

In night one the shelter hasn't been built yet, so of course you're miserable. It's not raining, but it's incredibly cold, more than you ever expected. You expected it to be cold in Iceland- ice is in the name- but you're surprised the world hasn't frozen over. It feels like the definition of misery.

There are a few people sitting next to you that you can't see in the darkness shivering near motionlessly around you. They don't make a sound, but you can feel their presence. You try and remember how they were during the day- you think you recall a strapping native who made it a point to say he lived in Alaska numerous times. An aloof bald accountant (or something) who only spoke to be condescending. An Indian woman- actual Indian, not Native- dressed to the nines in enough spectacular garb to make your gray shirt and mini skirt look stolen off of a druggie. Someone who wouldn't shut up about being a Survivor reporter and not being able to believe she was on Survivor and now could be found withholding tears and obnoxiously holding onto you for warmth as though you're the best source for it.

You try and ignore her on your shoulder but you're glad the darkness is sheathing your smirk. Good. Whoever thought this was all blindside this and idol play that is deluding themselves, and as cold as you are, someone realizing that harsh truth is warming your little black heart. Then you remember the cold and can't distract yourself anymore- the shirt is so thin and tight that it barely functions as more than toplessness prevention, and your skirt keeps riding up your legs. Too much of your skin is at the mercy of Iceland, and it has none. You're not going to cry, but you feel numb inside.

Someone's footsteps are the only audible sound, and all you can wonder is "how the hell can someone walk around in this shit" when you notice someone sit next to you. Well, notice is a light word for the feeling of immense yet temporary pressure on your legs and someone saying "oh, shit" before clumsily sitting next to you. That's the only noise you can hear, and the woman sniffing on your shoulder perks up as if she can see them, before you feel her face forward. You'd do the same if you knew it weren't useless.

A few seconds pass, but in the cold feels like literal hours- has the sun not risen yet? Then you hear a zippering and tense up, but as it's undone you feel an open, thick jacket placed on you, hanging off one shoulder. You're surprised to feel it, and you move to hand it back, a little shocked. Your neighbor feels the arm of the jacket on his hand and whispers "keep it. I'm used to this."

You do, and mumble a thanks, but you're wondering if it's Alaska guy who gave it to you. In the middle of realizing he didn't have on a jacket this thick, you go to cover up the reporter on your shoulder, who whispers too loudly "Did Kent just give you a jacket?" right in your ear. He doesn't hear, but you're so stunned you barely nod.

"Is that his name?" you choke out a few seconds later.

The reporter acts shocked. "Bro, how do you not know who Kent Richter is?"

You shrug again- her head rising with it- and finish covering the two of you up. She nuzzles against you as if it's a heating pad and she wants more. The jacket does help you go from "forcefully freezing" to "pretty damn cold" but it's an improvement. No one makes another sound and eventually you slowly, slowly, fall asleep.

When you wake up, it's barely sunrise so you can start to see people, but you immediately feel that you're no longer sporting the jacket or the reporter. Of course.

Your neighbor, apparently named Kent, is audibly asleep, and you decide not to wake him. Instead, you're the only one awake, still feeling as cold as you did last night. You huddle up inside of yourself, too cold to look around for the jacket, too used to feeling alone, and wait for the sun to rise. Even when the others wake, you're the last to get up.

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"I just had a revelation," you say. "I think I'm lucky because it takes people three weeks to get this clarity. That I'm out here for everyone but myself."

You tell this to the confessional camera when it's your turn. It's been your first and best friend since you got here, because a lot of what you think isn't casual conversation. *Hi, I'm Talia and I'm having an existential crisis, how are you?* Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration, but you're used to keep things close to the vest. In fact, it's only you realizing you were cast to be a character that you're saying this at all.

"I'm doing this for my boyfriend," you list, each new person a new finger. "to show that I *am* strong enough to survive on nothing, *thank you very much.*"

"For my sister- she's one of those superfans who implored me to apply." You add derisively "because apparently she couldn't for some reason.

"For the memory of my father, because..." You don't choke up, but you barely choke it out. "You know, he deserves some sort of legacy to his name. He spent his life waiting tables for ungrateful people and baking the Shabbat bread on his days off. He deserves this.

