature guide, and as Jonathan and Katie exchange looks for a quarter of a millisecond, and as Courtney examines her precious belongings, I gain some respect for Jonathan – he had just managed to please three people all at once.

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"Now", Shirley says as we are walking across the shoreline, the sunset coloring everything bright red, "memorize every word I say. You *do not* decide what you film and what you don't film. You *do not* make up your own mind. In fact, as far as I'm concerned, you don't even have a mind of your own. And that's fine, because your sole purpose here is to serve as my executioner, your whole being here is to do what I tell you to do. Don't be tempted to think for yourself, because you *know* it will only end badly, like I did today."

I listen to a red-colored Shirley and my heart hardens a bit. I distance myself from it all, from all the flawed people, even from myself. In this moment, nothing matters.

"Ok", she says, probably after imagining that I had just agreed with every word she said. "We are going to interview Ian, and of course, by that I mean *I* am going to interview Ian. You behaved yourself just fine at Yau-Man's interview, and I want that behavior to continue. That means that you're there merely to hold the camera and to press the 'ON' button, nothing more. That goes for you as well, Boom", she addresses Boom, "remember, no talking to the interviewees."

Sometimes I wonder – would she even recognize us if she passed us on the street a few months from now? Boom just shrugs and continues to walk behind us, his sunglasses shielding him from the sunset light.

Ian is sitting on the beach with Julie and Eliza, and the three of them are having a pleasant conversation. Of course, Shirley puts an immediate end to it.

"Ian, would you care to come with me for a brief interview?"

"Sure", he says, standing up. "I'll come." He says goodbye to Julie and Eliza and comes with us to a quiet spot a short distance from camp. When he sits down in front

of us, his stomach makes a funny noise. "Forgive me", he says cheerfully, "some pizza action taking place down there."

"That's fine", says Shirley, who obviously could not care less. She cuts right to it.

"What, in your opinion, are your chances of being the next to go?"

Ian stares at her for a few seconds. He probably wonders, like I do, where this question came from.

"Hmmm..." he says uncertainly, "small chances? Small-sized?"

"Why is that?" Shirley asks him.

Ian seems strained now. "Do you know something I don't?" he asks half-jokingly. "Do you think I need to be concerned?"

He does not wait for an answer, perhaps knowing that he would not get one. "The reason I think I'm safe, at least for now, is my alliance of eight, which some call 'the leftovers' for no apparent reason. It was my choice, joining it, and for now, I'm happy with it. This alliance already got me through two tribal councils –"

"But what makes you sure it will continue to work in your favor?"

"You can never be a hundred percent sure, that'd be stupid on your part", Ian says, now with even less certainty. "But there *are* some things. Little hints that make you feel more comfortable. Julie and I get along great. She has a killing sense of humor, even though you'd never guess it the first time you meet her. And, I have been hinted that some sub-alliance is in the making – Yau-Man vaguely told me about it last night, and it includes myself, him, Julie, little 'Liza and Cindy. But I'm not sure I'm gonna go with that alliance."

"Why not?" Shirley asks immediately, like a well-oiled machine.

"For one thing", Ian explains, I'd feel like the odd man out. Julie and Cindy are pretty tight, and so are Eliza and Yau – where do I stand between those two couples?"

*'In a perfect spot'*, I think to myself. *'They will be fighting for you in the final five to vote with them'*. I desperately want to tell that to Ian, but one glance at Shirley indicates to me that I should not.

"And besides", Ian continues, "Katie is my girl in this game. I need her by my side. You see, we have this unsaid agreement between us, that she takes care of me, and I take care of her."

Ian's stomach growls. He smiles apologetically.

"I'm sorry, where was I?" He asks.

"At the part where you take care and Katie takes care and all that stuff", Shirley says impatiently.

"Right", says Ian. "Like when I voted with her when she wanted to vote out Shane instead of Cindy. Or when I switched alliances two tribals ago."

"And when did she take care of you?" Shirley asks.

"What?" Ian says, startled.

"Give me an instance where Katie helped you in this game. What did she do to return the favor?"

"She...", Ian seems to struggle. "She didn't quite get the chance yet, but I'm sure she..."

Another moan is heard from Ian's insides.

"I guess that in no time, she'll prove herself to me. I mean, she was part of the alliance we're in much longer than me, and she must have some connections that would help us down the road – and I'm sure she includes me in her plans, I'm not worried", Ian finishes, somewhat lamely.

When Ian's digestion system makes yet another loud growl, he jumps on his feet, looking around. "Look, I have to... *occupy* myself, if you know what I mean. It was real nice talking to you, though."

And he runs into the woods, scaring away some birds from a nearby tree.

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Since Ian had just made himself busy, Shirley probably feels that she should make sure that I am busy as well.

"Return to camp", she says. "Look for some action, any action. I need to take care of some things."

Suddenly, Shirley is far less impressive than before. Only a few hours ago, I would have done anything she ordered me to whole-heartedly, even if she ordered me to jump off of some roof. But now, it is as though I can see right through her. It is as though I can see everything more clearly, and that makes everything look vaguer, if that even makes sense.

I go back to the beach we had found Ian on a short while ago. Julie and Eliza are still there, apparently sunbathing, although there is not much sun left to bathe in.

"Oh, here comes the cameraman", Julie looks up at me. "Do you think they'd take this footage of us and turn us into some sort of lazy bitches?"

"Wouldn't be the first time", Eliza says, and I smile to them, but they are no longer looking at my direction.

"Or maybe they'll try something different this time. Maybe they'll turn us into lazy bitches who through up from time to time."

I can see someone approaching from afar. I need to put my hand over my eyes – a challenging task for a person holding a camera – to shield them from the sun and to see that it is Cindy. Julie and Eliza do not notice her yet.

"It's nice", Eliza says. "Having meaningless fun on the beach, like old times. And we get to this until at least the final eight, if not longer than that." It is apparent, at least for me, that Eliza is dying to say something, but have not made up her mind yet on whether she should.

"Yeah, absolutely", Julie says, "it *is* nice. It's also nice that we have a guaranteed final eight spot. I'm not used to finding myself in a safe position."

"Well, get used to it", says Eliza, obviously holding back from saying what she really wants to say. "I don't have any plans to get rid of you any time soon, believe me.

Obviously, it's not gonna be like last time, with an all-girl alliance, since the driving force behind that, Ami, is in the minority, but –"

"You're right about Ami being in the minority", says Cindy from behind them, and Eliza jumps in surprise, "but I'm not so sure about the part where an all-girl alliance is out of the question. I think we could pull it off, if we really wanted to."

Eliza sits up. "What do you mean?" she asks, raising an eyebrow.

Cindy sits down and says: "Julie and I have been talkin'. 'Bout what's the right move, once we're down to the eight."

"Isn't it a little too early to think about that stuff?" Eliza's mouth can't help itself but intervene.

"It's always too early until it's too late", says Julie. "If someone else had made a move before we did, we would have never forgiven ourselves. I think now is about the right time to act."

"This is what we came up with", Cindy says, in what sounds like a well-rehearsed pitch, carefully planned by her and Julie beforehand. "Us three, Katie and Courtney. An all-girl final five. Think about it, it makes the most sense."

"Yeah", Julie adds, "it makes the most sense just by ruling out other scenarios. Just look at the other three in the leftovers alliance – Ian is practically everyone's favorite guy around camp, *and* he's the biggest challenge threat next to Terry. Once Terry's gone, he'd probably win most – if not all – of the physical immunities. We can't afford that, not if we wanna play it smart."

Eliza seems to find the logic in Julie's words.

"And Jonathan", Cindy looks disgusted as she speaks. "He's about as untrustworthy as they come. The moment you let him in's the moment he'll slit your throat open. It would be suicide to trust him, even for a second."

Eliza seems to agree even more. She does not say anything yet, however.

"And of course", Julie says with a laugh, "if letting Jonathan in is suicide, letting Yau-Man in is organized slaughter. *No one* would be stupid enough to want someone this popular and likable with them in the end."

It is now dark – the sun is almost gone. When Eliza still does not say a thing, Cindy asks her, "Well, what do you think?"

"No thinking", Eliza responds sharply, as though suddenly awake from a deep sleep.

"No thinking going on. Absolutely no thoughts on the matter. I'll have to think about it, is what I mean. I'll –"

She stands up.

"–I'll think about it, and then there'll be thinking, and then I'll return to you with an answer well-thought-out answer. I – I think I should go now. To think."

She leaves the place as quickly as humanly-possible without actually running, obviously with the intention to spill every little detail to Yau-Man.

"Ain't she a busy little beaver", Cindy says, looking at the spot where Eliza had just disappeared.

"Yes, she's a little... intense", Julie says with a sour smile, "but I'm sure she'll return to us with a 'yes' before long."

"How can you?" Cindy turns to look at Julie. "Be so sure?"

"For one thing, she doesn't have the numbers to cook something else up. I mean – you, me, Katie Courtney, that's already four out of the eight. Even if she recruits the remaining three, once we're eight left in the game, she wouldn't risk a tie, not if she didn't absolutely *have* to risk a tie."

"Thank god for that", Cindy says, "or Shane woulda been here instead of me. But what if she'll be lookin' for numbers elsewhere? What if she'll turn to Cirie and her folks?"

"Then she would have betrayed every single person in the game, and ultimately – on the jury. Even Eliza isn't so impulsive. Besides, why would he want to form a sub-alliance with the likes of Cirie and Rafe? They would beat her in a final-two scenario even worse than we would!"

A short silence, and then –

"But there *is* one thing that concerns me about Eliza", Julie says.

"Only one?" Cindy asks. "What's that?"

"She seems somewhat close to Yau-Man. I just hope she realizes that he needs to be the first one out at the final eight, no matter what. I just hope her judgment isn't clouded."

"Don't worry about it too much", Cindy calms Julie down. "She's a smart cookie. She won't throw away her whole game because she likes the Yau-Man. Her best bet is to go with us."

This is true. Eliza's best bet *is* to go with Julie and Cindy. But it is also true that her judgment is clouded.

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"El Donald! How is you? Let's go, bring the camera to me and go now to sleep!" You might think that Julio is generous in ending me to bed, but he does so half an hour later than agreed. I do not mind, though. It gave me a chance to watch Courtney's fire-dancing skills up-close. She is not the person who threw up earlier. She is not the person of whom Jonathan made fun in the morning. She is completely alive now. All the muscles in her body are working perfectly together to perform a mesmerizing display of courage, and freedom, and life. But right now, Julio is tearing me away from all of that.

