

*Marquesas* has probably the best storytelling of any (...post-*Borneo*) season in *Survivor* history. On a rewatch, you can very clearly see how early content sets up the rest of the season, how a lot of the scenes in the first few episodes all serve to make later scenes down the line far more impactful—so many narratives are being built up at once that the season really is rewarding, and there aren't really jarring heel turns like "Kelly Wiglesworth, who you have never seen, is actually a jury threat." Things are contextualized in advance in ways that not only explain them but also enhance them.

By the same token, the season also focuses effectively on the relationships and dynamics *between* the players—more than just about any other season has. Inspired by a ranking of the best relationships in *Survivor: Philippines* (ex. Mike/Lisa, Abi-Maria/RC, Malcolm/Denise, Malcolm/Angie... one of the most inventive *Survivor* rankings I've seen, though I can't find it now), I once doodled a web in my notebook of all the relationships between the *Marquesas* cast, and the amount of overlap is *astounding*; with so many well-crafted storylines in such a dynamic season, those stories naturally bleed into each other. The contestants actively make *each other* better and shine brightest in conjunction *with* one another on a level that many seasons don't hit. This is the exact kind of thing one might expect to see rewarded in a ranking not of contestants but *tribes*—not of characters but of *groups of characters*—and so I'm happy *Marquesas* is represented here.

Let's start with Maraamu's episodic content, since that's the sole factor most rankers have been considering in a lot of their cuts. Looking just at what happens on Maraamu beach in those first three episodes *exclusively*, they're still an utterly *fantastic*, forgotten gem of a *Survivor* tribe and brilliant contender for our endgame. My favorite thing about Maraamu is that, in terms of tone, they're sort of two tribes in one. I see people say "Maraamu is such a fun, light-hearted tribe"—but that feels incomplete. Yet I also see people say "Maraamu was a dark, clusterfuck tribe"—and *that's* incomplete, too. And that's the beauty of Maraamu: they're both. It's their *duality*—and how fantastic each individual side of the coin truly is—that makes them an endgame tribe.

The light content people talk about is of course stuff like the radio show, which is brought up any time you talk about Maraamu (hell, I feel like a majority of the time I see people talk about Maraamu, it's *to* bring up the radio show)... and deserves it. The radio shows are truly some of the all-time great comedic scenes in *Survivor* history. I mean, why were the auctions fun back in the day? Because they provided a break from the game—a time to put all the manipulation, all the strategy, on pause and just watch people exchange funny banter or lose their shit over chocolate. The Maraamu radio show is much the same... only invented *entirely by the contestants*. The auction is still a formal part of the game, something instituted by the producers; here, we have something completely original that players just... came up with on their own. This big, complex, official way of entertaining themselves, and us, entirely of their own creation.

How fucking great is that? It's unbelievably creative, and how often do we *ever* see something like that? The sheer fact that that's even *happening* is in itself fun and tells us a lot about these people, about how they want to get through the day... and it makes them all feel kind of relatable, it grounds the series by reminding us that they're just real people trying to pass the time and have fun. And seeing them all get together and have fun banter like that—it's just *fun*, it's a reminder that things don't always have to be so dark and miserable on *Survivor*, it makes them all feel a little more likable. It also proves the strength of *Survivor* casting: the early seasons are said to cast more "real people", and they definitely didn't all look like Californian models—but, I mean, the producers were still making a hit TV show. Accordingly, they didn't just grab sixteen random people off the street; they tried to grab people who were lively, who wouldn't get beaten up easily, who had a good humorous spirit and intelligent, quick wit—and all that comes out fully in the radio show. There's a lot of reasons why it's great... but at its core, it's just straight-up fucking fun that they actually took the time to regularly do that, and it's fun to watch. It's great character development, too, with the music choices, Rob bitching about the weather, and, of course, Sean's classic "RIIIIIING! RIIIIIIING! THIS IS AL SHARPTON!", legit might be the single funniest moment in one of the greatest *Survivor* seasons ever, it's perfect.