"For the very idea that, you know, I'm a tiny little jewelry designer. I'm 5'2" and weigh like one-twenty soaking wet. Everyone sees me and thinks I couldn't do anything but assemble diamond rings and that I have to camp out in, like, a full RV."

You finish "And when I lay it all out like that, my reasons to want to win are all to make other people appreciate me more, whether they're dead, alive, or hypothetical. None of those reasons feel like they're for me."

You want to say you leave this in confessional, but all of this buzzes in your head when you're at camp with the others. It's only day two, and you try not to let doubt cripple you and instead focus on the freezing daytime cold like that's any better. The other tribesmates are assembling everyone's shelter- you helped build the pieces with a few of the faces you haven't quite put names to, but at least one familiar one (which you apparently should have known by now).

You reckon these are names you should learn if you want to stand a fighting chance but you can't imagine you're the immediate target. Despite your waifish form and city slicker mind, you're pretty sure you managed to dodge the bullet that has hit many a woman like you- to be instantly taken as weak and slated to leave- but you still feel miles away from winning.

"And a one, and a two, and..."

The familiar voice you heard last night sounds clearer in the light of day. You remember that your sister made you watch a season a few months back with her. You were only half-paying attention, but you remember a strapping, fifty-something black mountain hiker named Kent winning it- not enough for you to remember him in person but at least you know where he's from (although with Survivor reporter being stunned at your not knowing him, you should have guessed). You've seen past players join with new, starstruck ones, and you can't count yourself as one, but before you can go back to forgetting him, the shelter finalizes assembly. With all the logs and rocks and shrubbery that make up your shelter from the storm, it doesn't look like home- a fine mess, maybe- but it's somewhere to sleep.

Shortly afterward, the Indian woman from before takes a careful seat in it. "Not spectacular," she confirms, "but quite cozy." Very shortly after, she lies down. Next is the reporter, whose short red hair flies up and dramatically down over her eyes as she leaps onto the logs, almost breaking hours of work. Everyone who worked on the shelter takes a much gentler seat in the shelter, except for the Alaskan who works on straightening the shelter in a way you still aren't sure isn't just showing off.

There's five people total in there- the Indian lady, the reporter, a spunky young firefighter you recall taking up too much unnecessary construction time, a light skinned black man in a Priest's Coat, and Kent, who beckons you in there, wearing his coat again. You've debated restaurant choices with your boyfriend so you'll never get caught in a you-go-first type of loop again, and sit near him. In the distance you see a form standing by a tree, but there's something surprisingly massive on her arm that she holds up like a pro.

Kent chuckles and says "that's Manaia for ya. I didn't know there were animals out here but leave it to her!" You jog down her name on a mental notepad but you don't even have her face to it- you wonder if she's always excluded herself. You try and get a sense of everyone's looks and you're about to ask for names (since using "the Indian girl" is starting to make you feel uncomfortable) when the reporter does what she does best- interrupts your thoughts.

“Hey, the hell is Fischer at?”

A few people look around to see where he is. You do too, but only to rule out the faces that *aren't* Fischer. By power of deduction it seems to be the condescending accountant. You wonder why he's not around but judging by his murmuring it can't be good. Suddenly reaching day six seems even more possible. You hear the word “idol” and someone responds “on day two?” but you're not a hundred on what they mean so you don't pay much attention.

Besides, all you can remember of him is talking to you like you didn't have a clue on living in the wild. You've already got enough self-doubt as it is.

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You celebrate winning the challenge with the rest of the tribe, but you can't remember it too well, such was the blur of the challenge. All you can remember is Fischer the accountant trying to tell you how to do simple instructions. Maybe you can't light a fire the best or lift thirty pounds across a field, but a puzzle is not hard. Besides, there were two people on it; maybe he should have tried helping with it rather than treating you like the moron for actually putting in the legwork.

Still, as the host gives the Alaskan the immunity trinket, you golf-clap politely. He also announces that for winning, you will receive fire in the form of flint. You grin a little because even though fire in the form of matches would be better, you'll take it. There's a lot of celebration heading back to camp- cheers, high-fives, and the firefighter pumps his fist. You hope that even as you don't join it no one notices.