"Come on, El Donald", he says impatiently. "You go now, I change you! I didn't coming here for nothing at all!"

I know for a fact that Julio, like many others, feels that when he is holding the camera, he has power. He has the ability to expose people. He can see what no one else can. But for me it is not like that.

For me, the camera has all the power, and I just tag along. For me, the camera already knows where to look, what to capture, how to catch the perfect moment, and I just follow her around, providing her a shoulder to lean on. And in return, she lets me see all the wonderful thing she sees – the reality in essence, caged in a frame. I could not ask for more.

But now the camera is in Julio's hands, and he's holding her like a weapon, and it is time for me to go back to the crew are and call it off for the night.

I walk past the dining room as if it is invisible. Some might say that they are starving us, with two meals a day and all, but after the reward challenge, I cannot even think bout food, let alone eat it.

When I enter the tent, Russ is already in it, listening to loud music through his earphones. I know that it is loud music because I an hear it, standing ten feet from him.\

"Donald, mate", he yells once he sees me – the music alters his sound perception a bit – "I told this fuck, Manuel or whatever –"

"Julio", I correct him.

"Yeah, that fuck – I told him to go and replace you on time, but he decided to go and screw this chick from the art department..."

"That's Ok", I try to calm him down, "I came late to replace him this morning, it's only fair."

"This shit-head will know what's fair and what's not fair once I'm done with him. Of course you were late this morning – he's depriving you of sleep, that fuck!"

"It is not important, I like being there at night sometimes."

Russ looks at me like I am some kind of alien.

"What's your mental disease?!" he shouts at me, and before I can respond to him that I do not have any mental diseases, he goes on: "you've got your priorities all fucked-up, mate! We're here for the money, and that's it! There's no other reason to sleep in third-

world tents and to eat that shit they're serving us as food if not for the green stuff! Sometime I think that you're here for the experience, or some other shit. Do me a favor and go to Disneyworld if that's what you're after."

I open my mouth to argue but then I understand that there is no point. We just see things differently. One might say that Russ and I are looking at the world from two different camera lenses.

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"Honestly, do I need to pour a bucket of water on your stupid head to wake you up? 'Cause if not, I probably will anyway..."

The first thing I see when opening my eyes is Shirley's nostrils staring at me from above. Something tells me this is not going to be the best day ever.

Russ wakes up as well from the noise made by Shirley; he looks at the cause of the disturbance, murmurs: "someone should really lock up this beast of a woman somewhere that's far away", and goes back to sleep. Sadly, I do not have the privilege of doing the same.

I get up from bed and dress. Shirley is already dressed, and wearing make-up, and high-heels. Her heels are higher than yesterday's heels, if that is even possible. I am suddenly hungry, as hungry as I ever remember being. And that is why, on the way to the contestant's camp, I grab not one, but two sandwiches, each containing bacon and eggs. I just have to make sure I finish them before we get there – but that is a challenge I believe I can manage.

As expected, Julio is taking a nap under the same tree as the one from yesterday. I do not think he gets the night-shift concept.

After an exchange of dirty words between him and Shirley – I believe that by now I have heard every swear-word imaginable – the camera is once again in my hands, where it should be. I change the battery, as Julio left her on all night, and we are good to go.

Everyone is seating around the fire when we get to the camp. At first I do not understand what it is that they are cooking – they usually eat their potatoes on the day they attend tribal council – but than I remember Yau-Man's luxury item. The nature guide is indeed open, lying on Eliza's lap. I take a peak at the cooking pot and am surprised to discover all kinds of smelly (not the bad kind of smelly) and nutritious-looking roots and mushrooms swimming in the boiling water. It sounds like the rest of the tribe is pleasantly surprised as well.

"Some of these things I've never even heard about!" Rafe says, looking at the book over Eliza's shoulder. "And it's my job to know about these things!"

"That is not something to be ashamed of", Yau-Man says, stirring the pot with a dirty-looking stick. "Galapagos is a very unique area in that respect. It has plants and animals that you cannot find anywhere else in the world. That is why I bought this guide in the first place."

"And it's a good thing you did", Ian says, massaging his stomach. "As much as I enjoy leaving on two potatoes a week, it's nice to know that it's no longer the only option on the menu."

"Well' don't worry", Yau-Man says with a huge smile, "As long as I'm here, so is the book, and as long as the book is here, so is the food."

A few giggle, but those that do not, namely Julie and Cindy, are looking at Yau-Man with concern.

Yau-Man is one smart guy.

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The morning passes by. Today's tribal task is to make the shelter floor a little more comfortable, and to have enough material that can be used as semi-blankets. Terry is in the jungle, cutting away broad leaves and soft bushes that would serve as some sort of mattress, and a few others, Ian and Courtney among them, are going back and forth, bringing the product to the shelter. I am startled to see that Katie is one of those people – in my mind, she is not really the working type. But I guess people can surprise you.

Eliza is also one of those people, but I follow her to the woods, and when she halts in the middle of the way, waiting for an unknown something or someone, I start to suspect that a comfortable shelter is not exactly what she has in mind.

"Courtney!" she whispers as she sees Courtney coming out of the shadows, "come here a second!" Courtney does as she is told.

"Have you seen Katie and Ian?" Eliza asks.

"Yeah", Courtney says, looking suspiciously at Eliza. "Yeah, they were behind me, they're on their way..."

"Good", Eliza says, looking at the spot where Courtney had just appeared. "That's good."

Courtney looks at Eliza as though she has gone insane – she probably has – and after a few long seconds, Katie and Ian become invisible, looking at each-other and laughing hysterically.

"So I tell him", Ian says, "I say: 'that's not his tail you've got there', and the man just starts running –"

Ian stops at the sight of Eliza and Courtney standing there, staring at them.

"Can we... help you?" he asks, obviously at loss for words.

"I don't mean to interrupt," Eliza says softly, "finish your story, go on."

"Nah", Ian says, dropping the bundle of plants he has been holding. "This one doesn't really have a punch-line. What is it?"

"Well, alright", Eliza says, and takes a deep breath. "I wanna talk to you guys about maybe forming an alliance that might carry us all the way to the end-game."

Ian raises an eyebrow. "Isn't it too early to think about the end-game?"

"It's always too early until it's too late", Eliza says, smiling to herself. "I'm thinking us four, plus Yau-Man, would make a strong sub-alliance of five. Five is all we need once we're eight, and the day when we're eight isn't too far-off."

Nobody says anything. I think that it is because nobody knows whether it is their turn to speak or not.

"Well?" Eliza says finally, irritated by the silence. "Are you in?"

"Why Yau-Man?" asks Katie bluntly.

"I'm sorry?"

"Why include Yau-Man? I mean, he's one of the biggest threats still left, why include him in the five? Why not someone much more disposable, like, say, Jonathan?"

Ian takes a quick look at Katie, but then turns back to look at Eliza.

"But we all know Yau-Man is a threat", says Eliza, somewhat nervously, "us four can easily take him out at the final five. When we think about it, what are our alternatives, really? Jonathan we can't trust, that's an obvious one; and Julie and Cindy are

inseparable, they're a dangerous combination when together, and one of those two won't agree to play without the other. At least with Yau-Man, there aren't any sub-sub-alliances – everyone's standing on even grounds."

When nobody speaks yet again, Eliza adds: "Besides, Yau-Man now has this guide book thingy. We need that right now. We need his knowledge if we want to eat properly. It's an individual game, and the challenges are individual - they aren't going to give us any tribal prizes. And that means DYING OF HUNGER, unless Yau-Man is around. That's the sad truth."

For me it is clear that Eliza had gone over every detail of this plea with Yau-Man. But I am not sure that it is clear to the three of them.

"I'm in", Courtney says.

Katie looks at Courtney for a long while, her expression unreadable, and then: "I'm in."

It is now Ian's turn to look at *Katie* for a long while, before blaring out a third "I'm in."

My guess is that Ian's and Katie's 'I'm in's are the 'I'm in's of people who know that no matter what, you don't say 'I'm out' on an offer unless you already have a better deal settled. Courtney's 'I'm in', however, is different. It is the 'I'm in' of someone who is just excited to be offered a deal, any sort of deal.

"Great!" Eliza cannot hold her enthusiasm inside, and does not really try to.

"It's settled then. I'll fill Yau-Man in, and update you soon. Oh, and one more thing –" she says as the other three are starting to make their way back, "Julie and Cindy had this idea, where it's the five girls in the final five. I think it's best to play along, just so that they wouldn't be looking for... other options. I'll tell them I'm with them the moment I see them. Katie, Courtney, once they come to you with the offer, I think you should say yes, act as if you're totally into it. It's the safest way to insure we're in control of this game. Right, off we go."

Just as they all take off, Shirley reveals herself, coming from behind a bushy area.

"Where have you been?" she asks as though I have done something wrong. "I have been looking all over for you! Well, I looked at the camp and then I came here and found you, but you shouldn't disappear just like that, you have to let me know where you are at all times!"

"You weren't anywhere to –"

"Let's do move on. Now, it's almost time for the challenge, and they haven't take their tree-mail yet. We need to... hmmm... guide them in the right direction. Come with me."

I come with her. We're nearing camp when I hear two low voices coming from the woods. I stop in my tracks. Before Shirley says anything, I put a finger over my mouth, signaling her to be quiet. This seems to piss her off even more, but when she, too, hears the voices, she plays along, and we both head off, as quietly as we can, in the direction of the noise.

It is Rafe and Jonathan.

"It is settled, then" Jonathan says with his hand firmly on Rafe's shoulder. "Cirie is going tomorrow, and then Terry. Don't sweat over it."

"And then what?" Rafe asks with an inquiring look. Shirley and I get closer.

"You don't have to worry about later", Jonathan calms him down. "I'm on it.

Remember, you've got my word, you'd be surprised how –" but at that moment Jonathan notices us, and Rafe looks at Jonathan and then notices us as well, and at

that moment, the conversation is over. Remembering yesterday's interview with Ian and the leading questions Shirley had asked him, I do not blame them.

In silence, they start making their way in the direction Courtney, Ian and Katie had come from earlier, and we follow. In no time, they reach Terry, who is chopping branches left and right. It is scary, really.