These guys are just fun and *likable*, so you kinda want to see 'em succeed...

...but they don't. They fail.

And then they fail again. And again. And a couple more times.

Throughout the first three episodes, Maraamu doesn't win a damn thing—and maybe, post-Ulong and Matsing, this doesn't seem as bad... but at the time, they *were* the Ulong. There was nothing else like this up to this point, and even in a vacuum without context, they still suck if you go back and watch it.

Losing that much means more despair. By the third episode, Maraamu has become an incredibly bleak affair; Hunter, one of the most badass wilderness experts ever on the show this side of Gretchen Cordy and, in some other universe, a superheroic leader of a dominant tribe, looks around and deploras the sorry, proto-Morgan-esque straits—notes how to truly *win*, you can't just get motivation in challenges and turn it off the rest of the time, because you'll *never* get as much motivation that way as the team who bring it with them all the time. It's an absolutely *fantastic* scene—the kind you can only get on a losing tribe, and the kind you can only get from someone who really *cares*.

Losing that much means more conflict. By the third episode, Maraamu blow up at each other, Gina sniping Sarah and Sean in confessional as unable to even hear instructions, Hunter slamming them as complainers, Sean... well, Sean hasn't liked Hunter much from the very

beginning, but he certainly doesn't care much more for him now. And by the third episode, these little abrasions have started to add up, so fractures are beginning to form.

And losing that much means more Tribal Councils.

More Tribal Councils means more votes.

More votes means more tension. More drama.

And, most crucially, more chances for someone to make a move.

But what kind of move is there to even make? It's Survivor 101: your tribe is losing, all you can really do is eliminate the weak.. right?

...Right?

Enter Rob Mariano.

And I beg of you, please take a moment to forget all you know about later Survivor, because it hadn't happened yet. Forget *The Amazing Race* and poker and other RTV stunts, whitewashed edits and manufactured victories. Reflect not on someone who returned too many times (returnees aren't even a thing yet!), but just on someone who is, at this time, nothing more than one very interesting, funny character we haven't seen before. Step back in time with me to 2002.

Enter Rob Mariano—a 25-year-old construction worker who just sits around flirting with the hot girl... but who also really *does* like The Godfather...

A crass young guy out of Boston with no real work ethic who seems to do nothing but wisecrack... but who, come to think of it, *does* have a degree in psychology, maybe he's not *that* dumb...

Come to think of it, why did he team up with Sarah? It *seemed* like it was just because she was hot—but what was that thing he said? Something about "she'll vote whatever way I tell her to vote"?

Didn't he say, "*I picked her for a reason*"?

And he's also a guy who's clearly okay with doing things on impulse; hell, back in 2000 (as his CBS.com bio showed), he woke up the day of the Boston Marathon and, with no training, ran (...and walked) it unofficially. Just to say he'd done it.

A guy who seems to be smart... who has a bit of a dark streak... hell, a bit of a *manipulative* one... and who's clearly okay with making impulsive decisions, doing what *he* wants, no matter how it might look...

...uh oh.

We might be in a little bit of trouble here.

You know what? Let's let Rob take the stand. I'm passing the mic to him.

"It's weird. You might not believe it, but I am totally 100% like Hunter, without a doubt. I would not let it show out here for the life of me because I know that people are not going to take kindly to that type of a atmosphere. Everybody wants to think that they're the big man. So the smart guy will sit back and let everybody step up to be the big man, and then in the end just bank in on their mistakes."

That right there is one of the best, most insightful confessionals of the season. Rob isn't just a guy who sits around doing nothing; Rob knows what makes people tick. Rob knows most people around him want to be the center of attention—so if he sits on the side, he's not threatening their ego. If he lets someone *else* step up, then *they're* the one rubbing people the wrong way.