At camp the Alaskan takes the flint and goes to start a fire before there's anything to burn in the clumsily made fire pit, and the firefighter follows. The reporter goes to say something, but finds herself at a merciful loss of words. Sighing, Kent rolls up nearby rocks towards the fire pit, and shortly after the priest follows. The firefighter is looking for the machete when the Alaskan says “Kent, Johnny-”

“Johnell,” the priest corrects in the kindest tone he can manage.

“Don't do that,” the firefighter says, as he accepts the machete for the flint and begins striking.

Johnell the priest doesn't know what to say, but Kent is authoritative in his stead. “We need to keep everyone safe first and foremost, then worry about the fire.”

“Listen,” the firefighter speaks up, out of nowhere. “I know fires. I know what gets them in and what gets them out. This one probably won't get them out.”

Great. Another person who has to let the world know what he specializes in and all he can give is a “probably”.

“It won’t take much work,” Kent insists. “Just some scrounging and some shieldwork.”

“I’d rather not have the others stay in the cold for much longer,” the Alaskan replies.

“I’m just saying, Hoss, I’d rather do it right later than do it wrong now,” Kent explains in a way that he probably doesn’t get sounds condescending. “I think they can handle the cold for a few minutes.”

“Yeah, sure,” the firefighter snaps, but looks away to pretend he doesn’t care. “Like your friends?”

Before you can even get why that means anything, the reporter is already on her feet and in his face. “You wanna say that again, Regan?” she volleys. “You wanna fucking say that again? I don’t think we all heard you be a horrible little shit. You fucker!”

“Sit down, Sally,” Hoss the Alaskan demands her, but it’s clear from the pained expression on his face that he’s hiding some hurt.

“No!” Sally the reporter screams back, and continues ranting at Regan the firefighter, where all he can do is try and argue back about the fire like she isn’t scaring him shitless. Johnell calls for them to stop as loudly as a morose man can, tears pricking his eyes. Kent pays them all no mind, but you can tell he’s dejected, and with the fight as the distraction that even other surroundings are watching, you decide to follow him.

It doesn’t take long to find him, but perhaps because you don’t know about the situation, you don’t mention it. You find him picking up some handwidth stones, enough to start placing them in his many jacket pockets. You don’t address it, because you can tell he’s just barely forcing a smile, so instead you help him. With no fanfare, you remove your shirt (knowing you’re wearing a sports bra underneath) and look for stones to help him. You can only hold a few stones and a couple of sticks in your shirt even using it like a bag, but it’s not just for the fire. It’s to let him know that wherever he stands, he won’t stand alone.

He looks at you with a smile, but you can see the concern in his eyes, that goes far past concern over fire sparks and heavy stones. You don’t address it, because you can tell he doesn’t want to talk about anything. This isn’t a learning lesson, after all, because the information you get could differ from the people with it.

On the way back to camp, you say “thanks for the jacket.” Finally Kent grins but says nothing, and that works for you. At the shelter, there’s no more arguing, but groups have been made. Sally is gone, and Regan is still watching Hoss scraping the flint against the machete to no

avail. Coyly, you dump your single-digit amount of stones next to the fire pit and organize a quarter of the wall. Regan notices, and you dare him to say anything with an emasculating, toothy grin.

Kent fixes the other side of the wall and, next to someone you can't see, Johnell lifts himself up to work on it as well. The fire pit comes together before the fire does, and you were only marginally cold before it. You stand up and wait for the fire to start, not taking your eyes off of Regan, because you like the idea of intimidating others.

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You realize on day four you hate being out of the loop when someone named Eavon was voted out at last tribal council and you're the only one not expressing shock at it. Sally is quick to explain that she was a *star* in Norway, which is nice, but it doesn't mean anything to you in Iceland where you don't see any celebrity for her. It takes you absently making eye contact with Kent to realize she meant Eavon was a former contestant in a season called Norway. You wonder if she won too, and it makes you wonder if it'd be that easy to vote out Kent. You'd miss him, but fear that he'd be far too easy to vote out.

The challenge is to, in the nearby ocean, face off one-on-one against another tribesmate in a "sumo match" in a two-out-of-three match. Padded bags equipped with handles rest on a large stand above a near-frozen sea you make it a point not to touch. Sally cheers when she sees it, and that's before the host yanks the drapery off of the reward with flair that suggests that he's done this before. The empty space reveals a tarp and some winter jackets. Everyone else has a big reaction and you realize those could keep you warmer and out of the rain, so that's nice.