"What have you got for us, Terry, my man?" Jonathan asks, looking around.

"Actually..."

The three of them turn to find out that it is Shirley who addresses them, with her kind voice – which is kind of fake.

"I'm sorry to interrupt", she says, "but I need you guys to go and check for tree-mail. There might be something waiting for you there."

That's a pretty blunt hint, at least in my opinion.

"Alrighty then", says Jonathan. Why don't you two go, while I take the machete and some of your... work's worth back to camp with me."

"Sure, why not", but then he realizes who is standing right beside him. They share an awkward moment, and we share it with them. Jonathan takes the machete and a few branches and disappears into the wild, leaving Terry and Rafe with no choice but to head off to get tree-mail together.

"Shall we?" says Rafe, trying, not too successfully, to sound casual.

"We sure... shall", Terry says lamely, and they both start making their way to the hill in the middle of the island.

A few times, one of them looks at the other, opening his mouth to say something, but each time nothing comes out.

Finally, Terry takes the initiative – and maybe it would have been better if he had not.

"So... you are a gay person, Rafe."

"Yeah", Rafe says, smiling in disbelief. "Yeah, I believe I am."

"And that's fine by me."

"Thank you", Rafe says, amused. I am not sure Terry notices the amusement in his voice, though.

"I personally know a gay person myself, you know", Terry says, obviously trying to impress Rafe.

"Really?" Rafe plays along. "What a coincidence."

"He's my cousin's son. Well I don't really *know* him, per se. I just heard about him, my cousin doesn't bring him with her usually when she comes to visit, but from what I've heard he's Ok, he's not that sexually perverted like one might think."

Rafe looks good-natured about this whole situation. "One might think so, yes", he says.

"So anyway, my point is", Terry says, and I am surprised to hear he has a point, "you don't have to feel uncomfortable around me, 'cause I'm totally fine with you lot – you can tell that to Ami as well..."

"I will", Rafe says. "I'm sure she'll be thrilled to hear it."

"Good", Terry sounds satisfied, "'cause us four in the minority – if we don't start working together, we'll ruin the tiny chances we still got of making it further. We need each-other."

"Total agreeance", Rafe says, now without smiling, and I remember his talk with Jonathan and understand that Rafe really *does* agree with Terry, only on a different level.

They reach the top of the hill. Under the tortoise's armor lies nothing but a small piece of parchment. I already know what the challenge is, but I am still curious to find out how the clue is worded. Luckily, I have Shirley for these kinds of things.

"Would you be kind enough to read it out-loud?" she asks Rafe softly.

"Sure", Rafe says, and reads out-loud:

*"Majority rules, that's the rules of this game,  
In order to win you must name the right name.  
Unique group of people, each one of a kind,  
Let's find out which one has a mind-reading mind."*

"Come on", says Terry, and I suspect he believes he had just made a new best friend, "let's go back and tell the others."

They go back, and they tell the others.

"Mind-reading mind..." Cindy wonders out-loud. "So we'll have to guess what others are thinking..."

"What the *majority's* thinking", Cirie corrects her. "'Majority rules', that means we'll have to be right on what the majority thinks, in order to advance."

"So it's the coconut-chopping challenge" concludes Eliza.

"But..." wonders Ian, "doesn't that means we'll have to fill out questionnaires? Rafe, are you sure there wasn't anything else in the tree-mail?"

"I'm positive", Rafe says, looking unsure, but my attention quickly shifts to Courtney, who is clearly very uncomfortable by the situation. So uncomfortable, in fact, that when the subject of conversation does not change, she actually stands up and walks away. Some notice this, but nobody does a thing, no-one goes to check what is wrong. No-one, except for Ami.

I do not need Shirley's over-the-top hand gestures to know that I have to follow Ami. She finds Courtney in the shelter, alone, looking into the distance. Ami sighs, and then sits beside her, putting her hand on Courtney's shoulder, very unlike Jonathan's hand on Rafe's Shoulder about an hour ago. This makes Courtney look around quickly in surprise.

"Oh", she says when she sees Ami. "Hi."

"Hey you", Ami says sweetly, looking right into Courtney's eyes. "Is everything alright? You just left without a word..."

"I just needed a private moment", Courtney says, looking away. "With god."

"Right", Ami says. "But are you sure you're fine, sweetie? Is it the message about the challenge that got you upset?"

Courtney scoffs. "That's going to be a fun challenge, don't you think? Where everybody can just lay it all out in the open, express what they really feel... It's gonna be a blast."

It is evident that Ami tries to find the right thing to say. When she asks: "are you worried about what gonna be said about you?", it is evident that she could not find it.

"Come on, Ami", Courtney says, and she sounds different than the Courtney I know, or think I know, "that stuff doesn't concern me anymore."

"You can talk to me freely", Ami says, "I won't judge you, I promise."

"I'm sure you won't" says Courtney, finally looking back at Ami. "But he will."

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Russ yawns the biggest yawn that has ever been yawned. He does not look tired – and he does not have a reason to, I have seen him sleep – he looks bored.

"You look bored", I say.

"Yeah, well, what's not to be bored about?" he says. "All the challenges recently have them just standing there, not doing a thing. Where does the budget go, then, if not for the challenges? It's not like we're getting overpaid."

"Maybe..." I wonder. "Maybe they are saving it for something good."

"Yeah", Russ says disbelievingly. "Does a trip to Majorca for Mark Burnett count as something good?"

Before I can answer Russ that a trip to Majorca does count as something good, Shirley comes and warns me that the contestants are about to arrive.

"And don't try anything funny like at the last challenge", she adds.

I turn my camera on just in time to catch the survivors coming out of the bushes one by one. They all stand on the mat laid out in front of Jeff Probst, who, after a short small-talk, like he likes to do from time to time, explains the rules of the challenge.

They each stand on a square (the first of eight squares), and get a hard notebook with their twelve names in it. After Jeff asks a question they would have to choose a name as an answer; the people who choose the name that comes up the most, will advance to the next square. The first person to advance all the way to the last square will win this challenge and be immune at tomorrow's tribal council.

Everybody takes their place. Courtney looks terrified. I probably look terrified as well.

"First question", Jeff Probst announces. "Which contestant is made out of all-star material the most?"

It is like a collective sigh of relief. There is no need to bash anyone – not yet, anyway. The answers are revealed. There are a few Ciries, and Terry has his own name selected, but most of the people select Yau-Man. Yau-Man smiles meekly, as the people who chose his name advance to the second square. He himself has selected Cirie.

"Second question", says Jeff Probst. "Who would you trust with your life?"

People do not hesitate much on that one. Even Terry chooses Cirie's name, and not his own. It is probably the combination of her being a nurse, and her age and experience, and the warm way she talks to people that grant her this title. The only two that vote differently are Cirie herself and Eliza, and both of them have Yau-Man's name revealed.

"Dammit, Jeff!" Cirie says.

Now everyone except for Cirie, Eliza, Terry, Yau-Man, Rafe and Ami are on their third square.

"Third question", Jeff says. I have a feeling this is going to get dirty. "Who would you *not* want to meet again after the game is over?"

I had a feeling this was going to get dirty. Everybody looks at each other, but nobody wants to be the first to choose a name.

Katie is the first one to choose. But that's not all she does: "Jeff", she asks, "am I allowed to show others what I've chosen *before* the reveal?"

"Nope", Jeff Probst answers her, "the choices are revealed all at once."

"Note to self", Katie says quietly. "From now on, do not ask Jeff about loop-holes in the rules."

"That'd actually be a very good advice," says Jeff Probst. "Alright, it's time to reveal." I do not want it to be time to reveal, because I know what will happen.

Courtney holds up Jonathan's name. So does Cindy. But everybody else – and I think I can hear my heart crack a little – has Courtney's name held up. The thing that kills me the most is that I am the one filming this, making it possible for millions of people to see it in a few months. I try to figure out Courtney's expression, but it is inscrutable.

Now Ian, Katie, Julie and Jonathan are at the front of the pack. If things continue this way, that means that the tree-mail was right and that the majority actually rules – one of them has immunity, and so they can send whoever they like.

"Fourth question", Jeff Probst says. "Who is the most likely to betray you in this game?"

This does not take long for people to choose. When Jeff Probst orders them to reveal, it's almost a unanimous vote for Jonathan. Only Rafe, Terry and Katie vote for Eliza, probably because Eliza has *already betrayed* half the people here. Katie is eyeing Jonathan thoughtfully. Maybe it has something to do with him voting for himself as the most likely to betray you in this game.

"Who doesn't deserve to be a part of the all-star cast?"

After the easy answer that was Jonathan, Everybody is at unease once again.

Courtney's name starts appearing everywhere again, like poisonous mushrooms after an extremely cruel rain. I want to scream to her, 'I think you deserve to be an all-star, Courtney, you deserve it more than the lot of them', but instead I just do my job. I film.

The sixth question is asked, and it is: "Who never shuts up?"

I narrow my eyes into two slits – I want to see as little of what is going on as possible. I do not want Courtney to be selected again. But luckily enough, hers is not the name that comes up the most – Eliza's is. Everybody votes for Eliza. Even Eliza votes for Eliza. When I think it over, I did not really have a reason to be worried – this one was obvious.

The less obvious part is that Ya-Man holds up Eliza's name along with everybody else. At first, I think that it is pre-planned by the both of them, but the look Eliza gives Yau-Man says it all.

"Second to last question", Jeff Probst says, and I look around to see who is in the lead. Cirie and Julie are. Everybody else is one step behind them, Except for Terry, who is two steps behind.

"Who, in your opinion, has the best shot of winning this game?"

This is the million dollar question, literally. The person that gets chosen the most this time is literally the person to beat. It is the person everybody knows is playing *well*, but it is also the person everybody *knows* is playing well.

"Everybody reveal."

This is not unanimous choice like the one before. There are some Yau-Mans, and some Ians, and two Cindies, and even a Cirie. But the person who got the most votes is Julie.

When I come to think about it, Julie *is* a well-positioned player, one that people respect, and like, and even fear. Julie herself, who had voted for Yau-Man, looks around, at the people toeing the line she is standing on, probably realizing that her 'winning' personality is what just cost her this win. Luckily for her, Cirie did not get this one right either, so no one is leading.