And he's right. He's been right the whole time. Just go back to episode one: Sean says, "I'm a alpha male, too, so I find it hard to just follow somebody just blindly and keep going to somebody like they're my daddy. I'm not going to do that." Don't you just *love* those confessionals that mean more in hindsight? Sean and Hunter didn't just clash because they were different; they clashed because they were *similar*... exactly like Rob goes on to describe. This is why *Marquesas* is a great season. Because it *makes sense*, because things *follow from* and lead into each other in rewarding ways, because scenes *connect* across episodes and even across tribes. This is why its payoffs *mean* something.

(And to that point: this quote is ultimately ironic *as Hell*, because once Hunter's gone and the swap hits, Rob COMPLETELY tries to "be the big man"! And it's those mistakes that cost *him* the game while other, quieter players flourish. Even as Rob is making his way to the top of his

tribe AND explaining how he's doing it... he's unknowingly explaining just how he himself is going to lose the game several episodes later. Awesome. I love this season.)

Jumping back up to episode three... this Rob guy is clearly smart, thinking on a level not every Survivor does. His bond with Sarah shows that he's clearly willing to do what benefits *him*, not what everyone might want him to do. And so, when Maraamu has to vote yet *again*, what benefit is Rob looking for?

Conventional Survivor tells you to factor in challenge strength above all else—especially when you're down by this much. But what does *Rob* want to factor into tonight's vote?

"It's important for me to have people on my team that are going to do what I tell them to do and not know that I'm telling them to do it. It doesn't matter if my team is stronger physically or even stronger mentally.

But just that they obey."

Rob wants people who obey.

Sarah wants to stay alive.

Sean doesn't want a daddy.

**Hunter, the tribe has spoken.**

...Remember, this is the same tribe that had the morning show.

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It's through a moment like *this* that the game of Survivor truly evolves. There are few greater moments in Survivor history than when—than those very, very rare few when—a player or group of players come together, realize that they can write *whatever name on their parchment they want*, that when it comes to voting there are *no rules* beyond those they choose to self-impose, that it is *their society* with *their laws*, and, in so doing, advance the entire franchise to a new layer of the metagame—push the boundaries that much further—than have ever been seen before.

There are probably a single-digit number of truly *game changing* votes in the history of *Survivor* (and none of them, sad to say, involve Sierra Dawn Thomas)—and this is one of them. Sorry, Hunter. Guess you really *were* like Gretchen.

Now, let's say you're the ultimate adherent to seasons existing in a vacuum, that you literally do not care even the slightest bit how much something influenced the show for better or for worse. Well, today's your lucky day, because this moment is still fucking awesome. Of course, nothing like this had *ever* happened before, not even close - you don't just vote off the big alpha leader during the pre-merge, and you damn sure don't do it when you're down by 3... and so, knowing this, the producers engineered it for maximum impact—making it something that still resonates wildly to this day. To the producers' outstanding credit, they sold this moment... by *not* selling it—at least not the way you'd expect. In one of the great, underrated *Survivor* blindsides, Hunter's name *never* came up as a target in the episode, not once. There isn't a *single* confessional that ends "...so I'm gonna vote out Hunter."

Yet at the same time, unlike [some episodes](#) over the past couple years, they told you everything you need to know about *why* Hunter would go home; they just didn't *tell* you they were telling you that. They gave you all the reasons but didn't forecast it directly. What's the first rule of storytelling? Show, don't tell. That's an easy one to miss when your story is literally built upon people looking into the camera and *telling* us what they think... but here, the producers absolutely remembered it.

They gave us all the pieces, but they didn't quite connect them. And if you were watching enough to catch the subtext, you might have expected there'd be a big clash *eventually*, that at *some* point there'd be a big Sean vs. Hunter clash and Hunter might eventually take a fall... but then they rip the rug out from under you and slam you in the chest with the full weight of the moment. "You already figured this might happen *eventually*, didn't you? Well, why not now?"

