Loss

by the_rest_is_silence

Summary

Four Heroes Fallen in Battle. Four Children Lost and Scared in the Digital World.

As Taichi and his friends return to the Digital World after the reboot, they not only realise that the reboot may not have been what it seemed but that their memories may have been just as corrupted as the Digital World itself... Will the Chosen Children be able to overcome the rift and will everyone survive the crisis?

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
He didn’t know whether the red colour of the sky was real or whether some blood had trickled into his eyes, leading him to see the Digital World with a menacing red tinge. He blinked sluggishly, but could not tell if his eyelids seemed to stick together because the blood had dried them shut or if it was the exhaustion gripping him tightly. It had been some time since Iori had left him, went away in order to look for the other two. He’d promised he’d come back quickly, especially since Ken had been so loath to let him leave at all. And he had seen the hesitation in the other boy’s eyes, the uncertainty whether it was even safe to leave Ken all alone, injured as he was.

He’d pleaded for his friend to stay. He wasn’t proud of it, but he’d pleaded, begged, whimpered, “Don’t leave me alone, please, please, don’t...!” In the end, though, they had both decided that he just had to go and look for their missing friends. It wasn’t as if Ken didn’t want them to be found; on the contrary, his most coherent remaining thought, the one that pierced painfully through the fog of concussion, was of Daisuke and Miyako, lost somewhere in this red desert, after their devastating loss against Alphamon. Miyako had been with them at first, but she’d left before Iori, trying to find Daisuke. Daisuke was gravely hurt, he knew it, he had to be, or else he would be with them, he’d have done anything even remotely possible to find them, to find Ken, to be with them. But he hadn’t and he wasn’t, and so Ken knew that something terrible must have happened to his best friend. Miyako had thought the same. She hadn’t said so, had tried to remain positive, but he had seen it in her eyes. So despite her shattered glasses and her dislocated shoulder, she’d gone off to find their leader, but she had not returned. The last thing he’d seen of Miyako had been her disappearing form on the horizon, standing out against the bloodred sky. And of Daisuke...he was sure he’d seen his goggles, cracked and bloodied, at some point, but that was it, nothing more. He could feel the tiny pinpricks of anxiety on his arms and legs, could feel the black hole of dread deep in his insides, caused by a striking absence in his chest. He hadn't told either Miyako not Iori, but what worried him most was that he could not hear Daisuke's heart beat anymore, not even faintly. And their Digimon... Ken couldn’t suppress the violent shudder that ran through him, but he refused to think about them, not now, not when he was-

It was hours since Ken had been all alone with his pain and fear and grief. Iori had helped him to the shade and shelter of a small, rocky overhang. And the exertion had drained him so completely that all attempts to convince Iori to let him help with the search had been extinguished before he’d even been able to muster up the words. To his shame, he’d had to vomit as soon as they got to the hiding place, only narrowly missing Iori’s shoes. The younger boy had looked concerned, but the decision that he was to look for Miyako and Daisuke had already been made, and so, with a resolute look and the promise to be back before long, Iori had limped away from Ken. He hadn’t seen him since.

Ken found it increasingly harder to breathe. He had to struggle for each little gasp of air. Whether it was because of the oppressive heat – and he hadn’t had enough water, was severely dehydrated, he knew that... – or because of the burns at his side, he could not tell. He wasn’t even sure if it was actually that hot or if he was developing a fever, but since he could not change either situation, he’d
given up trying to find an answer. He only hoped that Iori and the others would come back to him before he could no longer struggle. He didn’t want to die alone.

The sound of footsteps suddenly broke through the silence and he felt his heart racing in his chest. It could be Iori, Iori and the others, but what if it wasn’t? They sounded loud, too loud for three scared and injured teenagers. Ken closed his eyes and tried to stop the rising panic that made his throat tighten and his stomach clench painfully. “...Iori...?” he croaked helplessly, but his voice was barely audible from disuse and dehydration. The steps came closer. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw somebody bend down, pick something up... his D-3...

“I’ll send you Ichijouji’s digivice. Seems to be working despite the attack.”

Ken shook with fear, he wanted to hide, crawl deeper into the overhang’s shadow, but he found himself unable to move. The voice didn’t belong to any of his friends, but it sounded familiar nonetheless. Familiar and menacing.

The steps came closer still. He couldn’t see who it was, not clearly, but the height of the figure in front of him told him without a doubt that it had to be an adult. Suddenly, he felt himself yanked up by his hair and cried out in pain. “Still conscious. No, he’s useless for my plans, I only need the scan.” Ken dimly noted that the man seemed to be speaking into some sort of communication device, but any other thoughts were eclipsed by the searing pain in his head. He whimpered weakly as he was hauled to his knees, the grip in his hair unrelenting. A cold metal was pressed against his neck – an eerily familiar feeling – and he could hear a beeping sound before another sort of pain began, emanating from his neck where the Spore still sat, inactive, but ever-looming. The scan – if that was what caused the pain – ran from his neck through his entire body twice before he was released and collapsed onto the ground.

“No, no, I’m not going to take him as a prisoner. Being left to his fate like this is a much more fitting punishment for the Digimon Kaiser,” the voice said with cold cruelty and a hint of amusement. “Yes, everything’s going according to plan.”

Ken could see the figure move away – and it must have been his confusion that made him think “Gennai” at the sight – before the world around him became dark once more.
Desert

Chapter Summary

They only barely managed to escape Meicrackmon and were forced to leave Meiko behind. Entering a crimson-coloured desert, the Chosen Children finally meet one of their lost companions again, but the encounter leaves them with more questions than answers - it's especially difficult for Taichi, who feels he has failed in his responsibilities as the leader of the Chosen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 1. Desert

They had only narrowly escaped Meicrackmon’s rage but they hadn’t been able to reunite with Meiko – none of the Chosen Children knew what had happened to her, but… all of them feared for her safety, considering her partner’s extreme reaction. None of them wanted to talk about it, though... They had had to leave her behind when Meicoomon’s evolved form attacked them, they had had no choice… but to Taichi, it felt like a betrayal. And not only that... The betrayal oddly felt like a repeat of sorts even though he could not actually remember leaving anyone else behind. However, since they had re-entered the Digital World, he hadn’t been able to shake that nagging sensation at the back of his mind that there was something missing in there, something he ought to remember but didn’t.

He looked back towards his friends – all of them exhausted, tired and scared. The thrill over their victory against Machinedramon had not lasted long, not when they had so many enemies still to fight, had still to figure out what was actually going on in the Digital World…

They had left the ice field by now and had come into a very different landscape. A red desert lay before them, the sky as red as the sand… Taichi shivered slightly, despite the heat. He certainly wasn’t prone to superstitious fears or premonition but something about the crimson-coloured wasteland made him afraid. The desert seemed out of place, like it did not actually belong to the Digital World, and its red colour reminded him uncomfortably of the distortions. It seemed to him like a battlefield, and he half-expected to find the bodies of the fallen around the next corner.

Unsurprisingly, the sight of an actual body lying in the shadow of a large rock, half hidden by some desert shrubbery, made him jump.

What is it?” He could hear Yamato’s irritated voice, but chose to ignore his friend. Without thinking, he sprinted towards the body as fast as he possibly could, his heart racing with an inexplicable urgency. The body could have been a discarded fashion mannequin – it would be weird in a desert, no doubt, but the Digital World wasn’t exactly known for making perfect sense all the time. But he knew, somehow, that that wasn’t the case and that he needed to get to the
person lying in the sand. Almost out of breath, he reached it, dropped to his knees and realised with a jolt that it was a boy his sister’s age. A boy he knew. They all did.

For a moment, he just stared, and the memories began flooding back. And they weren’t at all what he would have expected – after all, he hadn’t even been fully aware that something had been missing, but even if somebody had asked him what kind of memories he associated with Ichijouji Ken, just a minute ago, he’d have said that he was a former enemy. That he had fought him once and kept some sort of contact just to ensure that the Digimon Kaiser would never make his return. He’d have expected forgotten memories to consist entirely of trivial encounters, the sort you had with a casual acquaintances.

