

game theory

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by Anonymous

Summary

The prisoner's dilemma is a standard thought experiment analyzed in game theory challenging two people; cooperate with your partner for mutual reward, or betray your partner for an individual reward.

or: Your name is Reddoons. In a submerged world—in a box in the sky—an entity asks you whether you trust your partner.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Split or steal, he calls it, presents them with the option like it's an inconvenience to even offer in the first place. He has a name. You don't remember it, much like how you don't remember how you got here or why he seems to know your fears.

But you know Ash the same way you know how your spine feels—something you can't quite see, map out with your eyes, but *know* the sensation of under your fingers, grooves fitting into place. Steady, constant pressure that you don't think twice about until the floor is swept out from under you—betrayals, whether he means it or not—and your back hits the table, carpet, whatever. All just fancy words to say that you barely give a thought to Ash being the imposter up until it's just the two of you in a box in a sky with nowhere else to go.

An entity with a face upside-down, forever smiling, asks you to choose.

Split or steal. Friend or foe?

The obvious, easy answer is to steal. You have no assurance Ash will keep to his word and *split* — neither does he. With your voice stolen— *just borrowing it for a minute*, the entity had laughed, amused and thoughtlessly cruel in the way cosmic beings tend to be—there's nothing you could say to try and convince him. All your charisma was nothing if you couldn't even communicate with him outside of vague gestures.

Ash does a weird motion involving his eyebrows and his whole face really, that could've meant anything from *I'm bored let's blow this place up* to *what are you choosing? What will you choose?*

If both of you chose to steal, it was a lose-lose situation. There was nothing to be gained, nothing to allow any further progress. By that logic, you should split. *But*— on the chance that for whatever reason Ash had chosen to steal while you chose to split, he'd grab all the winnings and run, leaving you to tumble out of the box and into the depths of the ocean, straight into the maws of the angler-fish.

The timer keeps ticking. You need to make a choice.

It's easy to call Ash your partner and keep people guessing—in romance? Business? Crimes? Did it even matter, when you would go to the end of the worlds for him if he would just put aside his pride to pull the words out of his mouth and *ask?*

Heedless of whichever world you were in, some nights you'd find him in your base. Ash sleeps there, which is a marvel in itself, sprawled on your sheets like it belongs to him—like *he* belongs there, lightning barely constrained into human form, utterly breathtaking in dim light even when wearing sleep-clothes that have little cartoon dinosaurs printed on them.

Once you'd woken up before him, roughly an hour before you were both due to show up at a tournament. He's always been a deep sleeper, and it's not anything you're unfamiliar with but you'd reached out anyway to marvel at the sensation, something aching soft taking root in your lungs.

It had been a silly idea. There had been a dozen different other things you could attempt at least but you've never claimed to be very smart. You cut off your sleeve in lieu of waking him, and later when he'd shown up he'd laughed at you but tore his own sleeve off—the opposite one, threads fraying and catching the light like gossamer— *in solidarity. Because you look like an idiot like that.*

It hadn't stopped you from grinning at him, helplessly loopy and too fond for such a public setting.

Ash had turned away to fiddle with something that was affecting his connection to the world. You hadn't been able to see his face, but you knew him enough to tell that he was smiling too.

You *know* him. *Split or steal*. It should be an easy decision to make.

In the best case scenario the both of you would choose to split. But you don't know whether he would. You *can't* know, not until the votes are in and taking a gamble like that would be more or less the same as taking all your armor off and placing a knife into his hands.

Ash puts in his response, bouncing back on his heels with an energy that belies the tension in his posture. The entity is still watching you. He does not blink.

Split or steal?

Loyalty to one's partner is, in this game, irrational. But in the same way you'd made the irrational choice to cut off your sleeve, it takes less than a second to write *split* and place the paper into the chest.

Your hands don't waver. You meet Ash's eyes from across the room and even before the entity brings out the papers to read the responses, you already know you've won.

End Notes

video referenced: [One Of Them Is Lying](#)
cut-sleeve segment inspired by this [tumblr post](#)

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