

hand grips hand

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Summary

"*Last round, boys.*" Boosfer's voice sounds, as always, stage-calm.

Ashswag and Reddoons play a game of Split or Steal. Boosfer, unknowingly, plays a game that cannot be won.

Notes

hi if you're here for lifesteal [Watch This Video](#). literally has all the context you need

Anyway. hyperventilating, chanting "why did it have to be swagdoons" five thousand times in a row. boosfer made me watch 240p golden balls videos by putting two bad bitches against each other in a game of trust

shoutout to [game theory](#) which i still haven't read bc i Don't Want to be Influenced before i finish this but hey. glad someone's battling the same demons

title from breezblocks; that and chirp the disk were the only songs i looped while writing this

The hair's sticky on his face, on Rek's, on Ash's as Rek sags down. Ash just stares — there's red on his face too now, and the lightning striking behind them into the ocean lights his silhouette on fire, catching Red's eyes, making him *not* look at Rekrap on his knees, the handle of the trident dragging out to somewhere past the corner of his vision.

Rek makes a gurgling noise and starts to fall to the side. His eyes are impossibly clear, light, like he knows what he's doing for once.

Red doesn't get to see how he dies, however, it feels like enough already. Before Rek's body hits the ground, the ground is swiped instead from under their feet.

Red hears a clapping noise and turns slowly, carefully. It's dark in here, this new scene, and he's been used to it with the ocean, even if the sensation *bugs*. He's been thinking he's not *sure* if Boosfer told the contestant he picked out if they'll be exploring their fear. He has to remind himself he didn't mention being claustrophobic back then. That doesn't help, because the fear is always irrational.

Rek isn't there anymore, no trace, and Red's suit feels smooth and soft to the touch like it's not been rained on — to be fair, same as it was after he got dunked in the ocean and transported into a voting room.

"*Last round, boys.*" Boosfer's voice sounds, as always, stage-calm.

A light turns on with too loud of a click, clean white to the side of Red, making a circle around Boosfer as he turns around. His clothes look... different, somehow, darker, but Red doesn't care enough to figure out when the dark's biting at both of them.

"Rek, fuck." That dark chokes, and Red won't say he expected to be alone here, save for Boosfer, who's now silently adjusting the mask over his mouth, waiting for something or thinking on something, he doesn't know, but it's good. It gives a fake feeling of safety, where Red needs to remember in the crowd there's always that one enemy, ...*enemy*? Always that person who's secretly working with Boosfer, who's in on the experiment.

The room's slowly starting to turn from dark to dusk, and he can catch Ash's figure again in it, gripping his elbows. He turns at Red as soon as he seems to see him, and his hands go limp, brushing the blood that's already not there off his jacket.

"So we're the last ones." Red mutters.

"*Interesting matchup, indeed.*"

He doesn't look at Boosfer anymore, and has to fight off the slight goosebumps on his skin, because by Ash's shoulder on the lighting up stage it *looks* like Rek, for a moment, again, in a mess of more bodies.

"That was pretty gruesome." Ash mutters, then shakes his head. "Better off, I.. I guess."

Red finally figures what the background for this one is and chews on his lip not to make a noise, just points a finger. "Hey, don't'cha..."

Ash jerks an eyebrow, looks. Almost *jumps* back, to Red's side, dropping a quiet swear. "...that's kinda... yeah. Sure." A couple dozen empty faces stare back at them from the spectator seats. Red

can guess which ones of them are supposed to be Rek, or the rarer few bland grey in cyan sweaters, a Branzly next to a black spot in the back row. Overwhelming amount of shapes that are full dark blue, which look cheap and almost completely impersonal without the eyes or mouth.

"Don't *pay attention to the props*." Boosfer presses, and some smaller and more spread out light brights up the center of the room, drawing in his attention, *away* from the figures that aren't really people at all, to the table, ridged, details worth admiring way more. He feels like they might be staying here for a while.

"I was gonna say they're not very *good*, but if you insist." Red drops a cackle and feels like he's gonna get two rounds of *shut up* back, but both his companions don't seem in the mood.

"*One last thing...*"

"Yeah, one thing." Ash steps closer to the table when he's already at it, leaning on it. "You're not giving us breathing space this time? Me and Reddoons want to chat things out. Right, Red?"

Red shrugs. "Let's say we do. The arena with Rek in it wasn't exactly... the best place, you know what I mean." He thinks Ash snorts, stressed, but he also knows well Ash isn't actually scared, nothing of the sort. Hell, this should be just in Ash's style.