But those that were coming back to him now were entirely different. He actually remembered playing soccer with Ken – and he was reasonably sure that he wouldn’t have done that with the former Digimon Kaiser if they hadn’t become friends afterwards. There was somebody else in the memory, too, but the image remained fuzzy, as if some barrier was blocking it. Memories of Ken, however, became rapidly clearer and more numerous the longer he stared at him. They’d fought together. He remembered that now. Had defeated BelialVamdemon and Diaboromon, as a team... And now Ken had been lying alone face down in the sand of a digital desert for who knew how long, and Taichi had no idea what could have happened to him. At least he was breathing – Taichi could see his shoulders move slightly.

\textit{What have I done?}

He reached a shaking hand towards Ken, softly touching his shoulder. No response. “Ken...?” Carefully, Taichi turned Ken over so he could see his face and swiftly drew back a little in surprise. He’d expected him to be unconscious, especially since he hadn’t seemed to react at all to Taichi’s presence, but instead, Ken’s eyes were wide open with terror.

Taichi couldn’t look away from the younger boy’s face – dried blood on his cheeks and temples, lips cracked from dehydration, dirt on his face, in his hair, and more blood. There was a faint trace of vomit in the corners of his mouth, and now he could also see it in the sand surrounding Ken. \textit{What have I done?} Softly, he tried to brush Ken’s dark strands of hair from his face, but he hadn’t expected him to wince in pain. Taichi winced himself when he saw the deep gash on Ken’s forehead. “Shit...” Tears had started to form in Ken’s eyes and when they trickled down his cheeks, they followed faint tracks in the dirt and blood – he’d cried before, all alone. “Shh...” He was only vaguely aware of Yamato catching up to him, then cursing under his breath and dropping to his knees right next to Taichi.

“What on earth...?” Yamato stopped mid-sentence, and Taichi could see the same recognition in his best friend’s eyes that he himself had felt just a moment ago – that transition from viewing Ken as a distant acquaintance to viewing him as a good friend, and all the implications that went with that realisation.

“Shit... what... they said he was alright...!” Yamato sounded almost personally offended at the thought that the two agents had lied to them, but beneath that bristling outrage, Taichi thought he heard the same guilt that he felt as well.
“Ken-kun, can you hear me? Please say something...” Taichi had no idea what to say to Yamato, could offer no explanation, neither for what had happened to their memories nor for Ken’s present state, so instead he focused on trying to get a response out of Ken. He spoke softly to him, gently tried to ask him what happened, but so far, Ken hadn’t said a word; only his eyes darted uncertainly from Taichi to Yamato and back, and Taichi couldn’t help but wonder if the younger boy recognised them at all. Had his memories been altered as well?

“What happened here?” Jou was the next of the Chosen Children to reach their little group, and Taichi was thankful for it, since Jou at least seemed to have a marginally better idea as to how to help their friend. He only took a moment to shift from confusion to recognition to a cool efficiency – he’d been slow to take up his responsibilities as a Chosen Child again when the distortions had first occurred, but now he seemed a lot better prepared to handle things than Yamato and Taichi combined. With a swift movement, he knelt in the sand next to Ken and gently took Ken’s hand to take his pulse.

Taichi watched as Jou spoke quietly to Ken while trying to get a closer look at the boy’s injuries. Ken, unfocused and somewhat disoriented, looked at Jou uncertainly, but allowed him to examine him anyway, even though Taichi could see Ken tensing up whenever Jou touched him.

“He needs to sit up a little – if I’m right and he has a concussion, it would be better if his upper body was higher up,” Jou sounded calm, almost professional, but Taichi was certain that he heard worry, too. “And he should definitely drink something, he’s dehydrated...”

With Yamato’s help, Taichi slowly managed to draw Ken in a more sitting position, resting against Taichi’s chest. Ken had closed his eyes again and was whimpering softly. Suddenly, there was a bottle in front of his face, and Taichi looked up startled to see Sora offering the water to him. The others had joined them by now as well, their faces mirroring the overwhelming feelings and memories that had also reawakened in Taichi, Yamato and Jou at the sight of Ken only a few seconds ago.

Taichi took the bottle and offered it, in turn, to Ken, who, seemingly a little more lucid now, tried to take it from him, but his hands shook so much that Taichi could not see how he’d be able to drink at all. He gently clasped his own hand around Ken’s to steady him.

Ken only managed to drink a few gulps before he retched and threw it all up again. Even Taichi was aware that that was not at all a good sign. Besides, Jou looked worried and he had no reason not to trust his friend’s judgment.

“I think he might have a concussion... and I really don’t like that he isn’t talking to us...” Jou said, partly to himself. “Ichijouji-kun? Can you tell us what happened? Are you in pain?” A small nod, and Jou actually seemed a little relieved. “Okay, good, so you understand what I’m saying, right? I’m going to try and clean the wound on your forehead, okay? It’s probably going to sting a little...”

Taichi was a little amazed when Jou pulled clean cloth and a bottle of medical alcohol out of his bag – clearly, he’d been a lot more prepared for their trip to the Digital World than the rest of them, but then again, he’d always been the most responsible one. Reliable, Taichi thought with half a smile. Ken stiffened, closed his eyes once more and instinctively pressed himself against Taichi as Jou
carefully cleaned the injury. He held him a little more tightly, which meant that he could feel the quiet little sobs shaking his younger friend. “Shh…”

Jou wrapped a bandage – another useful item drawn from his bag – around Ken’s head in an almost professional manner and then drew back a little to observe his patient. He still didn’t look overly satisfied, which Taichi found immensely understandable – Ken still looked like a mess, despite the clean white bandage now hiding the nasty wound on his head.

“Does anybody have a blanket or a towel?” Jou asked, “And do we have enough water? I think there are some burns on the side of his chest, not too severe, but I’d like to cool them…” And, with a stern look at Taichi “Talk to him. Make sure he responds somehow. And get him to try and drink something again soon, while I deal with this.”

He didn’t actually think that he could get Ken to answer, but what else could he do? “Ken-kun? You okay, buddy?” Stupid question. But- “T-t-taichi-s-senpai…?” Ken’s voice shook about as much as his hands just had, but at least he was talking now. “Yeah…?”

“What…where…?” He sounded confused. Not that Taichi could blame him for that. “…where were you?” Taichi frowned. “What d’you mean?”

 “…where were you…we…we needed you…” Ken still seemed somewhat unfocused, and Taichi could see him frown and move his lips silently, as if in deep thought. “I…I don’t know what you’re talking about…” But he did, at least in a way. Clearly, something bad had happened to Ken, and he shouldn’t have had to face it alone. His friends should have been with him. Taichi, as the leader of the Chosen Children, should have been at his side, at least.

“Here, try and drink something again…” He didn’t want to face his own guilt, not yet. Jou, who had drenched Hikari’s necktie in water, was back at their side and slowly pushed Ken’s shirt up – Taichi could see the angry red now for the first time before Jou carefully covered it with the cloth. “Make sure he only drinks a little bit.”

Taichi did as he was told, and this time, even though he coughed a little, Ken didn’t throw up again. He looked towards Jou, basically looking for a confirmation that he could be at least a little relieved right now. Jou, however, didn’t pay him any attention. Having dealt with the injuries at Ken’s side, he was now looking at his right leg with a frown. For the first time, Taichi noticed that Ken’s trousers were bloodied, but that his leg seemed to have been bandaged – a light blue sleeve was wrapped tightly around his upper calf where the blood seemed to have come from.

“Did you do this?” Jou asked gently, even though it seemed clear to Taichi that that couldn’t have been the case. That sleeve had to have come from somewhere. Predictably, Ken started to shake his head, but the way his face contorted told Taichi that the small movement had almost been enough to make him throw up again. “N-no…” Ken said quietly, “M-miyako helped me bandage my leg… that’s her sleeve… it was bleeding a lot, so…”

Miyako. The name seemed vaguely familiar, but that was about it. Yet Taichi had the haunting feeling – no, rather a certainty – that there was more to it. If he had forgot Ken, who else might have been erased from his memory? Jou didn’t quite seem to recognise the name, either, but chose, just as Taichi, not to comment on it for now.
Before they could ask any further questions at all, Taichi felt a slight bump on his elbow and looked down towards a slightly disgruntled looking Koromon. “Taichiii, I’m hungryyy!” Koromon was hopping up and down on his ears, and Taichi could see a thin smile appear on Ken’s face at the Digimon’s antics. “Who’s your friend, Taichi? Why does he look so sad?” The smile had disappeared in seconds. Ken looked at Taichi in shocked confusion. “…why…why doesn’t Koromon recognise me…?”