Julie and Cirie are still at the front, accompanied by, Jonathan, Terry and Yau-Man. One square behind are Eliza, Katie, Cindy, Rafe, Ami, Ian and Courtney, who have probably realized that they have no chance of winning this challenge, but they do have a huge impact on crowning the winner.

"Last question", Jeff says. Cirie wears her determined look. She has already won this kind of challenge a year and a half ago. On her left, Julie does not look as confident. She still seems startled by the previous question.

"Who, in your opinion, is the person most likely to go home tomorrow night?"

This is kind of a direct question – my first thought is that the answer to this question might actually have an impact on the answer to this question. I remind myself not to think too much.

It is reveal time. All of the names that come up are from the minority alliance.

There is one Rafe and one Ami. There are four Terries. But Cirie is the person who wins the jackpot – or rather, loses the jackpot, considering the question. Everybody in the left row has voted for her, except for Cindy and Courtney.

But in the front row, only one person has voted with the majority, and that person takes a step to the last square, wearing the calmest smile I have ever seen. The person who has the best chances of winning, won. Julie won. Behind her, Cirie looks like she is made of stone.

All eyes are now directed at Jeff Probst, who usually announces the winner the second the challenge is over. But a second has passed, and so are a few more seconds, and he still has not made a sound.

He finally opens his mouth to say something. I expect a pompous 'and Julie wins immunity!' from him. But all that comes out is a weak, broken "Julie wins immunity". She comes forward, and he puts the necklace around her neck without even looking at her. It is very uncomfortable to watch, and very uncomfortable to film.

The challenge is over. The contestants are leaving the same way they came. Russ leaves back to our tent, murmuring: "well, that was a waste of a portion of my life". Shirley, for some reason, walks in the same direction, calling to me: "I have some business to attend to, don't do anything extremely stupid while I'm gone."

Only Jeff Probst stays. He looks as broken as his voice sounded. He had just hurt the feelings of his favorite out here. And then he had to watch her without being able to do a thing.

I know exactly how it feels. To stand there, to watch something painful happen to someone you love, and to know that you cannot do anything about it.

It feels like crap.

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I get back to camp, somehow feeling sicker than I did after the reward challenge. I take comfort in reminding myself that in an hour or two, Julio will come and replace me. This is the first time since I have come here two weeks ago that I want the day to be over.

My body feels heavy. I drag my legs on the beach, leaving two long stretches of dug-up sand behind me. It does not matter – it will only take minutes for the wind to completely erase the marks I had made.

I look around to see if I can find Courtney, but she is nowhere to be seen. I guess she is not in the mood to be surrounded by people. I am not in the mood to be surrounded by people either, but it is the job. I do not really have a choice.

Julie is placing her hideous necklace on a branch in front of their shelter, with Ian at her side, complimenting her on her win. I scoff. Boom looks at me.

People are congratulating other people while thinking about how they are going to slit their throats open. People are lying to other people's faces about their plans without blinking an eye. People are playing a game of deceit naturally, smoothly, without having doubts, without feeling that maybe they should not, that maybe there is another way.

Courtney is not one of these people. It is just not in her nature. Maybe that is why she is away now, while other people are socializing at camp. Maybe that is why the game is not suited for people like her.

Julie leaves to talk to Cindy. I leave as well, dragging my legs below me, without a real purpose.

I pass by Ami and Rafe, and I can hear Rafe say: "It's good, Ame, we have Jonathan working for us, he's already talked to – ", before I am too far to hear more.

I pass by Eliza and Yau-Man, and I can hear Yau-Man say: "have you talked to Cindy and Julie yet to make sure that they trust you? You need to appear one hundred percent with them – ", before I go out of earshot.

I pass by Cindy and Julie, and I can hear Cindy say: "yeah, Jules, stop asking me that. Katie sounded genuine when I talked to her. She's at our side. What you're saying about Courtney's behavior bothers me, though – ", before her voice turn into a distant sound.

I do not have the patience to stop and listen to any of these people. I am only focused on looking for Courtney, even though I have no idea what I will do once I find her.

"Donald, you piece of work, stop storming away for a second!"

I feel Shirley's nails digging into my arm, her firm grasp stopping me from advancing forward.

"What is it?" I snap at her. I am not used to snapping at people. Shirley is also not used to me snapping at her.

"I mean – is there something you want?"

She looks at me disbelievingly.

"Yes, there's something I want, you challenged child, I'm not running on the beach looking for you just because I'm bored. Now less talking, more coming with me."

Still holding my arm tightly, she brings me to a route I am not familiar with.

Five minutes later, we enter a dark cave, nearly hidden behind a bunch of bushes. It takes some time for my eyes to get used to the darkness, and only then do I notice Cirie sitting there, completely silent.

"Are you sure you don't prefer to have this interview outside?" Shirley asks nicely, but I can sense the frustration in her voice. "There's just not enough light in here for the camera to capture you properly."

"I like it here", Cirie says decisively. "This place helps me to think." It sounds like she does not have a lot of patience right now for people like Shirley. I do not blame her.

"Alright", Shirley says, less nicely, and, not without reluctance, she sits down on the dirty ground and signals me and Boom to do the same. It is now that I realize just how small Cirie's cave is.

"What exactly does this... *place* helps you think about?" Shirley asks, looking around. I have no doubt the cave helps Shirley to think about a long, thorough shower she will be having as soon as possible.

"Just... stuff", Cirie says. "Like about just how doomed I am."

"Why are you doomed?" Shirley asks.

"You probably already know", Cirie says, raising an eyebrow at Shirley. "You're in the in, aren't you? Not only am I in a minority of four people, but I'm also the likely target out of the bunch. Haven't you seen today's challenge? 'Most likely to go home tomorrow night' doesn't exactly makes you feel safe."

"So how do you fight it?"

"How can I, really? Terry, Rafe and Ami are the only people I can work with, and that's really no big consolation. Just the night before last, Rafe and Ami planned on voting for Terry, so it's not like we're all working together towards the same goal."

"Do you believe Dreamz? Do you buy everything he said?"

"One hundred percent, unfortunately. I mean, why would he lie? It was his desperate attempt at gaining trust – why would he let people an opportunity to call him on his bullshit? If it wasn't the truth, I bet you anything Ami and Rafe would have protested to it at that exact moment – or came and talk to us afterwards – but they didn't. He was telling the truth."

"So, besides Terry, you don't have any allies in this game, at all?"

"I don't have any *real* allies that I can trust completely, besides Terry who proved himself to me with the necklace at the last tribal council. But that doesn't mean I won't cut deals with people who have the same goals as mine. Ami and Raf need us, and we need them. Sure, they thought about voting for Terry, but they ended up voting for Jules, same as us. I think we can count on them to be on our side when the time comes."

The telling exchange between Rafe and Jonathan pops into my head.

"Good for you", Shirley says in her careless way. "So you're just going to stay in the game, one day at a time, hoping that things would work out in your favor?"

"I guess", says Cirie, and then she realizes what she had just said. She smiles a sad smile. "That doesn't sound like a very good plan, now, does it?"

Shirley smiles back at her in a mean way. I suddenly do not dislike Cirie so much – maybe because she seems more vulnerable now, in her small cave, more human in a way.

"Well", Cirie tries to explain, perhaps to herself, "It's not like I've got a lot to work with here. Who do I got on the other side – Courtney from my season?" she lets out a giggle. "I mean, she's not really someone to rely on, is she? I mean, these days, I'm not even sure she can rely on herself."

My face turns hot at once, and without thinking I say loudly: "She is doing better than you, is she not?"

The cave echoes what I said. I wish it would not.

Cirie looks at me.

Boom looks at me.

Shirley looks at me in a way that suggests that in the near future, we are going to have a serious talk.

"W...where were we?" Cirie asks in a tone that is both confused and amused, and I do not know where to bury myself.

"You..." Shirley also finds it hard to get it together again. When she gives me another meaningful look, I try to hide as much of me as I can behind the camera. "You were explaining why you're not doing anything about your doomed situation."

"Right", Cirie says. "Like I said, I don't really have any allies, outside of my little sinking boat. And anyhow, I don't blame the others one bit – getting rid of me is a smart move on their part – hell, *I'd* get rid of me!"

"What do you mean?" Shirley asks her. I am glad that my little incident is forgotten. "C'mon, you've been to today's challenge! What categories did I win, can you recall? 'The person you trust with your life'? 'The person you'd like to be stuck on an island with'? And there was one more category, let's see if I can remember... Oh! Right! '*The person most likely to go home tomorrow night!*'! Do you see the connection?" Shirley thinks for a moment before replying, slowly: "Are you saying that you're... too well-liked?"

"I wish", Cirie says somberly. "If I were, people here would like me enough to keep me. I'm saying that people *think* of me as too well-liked – they had decided I'm too well-liked before they even met me. People are positive that if I stay here long enough, I'll magically pave my way to the end and win, so they wanna send my behind home quick as possible, so that nothing of that sort happens. But in truth I'm not a real threat to them. I don't have any real allies and I'm on everybody's radar – for god's sake, if it wasn't for the immunity necklace I wouldn't even be here right now. They would be smart to take advantage of my situation and use me as a pawn, but they're too god-damned afraid.

So it happens that I'm supposed to be this super-popular person, but in reality, nobody would even talk to me about a possible alliance. So you're right – ", she looks directly at me, right through the camera that separates us – "Courtney is absolutely doing better than I am. Everybody on this planet and beyond wants to be in an alliance with Courtney, just because she's so..."

Cirie stops mid-sentence with a frozen expression on her face. This bothers Shirley, who is a woman of action who probably has not experienced a single moment of silence in her entire adult life. When Cirie does not resume her monologue for what seems like an eternity, Shirley resorts to coughing, pointedly. When this does not help either, she tries the direct approach and asks Cirie: "Are you feeling alright?"

Cirie unexpectedly smiles. "I'm feeling better than alright. I just realized something important."

"Really?" says Shirley. "What's that?"

"I realized that if I have a certain... *Reputation* that holds me back from making it through, all I gotta do is smash this reputation into tiny little pieces."

"Meaning?" Shirley asks.

"Meaning", Cirie says, almost mocking Shirley, "that I might have to get my hands dirty just a little bit. And I might know just the place to start."

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When Cirie's interview ends, it is completely dark. The night-vision button is already pressed for more than half an hour, because it was even darker in the cave. I take a peek at my covered-up watch before we get back to camp. Eight thirty pm. Any minute now, Julio is supposed to appear in his annoying way and take camera from my hands. I am starving. I wonder what is for dinner. I hope it is not pizza, or mushrooms, or potatoes. I need something that would take my mind off of this place. I need a break. I need sleep.