"*Sorry about that, he chose that himself. I did offer an honest matchup to the death.*"

"Wouldn't really work." Ash mutters again, but shakes his head when Boosfer prompts him to speak it up. "Doesn't matter, we're here now, we need our breathing space."

Boosfer drums his fingers on the table, and Red thinks what slides out of it is some kinda... *tubes*? Really? This looks more thought out than some of the other spots they had to fight in, more... modern, he'll say. "*There's just the two of you, I think you can work it out right here.*"

"Did something glitch in again?" Ash asks lazily. If it did, Red would *know* who to blame for that one.

Boosfer huffs and goes on at Ash, and Red doesn't care if that rant drags on, as long as he's distracted enough for him to poke at Ash, maybe ask something and *even*, if luck's just that on his side today, get an inconsistent, tentative *yes* to the question of whether or not Ash *is it*.

Ash seems too busy trying to argue when he does, so he just has to settle for talking over both of them. "So, Ash, *are* you the imposter or not?" He asks chilly, tugging at the lapels of Ash's suit. Ash jerks his head to look with a slightly blurry look.

"What? Oh. Uh. Yeah? What?"

Boosfer wheezes, claps a couple times to try and get their attention, and then continues, still cackling. "*And this is where we start, Ashswag, Red... doons, welcome to the game of Split or Steal.*" He gestures wide, pointing at both chairs same time, expecting them to sit. Ash's already almost there.

Red squints. "Wait, wait, is this a... it *is* a prisoner's dilemma thing? Boosfer, *do* you know about the prisoner's dilemma?" He settles into his chair comfortably, leans back.

Ash runs a finger over the plastic tubes, then tries to shake them, unsuccessfully. Boosfer looks, unimpressed.

"Oh my *god*, hold up." Ash mumbles. "Split and steal *hearts*? He got us there."

Boosfer tries again. "*This is a game of Split or Steal. While it is an iteration of a problem you, Reddoons, evidently know as the prisoner's dilemma...*" He jerks his hands.

Red mutters a *yes!* into his fist.

"*What you each have is a set of two balls.*"

Boosfer's hands blur, and it's hard to see if he has four or just the two that move weirdly, at some kind of tilt or speed that makes them look *wrong*.

He puts down the four gold balls at the same time.

Oh, that's what the tubes were for.

"*And what you are going to be deciding is...*" Boosfer has a voice that's up there now almost *triumphant*, like he found his footing after anything they've thrown at him, him and Ash and Rek and all of their friends except that *one* person who didn't. "*...if you are guilty.*"

"Isn't that just... meaningless?"

Ash picks up a ball, turns it over in his hand.

"*Don't show the opponent what the ball says.*" Boosfer says quickly. "*You wouldn't want that. And what? It makes complete sense.*"

"If the person knows it's not them, what option do they... ah, your guy could be voted out for all we know." Ash cringes. "Didn't... didn't think of that one."

Boosfer leans in, and Red thinks he can see the split of the mouth on his forehead form a toothy grin. He forces himself to turn his head to Ash.

"*How it works, is you have two balls. One that says... they were used to figure what contestant a prize goes to, so, whatever, it is your chance of survival. Your set of hearts. Your... your trust.*"

Red stares.

"*If you get betrayed, you are banned, and you lose.*" Boosfer murmurs.

Isn't that a familiar notion.

"*You are voted off, essentially as the other players.*"

Red carefully takes one of the gold spheres, opens it. It reads, *Steal*, gold letters on red. On the other side, Ash puts his down with a clack.

"It is steal for Lifesteal. It doesn't make sense otherwise." Ash lets them know, helpfully.

Boosfer's teeth click, somewhere.

"*What I am trying to say is, if both of you steal from each other, you both go. If one of you steals, the other goes. If you both split... well, then who knows, maybe the imposter will stay winning.*" Boosfer walks side to side of the table. There's a smile back in his voice. "*And what I like about this twist, right. You're not the one who decides your... fate. But don't mind that, don't. Just think. Do you trust him?*" He stills in the middle, turns so he's not looking at either in particular. "*I'm giving you a moment to talk, now.*"

Ash drops both hands on the gold.

"And now we try to figure out what this..." He clearly bites down an insult. "...*means*."

"Haven't *you* heard of the prisoner's dilemma, Ashswag?" Red tilts his head. "I can explain, if you'd like."

"I'll imagine, thanks." Ash sighs. "What I can't get is *how* this helps at all. This is just a game of..."

"*Helping figure out the imposter*." Boosfer drops.

"*Yeah!* Yeah, *how* does that help figure out... how does *winning* a game like this, how does cooperating or not cooperating and sending *him*..." He bites his lip. "*Off*, help figure out the fucking imposter here?"