“Well, there’s been a sort of reboot…” Taichi began, rubbing his head earnestly. Honestly, he had only a vague idea with regards to what had happened to the Digital World. As far as he was concerned, everything had been set to the beginning, their Digimon had lost all memory of them, which was, well, less than ideal, but ultimately not a disaster – they’d just become friends with them again.

Ken, however, seemed not to share Taichi’s relative ease with the situation. “A…a reboot?! But…” He coughed and then had to struggle to continue speaking. “…but the Digital World can’t be rebooted…! You all told me that…!” Had they? Taichi had no idea, but then again, not only were his memories not to be trusted, but he hadn’t ever had such a firm grip as to what was and wasn’t possible in the Digital World anyway in the first place. Koushiro, however, made a noise like a strangled cry, flipped open his laptop and started typing furiously – with Motimon next to him apparently torn between looking curiously over his partner’s shoulder and apologising for said partner’s erratic behaviour with little bows in all directions. Well then.

Taichi turned at Ken again. “I…have no idea if that’s true or not, but I’m guessing Koushiro will come up with something in an hour or two…” “Right…” Ken said no more, but Taichi could tell that it was only because he did not have enough physical strength left to question the situation further. He could feel the boy lean heavily against him in exhaustion. Sora, who’d been talking to Mimi and Takeru, came over to them and knelt down next to the two boys. “Listen, Taichi, our partners are all just as hungry as Koromon, and, well,” she looked uncertainly – guiltily – at Ken, who barely seemed awake enough to notice her anymore, “we won’t be going much further today, anyway, so we thought it would be best to get to a safe place and make camp…”

He nodded. “C’mon, Ken-kun, we need to get moving…”

They couldn’t very well stay where they’d found Ken, even though it was relatively secluded – the blood and vomit at the site didn’t exactly make it into an appealing camping ground.

“N-no…” Ken didn’t move when Taichi started to get up – he was just about able to remain sitting. Taichi frowned. “Don’t worry, I’m gonna carry you – you won’t have to walk.”

“No…no… I can’t leave… the others… they’re coming back here, they won’t leave me…” Ken looked up at Taichi with such obvious despair that Taichi could almost feel it himself. “Please… Daisuke… He… he wouldn’t leave me here, he wouldn’t leave me alone. They’re coming back for me, they have to, so we have to stay.”

“Who’s Daisuke?”

Taichi looked up to see who’d said it at about the same time as Ken did. It had been Hikari, who looked concerned and worried, but Taichi only wished she’d remained silent. This was so not – “WHO ARE YOU?!” Ken screamed at them with all the force he had left. He struggled to his feet,
stumbled forward a little bit and tried to get as far away from them as possible. Taichi only stared at him for a second, then immediately set after him. Ken didn’t make it far anyway.

“…who are you…? …who are you…you’re not…you’re not…them…” the boy croaked, now barely audible again. Taichi knelt down next to where Ken had collapsed on the desert ground. He could only watch helplessly as Ken cowered in the sand where he’d fallen, shielding his face with his arms and turning away from them as much as he could in his weakened state. Taichi turned his head to exchange a worried look with Yamato. The others had formed a circle around him and Ken, looking just as unsure about what to do next as Taichi felt. Only Koushiro was still sitting a few feet behind them, completely oblivious to what had been going on, still typing furiously. Taichi turned back to Ken who was shaking violently.

“Ken-kun, listen…”

**********************************************************************

It had taken hours to calm Ken down at least a little. By then, all thought of moving camp had been abandoned. Takeru and Sora had cleaned up the little shelter beneath the rocky overhand as much as possible, freeing it from blood and vomit. They’d started a little camp fire, around which they were now all sitting – except Ken. He was asleep, his head resting on Taichi’s knees for lack of a better cushion. Ken was still wary of them, Taichi knew it. He didn’t fully believe that they actually were the real Chosen Children even though they’d tried to explain that something had clearly gone wrong with their memories. They still had only the vaguest idea as to who “Daisuke and the others” might be – Taichi kept having flashbacks of his old goggles he couldn’t quite explain – but they had no reason to doubt Ken’s descriptions of their supposed friends, even if he’d been hard to understand through his confusion and fear. They’d forgotten that Ken was a trusted friend and teammate rather than just a former enemy, so it was entirely plausible that whatever had deleted or suppressed their memories of him had done the same to their memories of those other three Ken kept talking about.

Hikari sat next to him. He occasionally shot her a concerned look – she was still shaken because she felt guilty for having caused Ken’s panic attack with her imprudent question. Even more so because Ken’s jumbled explanations had made it clear that their missing friends had been close with her and Takeru in particular. He loosely had his arm around his sister, squeezing her comfortingly whenever he felt her tense up a little more. Across the fire, Takeru sat a little distant from the rest of them. He looked almost as brooding as his older brother. Whenever the Chosen Child of Hope happened to look at the exhausted Ken, Taichi could see him grimace almost as if in pain. He thought he knew what Takeru was feeling. They were all guilty. They’d all been away, had all been incapable of helping their friends. For some reason, though, Takeru seemed to think that he in particular was to blame for something. It was clear that even looking at Ken was hard for him. And so he’d distanced himself from the others, sat alone and moped. Typical. Maybe, Taichi thought, he should just bang the two brothers’ heads together, see if it helped… Yamato, at least, had told him what bothered him so much. He’d told him that he’d gone to the two agents to ask about Ken, which, in Taichi’s mind, meant that Yamato was likely the most blameless one among them. He’d been the only one to ask about Ken at all when they’d first seen the fake Digimon Kaiser. Nobody else had thought of that, and when Hikari and Takeru had gone to check on the Ichijouji family, they’d been satisfied with a single visit that didn’t yield any results. The Ichijoujis hadn’t even answered the door, which, in hindsight, should probably have alarmed them even further. Or prompted them to try again, at the very least. The fact that the Ichijoujis hadn’t opened the door only added to Taichi’s worries. Had they just been at work? Or had they disappeared somewhere, too? Were they looking for their son? What about the other parents, the ones whose children they had apparently forgotten? Why hadn’t there been any news about missing children?
Maybe the agents had suppressed that information, too...

“...Himekawa-san...” Surprised, Taichi looked at his sister, who, despite having spoken, did not look at anyone in particular, but in the fire itself as if she saw in it whatever was bothering her at the moment. He was about to ask what she was worrying about when she continued. “...she had Ken’s digivice, didn’t she? I didn’t know, I mean, I didn’t remember, then, but it was his, wasn’t it? The black D-3 she used to open the Gate?” Taichi glanced towards Koushiro – surely, he had paid closer attention to the opening process itself and was able to weigh in? But no, Koushiro was still so deeply engulfed in whatever he was typing into his laptop that he might not even have reacted if a volcano had erupted next to him. Instead, Yamato was the first to respond.

“Well, we know those agents aren’t trustworthy now, so that isn’t really a surprise.” He sounded unnecessarily harsh and Taichi was about to say something angry back at him because he was being mean to his sister, but ultimately decided against it. They were all stressed and easily irritated – best not provoke even more anger by starting a fight. He noticed Sora looking at him quizzically but couldn’t quite figure out why.

Mimi pulled a face. “But Himekawa-chan seemed so nice! And Meimei was friends with her, so she can’t be that bad.”

“Oh, well, sorry. Clearly, it was all a big misunderstanding then. Nothing odd going on here. Ken-kun probably just got lost in the Digital World for fun, and that woman got hold of his digivice by accident.” If Yamato had sounded harsh when responding to Hikari, his reply now was almost dripping with sarcasm and aggression. “How do we even know “Meimei” isn’t working with them in the first place?!”

Mimi blew up her cheeks. “She’s not! She’s our friend.”