I can only see Rafe, Terry and Ami when I set foot at camp. At first, I think it is because of the darkness that I cannot see anyone else, but then I follow Cirie to the shelter where the three of them are sitting, and I hear what they have to say. "Where is everybody?" Cirie asks, voicing my thoughts. "Disappeared one by one", Rafe says gloomily. "Each with a different excuse. Probably huddled somewhere, deciding which one of us is the next to go. Remember when we used to do that?" "The good old days", Terry sighs, and they all fall into a depressing silence. This is not exactly what you call riveting television, so I decide to go and look for the rest. Shirley, of course, is nowhere to be seen once again – she left me somewhere between here and the cave – so I do not even have to ask for permission.

I go down to the ocean, but there is no one there. I go up to the tree-mail hill, but there is no one there. I even go as far as circling the entire island, which takes me about

forty minutes, but there is no one anywhere. Julio was supposed to be here already, but I am not surprised that he is late. It is expected of him, to tell the truth. And besides, the silent night is something different to experience. All day, I am surrounded by people; loud, outspoken people. Up until now, I have not realized how much I have missed being all by myself, with only the moon keeping me company. It all falls slowly and quietly into place – I have been too invested in this game to remember that it is, after all, a game. That I have people that I love, that love me back and that are waiting for me at home. That there are more than a few dozens of people on this planet. That Jeff Probst is only a host of a television show, and that Shirley is only a producer, and the contestants are only contestants. And that I am only me, and that I cannot be more than that, even if I try real hard. This brings me comfort.

I am walking in the forest, only me and my camera, giving in to my thoughts. Just when I am starting to get used to it, I find them, in all their loudness and outspokenness. It feels like they are the ones to find me, not the other way around. They are sitting on the logs that have not found their way to camp yet since two and a half days ago.

"Another two challenges", Eliza says, "that Cirie almost wins, and that Terry doesn't even come close to winning. That alone should give us some clue as to who we should get rid of first. Cirie is more likable. Cirie is more cunning. Cirie is more –" "Alright", Jonathan cuts her aggressively. "Eliza, we get the point. We've heard both sides. Let's have a show of hands, shall we? Who here thinks we should vote off Cirie next?"

It is almost unanimous. Only Cindy and Courtney do not raise their hands.

"Than it's decided", Jonathan sums up. No need to dwell on it." And he gets up and leaves. Others follow.

Only Yau-Man remains seated. When the place is almost deserted, he says softly:

"Katie, Ian, may I have a quick word with you two?"

"Everyone wants a word with us nowadays", Ian says, sighing deeply. "Oh, the price of instant stardom."

"Maybe we should start charging", Katie suggests, and they both sit down opposite Yau-Man.

"What's up?"

"Eliza talked to me earlier today", Yau-Man says, "and I understand that she talked to you as well."

"Well, yeah", Ian says immediately.

"And you have both agreed", Yau-Man continues, "to her offer of a final five."

"Well, yes, we did", Ian says immediately.

"While actually planning to get rid of me the moment you get the chance."

This time, Ian does not say anything immediately, and after a while he does not say anything either. In truthfulness, what do you say to a statement like this, especially if it is correct?

"It is completely fine that you want me gone, I can understand why", Yau-Man says, surprisingly calmly. This is weird. "You are scared that I will get to the end, and that people would vote for me to win. You are convinced that I would not contribute anything to your success in the game – on the contrary, you think I might jeopardize it. That is why I want to make you an offer that would prove otherwise – that I can be beneficial, even crucial, to your game."

Katie frowns, examining Yau-Man carefully. "We're listening", she says.

"After we get rid of Cirie, Terry, Rafe and Ami, we find ourselves at a crossroad", You-Man explains himself. "No more enemies to take care of, only us eight. We become each other's enemies. It is then that you have a decision to make – you either keep your word and vote with myself, Courtney and Eliza, or you are doing the tempting thing, and vote out yours truly.

This is my offer – if I come back from that tribal council alive, if you spare me and I find myself in the final seven, I promise that at the following tribal council, I would vote whichever way you'd want me to. At that tribal council, my piece of parchment is yours."

Ian and Katie look at Yau-Man like he is some kind of a mental patient. Yau-Man, however, seems confident in his offer – no sign of hesitation is visible on his face. "It's a deal", Ian says awkwardly, as though afraid that Yau-Man might take his offer back.

"Good", Yau-Man says, although from my point of view it is not good at all, and he walks away, leaving Katie and Ian glued to the log they are sitting on.

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It is now eleven thirty pm., and everyone is asleep. Everyone except for me.

Julio has never been that late. He is hurting his reputation, and that is something of note, as his reputation is pretty hurt to begin with.

I wonder why Russ does not wake him up and send him here – maybe Julio is not even in the tent. But where *is* he?

Shirley is long gone. Her shift ended hours ago. There are not any producers here – only two sound-men, and two cameramen, and for some reason, I am one of them.

I have already walked around the island again, to see if I could do it in less than forty minutes. I can. I can do it in thirty. And also in twenty five. And in twenty three.

Now I am overseeing an experiment to find out who snores the loudest. Yau-Man is doing pretty well, and so does Ian. Before starting the experiment, I betted on Jonathan to win it – but strangely enough, no sound comes from his direction, not even a faint wheeze. I find out why that is soon enough.

Without any warning, and with no apparent reason, he sits up straight, looking around, checking his surroundings like a curious hound. When he does not find whatever it is he is looking for (or perhaps he does), he makes a signal with his hand to someone at the far end of the shelter. That person immediately gets up and walks over to Jonathan. Only then do I see that it is Katie.

"Let's go", she whispers, and they take off. I take off after them, of course.

"It's about time we'd take one of our midnight walks", Jonathan says once they are completely out of the shelter's earshot. "The last one we had was three frigging nights ago."

Behind them, I take the cover off my watch and check what time it is. 11:43 pm. At first I wonder why they are not having their midnight walk at, well, midnight. Then I remember that they do not know the exact time for almost fourteen days. For them, midnight is right after the sun goes down.

"It *is* about time", I hear Katie say. "You have no idea what went down today. I have been waiting for hours for the opportunity to tell you. It's *huge*."

I can practically hear Jonathan's head turning in Katie's direction, or at least I think I can. Maybe it was just the wind. "What is it?" he asks loudly.

"I have been approached today", Katie says in a dramatic voice. "By two separate alliances. And I gave my word to both of them."

And she goes on to tell him about Eliza cornering her and Ian and Courtney in the forest; about Cindy cornering her after the challenge in a very similar fashion; and about Yau-Man and his peculiar offer made a few hours ago. When she is done, Jonathan does not talk at first. I run forward so I can face them – I want to catch Jonathan's expression. This is challenging, walking backwards, and I am afraid that any minute I might fall into a hole and die, but it is worth it.

"So...what are you planning on doing?" Jonathan asks at last, very cautiously.

"You mean", Katie says, "what are *we* planning on doing."

"What?" Jonathan is caught off guard. He sounds very confused by the whole situation. "So you're not gonna follow either of these alliances?"

"Of course not", Katie says simply. "My alliance is with you, and the offers I got don't include you, so obviously I'm not gonna go along with them."

"But you've said yes to them both."

"What was I supposed to say? 'No thank you, please look for another alliance that does not include me'? I'm not *suicidal*."

When Jonathan does not say anything, she adds: "You're not questioning my word to you, are you? Because it's valid. Why else would I be spilling all my beans to you, at night, when I could have had a perfectly good sleep right about now?"

"You're right", Jonathan says finally. "I trust you."

"You should", Katie says. "What do you think, that I'm walking around all day, giving my word to everyone who asks me to? Well, I did sort of do that today, but those were special circumstances..."

"Don't sweat over it", Jonathan says. "You did what you had to do; it was the right way to act. Now we just have to make sense of it all. So, Cindy and Julie want you, Eliza and Courtney with them at the five. But Eliza would have none of that. She immediately runs and forms a new alliance, with Yau-Man and Ian instead of Julie and Cindy."

"So she's either afraid of Cindy and Julie, or she's really fond of Ian and Yau-Man."

"Or she wants to be in control. Or it's a combination of those things. Maybe she has a tight alliance with Ian or Yau-Man. A final-two alliance. Julie and Cindy's offer to her does not include her companion. In her mind, Cindy and Julie are now her companion's enemies, and she has to form a new alliance, an alliance that doesn't include the enemy."

"But is it Ian or Yau-Man?" Katie asks, frustrated. "Either of them doesn't make sense. Nobody would pair up with Yau-Man – not while they're sober, anyway. And I hang with Ian a lot; I didn't notice anything between him and Eliza."

"Maybe they're secretive, like us."

"No, I don't think that's the case", Katie says thoughtfully. "I think I have Ian in a place where he tells me everything that's going on."

"Which is more than he can say for you."

Katie chooses not to respond to this.

"Either way", she says instead, "Eliza now knows that Cindy and Julie are planning on having an end-game that doesn't include her partner. That probably means that *Eliza* is now planning on having an end-game that doesn't include Cindy and Julie."

Jonathan ponders this for awhile. "Does it mean that we have to choose sides? This early? Or are we gonna wait until it's just us eight? What do you think?"

"I'm thinking..." says Katie, and she thinks. And then her face lights up. "I'm thinking, neither. Interrupt me if I'm too far off, but I have an idea... a risky one."

"I like risky ideas", Jonathan says. "Go on."

"Let's say I play along with one of the alliances I've been offered. We reach the final eight. Then, sometime over the following nine days, the inevitable comes. They tell me to vote for you, and I have no comeback."

"But you won't, right? You're going to stay true to your word."

"Yes, I am, but what good would that do to me, or you? Then they won't trust either of us. Instead, we need them to add *you* into the alliance."

"Well, I'm sure they will, if we would just ask politely..."

"But there is a way", Katie says, kind of manically. "A wacky one, but still, a way..."

"What's that?" Jonathan asks, and I think that he is skeptical.

"Think of the reason that you're not included."

"It's easy", Jonathan says immediately. "It's because only a crazy person would make a pact with me, considering my reputation. No offense."

"No", Katie says. "The reason is that there are better options. More attractive options. With the main one being Courtney."