Boosfer rolls his eyes. "*It's a game like any other*."

"I think there's something you're not saying." Ash snaps.

"*How is it any different from spleef, from cutting logs? At the end, you're voting for the person you think needs to be gone. This is the same thing. The point to win? Who says you need to be both here to win? To win, Ashswag, is to stay on. And for the person who's lying to be found and banned.*"

"That's not really the point, of the prisoner's dilemma."

Boosfer turns at him.

"You *are* right, individually a person oftentimes wins by betraying, but the sum, the overall result is worse." Red shrugs. "The perfect result is neither betraying the other."

"*And the imposter staying with us?*"

"Nobody said anything about the imposter. *That* just wasn't right."

"You know." Ash leans forward. "If the *imposter's* still in the room with us, they can just vote the other out, and that's it? That's a losing game?"

"*I think you're getting off topic, the both of you. And you know why? Because you can't handle it there being a traitor between the two of you! Now, think. Would there be? Would you trust each other not to be one?*"

Boosfer's hands land on the table. Red stares past him, now.

This *can* be simple.

"Ash, you said you are the imposter. How does that make you feel?"

Ash hides his face in his hands, stares at him through the fingers. "What, I'm not the fucking... come *on*, Reddoons."

Red laughs quietly.

"I really wouldn't want to lie to you." Ash says. "It isn't me."

"Well, it isn't *me* either, so, does that settle it?"

Ash drops out an empty hand off the ball, reaching out. Red takes it. Ash's grip is uncomfortably strong.

"It's not a play on you being claustrophobic, right." Ash doesn't really ask, just says tiredly.

"Why the ocean, then." Red replies with a snort.

The part where it's simple is there is no winning condition. He doesn't need to bet on Ash keeping silent, or... splitting, it's easier. What they're doing is voting if the other needs to be out. What they're doing is saying if they trust each other not to be *it*, essentially. Red hopes Ash understands it, not so he can make the right choice — there is no right choice, because he doesn't *know*, doesn't fucking know — but so he knows what he's doing.

Red doesn't think Ash has a fear of the ocean, but what he really does is doesn't *know*. There was no ocean in the apocalypse, unlike cramped up spaces they had to hide in.

"*Are you done?*" Boosfer asks, and it's almost curious.

Ash takes a ball with the hand that's empty. Red feels uncomfortable, needs both of his hands back on the ball that's full gold, that says *save*, or *trust*, or *split*, but Ash's fingers are digging into his palm, and he squeezes back.

"*You're probably gonna need both if you wanna actually open them.*"

Ash tells him to fuck off.

Boosfer laughs.

"I'm gonna be proud of you, Red, you know." Ash lets go of him and positions his nails right at the crack in the ball. "If you play this right."

Red clasps his hands around one of the balls and thinks with a chill Ash is going to drop him. It's always how it happens.

Except that it's deeper than that, he thinks. It's not about being patted on the head by Boosfer and being told he figured the imposter last.

"*Reddoons, did you pick your ball?*" Boosfer asks.

"I did." He says, low, picks it up. The balls don't weigh any different.

Sometimes it's about the trust fall.

"*You can open yours.*"

They click, and don't raise either of theirs so Boosfer has to squint down. He leans back with a sigh then. "*It's fine, you can show them to each other.*"

Ash's face breaks into a mad grin when he sees Red's *split*. Red laughs, like he doesn't believe it himself.

"I knew it, I *knew* it!" Ash stands from the chair, and it slides back with the strong motion. "Suck it, Boosfer, you can't outplay *the...* the, us, you *can't*."

His ball drops on the tabletop when he goes on to hug Red.

Boosfer sags down on the table, twisting it against the surface. The inside of it pokes with the same gold, and lighter letters.

"Congratulations, you both split." Boosfer says, apathetic. *"Neither of you will be banned this round. Did you miss the imposter right in front of your eyes? I guess we'll find out later."*

"You know, if you are, right." Ash mutters, leaning back slightly, his hands in a lock around Red. "I'll still be proud of you. That doesn't change. You'll have outplayed, even if you didn't ban me."

Red can't keep his eyes from lighting up, looking back. "You think I am?"

"No." Ash smiles. "Do you?"

Boosfer's already gone for a few seconds when the scene starts dimming, and Red only notices it then, in the silent claps of the crowd without faces.

"I was damn sure you were going to ban me either way. I... don't know. It doesn't matter."

Ash's smile starts to fall and turn to buzz as the lights fade, and before it's all gone, Red leans in, nose to cheek, mutters. "I'm just not banning you off here, Ashswag, any case."

Ash cackles in the dark, and it might sound like a sob.

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