“...Mimi, we don’t even know her, not really...” It was the first time Takeru had spoken up in hours. “She’s just sort of...managed to sneak into our group, somehow.”

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“...Mimi, we don’t even know her, not really...” It was the first time Takeru had spoken up in hours. “She’s just sort of...managed to sneak into our group, somehow.”

“That’s not fair!” Mimi sounded outraged. “We invited her in! We wanted her to be one of us!” Taichi couldn’t help agreeing with Mimi, but he still felt unsettled by the fact that they’d been capable of warmly welcoming a complete stranger into their midst while at the same time completely ignoring the disappearance of one of their friends. Several friends, apparently.

“Besides,” Mimi added, perhaps with more hostility than she actually intended, “how do we know he’s not working with the agents... We all saw the Kaiser.”

Takeru pretty much exploded at her. Now that Taichi remembered Ken and his friendship with all of them, he knew that he and Takeru had got on well enough before, but the extreme protectiveness with which the boy reacted now carried more than just a hint of guilt with it. Taichi thought back to the moment when they’d first seen the new Kaiser and how they’d all reacted with varying degrees of surprise and shock at the revelation that Ichijouji-kun had returned to his old evil persona. Takeru had not seemed to doubt that it really was Ken for a second. He’d even posted about it on the forum for the international Chosen Children… ah. The international Chosen. Certainly another subset of children, of allies, of friends that they’d neglected, not to the same extent as the four
Japanese kids they’d completely forgotten, but still. He wasn’t even sure if anyone had told them about the reboot, even though it would only have taken a quick post online. Not one of them had remembered that they, too, had partners to lose.

There was a full-blown fight going on now. Only Taichi, Hikari and Koushiro seemed to have no part of it, Koushiro because he was so utterly engulfed in whatever work he was doing that he was pretty much lost to everything outside of his laptop. Even Sora tried to get a word in, albeit only to add some facts into the volatile mix that was Takeru’s guilt, Mimi’s protectiveness of Meiko, Yamato’s anger at the agents and Jou’s futile attempts to get them all to shut up.

“The Kaiser wasn’t Ken, though, we know that for a fact,” Sora tried to make herself heard. “He changed into…into Gennai, or at least a copy of Gennai, when he was attacking me.”

“That must have been a trick, Gennai wouldn’t fight us!!”

“Neither would Ken!!”

“SHUT UP, EVERYONE!”

Everyone turned to stare at Jou. He seemed a little embarrassed at the sudden attention, but still righteously angry. “Be quiet, this is leading nowhere. We need to find out what is going on, yes. We need to figure out what went wrong with our memories and where our missing friends are. But we won’t accomplish any of that if we fight. Besides, you’ll wake up Ken with your senseless shouting.”

“…maybe Mimi wants to share her brilliant theories with Ken personally…” Takeru muttered, but Jou shot him a warning glance which silenced him promptly, at least for now. Taichi cleared his throat. He’d felt Ken stir in discomfort while the shouting match was still going on, but now the boy was motionless again. “Jou is right. We need to calm down and think about our situation. We shouldn’t fight each other, we’ve got enough problems as it is.”

The silence into their which their company settled now was sullen and gloomy. No one was so much as looking at one another – except Sora and Yamato, who occasionally shared a glance and then, confusingly, looked at Taichi with something very much like appreciation, but apart from that, each of the Chosen Children seemed lost in his or her own thoughts. The only noise frequently interrupting the uneasy silence was Koushiro’s constant typing. As much as he hated the tension that had developed among them, Taichi really hoped that that noise, too, would soon stop, preferably before he’d do something rash, like take Koushiro’s laptop and throw it into the fire, which would surely lead to another, albeit different, sort of fight. He was sorely tempted to do just that regardless of any consequences when, suddenly, the typing stopped. He let out a relieved sigh, relaxed, closed his eyes and thought about maybe napping a little after all the quarreling.

“We need to leave right now!”

Taichi’s eyes popped open again. Koushiro had rather unceremoniously shut down his laptop and
was now standing where he’d been sitting all evening, seemingly without noticing anything that
had been going on. “Right now. Get up, everyone. Quickly!”

“Koushiro, what the heck is going on?” Everyone’s eyes were turned towards their official digital
expert, but instead of acting uncomfortable, as he usually did when suddenly becoming the centre
of attention, Koushiro remained focused and tense. “I’ll explain later. This desert is dangerous, and
we need to leave it as soon as possible. Now!”

Suddenly, everyone was moving. Jou and Mimi were trying to extinguish the fire, using the
surrounding sand to quench the flames. Takeru and Yamato had started packing their collective
stuff. Taichi knew he had to get moving, too, and Hikari had already got up to help Sora wake their
drowsy Digimon, who’d drifted off at some point after their quarrel, but he was reluctant to wake
up Ken, exhausted as he was. Not that it could be helped – if Koushiro said they were in danger,
they most definitely were, which was perhaps the only certainty uniting them just now. He turned
to the younger Chosen Child, only to find him already wide awake, propped up on his elbows and
staring at Taichi. “What…what is it?! What’s going on?! Is it Alphamon? Is he attacking?” He
sounded breathless, panicked, but Taichi had no time to answer. Instead, he picked Ken up as
quickly as he could – he was light, thankfully enough, but still a fourteen-year-old boy, and Taichi
had to muster all his strength to hoist him up and keep carrying him. As soon as he was standing,
he could feel Ken convulsing in his arms and there was a sensation of warmth on Taichi’s shirt –
Ken had vomited again. Clearly, moving him so quickly, what with the concussion and his other
injuries, wasn’t such a brilliant idea, but what other choice did he have? Koushiro was still urging
them on, the concern in his voice now bordering on panic.

Seemingly in a matter of seconds, the campfire extinguished, their bags all shouldered, their
Digimon more or less awake and alert, they were on their way out of the red desert. Or at least
Taichi hoped so.

Chapter End Notes

UPDATE (06.08.2017) I followed stellaria's kind advice and added a bit of dialogue
and conflict to the scene around the campfire - among the Older Chosen. I hope you
all like what I did with it!

As for how the kids address each other, I kind of assumed that they would call Ken by
his first name at this point - and that the majority of the Chosen Children calling him
Ichijouji in tri is due to the brainwashing I'm assuming. Concerning the honorifics, I
did try and read up on that, but I am by no means an expert so if something strikes you
as weird or unfitting, feel free to let me know!
Twelve Years Old

Chapter Summary

Iori is too young for this. He's too young to be wandering through a scorching desert on his own, desperate to find help or find his friends. He should be in school, preparing for middle school entrance exams. He should be having ice cream with his friends. Instead, two of them are missing and one he had to leave behind, injured. Is he strong enough to do what he must?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Two Twelve Years Old

He had had no other choice. There hadn’t been any other option than to go and look for the others. He just had to.

Iori kept telling himself that it had been the right decision; that somebody had to try and find Miyako and Daisuke. And it certainly wasn’t going to be Ken, who was still throwing up at the slightest movement. Still, leaving him behind made Iori incredibly uneasy. Shouldn’t you stay with someone who had a concussion? Make sure he remained awake? Iori bit his lip. What if something happened to Ken while he was gone? Normally, he’d trust the older boy to defend himself – after all, he was still proficient in judo even without the influence of the Dark Spore, but in his current state, any hostile Digimon higher than in-training level would be a danger to him. Not to mention the concussion. Or that deep wound on Ken’s leg. Miyako’s sleeve, tightly wrapped around it had stilled the bleeding, but what if it wasn’t enough? Should they have done something else to treat it? What if Ken threw up again and couldn’t move enough to make sure he didn’t choke? What if he got a heat stroke? Iori decided that he wouldn’t stay away from his friend for long. He’d try his best to find Miyako and Daisuke, but if there wasn’t a sign of them within the next twenty, maybe thirty minutes, he’d turn back and check on Ken.

The truth was, he had been equally as reluctant to go as Ken had been to see him leave, not only because he was worried for his friend, but also because he, too, felt safer in Ken’s company than alone. Neither of them was in fighting shape, but together they’d certainly have a better chance at defending themselves if necessary. Or even just a better chance to escape, to get to safety in time. Would Ken be able to flee if he was attacked again or was he now completely helpless?