"But what can we do about it?" asks Jonathan. "Courtney is the perfect goat to take to the final stages of the game. She is probably gonna stay here 'till the end."

"Not if we get rid of her. Right now."

---

The sun rises, just when I thought it would never rise. It is probably a spectacular sunrise, but for me it is all a blur. I am now awake for almost twenty four hours. Julio did not come to replace me.

I am jealous of the contestants, who are only now beginning to wake up from their terrible sleep on the hard floor of the shelter. Cindy is the first one on her feet. She walks over to the dying fire and starts recreating it.

"Flint... would... be... nice... right... about... now..." she says between exhalations. She does not know that in two days, they would get the chance to earn flint, and much more.

For some reason, when Jonathan walks by, Cindy takes action – she stops abruptly with the blowing, and holds him by the leg, preventing him from walking away.

"A word", she says pointedly, and he bends over.

"Terry knew", Cindy says quietly, while tiny flames dance beneath her.

"What?" Jonathan looks at her in a you-need-therapy look. "What did Terry know? What are you talking about, woman?!"

"Terry knew that I voted for him", Cindy says in a combination of calmness and furiousness. "I talked to him two days ago, and he revealed that someone *let him know* that I was the one who voted for him. I thought about it some, and came to the conclusion that it must've been you, seeing that you're the only one I've told this to."

"That's crazy", Jonathan shakes off Cindy's accusations, "why would I tell him? Why would I want to create cracks in an alliance that *I'm part of*?"

"Why don't you tell me?" Cindy says persistently. "I've told you because you asked, and because we're in an alliance together, and I wanted to have a nice atmosphere at the workplace. But how can I trust you if you don't even wait five darn minutes to spill all of my darkest secrets to anyone who'd listen?"

"Look", Jonathan says to her, looking directly at her over the growing flames. "I did not give this information to Terry. I had no reason to. He probably guessed that you voted for him, because you made it apparent that you dislike him. I am sad that you

feel that you cannot trust me because of something I didn't do. If you want, I will call Terry right now and we will settle this. But I don't appreciate being accused of something that doesn't even involve me."

Cindy does not respond right away. It seems like she regrets making all that fuss over something she is not exactly certain about.

"You know what?" she says. "Let's leave it. Give you the benefit of the doubt. Just prove to me that you're worth it."

"Gee, thank you for your kindness", Jonathan says, and he actually seems a bit hurt when he gets up and leaves. But when he is far enough from Cindy, he cracks a smile, looks exactly at the camera, and says: "That was close."

At the edge of the forest, Ami, Cirie, Terry and Rafe are collecting firewood. Or maybe they are using it as an excuse to have a strategy discussion.

"We need to think of a plan", Terry says. "We need a thought-out plan that would get us out of the mess we're in."

"Easier said than done", Ami says. "Those eight are happy to be where they are, there doesn't seem to be any weak links among them."

"That's not necessarily true", says voice from behind me. I turn my camera, and myself, around to see Jonathan walking towards us. He immediately joins in the wood collecting, probably not wanting to draw attention to the fact that he is mingling with the enemy.

"What's up?" Rafe asks him without making eye contact with him. "Do you carry some kind of offer?"

"Better", Jonathan says. "I have a gift. I'm going to save your asses tonight, and you'll owe me absolutely nothing in return."

"Sounds wonderful", Ami says. "Almost *too* wonderful. Do spill."

"Katie and I are voting for Courtney tonight. With you four, we have six votes out of twelve."

"A tie", Terry says, sounding a little disappointed. "Another tie."

"Oh, no", Jonathan says, his eyes persistently on the ground, "I don't intend it to be a tie at all. In fact, Katie is with Courtney right now, persuading her to vote for Yau-Man, telling her we're changing up the game. She'll buy it, because she'll buy anything at the state she's in, and because she'd be pushed into a corner. Trust me, it's all figured out."

Cirie joins in on the conversation at last. "So it's gonna be five votes for one of us – probably me – one vote for Yau, and six for Courtney. That's brilliant."

"I think so as well", Jonathan says.

"But why are you doing it?" Terry asks suspiciously. "What's in it for you?"

"I have my reasons, which I'm not yet ready to share", Jonathan says. "But I'd say it's obvious what's in it for *you*. You've got nothing to lose and everything to gain by cooperating with us. Anyway, tonight you know how to vote if you wanna stay alive a little longer." And he leaves for camp with the small pile of firewood he had collected.

"Do you guys buy it?" Terry says when Jonathan is out of sight.

"What choice do we have?" Rafe responds instantly. "It's not like the game's in our hands. We need to work with what is given to us."

"We *do* have the option of going to the others with this information", Ami suggests.

"Turn the tides against Jonathan himself."

"They wouldn't buy it", Cirie says. "From their point of view, we'd do anything to try and break the core alliance. We need to jump at this opportunity; it's as simple as that. We don't need to complicate things, not now."

"Wow", Ami says, a sad smile on her face, "if it works, than poor Courtney."

"Yes, poor Courtney", Cirie says with a giggle.

'*Poor Courtney*', I think to myself all of a sudden, without giggling or smiling.

Suddenly it is obvious to me that I have to rescue her. I turn the camera off and start running – I have no idea how I know in what direction to run, but I do.

It is the epitome of unethical, to get involved in the show, but there is no other way. Courtney is going to be sent home tonight in the cruelest way imaginable if I do not do something about it.

At last, I arrive to the ocean, where Courtney and Katie are deep in conversation. I do not even feel the coldness or the wetness of the water as I advance towards them. This is not what concerns me right now.

"...Ami, Terry, Rafe, Cirie, they're all with us", Katie says to Courtney with conviction. "Jonathan is talking to them right this second. I really wish things were different, but I've heard it with my own ears. Ian proposed to them the final five, and they all jumped on board immediately. That's why you were approached by both Eliza and Julie – that's why I've been approached as well –they wanted to insure we won't get too suspicious. It's going to be Jonathan out at the final eight, then me, then you. Bam, bam, bam, like sitting ducks. But not if we take matters into our own hands."

I try to speak, but no voice comes out.

"We have to vote for Yau-Man tonight, or he's gonna win this whole thing, while we won't even live to see the final five."

I try to force words out of my throat, but without success.

"I understand", Courtney says, and I die a little, or at least it feels like it. "I'll do it. I'll vote for Yau-Man. I just hope it'll work."

"Oh, I'm sure it will", Katie says with a smirk.

I cannot talk. I cannot interfere, not even now, when everything in me tells me that I should.

About an hour later, Eliza and Ami are sitting alone by the fire, preparing twelve potatoes, along with a few weeds - the legal kind - Yau-Man had brought to them earlier.

"Look, our potatoes are dwindling", Ami says. "This means our numbers are dwindling."

"Yeah", Eliza says thoughtfully. It seems like Ami tried to squeeze some response out of Eliza, but Eliza just does not budge. She is just staring at the boiling water, wearing an unreadable expression. This is very unlike Eliza.

"Are... you here?" Ami asks her.

"Yeah, of course", Eliza says in a hollow voice. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You seem off."

"No, I'm on", Eliza says. "Every thing is fine. Everything is turning out fine."

"So why aren't you talking?" Ami asks with a smile that is a bit devious. "Usually, when things are fine, you talk, a lot."

"Oh, I've talked a lot lately, believe me", Eliza says. "Maybe even too much."

"Tell me what's on your mind", Ami pushes, and it works. Out of nowhere, Eliza bursts into tears, tears that spring out of her like a rainstorm, tears that fall rapidly into the cooking pot. "I'm sorry", she says, weeping. "This is so not me."

"It's totally fine ", Ami says comfortingly, caressing Eliza's hair, "Everybody breaks down sometimes, it's totally natural. Besides, we're missing a little salt for the potatoes, it's all good. Now, tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing, that's the thing!" Eliza sobs. "Everything is going exactly as it should be. I'm in a power position. My head is spinning with possibilities. It's spinning so fast, Ami."

She rests her head on Ami's knees.

"I don't know what to do. I'm so little, and I'm surrounded by all these big personalities, and big game moves, and I feel lost. I've kept my cool until now, but I don't know if I could do it much longer."

"Of course you can", Ami says, putting a consoling hand on Eliza's cheek. "You're strong, and you'll come out of it even stronger."

"I'm... I'm sorry I'm dropping all this on you, when you're in a sucky position as it is... it's so selfish of me..."

"No sweetie", Ami says at once, "everybody's allowed to be comforted from time to time..."

"I guess", Eliza blows her nose. "And I guess everything will be fine, it's only a small meltdown... I think... I think it's the stress of making all these huge decisions, and having no one familiar that I can talk freely to..."

"I'm familiar", Ami says, almost too quickly. "You can come to me with anything, honey."

"I know", Eliza says. Her crying has calmed down a bit. "And I really need that, now with Julie –"

"What's with Julie?" Ami asks, sounding anxious to know.

"Nothing", Eliza says, probably wishing she did not mention Julie's name. "Never mind, really. It's just... I wish you were with me, in an alliance. It would make things so much easier."

"I know, sweetie", Ami says, and she has a look on her face that somewhat frightens me. "I know."

But I cannot worry about Eliza right now. I have problems of my own. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Shirley approaching.

---

"We haven't had a chance talk since yesterday's... incident". Shirley says, smiling at me maliciously.

"I guess not", I say offhandedly. She does not scare me. I can stand up to her, or at least try to.

"Here's the deal", she says. "I like you, Donald, I really do. I think you're a sweet little child. That's why it would pain me to squash you like an insect. But I would, if you gave me no choice.

We are now going to conduct an interview with Katie. It is going to be a nice, calm interview, with her doing the talking, and me doing the questioning. Now, I'm warning you, and this is the last warning you're gonna get – I hear one peep from you, one tiny little sound, and you're out of the business. And I don't just mean survivor – I mean filming, as a career choice. You'd be lucky if some tourists on the street asked you to take a picture of them. No filming company would ever hire you, I'll personally see to that. Believe what I tell you."

"You do not have that kind of power", I say, with as much fake courage as I can muster.

"Oh, try me", is all she says.

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"Katie, you seem to be in a good mood", Shirley says, and it is hard to believe it is the same Shirley that threatened me ten minutes ago.

"Oh, don't make me blush", Katie says playfully. "It's just that it's a beautiful day. And I have a feeling it's going to be a beautiful night as well."