Sally immediately screams and cheers over it and you smile a little too until you picture yourself in nothing but your swimsuit and your fighting wire frame getting launched by some linebacker, right into the same hypothermia-inducing water you want no part of. A woman... (right? You could be wrong?) with green hair and a tattoo on her face gives you the world's most comically evil sneer, but it's not like you needed any help fearing this challenge.

Your tribe is told to sit someone out, presumably for even numbers. Your first instinct is to volunteer, but just as you open your mouth, you're fearful of being *that person*. The millstone, the princess who refuses to try anything that gets her nails dirty. Everything everyone at home thinks you are.

Thankfully, the host says it has to be a man, and everyone decides on the accountant, Fischer. You're fine with this, but not as fine as he, as he goes to the sitout bench at a foolishly leisurely pace, comfortable at not working.

As the challenge goes on, you start to pay attention to some of the other tribesmates that go before you. They're gendered matches, which helps you cross off the women you have to face.

Hoss from Alaska goes up against an older surfer dude looking guy with gray hair down to his shoulders and demolishes him easily.

Next, a dark-skinned woman you don't quite recognize tells someone decidedly not on your tribe "come on, come on!" in a gleeful Kiwi accent that sounds happier than it is. The other woman, a ponytailed redhead who already looks like she spent four days exclusively in the dirt, fights like a bull moose and pushes her into the water in less than ten seconds. You hate to admit it, but you're impressed. An already sweating Hoss looks at the enemy tribesmate with a look not unlike hunger, enough so to give you the creeps.

Next match starts, and it's Johnell up against a rough-and-tumble white man in messy plainclothes aside from a scarf around his neck that is far too nice to match. Johnell's opponent seems a bit too hesitant to fight him, so despite having very few skills to fight, Johnell manages to eke out a win. It's not a win that makes the crowd go wild, but it's a win.

Sally goes up against potentially the oldest castmate- a black woman in her sixties who is barely twice the height of her width. Still, she's up there smiling, daring Sally to hit her. She doesn't look quite zen, but she looks expectant. Donovan calls them to face off, (teaching you that the black woman's name is Edna) and Sally goes all in, pushing on her opponent's knees. Edna doesn't react beyond a little stumbling, staying on her feet. You're surprisingly rapt with attention, watching Sally play dirty but get nowhere substantial. Finally, Edna has had enough and, seeing Sally empty her energy tank so quickly, makes one mighty push to launch her off of the podium and into the water.

Edna's tribe cheers her, and against your better judgment, you do too. Sally is in the water crawling out and Regan makes it a point to say "how did you lose to HER?!" Hoss the Alaskan is looking at you with a look that screams "intrigued"- quotation marks and all- sending electric shocks up your spine. Johnell walks closer, as if to keep things from escalating, and says "excited?"

You just nod. "It means I have hope."

Johnell chuckles and admits "yeah, Edna did really well." Hoss takes his eyes off of you but the tension from his gaze lingers.

The score is tied at two. Next up is Kent, who is facing off against a tall, thin white man in pervasive, withering silver makeup that, in retrospect, it's very odd that you've only now noticed. Seeing the two together, it doesn't take Kent pushing his opponent to his knees and shoving him in the ocean so hard that it knocks glitter off his pants to realize that the men on your tribe are incredibly stacked.

It's your turn next, and the one with green hair grins as they step up to volunteer. The fact that you have to look up to make eye contact with them is itself unnerving. They're still grinning

toothily, seeming to revel in the idea of you fearing them. Logically, however, you fear the freezing cold water three feet beneath you- it's just that you know that she would shuttle you there, express route, without a stop for coffee.

You hear your name and their name- Kaz. Great. Even their name reminds you of the Tazmanian Devil. Kaz's tribe roots for them and you hear a few people root for you halfheartedly, not exactly inspiring confidence from you. Donovan counts it down, and you hold the mat, working out the cricks in your neck. For some reason, Kaz laughs.

It starts, and it isn't close.

To your credit, you try. You push at their chest but they knock you over. You hit the floor of the podium and try and swipe at their legs, but it's useless as Kaz pushes you off with ease, like taking out the trash. You hit the water sideways, scrambling to the surface, just in time to see them laughing. The other tribe cheers and hollers like they already won the damn thing, but go figure, you feel like a loser regardless.