

On the Volatility of Sinners

CHARACTERS:

SARAH, or NUMBER 32: Gaunt, haggard, young but looks old

PETE, or NUMBER 47: Sleep deprived, reclusive, afraid and ashamed

DAVE, or NUMBER 23: Looks upright and bright but very selfish

JOHN, or NUMBER 18: Boastful, arrogant, forceful

SPEAKER: The conductor of the experiment

Four people stand in four corners of a blank, white room. Each person is assigned a small white desk, an ordinary white chair, a number engraved on their plain white clothes, and finally a small, closed and seemingly empty bottle.

NUMBER 32 [*distastefully*]: Why did we choose to be here? This whole thing is stupid! They better give us the million dollars they promised.

NUMBER 18 [*Scoffs at her despair*]: I assume you meant: why did you choose to be here, and they better give you money? If you aren't some angel, why would you care about the rest of us?

NUMBER 47: Shame on you! We have only been together for a minute or two, yet we are already fighting over trivial matters like children! [*Turns red when 32 and 18 glare at him, and*

backs away deep into his corner] P-p-pardon me, good sir and madam. I just wished to suggest a more friendlier beginning so that—

NUMBER 23: Everyone, settle down! Number 47 is absolutely right; we should stick together. Now, shall we introduce ourselves with our proper names instead of dehumanizing numbers? [*Everyone falls silent*] Fine, I'll go first. My name is Dave, and I hope we all get along.

NUMBER 32 [*sharply*]: I'm Sarah. Moving on.

NUMBER 18 [*curtly*]: I expect you all to call me Mr. John, not John or number 18.

SARAH [*irritably*]: As if you're the boss around here, *number 18!*

DAVE: Be quiet! Let 47 introduce himself.

NUMBER 47 [*nervously cowers under JOHN's glare*]: I-I'm Pete. Nice to meet you all...

JOHN: Dave mentioned something about a challenge we have to face. I can't believe I'm asking you idiots for any valuable answers, but does anyone know what this challenge— [*A speaker nobody noticed before crackles to life*]

SPEAKER: Welcome, participants. Assuming you all applied to be part of this experiment because you are desperate for the promised million dollars [*everyone averts their gazes*

shamefully], I will explain in further detail if you all consent to participate. If you do not want to take risks, now is the time to turn back and lose your chance of striking the jackpot.

JOHN [*toughly*]: Anything for the million.

SARAH [*skeptically*]: It's probably fake anyway.

DAVE: 'course yes! [*threateningly eyes PETE, who is hesitant*] You better stick around with us too, Pete.

PETE [*reluctantly*]: Fine. I'm in.

DAVE [*to the speaker*]: As the leader of our group, I assure you that all of us are going to continue.

JOHN [*bangs his fist on the table, enraged*]: Who said anything about you being a leader? We ought to vote! And if anyone is president here, I insist on being the top candidate! [*Turns toward SARAH and PETE*] Don't you two see? That number 23 might seem to be all smiles and sympathy, but now it's as clear as daylight that he's a complete, power-hungry fraud!

DAVE [*calmly*]: I think you're rather reflecting on yourself, Mr. John. And even that's beside the point here; all I was trying to do was make our final decisions heard to the speaker, since nobody

else did! Ms. Sarah and Mr. Pete, do you see anything wrong with this? [*A tense moment passes as everyone looks accusingly at each other*].

SPEAKER: May I continue?

JOHN [*grumbles*]: Says who?

SPEAKER [*ignoring JOHN*]: There aren't any strict, mandatory rules here. But I do have some advice and information to give you. First, there's the little clear vial on the table that you have noticed. [*Everyone uncomfortably stares at the small bottles placed on their desks*] One of you has a bottle with an invisible gas that will toggle a siren that will immediately eliminate everyone besides the holder from this challenge, and you will each have to pay the prize money of a million dollars to them. [*Everyone's faces shine with excitement and impatience*] However, if someone without the special bottle opens theirs and discovers that it does not have the gas, they must choose someone to give away their prize money to. You will be confined to this room until the siren is activated. And while most of you may be considering not opening your bottles and waiting for others to take initiative, if nobody opens their vial within thirty minutes, one person will randomly be eliminated. You may begin... and best of luck. [*Static noise fills the room then fades out, leaving the participants in blank silence.*]

SARAH [*laughs while eyeing everyone suspiciously*]: This must be a scam. This bottle looks lighter than all the temptations and sins in this room combined. Does anyone volunteer to either win or take one for the team?

JOHN [*sharply*]: Funny how you're asking everyone but yourself to volunteer. If only one of us has the winning vial, chances of you losing is 75%, if we don't count the possible random elimination that would complicate things.

SARAH [*sighs*]: I suppose so. But what else is there for each one of us to do? Risk our lives on a small chance by opening it? Or likewise by not? [*With a hollow laugh*] How cruel it is! Whatever you do, it's the same risk. I'd rather just get it over with... haha, I never thought I'd be the first person to open it... but here it goes... [*Nobody says anything. Everyone shrinks into their corner as SARAH grips her bottle nervously.*]

DAVE: Now all there is to do is wait for the siren... [*sarcastically eyes SARAH*] that is, if Ms. Sarah is the holder of the bottle. If not... Well, we'll see.

[*SARAH opens the bottle and everyone anxiously waits for the siren. After a minute of silence, the speaker crackles to life.*]

SPEAKER: Number 32, you unfortunately opened an empty bottle. You are eliminated, and you must now choose which contestant you would like to bequeath your prize money of a million dollars. You have five minutes to make your final decision.