"Would you care to elaborate?" Shirley asks.

"You'll see", Katie says with a smile.

Shirley try to attack from a different angle.

"I couldn't help but find it peculiar", she says, that at the reward challenge, you didn't even tasted your pizza. You didn't even give it a try."

"You noticed that, huh?" Katie says, looking down at the ground.

"Why was that?" Shirley pushes. "Were you feeling sick? Are you allergic to olives or something?"

"No", Katie says, playing with her buff with both hands. "It's nothing like that. It's just... this reward wasn't that important to me, not so much that I would..."

"What?" Shirley insists. "You would what?"

Katie sighs. "I just don't want to come out as the enormous pig again, that's all. When everybody got a hold of their slices, probably thrilled to finally sink their teeth into something, all I could think of is how it would seem on TV when the show is aired. I was thinking about my diet, my torturous, painful diet, and about how it would amount to nothing if I fatten myself with pizzas. It wasn't worth it, it just wasn't worth it."

"So, are you saying that... you're trying to be a better you?"

"You could say that", says Katie, her eyes still on her buff, "a new and improved Katie. I'm trying to work harder around camp. I'm trying to give my best at challenges – obviously with the exception of the pizza one. But the most important thing to me is being better towards people. I can be – with a lack of a better word – a bitch sometimes, without even realizing it. I say what's on my twisted mind, things that I find funny, and that other people sometimes find offensive. I'm not *trying* to hurt people – but I tend to. People back at home, they get my humor. But here, I gotta be careful, alert at all times. I learned that the hard way on Palau, and I don't intend to make the same mistakes twice."

"So why do you still treat people like crap?" I ask.

"*Donald!*" Shirley yells at me, instinctively standing up. "Shut up! Excuse him", she turns to look at Katie apologetically, "he's new, he doesn't really get how things work around here..."

"I get exactly how things work around here", I continue, "With betrayal, and deceit, and manipulation."

"Donald, you stop right this instant. You stop or you'll regret you've ever opened your filthy little mouth." Shirley has malice in her eyes when she says this.

"No, let him speak, please" Katie says. "I wanna hear what he has to say, and why he feels that I treat people like crap."

"Because you do", I tell her. "Maybe you are kinder, and maybe you do not talk trash about people any longer, but tonight, you are not only going to vote Courtney from your alliance out, you are going to make her vote herself out!"

You are setting her up for a fall, using her innocence and faith as a trap. You are still preying on the weak and the vulnerable, no matter how you put it. And you say you have changed. You have not changed at all."

Katie just looks at me, a wondering look on her face. Then she lets out a quick laugh. "I suck, don't I?" she says.

"Ignore him, completely", Shirley jumps in. "He's delirious. He haven't slept in a long while."

"So you know that Julio did not come to replace me", I stay, standing up to face her. I have had enough of Shirley's way of handling things. "You just did not care enough to do something about it. You do not care about anything, do you?"

Shirley turns to face Katie again, smiling sheepishly. "I'm really sorry", she says, "but we'll have to cut this interview short. The cameraman and I need to exchange a few words. But thank you so much for your time."

She turns to me. "You", she says, grabbing my arm. "With me. Now."

What choice do I have? She drags me to a private spot by the sea, her high heels leaving a trail of deep holes in the sand. Then she grabs me by the other arm so we are face to furious face.

"You are so dead", she says, slowly and quietly. "You have no idea how dead you are. So let me explain. Let me give you the inside scoop on how things will unfold from this point on. It starts with me notifying –"

But before she gets the chance to finish telling me about my execution, something in her pocket makes a beeping noise. She takes the beeper out, reads what is written on its little screen, and lets out a deep sigh.

"We'll have to finish this conversation, and your filming career, at another time. Meanwhile –"

Before I realize what is going on, she sends a dangerous hand at my shoulder's direction, taking the one thing that I still have, the one thing that is keeping me somewhat sane.

"I'll hold on to the camera", she says deviously. "From now on, you won't be using it." And she heads off in the direction of the crew's camp. What she is looking for over there, I have no clue.

All I know is that my camera has been taken away from me.

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I am exposed. I walk around camp exposed. I feel like one of my arms has been cut off from my body, but in actuality it is much worse than that. My dream job is no longer mine. As much trouble as I had with some aspects of this work, I could not ask for anything better. And now it has been snatched from my fingers by a cold-hearted devil woman. Anger is rising in me, making my head dizzy, making it hard to walk a straight line – but I do not have to walk a straight line anyway. I do not have to walk anywhere. I have nowhere to walk anymore.

I bump into something and fall to the ground. This is what happens when you do not know where you are heading.

My head is spinning. I try to stabilize it by holding it with my two hands.

When the pain lessens, I look at what I had bumped into.

It is Courtney.

"I am... so sorry", I say pathetically.

"It's my fault", she says, standing up. She had fallen as well. I made Courtney fall. "I wasn't looking where I..." her voice trails away as she examines me. I suddenly realize that now I am just a cameraless man wondering around the contestants' camp with no apparent reason. "Are you one of the producers?" She asks me curiously. "I haven't noticed you before..."

"I have noticed you", I say, and immediately hate myself for saying it. "I mean – I am a cameraman. Only I am without my camera. So you could say I am just a man now." She smiles, and reaches out a hand to help me get up. I take it, maybe too enthusiastically.

"Don't tell anyone", Courtney says to me when we are standing close to one another, "but I am woman of faith, only without the faith part. So you could say I'm just a woman. Does that make you feel better about your condition?"

"No", I say, "but thank you."

We stand there for a short while, looking at each other in silence. It is weird, but it feels natural somehow.

"It's pleasant", Courtney says to me, "talking to someone outside this game. It takes the pressure off. It puts things in perspective."

"I am glad to be of service", I say, and suddenly I realize what I am doing. I am not allowed to talk to her. I am probably not allowed to be in this part of the island. This is totally unlike me. But somehow it feels right.

"Are you OK?" she asks me, probably because I stare at her, deep in thoughts.

"I will be OK, I think. And you?"

"I was kind of going through a rough time", she says, and I do not know why she is so open to someone she has not met before. "But I think things are finally beginning to brighten up."

"It is good to hear", I say to her. Inside me, everything falls into place.

---

Half an hour later, I am still not over my encounter with Courtney.

And as if things are not surreal enough, I can see a familiar figure walking towards me, a figure I am not used to seeing in this section of the island.

"*Russ?* What are you doing here?"

"Taking up your place, mate", Russ says, patting me on my camera-free shoulder.

"Shirley came to the crew's camp, said something happened to you and that I need to take my camera and replace you out here. I couldn't ask her what's wrong, though – before I got a grip she was gone with the wind. Never a quiet moment with that spawn of Satan.

But you look alright to me – what happened exactly?"

"Long story", I say, as Russ would not understand why I acted the way I did.

"I've got time", he says with a shrug. "I'm not exactly anxious to film these bastards trying to stab each other in the back while starving."

"Why do you always do that?" I ask him.

"What am I doing?" he asks defensively. "Just because I'm not having an orgasm over these folks like are, it doesn't mean that I have a problem."

"You always act like you suffer here", I say. I do not know why I have suddenly decided to say things I do not usually say, but now I cannot stop. "Like it could not be worse, and you are waiting for it to end."

"Maybe that's because I *am* waiting for it to end", he says, looking pissed. "I'm waiting for the check to arrive, so I could take the first flight home."

"And then what?" I ask.

"Then I'll pay some debts down under. Meet some people I'm not keen on meeting. It's not gonna be an enjoyable time, but I gotta go through it –"

"For what purpose?" I ask.

"For what pur..." Russ seems lost for words. "What are you getting at, Donald?"

"That you are going to die", I say. "You are going to die miserable, and angry, and you are going to look back on your long life, and you are going to ask yourself how it had gone by so uneventfully, and you are going to try and remember, without any success whatsoever, when, in all this time, you weren't just waiting for something to be over, When were you actually *living*."

Look around you. Look where you are. You are not going to get this kind of opportunity again. You are one of the luckiest people in the world. Start acting like one."

I have no idea what have gotten into me. Russ is left speechless. I probably should not have said half the things I did. But I am so tired of worrying about what I do and do not say.

---

I figure I am not really allowed to stay at the contestants' camp. And I do not really want to go to the crew's camp, in case I run into Shirley. So I decide to head to the only place that would have me – the forest.

I walk in familiar routs, and at some that are not familiar.

Time passes by.

I feel changed, somehow. I feel more relaxed. But my heart still does a back-flip every time I think about Courtney, and about how she had finally found some piece, and about how she is going to be voted out tonight in that cold-hearted fashion.

I do not want to think about it, so I walk some more, deeper into the forest.

"Why did we have to come all the way here?" I hear from a distance. Apparently I am not the only one looking for some privacy. I get closer, close enough to see that Cirie and Jonathan are standing in the middle of a cluster of big trees. I use my knowledge as an ex-cameraman to practically get into spitting distance from them without them actually noticing me.

"I think you'll find that it's in your best interest for this conversation to be unheard", Cirie says smugly.

"Why's that?" Jonathan says loudly. "What have I got to hide?"

"I don't know", Cirie says in a high-pitched voice. "Your final-two alliance with Katie, perhaps?"

Jonathan looks at Cirie with his mouth open. For a long while he forgets to close it.

"How do you know?" he says at last.

"I've heard you two talkin' four nights ago", Cirie says victoriously. "I was up on our shelter's tree, retrieving the necklace that saved my ass at tribal, when your two voices carried all the way up to my ears. You were taking a trip together, while you thought everybody was asleep, and you were talking freely about how you plan to get to the end together. Riveting, captivating stuff, really."

"You've... told anyone?" Jonathan asks, looking like he is trying to stay calm.  
"Not yet", Cirie says casually, raising both her eyebrows. "But that's not to say I wouldn't ever. Keeping secrets is bad, Jonathan. It eats you from the inside..."  
"What is it that you want?" Jonathan cuts right to the point, apparently tired of playing games.  
"Nothing special", Cirie says, thriving in the role of the blackmailer that is so not like her. "You know, the basic stuff. A promise that you won't get rid of me before the rest of my alliance. That leaves me at least three free-passes – four, if I can count on you to actually vote for Courtney tonight – and then we'll see what happens."  
"Or else?" Jonathan tries his luck. "What happens if I don't play by your rules?"  
"You could do that", Cirie says. "You could even vote me out in a few hours, but let's just say that in that case, my final words won't be in front of a cameraman in a distant booth. They'd be right there, at tribal council, in front of everyone. You just have to decide whether it's worth it for you."