It's a *fantastic* way to sell a vote, one we see *very* rarely (this and the Gretchen vote might be the only two times in *Survivor* history? Even *that* was more directly forecasted than this, though), and it makes it exponentially more impactful—they give us the pieces and let us work it out ourselves. Show, don't tell.

Of course, everything I've written here *still* isn't all that goes into setting up this moment: Hunter's own comments in episode 2 about Patricia stepping up too much, Sarah's own individual resentment when nobody listens to her, and Hunter/Gina's connection giving him the setup for this moment to even really be a fall... The only way to *really* do any big *Marquesas* story like this justice is to practically go scene-by-scene and annotate it. Because *Marquesas*—even if you're a fan of it already—is even better than you remember. Seriously.

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Now you may have noticed that one contestant was missing from our list of Hunter voters up above: the Sole Survivor herself, Vecepia. Vecepia on Maraamu is an interesting case study - on the scale of "winners whose games were sort of hidden from us", she's certainly not a Danni, not quite a Tina—but probably the next thing. What distinguishes her from them is that in her case, we saw the subtle aspects of her game; they just weren't fully explained to us—but if you check exit interviews, hear her talk about the things she did strategically at the beginning, and go back, they're all right there. You just might not catch *that* they're strategic without context (...and none of the other players ever would, either, and that's why Vecepia is one of the most threatening players ever.) Part of her early strategy, she's said, was a more insidious version of Rob's "let Hunter take the fall" approach; in her case, she actively helped set Hunter *up* for the fall, talking him up as a great leader... knowing some people didn't feel that way, and knowing it'd go to his head, making him feel comfortable being *more* of a leader, incensing tensions... and like I said, with more losses, those tensions turn into abrasions, abrasions into fractures, and fractures into opportunity. Or so she claims—and sure enough, you can see it at one of the first Tribal Councils. (I think the very first one, in fact, but damn I guess I don't know *everything* about Marquesas offhand. [/u/m4milo](#), Tribal Council transcripts next? :P)

But setting things up so indirectly wasn't enough for her, so multiple times, Vee set up arguments by suggesting the tribe sit down, have a conversation, and air their grievances... which, spoiler, didn't make people happy or make camp more peaceful.

Through this, she's definitely being sneaky at the start of the season—and through these tense blowups, Maraamu continues to become and remain a more dynamic, argumentative, engaging tribe as their story unfolds.

But hey, *why* did I omit Vecepia from the post for so long? And how does this sneaky approach pay off for her in the long run?

*“So the smart guy will sit back and let everybody step up to be the big man, and then in the end just bank in on their mistakes.”*

...See, I may spend a lot of time hyping up this season... but if you really dig into the double meanings and long-term connections in the confessionals, *some* of the stuff I say makes sense.

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Hunter's boot is obviously the clearest selling point of early Maraamu, but it's hardly the only one. Peter stands out as one of my all-time favorite first boots; [Wendy, Zane, Francesca 1.0](#), and [██████████](#) give him strong competition as later first boots who also had fully realized storylines within a single episode, but he's still way near the top of the list. He's most easily remembered as a wacky, OTT character who told his tribe within the first couple days about the spiritual significance of all their orifices... which, okay, he should be, because haha what.

But he's still humanized a bit—like, people always talk about the “holes” part of the scene, but they always *forget* that RIGHT before that, he was laying with Sean on the raft trying to learn slang. Or as he put it, "Harlem stuff". <3 He didn't know what "chilling" meant. <3 He's from a town with a couple thousand people—I just checked the Wikipedia and as of 2000, it was 97% white—and after doing too much work around camp, he just wanted to blow off steam by laying on the raft and learning some... in his words, "Harlem stuff". (Again we see people's different individual backgrounds coming out in a Marquesas scene, and once *again* we see Maraamu members coming together in a purely character-centered scene where they bring something of their own to the table.) And... then it turns out that for Peter, "chilling" is talking about your holes. But fuck it! Dude's just into yoga. (Which, by the way, was *already* an established character trait by this point in the episode!) Good for him, I guess. He has something that works for him and it's not hurting anyone, he just... didn't really think of how it might come off and he came on a little strong, but he just wanted to share something valuable to him, and honestly, I think the whole thing's pretty endearing. <3