Iori’s right ankle hurt with every step and he was fairly sure that his right arm was still bleeding, but he couldn’t let that stop him now. His friends depended on him. He wouldn’t let the blurriness in his vision stop him, either, even though it was getting worse with every anxious thought about the fate of his older friends. Iori blinked and then quickly wiped his arm over his face, careful not to get any blood from his sleeve into his eyes. He couldn’t be weak now. He wasn’t as badly injured as Ken anyway, not as badly as Miyako, either, who had a dislocated shoulder and, probably, they thought, a few broken ribs. Iori bit his lip when he thought back to the first few moments after Alphamon had left, when they hadn’t yet been able to check who was hurt and what kind of injuries they’d have to deal with. Iori had crawled up from under the little shrubbery –
Ankylomon had thrown him there to protect him – and nearly cried out when he’d seen Ken lying in a pool of his own blood. “Head wounds just bleed a lot,” Miyako had said when she’d reached the two of them, badly bruised and slowed down by her own injuries, but Iori had seen her tremble, had heard the fear in her voice. Luckily, Ken hadn’t remained unconscious for long – Iori was sure that that would have been a bad sign. He hadn’t been entirely lucid when he came to, though, asking them what had happened, where Daisuke was and where Wormmon was, slurring his speech and repeating questions they’d already answered. Iori had thought it had to be really bad if Ken was in this condition, but again, Miyako had attempted to console him. “A concussion, definitely. I think you’re supposed to be confused when you’re concussed. It’ll get better.” She’d given Ken a piece of cloth, ripped off from her trousers, to press against his head, which he had done obediently, despite the confusion. And it had improved, thankfully. Ken had been able to talk to them coherently, at least, even if he was still weak and disoriented. And he’d remembered what had happened, even though that might not necessarily have been a good thing. Ken’s eyes had looked so haunted whenever they’d talked about how they couldn’t see Daisuke anywhere and he wasn’t answering their calls. They’d bandaged Ken’s bleeding leg with one of Miyako’s sleeves and fashioned the other one into a sling for her to rest her dislocated arm, but they hadn’t been able to do anything for Ken’s burns nor for Miyako’s ribs. Not for Iori’s hurting ankle and the cut on his arm, either, but that was more because he hadn’t spoken up about them. He hadn’t wanted the two of them to worry about him when he was clearly so much better off, Ankylomon having shielded him from the worst damage.

He had to be strong now. So what if he was only twelve? Miyako had only been twelve when they’d started fighting the Digimon Kaiser – but that danger seemed almost silly to him now, and he let out an almost hysterical chuckle at the thought of Ken’s extravagant ‘villainous’ clothing, flowing cape, shoulder pads and all. Ken’s theatrical form of villainy paled in comparison to the cold cruelty with which the four children had been attacked now. There had been no hesitation in Alphamon, no compassion whatsoever. He’d wanted them dead. He’d succeeded with their Digimon, at least. Iori wiped his eyes again when the thought of Armadimon became too painful to bear.

Jou-senpai, then. Jou-senpai had been twelve when he’d been transported to the Digital World in order to save it from destruction. Only, he hadn’t been alone, not at all. He’d had Gomamon, and he’d had his human friends and their Digimon Partners. And he’d had Taichi-senpai to trust in. Taichi-senpai, the unspoken leader, of all the Chosen Children. Where had he been when Iori and his friends had been attacked? Wasn’t a leader supposed to take care of everyone? He’d never felt as if he’d been treated differently than the other Chosen just because he belonged to the second generation, so to speak, but maybe that had only been his own perception… He longed to see Daisuke’s silly grin, trusted in his ability to find a way out more than he’d trust Taichi-senpai to find them now that they’d been lost and defeated.

This had to stop. Iori wiped his face furiously, even though it hurt. He couldn’t keep crying like this. How would he ever be able to find Miyako and Daisuke if he could hardly see anything?! He sniffled and wiped his face some more. Then he forced himself to take several deep breaths. He had to be strong. He had to find help for himself and his friends. He would find Miyako and Daisuke, and then they’d all go back to Ken. Daisuke would have no problem carrying Ken if he still couldn’t walk, and then they’d be able to escape this dreadful place together. But for that to happen, it was up to Iori to find them first.

He shuffled onward through the red sand, glad for his shoes, because the sand seemed hot from the touch of the scorching red sun that hung menacingly low above the desert. Iori wondered when it would be too dark to search. Should he turn back now? He had no idea what time it was. In fact, his whole temporal sense had seemed awry from the moment they’d entered the red desert, even
though back then, everything had still seemed fine. They’d been wondering what the Digital World needed from them, of course, when they’d been sucked into their computers one morning and, by some good fortune, had all ended up in the same place. But they hadn’t really been worried at first, no, they had quite happily enjoyed the reunion with their partners, who they hadn’t seen for over a year. Their spirits had dampened a little when they’d entered this region – clearly, they’d all felt that something about this desert was unnatural, but they hadn’t really been too concerned, had been confident in their and their Digimon’s ability to protect one another. Nothing had prepared them for Alphamon’s sudden attack.

The sun had sunk lower, plunging the desert into an eerie twilight. He’d go back now. He couldn’t be away from Ken much longer – they’d both be scared alone the dark, and besides, he couldn’t keep looking for Miyako and Daisuke during the night anyway. Iori was about to turn around and head back where he’d come from when he noticed something glinting in the dying sunlight, not too far away. Could it be Daisuke’s goggles…?

He decided to go and check and then head back to their little hiding place – maybe with Daisuke to keep him company. Iori felt his pace quicken with this new-found hope. Ken would feel better, too, once Daisuke was back with them. He always seemed more at peace when their goggled leader was close by – and now there’d be relief as well, relief that Daisuke was alright, wasn’t too badly injured… he couldn’t be. He just couldn’t, he had to be fine…

Iori was running now – maybe Daisuke needed help? He’d already decided for himself that the glinting in the distance had to be Daisuke’s goggles, had to be Daisuke lying in the sand waiting for Iori to get to him. He had no explanation why Daisuke would be so far away from the site of their battle, but since they hadn’t found him before, it stood to reason that he’d been hurled away by the full force of Alphamon’s attacks. But if he’d been thrown that far and with that much force… No! Iori refused to continue that thought, instead pressing on towards the light he’d seen, ignoring the piercing pain in his ankle, which seemed to become worse with every step.

Suddenly, he felt something like resistance in the air. Perplexed, he threw himself against it – he couldn’t stop now, he was too close – and suddenly, the air seemed less oppressive, the heat less intense. Startled, he looked behind to see desert sand, but not the threateningly red one he’d just trekked through. He looked ahead of him and saw an impossibly green meadow he hadn’t noticed before when he was ostensibly walking towards it. Confused, he turned around in a circle, trying to get his bearings. Everything looked familiar and different at the same time.

Quickly, he walked back into the desert. Daisuke wasn’t here, and there was no sense in going further. He had to rejoin Ken now. Hesitantly, he moved in what he thought was the right direction, but it didn’t feel right at all. It was a desert, yes, but not like the one he’d traversed before. This one was almost benign in comparison, with a slight breeze moving his clothes, warm sunshine on his face and the chatter of desert Digimon in the distance when, before, there had only been silence, but even though the atmosphere was almost friendly, his unease could not have been more pronounced. With every step he grew more certain that this was not the desert he’d left his friend in. “Ken...!” He started to call out, even though he had the dreadful feeling that it was pointless. “Ken...! KEN!” No answer. Iori spun around again. Maybe he was just going in the wrong direction…? Maybe he’d got lost? He checked the position of the sun – it had been setting ahead of him, so that had to have been the West, and he’d have to turn East to find Ken. And then it hit him. The sun had been setting just before he’d come across that meadow. Now it was high in the sky, maybe in the middle of the afternoon, but certainly not twilight.