After Jonathan and Cirie part ways, I continue my walk. You would think that their voices would be the only voices I hear in this abandoned part of the island. But soon enough, I hear another set of voices, a very different kind of voices.

It sounds like someone might be in trouble. I walk at a quicker pace towards where the noise is coming from.

"Stop it, it hurts", I hear, and I recognize the voice immediately. It is Shirley's voice. Shirley is in trouble.

I begin to run.

"Julio, what are you doing?"

Julio is hurting Shirley. I try to get there as fast as I can. I have to stop this.

"Julio, not there, I liked it better when you did this thing with your tongue."

I finally get there, and immediately regret it. It is indeed Shirley, and Julio is indeed with her, and they are both lying there, between the bushes and the trees, and I get an eyeful of them – I certainly see more than I wish to see.

"Hello", I say, looking away, a little amused.

"Donald!" Shirley says – she almost screams it, she is so surprised – "What are you doing here? Because – because *we* certainly aren't doing anything!"

"Yes, I can see that", I say and smile – I cannot help but smile.

"El Donald, it is very nice to seeing you, how are you been?" Julio asks me, standing up, picking up some of his clothes.

"I am alright", I say, amused – and suddenly things make more sense. "This is why you are always disappearing", I say to Shirley. "And you –" I look at Julio, " – Of course you are always late, you do not exactly get much sleep during the day, seeing that you're... busy..."

Shirley stands up as well, red with shame. "I'm sorry you had to see this, Donald", she says kindly, "Julio and I are – well, it is what it is, and now you know. I'm assuming I can trust you to... not tell anyone?"

"Of course", I say good-naturedly. Nothing seems serious anymore; everything seems like a light-hearted joke. "Your secret is safe with me."

"That's nice", Shirley smiles at me. She suddenly seems like a real person, without any shields to hide behind. "I really appreciate it, Donald."

"I guess I will see you guys later", I say, wanting more than anything to leave those two alone.

"Wait, you forgot something!" Shirley calls after me. I turn around.

She hands me my camera.

---

I arrive to tribal council before any of the contestants. I need to, as I am supposed to film them as they climb the ladder into the set.

I am also there before the rest of the crew. The place is deserted, probably because everything is ready for filming, and it would take some time for the contestants to arrive. Behind me, the sun is beginning to sink, and in front of me are the tribal council props – the snuffer that is shaped like a shell; the stools the survivors and Jeff Probst usually sit on; the voting booth, with the voting urn.

For the first time here, it all seems less like the real thing, and more like a game show. It reminds me of the sandbox in my hometown, and how, as a small child, I saw it as this giant desert.

"It's Donald, right?"

Jeff Probst is standing there when I turn around to see who called my name. Jeff Probst remembered my name.

"Yes, it is", I say, "and you are Jeff, right?"

"Right", he says. I am not sure he got the joke. "Tell me, Donald, how do you like this gig?"

"Well, you know", I say, "it is not in 'Paradise Hotel' standards, but I am coping."

Jeff Probst laughs. He laughs at my little joke.

"We try", he says. "We're on a learning curve."

This conversation could end this way. I made Jeff Probst laugh, and now we could head off in different directions and never speak to each other again. But lately, I tend to speak what is on my mind, I tend to say things I would have never dared saying just a few days ago, and I suddenly have the urgency to act like this one more time.

"Jeff, can I ask you something?"

"Try me", he says.

"I have noticed you have treated Julie... rather coldly."

Jeff Probst did not expect this kind of question from me. He does not know how to react.

I guess he decides not to punch me, and instead he answers: "Yes, I guess you could say that I have. But I... have my reasons."

"Yes", I say, "I understand that you two have broken up."

"It's more complicated than that", he says.

"I see", I say. "But I think that, either way, Julie's feelings are hurt. I saw it in her eyes."

"I know", Probst says, sitting on one of the twelve stools that are intended for the contestants' behinds. "And it kills me. But it's for her own good. And mine."

"But the thing is", I take a seat next to him, "sometimes you act a certain way because you think that in the long haul, it will do good. But what happens is that, in the present, it comes out all wrong. It stops you from doing what you really want to do. What you really *need* to do."

"It's nice in theory", Jeff Probst tells me, and I can see that he is having mixed emotions. "But you can't always do what's on your mind. It doesn't work this way, especially here, on Survivor."

"What do you feel like doing?" I ask him.

"Excuse me?"

"When you meet Julie tonight, what do you want to say to her? What is the first thing that pops into your mind?"

"I..." Jeff Probst thinks.

The sun is gone now, and crew-members are starting to appear, like nighttime creatures.

I take my spot, by the shipwreck, and turn my camera on. The contestants should climb up here any minute now.

Shirley comes over to stand beside me. She did not come here to yell at me or to put me down, this much I know. But I do not expect it when she whispers in my ear: "I have an offer to make you." I turn to look at her anxiously, and so she adds: "Later."

A hand becomes visible at the far end of the set- it soon turns out to be Ami's hand as she reaches the top of the ladder and enters tribal council, followed by eleven other castaways.

Just as they take their seats, I hear another voice whispering in my ear, this time a male voice with a heavy Hispanic accent.

"El Donald, is time to replace you now."

"Julio? What are you doing here?" I look at my watch, trying not to move the camera too much. "Your shift starts in half an hour!"

"I know", he says, smiling broadly, "but I was thinking I would surprise you, so you can go and sleeping early. Now you go! Give me the camera! I promise I will keep it warm for you."

My first instinct is to object, but I am tired – my eyes are almost as heavy as Julio's accent. And besides, I know exactly where I need to be.

When I hand the camera to Julio, this time much more willingly, I hear Jeff's opening words to the contestants: "Let's talk about the immunity challenge. Julie, you've *nailed* this one. How do you explain your exceptional ability to know what other people are thinking?"

I smile to Jeff Probst, and for a split second it looks like he smiles back at me.

I take the path that the ones voted out usually take. It is clear to me where my feet are carrying me.

"How are you doing, Russ?" I say when I get to the final-words booth where Russ is waiting patiently behind a camera on a tripod.

"Donald?" he looks pleasantly surprised to see me. "What are you doing here?"

"Asking you for a favor", I say. "I want to stay here and film the final words of the person booted tonight. Is that alright with you?"

I am completely ready for an answer along the lines of '*why the fuck would you want to film it? Are you hopelessly bored, uselessly pathetic, or both?*', but instead Russ takes a step sideways, gesturing with his hand to take his place behind the camera.

"Sure, mate", he says.

He starts walking away, but then he stops abruptly. "Donald", he says, in a tone that sounds nothing like the Russ I have come to know, "about what we've talked about earlier... you're right. I thought about it, and you're spot on. I was acting like a sore pain-in-the-ass, while I should've just –"

"Russ", I say, "stop acting all sentimental. You're turning into a sissy, mate."

He laughs, and for the first time, I feel like we get each other.

For about an hour and a half, I wait. I do not wait with anxiety, for I know exactly who will walk down the path towards me in a short while. But nonetheless, I wait because I have to be here when that person arrives.

Finally, I can hear steps that grow louder by the second. I can see a silhouette of a woman with big hair advancing towards me in a confident manner.

Although I knew this was coming, nothing could have prepared me for it. My heart falls to with a soft *thud* to my feet. The battle is lost.

But Courtney does not act like the battle is lost. Even in the dark, she is radiant. She seems so different from the worn-out, defeated woman she was on the island. With a huge grin, she sits in front of me and takes a deep breath.

"Should I start?" she asks.

"Whenever you would like", I say.

"Well, where do I begin?" she asks, looking straight at the camera. But then she does something I am not used to see people doing – she looks past the camera, *through* the camera, directly at me. "It's you", she says. "I see you got your camera back."

"Sort of", I say, and add, because I cannot help it: "I am sorry you got voted off."

"I'm not", Courtney says to me, and I believe her. "I wasn't myself out there. It was time for me to go."

I know that it is a sensitive subject, but I have to ask her this. "Are you not mad that they... set you up?"

"They didn't", she says simply. "It was my own doing."

I feel sorry for her. I do not know how to explain.

"Katie and Jonathan", I try. They were behind the plan to get you out."

"I know", she says.

I try to make it clearer for her. "They convinced Terry and Ami and..." And then I realize what she had just said.

"You know?" I ask blankly.

"Yeah", she says, but she does not seem concerned by it at all. "Katie told me today."

"She did?" I ask blankly.

"Yeah", she says. "She said she regretted playing me like that, and that all I have to do to get the target of my back and cause a tie is to write Cirie's name down."

"But you did not", I say, trying to process it all, unsuccessfully. "You did not cause a tie."

"No, I didn't", she says. "I voted for Jonathan tonight."

"For – what?"

"Yeah", she says. "I knew that in order to stay in the game, all I had to do is play by their rules. But I didn't want to play by their rules. When Katie revealed to me what she revealed, I had a revelation – and not the religious kind – I realized that I don't want to be a part of the half-truths and the semi-friends act. This is not what I need right now, when in real life, I don't even know yet who my friends are or what the truth is."

"So you... ended your own game?"

"I guess you could say that I did", she says. "But it feels like a fresh start to me. Here, you can have this, I don't really have any use for it anymore, and I wanna thank you somehow, for the way you cared for me, earlier, on the beach. I really needed to know that somebody like you exists."

She takes off the cross she wears as a necklace from her neck and hands it to me. I do not believe in god, or in necklaces for that matter, but from now on until the day I die, this necklace will remain in my pocket.

I need to buy more pants with pockets.

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Half an hour has passed since Courtney left. It very well may have been the last time I ever see her.

I have never been so tired in my entire life. I have also never been so calm.

Without understanding what is it exactly that I am doing, I move around the camera so that I am facing it. Only now do I realize that it was turned off while Courtney was here.

I turn it on.

"Good evening", I say, looking at my reflection in the camera lens. "My name is Donald Jacobson, I am twenty years old, I have the best job in the world, and I have not slept for more than thirty six hours. And in these thirty six hours I have learned only one thing – and that is that I have a lot to learn. I have not figured out how this world works, or how I should work as part of this world, but I have time."

The battery runs out.