Patricia, meanwhile, has her own developed arc as a second boot: early on, we see that she's been a little withdrawn, and she's been worried about how she'll be perceived by the tribe as "the weak one". So in episode two she comes out of her shell more and tries to provide more... but it turns out coming out of her shell is a little much and she's a little overbearing, so that doesn't work either. So long, Patricia. I can't say I really root for *or* against Patricia while she's around... but hey, I *do* get a very clear sense of how she's perceived, why she's perceived that way, and why she's doing the things *that* make people perceive her that way. So they handle her story totally well, she's a very well-developed character, and that is honestly more than I can say for a *lot* of other ep.1-2 boots; I may not particularly root for or against her, but she's not *forgettable*. It also does a solid job setting up the subsequent Hunter blindside and paralleling with Kathy's own early arc on the other tribe, so factor in the thematic relevance to more interesting characters and I'd say Patricia's short arc actually boosts the season overall, in its own little way.

Most of Sarah's content is on this tribe, and she's yet another underrated character: at first glance, Sarah's just a joke character.... and even in that role, she works pretty well. Sean's Cleopatra confessional about her arriving is absolute *gold* and sets up her arc perfectly, Vecepia's "Sarah has a cute body... she paid a lot for it" is deadpan savagery, and she becomes really the first "cockroach" in Survivor history—the one who perpetually gets votes but doesn't go home. A lot of it's driven by SPV, but even so, I'd say she works well in this role: hearing so much about how Sarah does nothing, Sarah's just there on a vacation, Sarah flirts—cut with her laying down, flirting with Rob, etc.—gives her a clear identity in those first few episodes, and I'd argue the Hunter blindside is as impactful as it is largely because she's *such* an obvious alternative. If Sarah didn't get such a constantly unfavorable edit, the Hunter blindside would be a bit less shocking—it's not just that he goes home, but that he goes home over *her*—so her role as "the useless one" is still well-done, important to the tribe, and generally pretty comical. Her total non-justification for voting Hunter ("I wanted to do something different!") is also great,

and one of the most underrated funny moments of all time is in her boot episode: everyone else is going on a hike, Sarah's not feeling it, so she tries to go back home.... but then gets lost and turns back and lays around near them lol. She was too inept to even be lazy properly <3 bless.

Yet when you pay a little more attention to her, she's really not that bad?—and even, I'd argue, a sympathetic character. (Hear me out!) One of the strongest Maraamu dynamics—and something I came around relatively late on appreciating, even after I was a Marq fan—is Gina/Sarah. The first time you watch, since Gina/Hunter are hardworking and Sarah is... well, Sarah, it's easy to just see them as the protagonists and root for them, and against her by default. But rewatching, Gina seems a little self-righteous and cliquy? Throughout the first couple episodes, then *especially* after Hunter goes, she often speaks about Sarah and Sean with this total dismissal or even condescension. And on some level she's not wrong and it makes sense, but especially after the swap, it gets more mean-spirited.

Meanwhile, Sarah... sure, she's not the best in the outdoors, but if you go back, she never really says anything mean about anyone the entire season. She says Peter seems a little strange, but so does everyone. Past that, she's honestly pretty harmless, or even sweet; after the swap, she even remarks on how Gina/Kathy share a passion for the wilderness and so it's nice that Gina found someone to connect with! It's a connection that'll hurt Sarah's game, but she seems actively happy about it on a personal level! There's a marked contrast between that and the way Gina ever talks about *her*. Likewise, before she goes out, she says it'll be a hard vote because she feels like everyone really gets along; to Sarah, she really was a part of that post-swap tribe... meanwhile, as soon as she's not around, Gina is shit-talking her to that same new friend of Kathy and says Sarah's the "type of person" who probably doesn't have a clue it's her—like okay, Gina, Hunter went home but you're not even on that tribe anymore, Sarah didn't do anything to you, and nobody else made anything *personal*, at any rate.