“No no no...oh no...” He’d changed locations somehow. Some kind of portal, but not one to the real world, no, this one had to have been within the Digital World itself. But even though he had not been transported back to their own home dimension, this shift had separated him from Ken just
as effectively. Almost angrily, he ran back to where the desert had met the meadow, but once there, he just collapsed. Sinking to his knees on the grass, he couldn’t stop the tears anymore, no thoughts about how he had to be strong for his friends, how they had faced much greater dangers when they were his age would help anymore. This...this had to be beyond what the older Chosen had ever experienced. This was cruel, brutal, and too real. The blood staining his sleeve was too real. Their Digimon dying was too real. It wasn’t supposed to happen that way. Maybe rarely, the partner Digimon died, as it had happened with both Takeru and Ken, but not... not like that! Not in that cruel, relentless battle with a foe they had never had a chance against to begin with. Iori sobbed and dug his fingers into the earth in desperation. He felt again the thorns piercing his skin, the thud as he hid the ground beneath the bush – in an instant, he’d felt almost outraged that Ankylomon had handled him so roughly. Then he saw – Alphamon focusing his brute force on Ankylomon, and then...and then... There had been nothing left of Ankylomon but separated data bits, floating in the air and then dissolving. Ankylomon was gone and there’d been no trace left of his partner. He didn’t know when Aquilamon had died, but Imperialdramon had dissolved in front of them all, dying to protect them from Alphamon’s wrath. Ken and Daisuke had both stood petrified, looking on in horror as their beloved partner disintegrated.

Iori was still sobbing without any concern whether he’d be heard and maybe attacked. He couldn’t think about that anymore, could only think about so much death, right in front of them, their friends just gone. He cried and cried – it wasn’t fair. Armadimon should be at his side right now. His friends should be fine, they should be in school! Not fighting a battle they didn’t even know the reason for.

No. This was pointless. He couldn’t keep doing this, couldn’t stay so weak. He was only twelve, but he was also a Chosen Child. He might not know why they had been summoned to the Digital World again nor why they had so horribly failed – although he couldn’t hide the bitter thought that the absence of Hikari and Takeru might have had something to do with it. But he knew that he had to keep fighting. He was responsible for the safety of his friends and of this world. He closed his eyes, allowing the last tears to run down his cheeks. He had to be calm somehow. Think clearly. The portal had to be here somewhere, he just had to find it and travel back in it somehow. Then he’d find Ken again, or Miyako, or Daisuke, and they’d figure something out together. They were weakest when alone, but they didn’t have to be, not for much longer. He started crossing backwards and forwards between desert and grassland as often as he possibly could and as long as his injured ankle still supported him. He was dimly aware that he probably looked like a maniac, switching between the two different terrains almost constantly, but never really going anywhere. Occasionally, he still called out his friends’ names even though he really knew that it was pointless. He kept going until it was evening and the sun had started setting again. Exhausted, he almost collapsed in the soft grass. He couldn’t keep doing this. He wasn’t helping Ken in any way if he just exhausted himself until he couldn’t move anymore. He had to find shelter where he could spend the night, rest a little and then go back to looking for his friends. They were all separated now, and Iori couldn’t help but wonder if that had all been part of an insidious plan to make them weaker by ensuring that they couldn’t fight together. He had to find his friends again, all of them, and then they’d be so much better prepared to face whatever the Digital World was throwing at them now. They had always been so much better off when they were together.

Groaning, he sat up again. His throat burnt – he had to remember not only to find shelter but also a well of some sorts. Maybe a ramen spring since he could feel his empty stomach protesting as well.

Slowly, he got to his feet and then stumbled onwards, this time in the direction of the lush green meadow where food, drink and shelter were probably more easily found than in the desert, even if it was not nearly as threatening as the first one he’d been in today.

Iori had stumbled across the meadow for a few steps when he came upon a few rocks and some
Gotsumon on them, taking in the last of the evening some. Warily, he approached them. Normally, they were friendly Digimon, but with all that had happened, he didn’t want to take any chances.

“Look, there’s a human.”
“Wasn’t there some rule about humans not being allowed anymore?”
“Rule? What rule? Do we have rules now?”
“I don’t know, I think Gennai-san said-”
“Look, he’s seen us!”

A bit sheepishly, Iori limped towards them, bowed in greeting and offered a quiet “Good evening” to them. They eyed him curiously, but nodded back politely enough.

“Excuse me, I… I think I’m lost. I must have come here through a portal or something like that. You… you wouldn’t know how I can get back through it, would you?”

The Gotsumon looked at each other, then back at Iori. “There is no portal, here,” one of them said and looked around as if to confirm it. “But there are data errors over there – it’s dangerous to go there, and some don’t ever come back!”

The others nodded vigorously while Iori’s mind reeled from what he had heard. Data errors? That didn’t sound good at all… Had they been trapped inside one of those data errors? Was that what the red desert was? If so, how could he get back into it to find his friends?

“Everything is becoming more dangerous,” the Gotsumon continued, “there’s more and more Digimon becoming wild, you know? Wild and aggressive. It’s like they can’t even think anymore.”

One of them nodded towards Iori. “You should go home before it gets dark, human. You’ll be in danger here.”

Iori only nodded, as if in a daze, and stumbled away from them. Going home… He couldn’t go home if he wanted to. He hadn’t seen a television set that he could use as a gate anywhere nearby, he didn’t have his digivice anymore – had Alphamon destroyed it? He had no idea – and even if that hadn’t been the case, he couldn’t just go home and leave his friends to their fate.

Tired and numb, he walked on until he came to a little tree, just high enough to protect him a little, at least from smaller Digimon, but not too high for him to climb. Since he didn’t know what else he could do now, he climbed up and settled in the crutch. He was asleep as soon as he’d closed his eyes.

*****************************************************************************

Iori woke up at dawn and blinked sluggishly into the early morning night. His eyes burnt from the tears he’d shed yesterday. His arm still hurt, but when he pushed up his sleeve to check, he was relieved to see that the bleeding at stopped. Above him, some pink fruit were hanging in the tree. He grabbed one and bit into it – beyond caring whether it was actually good for humans to eat or not. When he’d finished his meager breakfast, he climbed down and saw that a little brook was flowing by just a couple of steps behind his tree. He limped to it and drank a few gulps from his hands. He removed his right shoe as slowly and carefully as he could only to find his foot red and swollen. Gingerly, he put it into the water to cool his hurting ankle.
Iori left his foot hanging in the brook and leant back into the wet grass, staring up at the deceptively friendly-looking blue sky. Suddenly, a shadow passed above him, blocking out the sun. In a moment, it was gone again. Iori sat up with a groan. He hadn’t rested nearly enough, not in the tree and not just now in the grass, but the shadow unnerved him enough to make further rest impossible anyway. He shielded his eyes with one hand and looked up into the sky. There! The shadow passed by again and now he saw that it was an Airdramon circling overhead. It was steadily sinking in altitude as if preparing for a landing. And when it was close enough to the ground, he could see that the Airdramon wasn’t alone. On top of it stood a figure, both familiar and uncanningly strange. Black shoes, joined to blue overall trousers with something very much like metal shackles. A dark blue coat was flowing behind the figure in the wind. His blue hair was unruly, his face half-hidden by yellow glasses. Beneath them, there was a very familiar smirk.

Unmistakable in his blue, purple, grey and yellow regalia, even if the design had changed.

With growing horror and cold dread, Iori watched as the Digimon Kaiser slowly descended towards the brook where Iori was sitting.

Chapter End Notes

So, it seems I was inspired this week - I did not expect to be done with this chapter so quickly, but it probably helped that a) I was on a train today and b) I decided to cut it in two - for dramatic reasons ;-) 
I have added some dialogue and conflict to the last chapter, as suggested by stellaria (thank you again!), so feel free to go back and read the last part again if you want to! :)
Interlude: A State of Purity

Chapter Summary

Maki has led an obsession guide her for most of her adult life. But now that the reboot is finally complete, she has to accept that nothing has turned out as she expected...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude: A State of Purity

“This is not what we had agreed on!”

“I don’t remember agreeing to anything, Maki-san.”

“Tapirmon doesn’t remember me! That was not what the reboot was for, it was meant to –”

“It was meant to what, Maki-san? It accomplished exactly what I intended. What Yggdrasil intended. It restored the Digital World to a state of purity before you humans started interfering. Naturally, it has also affected the memories of your partner…I do not understand why you act so surprised.”