SARAH [*laughs maniacally*]: Ha! So here goes my only shot at life... and to whom shall I pass it on to? [*Nobody says anything and everyone is dumbfounded by the quick elimination.*]

DAVE [*haughtily*]: I say I deserve it the most. I bet you anything John will try to do something malicious with the money, and what use does timid little Pete have for it? I will use it on... [*with a twisted grin*] ...charity.

SARAH [*sourly*]: And how will I trust you?

DAVE: [*Acting surprised*]Do you really trust them over me? And look, they're not even asking for money!

SARAH: I'm just leaving. Let the speaker randomly decide. [*A door they never noticed before opens and SARAH leaves.*]

SPEAKER: As number 32 wishes, the owner of her prize money will go to a random contestant... which is... number 47! Congratulations. Now you have two million dollars at stake. While one million will be automatically yours, the other half will be part of the game. [*Static fizzes off*]

DAVE: Ha... I told you, it's rigged! Now, Pete, tell me: you rigged it, didn't you? [*Menacingly approaches PETE, who has become eerily calm*]

JOHN: Hey now, will you calm down? We're all here with the same purpose, and nothing is fair but we want a shot at the money anyway. Pete has nothing to do with the randomizing. Thinking

about it, if you, Dave, got Sarah's prize, you also would have denied that you rigged it if we accused you. Hmm? [*JOHN flushes red with anger and glances at PETE for support, but receives a strange, concealing look from PETE.*]

PETE [*reclaiming his innocent, timid expression*]: Ah, yes, of course. Thank you Mr. John...

JOHN [*tries to ignore the building suspicion*]: Anyway, we mustn't fall off track. We all are one against the speaker.

DAVE [*suddenly looks very uncertain*]: Pete... I regret saying that you rigged it. Don't mess things up from here on, okay? [*Glances nervously at JOHN, who also noticed the change in PETE*] ... We're one team.

JOHN: Right. Now who's next? [*A long silence in which DAVE stares deeply at PETE, who has a small smile across his face*] I say Pete should open his bottle. He already has the million dollars from Sarah on him, so even if he doesn't get the bottle he'll still leave with a fortune.

DAVE: I agree. By all means, Pete, it's all up to you.

PETE [*now openly smiles*]: My pleasure. [*A tense moment as he unscrews the lid of his bottle. Everyone nervously watches the siren, but nothing happens. The smile slips off PETE's face*] No... it can't be. [*Turns wildly to JOHN and DAVE, who look triumphant*] Just... wait! Wait! The siren will sound!

SPEAKER [after letting the silence sink in]: The siren has not rung. Unfortunately, contestant number 47 has been eliminated. Please choose which player to bequeath—

PETE [*hysterically*]: I deny it. I deny it! I DENY IT! [*Crumples to floor, clutching his bottle*]

DAVE [*arrogantly looking down at PETE*]: The speaker has eliminated you. Get out. Or else. [*PETE, who is unconscious, is dragged out the door by masked figures and the door quietly clicks shut. DAVE and JOHN face each other with an oddly calm demeanor*]

JOHN: So, this is it. Just you and me. Waiting to claim the prize. Waiting for the speaker to give the money to someone. And it's either one of us gets all the prize money or we all leave with nothing. Haha! I love this cruel game... I love it...

DAVE [*smirking*]: It may be better for both of us if you don't turn into a lunatic... *this early*. Now let's get on with the game. I assume we aren't on very friendly terms now? [*JOHN, infuriated, grips his bottle tightly*]

JOHN: Yes. It's one on one. [*The SPEAKER crackles to life once more*]

SPEAKER: So, we have our final two, eh? Well, I take it that number 47 took a million and left another million to give to one of you. And that lucky man is... number 18! [*The Speaker dies down, leaving the white room in empty silence.*]

DAVE [*calmly*]: So it is, my friend. I recall how you had suggested to Mr. Pete to open his bottle when he already had the million dollars to himself? I say you should follow the principles you gave life to.

JOHN [*turns white from anger and fear*]: I made those principles, so I have the right to destroy them, don't I?

DAVE: It doesn't really matter now. You already have a fortune no matter what, even if your bottle isn't the chosen one. And nothing will change about the results since the winner is already decided by whoever created this system— there is no difference between who opens it first. So why don't you stick to your little tradition and open yours?

JOHN [*hesitatingly*]: You are quite convincing, 23. I shall open mine. May the fates decide...
[*takes the lid off the bottle and both wait with a terrifying calmness, but nothing happens*]

SPEAKER: The siren has not rung. Unfortunately, contestant number 18 has been eliminated. Since number 23 is the only other person in this game, he will receive your million dollars. But you will keep the other million to yourself. [*The SPEAKER does not turn off but is silent, as JOHN and DAVE look at each other*]

JOHN [*wearily*]: Funny. We're equal, I suppose, and we both have fortunes at hand. Tough luck for poor Sarah...

DAVE [*with an empty laugh*]: You've changed. You're taking pity on someone since you could have been that person but you're not. [*Glances at the SPEAKER with a wry smile*] I think the speaker has more to say.

SPEAKER: Ah, yes! I forgot to tell everyone in the beginning; the last person to be eliminated is the winner of this psychological experiment, and only the winner has the true million dollars. So congratulations, number 23! You leave with a fortune thanks to your luck.

JOHN [*hollowly*]: You knew the whole time, didn't you? [*SPEAKER clicks shut and DAVE looks at JOHN with an indescribable expression on his face.*]

DAVE: Of course.

FINIS