It's not like Gina's some monster—she's not *wrong* about what Sarah adds to the tribe, and if the Hunter blindside is such a wild and jarring thing, of course I expect his #1 ally to react negatively—but still, looking at how comically overboard she kind of goes after the swap, and seeing how Sarah seems to still have zero ill will towards her, there's definitely more ambiguity and complexity to their arc than one might expect: Gina's better in the outdoors, so you root for her the first time, but when you really pay attention, she's honestly kind of the *less* purely likable of the two. (Plus, while Sarah's inability to explain her Hunter vote is funny... why does she have to explain anything?? She would have gone home otherwise! That's all the reason she needs!) Both are great characters and even better in conjunction with one another; I honestly find it hard to really talk about one without talking about the other, and their running quasi-feud is one of the more fun parts of the early episodes. It's built upon the very first content we get from either of them at the start—Sarah being carted in like Cleopatra while Gina clicks with survivalist Hunter—and makes both Sarah's elimination at the swap and Gina's elimination right before the merge more rewarding at the time, and both are a little more interesting on the rewatch when you rethink whether Sarah was *really* that bad.

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Because it's such a fun, interesting collection of contestants, there's a handful of fun moments scattered throughout the episodes, too, that I haven't touched on and can't really work in anywhere else but still want to mention. The Cleopatra scene is great of course—but another GREAT moment from the marooning is when Sean and Peter first hit the beach, they come together in prayer and Sean outright collapses into the water. It's a small but *beautiful* moment: back when we get the hike to camp, the arrival *means* something. Right off the bat, having that moment of accomplishment gives the season weight and emotion; it's easier to add that climax to a finale, with a giant scene of everyone's names symbolically being burned on a giant hike, but adding that climactic feeling to a *premiere* can be harder—yet showing a trek to camp ensures and reminds us that the contestants have already overcome things on day one, and it often delivers. It immediately makes the season bigger, and it gives us that attachment to the *entire* cast, collectively— that feeling that whoever goes out first isn't coming in *last*, but is coming *sixteenth* out of all the countless applicants, has already had a significant journey—that's completely absent from the show today.

But more than that, that *specific* scene immediately tells us about Peter and Sean. We see later in the episode that they have completely different backgrounds... but here, we see that they nevertheless have the same *values*. They're both deeply religious men (which comes up later in both their respective arcs—Sean screaming "I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST!" after winning the car always stands as one of the most moving moments of the season for me), they draw strength from that, so watching them come together like that... honestly, to me, the sheer emotion of it borders on beautiful. (That's right, I called a Peter Harkey moment beautiful! Fuck you!)

In a massively left-leaning fanbase that's comprised primarily of atheists and agnostics, you get a lot of people saying "I don't like when the seasons get all religious"—and I can see how the "cult" narrative of 23 rubbed people the wrong way—but the idea that seeing devout religion on *Survivor* is inherently a bad thing? Man, as Vecepia would put it, bump that. There are few things that inspire more raw, visceral emotion in people than their religion—their connection, perceived or otherwise, with some higher power—and so when I'm watching the show for people, colorful people with unique backgrounds and the interactions between them, I'm *all* for scenes like this. I mean Damphair is one of my favorite POVs in ASOIAF, after all. Almost nothing can bring out more raw, *powerful* emotion in people than those religious beliefs and connections. Whether or not you or I believe in God is frankly beside the point; these two guys do, so the emotions they feel are authentic and powerful. The display of that emotion is something I find quite moving and revealing; the openness to displaying that emotion and adhering to their beliefs, regardless of how it might come across at the start of a social game (indeed, Rob immediately brands them as the "froot loops"), admirable; and, in particular, the connection they form in that moment is beautiful: two guys who didn't know each other before this, would never have met, don't really know each other even in *this* moment, won't be on the same beach anymore in 72 hours... but nevertheless, in this moment, they come together over a

shared belief in God and a shared elation at having accomplished this massive step of their journey. It's so sincere, so passionate, and so *raw*. Anything that can bring a grown man to collapse into the water on day ONE is great television in my book. I'm finding myself wishing I had better words to describe it, but I absolutely find myself moved by and empathizing with a scene like that.