“I thought it wasn’t a complete reboot anyway…”

“Of course not. A complete reboot is impossible. The Digital World is a living, breathing entity, much like the human world.” He smirked when he called it human, as if he wasn’t entirely agreeing with that description, either, but chose to stay with it for Maki’s sake. “It’s not a computer game, but your kind has always found that surprisingly hard to accept. Anyway, what is your problem? Tapirmon is alive again, that is what you wanted, is it not?”

“But he doesn’t remember me!”

“Why does it matter? This attitude is why we have to do all this. Digimon do not exist for your sake! They do not exist to be blindly partnered to human creatures, enslaved to you, just to add to your self-fulfillment. They are not a part of you, whatever you or the other so-called Chosen Children may believe. You must accept that, or you can never be a part of this world.”

He scoffed. “Most of you humans will never understand. That is why a complete separation is so crucial. Why it was essential that the Chosen Children would not be remembered by this world. That is what Yggdrasil wants.”

He looked at her with a cold stare. “Besides, you had no qualms with the knowledge that the so-called partner Digimon of the others would lose their memories, too.” He smiled. “Curious. You seem to care little for your own kind and not for the Digimon either – not even your own partner.
You’d rather see Tapirmon dead than without knowledge of you?”

Maki growled. “Shut up! Shut up!” She was all the more insistent because she knew that at least part of it was true. Her obsession had not allowed her to consider anything else but Project Reboot. The return of her partner had been her top priority, her only real thought for years. It had led her to cooperate with this version of Gennai, with his master, Yggdrasil, too, even though she had never seen the mysterious creature and hardly knew what it really wanted. “But Tapirmon’s gone now, Tapirmon fled from me!” She couldn’t understand it. They were supposed to have a bond, were they not? If that wasn’t the case, then what had she really accomplished? What had she sold her soul for? Had all this been worth it?

“Good. Tapirmon shows more wisdom than the rest of these groveling, pitiful slaves…”

Gennai was not her ally. Yggdrasil was not her ally. She had been used.

“What are you going to do now?” She asked, ostensibly calmer now, but still seething inside. “The Chosen Children got away. Meicrackmon is Meicoomon again without having done much damage. Was that the plan?” She knew she probably shouldn’t provoke him. He’d shown already that he was volatile – and she knew for certain that he wouldn’t hesitate before attacking her just because she was a woman. But she didn’t care.

“Of course not.” A hint of tension was in his voice; he frowned, discontent that he was being challenged. “But I will find them again. I will destroy them as Yggdrasil has ordered. Once the Chosen are out of the way and the two worlds are separated, phase 2 will begin.”

“Conquest?”

“Conquest.”

He was typing something into the keyboard in front of him, his face partly illuminated by the screens, but everything else was dark. She tried to see what he had written, but she only partly understood the trinary code he was using. Before she could try to make sense of it, he shut the screen down.

“None of your business,” he said coldly. “If you wish to remain in my fortress, you ought to make yourself useful. Check on the prisoners.”

“Prisoners?” Mochizuki Meiko, of course, but he had spoken in the plural. Maki wondered if he was referring to Meicoomon, who was currently suspended in a tank – to ensure that it would not wreak havoc once again, at least not without Gennai’s control. She didn’t think that he was opposed to spreading the infections as such, but rather sought to control the volatile power within the catlike Digimon himself.

“Yes, the prisoners. Do I really have to repeat myself?” he snarled. “Go!” He waved his hand dismissively and carelessly indicated the direction she should take.

Maki turned around and walked towards the presumed cells. This was not how she had envisaged it at all. This was not success. She did not want to work for this maniac who seemed to hate her and all other humans equally. But what other choice did she have now
Chapter End Notes

Just a short bit to interrupt the main plot a little and keep you wondering what's happening with our main heroes and heroines ;-)
The Kaiser

Chapter Summary

Iori has been captured by the Digimon Kaiser. Will he be able to figure out who he really is? Will he manage to escape? And what's with the red countdown in the sky?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Three: The Kaiser

He sat as far away from the impostor as the limited space on top of the Airdramon’s head would allow but he kept observing him closely. It was uncanny how much he looked like Ken. If Iori hadn’t known better, he might have been convinced that it really was Ken, but even if his friend wasn’t currently too injured to be pulling off something like this, he would never have believed it. It had taken him a long time to accept Ken as a part of their group and to forgive him for his crimes, that much was true. He had been wary, suspicious even, when Ken had first started fighting alongside them instead of against them. But once he had realised that Ken’s remorse had been genuine, the distance between them had become less and less over time. Ken was his friend – and as his friend he knew enough about him to be absolutely certain that he would never again become the Kaiser. There was nothing that could cause Ken to plunge into that kind of darkness again. Unless… if something happened to Daisuke, if Daisuke…died, then- No. There was no way Ken could have recovered enough in the meantime to be physically able to design and program a new Kaiser outfit, to subdue this Airdramon to his wills and eventually capture Iori. A shock like losing Daisuke could maybe push Ken over the edge and reactivate that Spore, but he was too weak to do anything about it, even if something had happened to Daisuke and he’d somehow learnt about it. No, Ken was probably still lying alone and afraid in that awful desert. How could he doubt him even if it was just for an instant? Iori let his head drop, disappointed in himself. The Kaiser, for the first time since taking flight with Iori, looked back at him and flashed his teeth in an almost manic grin and Iori got the incredibly absurd impression that his captor had read his mind and was satisfied that he’d managed to sow doubts… Iori pressed his lips together and refused to look away until the Kaiser gazed ahead again, apparently ordering the Airdramon which direction, though Iori didn’t know how – he hadn’t seen a Dark Ring yet.

So he couldn’t be Ken. Yet he looked like an exact copy – his face, his body, even the way he moved – nothing seemed to indicate that he was a fake, except perhaps the fact that he didn’t speak. The clothes were different, though, as if they had received an upgrade. The shoulder pads were purple instead of gold now, but gold still featured in the design, in the linings and seams of the costume. The cape had gone, replaced by a dark coat. All in all, it looked like a slimmer, more adult version of the original emperor’s outfit – it might very well have been what a fourteen-year-old Ken would have come up with, had he been under the influence of the Dark Spore now instead of at age eleven. Still, he knew it wasn’t him now – all doubts extinguished by the fact that Ken still had to be where he left him. All the more reason to figure out what was going on and find a way to return to his friend or at least send help.
“Who are you?” Iori asked, not really counting on an answer – the Kaiser hadn’t spoken to him at all since he had been taken prisoner, so why should he now?

As expected, the Kaiser only smirked. Iori clenched his fists. The smirk was so familiar, yet so unlike Ken’s usual smile – and he knew what it would do to Ken to see this nightmare version of himself now, and it just made Iori dig his fingernails into his palms more tightly and bite his lips in frustration. He looked away. There was nothing more to be gained from watching him at this moment and the eerie resemblance to his friend only served to unnerve him.

Instead, Iori looked down at the Digital World, which seemed to be passing by beneath them at an almost dizzying speed. At first glance, everything seemed normal. The same trees, hills, mountains, towns that he had once travelled through and fought for with his friends. The longer he watched, though, the more inconsistencies he seemed to notice. Not the usual eccentric combinations of scenery that seemed to be one of the hallmarks of the Digital World – a vending machine in a forest, a line of phone boxes on a lonely beach, an abandoned rail car in the middle of an island wouldn’t have surprised him at all. But this was different, more sinister. There were hills that suddenly broke off and became lakes without any reasonable transition, waterfalls that had stopped flowing in mid-air. These breaks in the landscape were surrounded by smudged edges, rough blocks like pixels on an old television set. Like their data had been corrupted somehow. Occasionally, he could see even clearer signs of some sort of corruption – the air sometimes buzzed and he could almost see the code that made up the Digital World shine through. Sometimes, holes appeared – far enough beneath them not to worry him directly, but so clearly sinister and menacing that Iori couldn’t help but wonder if whatever was wrong with the Digital World was beyond their abilities to handle. He could also see signs of a different sort of trouble – not quite the kind that ripped holes in the fabric of reality as these red gaping holes appearing out of nowhere seemed to do, but frightening nonetheless. Smoke was rising from a village or a meadow below them, one forest was nearly flattened to the ground, and once or twice, he saw flashes of light and heard thunderous blasts, and it seemed to him that there were Digimon fighting against each other. He looked back to the Kaiser who had a satisfied smile on his face – the destruction seemed to please him…

“Tell me where we’re going at least,” he demanded, his voice slightly trembling, but still determined.