Funnily enough, the next isolated moment I wanted to mention *also* involves religion. It's one of my favorite Tribal Council answers in the show's history. Vecepia is just as religious as Sean or Peter, and as the tribe is floundering, she's asked at Tribal Council how the members should proceed—and she just nails it. She says that every individual person has to find something deep inside them that motivates them—that they have to find that something inside themselves, and that for her, it's her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ... but that for someone else, it might be the Buddha, and for someone else, it might "just be looking at the stars".

I am *in love* with that moment. Vee is a *devout* person, and there's no doubt that when she's broken down, what she falls back on is the God she believes in. So when she's asked how a failing tribe draws strength, she says very openly and proudly that that's her source... yet fully acknowledges that for other people, it might be something different. It might be another religion, or spirituality, or even no religion at all. That simultaneous affirmation of her own faith yet clear respect for all other faiths, or lack thereof—that direct acknowledgment that any number of things may play the exact same role in someone's life that her connection to Christ does for her, and that *that's okay* as long as they have *something*... I just love it.

Early *Survivor*, at its best, often brings together people from different backgrounds and studies the inevitable clashes that occur when their different values are brought to the table. Vecepia brings forth her values as openly as anyone—but instead of a clash, she simply respects the difference. It's a quick moment, an easily forgotten to a Tribal Council answer from a pre-merge episode a decade and a half old... yet it's always stuck in my mind as an all-time favorite Survivor quote. It's something I try to channel myself, and it's a glowing message of respect and tolerance from someone who's so exceptionally in touch with her own individual belief. Her beliefs may be mutually exclusive from yours—yet *that she believes them* need not be exclusive with, or even in the faintest conflict with, you believing yours. The way she words it—"just looking at the stars"—is lovely, too: it immediately paints a picture of just how and why someone may feel in touch with the island around them, and of the starry nights that all Survivors lie awake looking at. It draws me right into that island.

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The three pre-swap episodes alone are easily, *easily* enough to justify Maraamu's content as one of the strongest sets of tribal content in Survivor history, and solidify them as an ultimate

hidden gem of a tribe that's *very* at home in our endgame. Considering the subsequent arcs of Gina and Sarah, they get even better.

Now unlike a Yasur or Rotu, Maraamu *isn't* a tribe that has as much post-merge to speak of. The reason is simple: a bunch of them went home right away. Half of them are gone in the first four episodes, and two more follow in the next three episodes. At the top nine, we have *two* Maraamus left, so in terms of *long-term* content, they maybe come up a little short.

What they do have down the line, though, is Vecepia and Sean, an all-time classic *Survivor* pair. I've talked a lot about *different* contestants coming together (Hunter and Rob, Gina and Sarah, Sean and Peter)—but with Sean and Vee, we see two people who are *similar* form an early connection. Their chemistry is always A+: their connection as two Black contestants who are also very actively, mentally in touch with that identity, their shared religious views, their sense of humor, and the fact that they're two of the smartest and most insightful people in the cast all ensure that any time Vee and Sean are on screen, it's gonna be something fun. In particular, any commentary they make on connecting as African-Americans, and all the cultural references that come out of that, is absolute gold and unlike any other relationship we've seen on the show.

Their relationship is developed early on, steadily present throughout the season—then bursts back into the forefront at the final five: "A Tale of Two Cities", one of the all-time great *Survivor* episodes. If you want to know why Sean Rector is at least one of the five best casting choices in the entire history of *Survivor*, *watch this episode*. Reminder: Kathy's the swing vote, Paschal/Neleh are openly aligned, they say Vecepia/Sean are aligned, and what follows is probably the absolute best "*Survivor* the social experiment" has ever been. Throughout the entire season, Vee and Sean have had this connection... but if you pay attention, Sean's right: they're not directly *aligned*, either. Hell, as he points out, Vee's even worked against him sometimes! She immediately, seamlessly jumped in bed with the Rotu Four at the swap (the only thing stopping Vee from winning all-winners is the fact that they won't invite her back), an alliance who, you may remember, were not big fans of Sean. Then she votes with them to take out Rob... and while she votes to keep Sean at the final nine, that's only once the numbers are there; as far as we saw, she had little active hand in flipping Paschal/Neleh like Kathy did. And frankly, she probably had little interest; an active hand is not V's m.o. Point is, Sean and Vecepia were a fantastic, compelling pair of *people*... but were they a pair of *players*? Not really. I mean, what does Vee get criticized for at FTC? "Flip-flopping so many times even *she* didn't know who she was aligned with." The answer, of course, is that Vecepia was really only aligned with Vecepia; does a player who everyone agrees had no real loyalty sound like someone with a diehard allegiance to Sean? Not really.

Yet in Kathy, Paschal, and Neleh's mind, their relationship is *the exact same thing* as Paschal and Neleh literally saying "We will never vote each other out, even if it costs us the game". (Do you think Vecepia and Sean would have drawn that rock for each other? Hell no!) Sean is *especially* vocal in this episode in saying that he and Vee have only been linked for being Black.

Now, can you argue whether that's the *sole* factor? Sure; they were also the last two standing from their tribe, they'd been together since day one and they were clearly close... but ultimately, I think Sean is right. When you have him *directly saying* "I'll align with Kathy" and Paschal/Neleh saying "We'll only align with each other", and that's treated as the same, the implication is clear. And, well, you know....

Paschal: I'm just kind of fed up about hearing their crap about, you know, them not being an alliance. Kathy's, you know, she's from Vermont. I'm from Georgia. And Sean's from *Harlem*. This thing runs deeper than a game.

Kathy: They're telling me they don't have a strong bond, and yet they're both Afro-American and I know that's very important in their culture to stick together.

...Yeah. Sean was right.

He and Vee, as the two African-American contestants, had a bond they couldn't have with anyone else, and he was open about that. But that does *not* mean they'd have sacrificed a million dollars for that bond. Other people assumed that, and they stuck by that assumption despite all Sean and Vee's words (and even actions!) to the contrary. And like he said at the start, he and Vee were playing a whole "separate game" from anyone else *in addition* to the game of Survivor, having to navigate an extra set of social politics everyday for them that the other fourteen had never had to navigate in their lives.

As great as Sean/Peter or Rob vs. Hunter or Rob/Sarah or Gina vs. Sarah or Gina/Hunter ALL are (and again, just try to imagine coming up with THAT many complex relationships from a lot of the newer tribes, and *Marquesas's* greatness becomes clear) as great as all those relationships are, next time you're in Vegas placing a bet on who the most compelling Maraamu relationship of them all was... well, you know the rest.

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Maraamu may not have as much down the line as most other tribes in the endgame—and I'd say the post-merge outcome, even as it culminates in a Maraamu win, is still fundamentally a Rotu story (which is why Rotu was robbed of an endgame ranking; I'd have them even higher than Maraamu... and every other tribe in *Survivor* history, for that matter.)

Yet they're here regardless. The reason is that, while their pitiful early showing prevents them from having many *long-term* stories... it gives us a *whole* bunch of fantastic, rich, complex Maraamu content all at the start of the season. Their story is concentrated towards the start of

the season, and with how many challenges they lost, that's inevitable—and that's just fine, because Maraamu is an excellent web of satisfying resolutions, fantastic stories, and colorful moments featuring some great contestants from an all-time great cast. Maraamu absolutely deserves this honor of ranking as one of the best tribes in *Survivor* history.