His captor chose not to answer, remaining as silent as ever. Iori scoffed. “The stony silence isn’t exactly helping your act, the real Ken could hardly ever shut up as the Kaiser…” he muttered under his breath. He wasn’t nearly as confident as he acted but he couldn’t let the fake see his fear, not if he could help it.

A low chuckle emanated from the Kaiser. It was the first sound that he had heard from him, and it was much, much deeper than Ken’s voice. Surprisingly, though, it was not entirely unfamiliar, but he had heard too little to be able to properly identify it.

They kept flying over the devastated landscape of the Digital World for quite some time. Iori’s stomach grumbled, but he wouldn’t ask the Kaiser for food. Whoever he was, Iori was sure that he wasn’t one to grant favours if he didn’t have anything to gain by it. Still, he wished that they would stop, so he could stretch his legs. His position on the Airdramon’s head wasn’t exactly comfortable, and his arms, bound tightly behind his back, were beginning to hurt. Soon after he’d thought about his discomfort, he noticed that the Airdramon was in a slow descent. Iori’s eyes widened – could the Kaiser really hear his thoughts? But even if he could, he didn’t seem to be inclined to answer them, but was more than likely following his own agenda. They’d passed through a force field that shielded a city like a dome and landed among skyscrapers – could it be the same one they had freed from Ken’s rule three years ago?
Instead of giving Iori something to eat – and Iori hadn’t managed to stop himself from hoping for some food despite of how unlikely it was that his silent abductor would suddenly become helpful – the Kaiser had walked Iori to a street lamp and, with a snap of his fingers, managed to tie him to it with a metal band that had seemingly materialised out of thin air. He must be able to reprogram the data around him, Iori thought, though he couldn’t tell how he did it. He had no laptop and the shackles around his wrists were different to those Ken-as-the-Kaiser had worn – Ken had had a sort of display on one of his wrists, into which he could type and code, but the shackles on this one seemed to be only decorative.

Iori kept watching him. He needed to figure out what was going on. Apparently, whatever he needed to do now did require an actual computer – Iori knew too little about these things to fully understand and wished he had Miyako at his side, but he knew enough to see that the Kaiser was going to use a phone booth standing opposite of Iori’s lamp post for something. It didn’t look like a phone at all; it looked more like someone had taken a normal phone box and installed a complete computer inside it. The Kaiser inserted a small device into it – a CD maybe? – and began to type.

Soon, the hologram of a cat-like Digimon appeared next to the phone booth, slowly revolving around itself. Iori had never seen it before. It was small, about the same size as Hikari’s Tailmon, had orange fur and green eyes, and it didn’t look particularly dangerous. But then it glitched, turned monstrous for a second, and then it was gone, replaced by what Iori could only describe as clouds of data, whirling and floating in the air, flashing in red and purple. And then that was gone, too, replaced by a window. Iori couldn’t fully see through it, but what he did glimpse looked a lot like the real world to him.

“I intercepted the message.” A woman’s voice came out of the window, curt, professional, as if reporting to the Kaiser without any prompting from the still silent figure. “Only the Digimon have heard it, but I managed to convince them that it was about the reboot. But they won’t remember any of it soon, so it doesn’t matter much, anyway.” There was a pause. “It’s not long now, is it? Before the reboot starts?” The Kaiser just nodded. “Good. What about the D3? Can I have it now? I will need it to help open the portal…”

To Iori’s horror, the Kaiser handed over a black D3 to the woman in the window together with a D-Terminal – it was Ken’s! How had the fake Kaiser managed to retrieve those?! Had he captured Ken before he’d captured Iori? Was that why he was able to impersonate him so perfectly? But… it didn’t make any sense. It had been barely a night and half a day at most since he’d left Ken – and it had only been morning when the Kaiser had caught him so there simply wasn’t enough time for anyone to capture Ken, take him somewhere, and return to capture Iori. It didn’t make any sense.

Unless, of course, the Kaiser hadn’t taken Ken as a prisoner. Maybe the Kaiser had killed Ken.

Iori’s vision was blurring. No, there had to be another explanation. Maybe the Kaiser was Ken after all, that would still be better than Ken being dead. He felt his shoulders starting to shake. The Kaiser had closed the window again and was turning towards Iori when a shape jumped down from a ledge not too far above street level, but the impact was still enough to send the Kaiser to the ground. The shape – and Iori could only see a whirl of red, light blue, light brown and lavender through his tears – ran to the phone booth and began typing something furiously. A click, a triumphant “Ha!”, and the metal band tying Iori to the lamp post fell down. The shape grabbed his hand and they both ran away from the Kaiser as fast as possible. Iori glanced back to see him quickly getting to his feet, heard him growling with rage and saw him setting after them, but before he could catch up to them, Iori was dragged into a side street and down a manhole they went.

There was a faint light illuminating the sewers, but Iori didn’t have time to look around before he was enveloped in a fierce hug. “Iori, Iori, I’m so glad to see you,” Miyako sobbed while pressing him even tighter to herself. “I thought you-“ She pulled away a bit and rubbed her eyes with her left
hand, and he noticed that she didn’t have the sling fashioned from her sleeve on anymore. Maybe
the other Chosen had found her and helped set her shoulder again? Maybe she’d lead him to
Daisuke and the others now, and together they would find the red desert again and help Ken.
Koushiro-senpai would know how to enter a distortion like that, he’d know what was going on,
would have it all figured out, and they would only have to follow his instructions to put everything
right again. Jou-senpai would know what to do about a concussion, or they’d just go back home
once they were all together again, go to a hospital and then think about what was wrong with the
Digital World…They’d have to go to Primary Village, too, as soon as possible, find Armadimon…
Iori’s vision was blurring again and he quickly wiped across his eyes, a little ashamed to cry now
that Miyako could see him.

“Come on… we’ll go to somewhere more comfortable and talk there, okay…?” She took his hand
again, more gently than before, and led him through the sewers. Once or twice, she looked at him
like she wanted to say something, but decided against it every time, instead biting her lip and
looking worried. When they finally emerged from the sewers, they didn’t enter the streets again,
but found themselves in a storage cellar, full of mechanical equipment, hard drives and circuit
boards that probably meant more to Miyako than they did to him.

“What is this place?”

“A friend’s home,” Miyako said and smiled, but she still looked tired and sad. “Come on. We’ll be
safe here for a while.” She led him upstairs to a metallic-looking living room. He’d have thought it
uncomfortable and cold, but it was clear that it was perfectly suited to its occupant’s needs –
Andromon stood in the middle of the room and ushered them to sit. “Welcome, Chosen Child,” he
said in his slightly electronic-sounding voice and gently pushed Iori towards a metal chair.
Somewhat dazed, he sat down in it. Now that he was sitting, he felt the strain of their escape on his
injured ankle, but chose not to say anything for now. He wanted to know how Miyako had ended
up here first. Andromon, as soon as his guests were settled, went about making tea, which was both
so strange and so comforting – it was the Digital World, after all – that Iori’s eyes filled with tears
again. Miyako didn’t comment on it but pushed the tea cup Andromon had handed her towards
Iori. For a few minutes, they just sat in silence, drinking their tea, but before long he noticed
Miyako shifting in her seat uncomfortably.

“…what is it, Miyako?

She looked uncertain, but in the safety of Andromon’s home she seemed more willing to ask the
question that had clearly haunted her ever since she’d found him again. “Iori…that…that wasn’t
really Ken, was it?” Her voice trembled as she said it, and she looked at him intently, desperate to
hear him deny it.

He shook his head, and instantly saw her shoulders slump in relief. “No, of course not,” he said,
perhaps even more vehemently than he’d intended because he was being reminded of his own
doubts that had flickered through his head not too long ago. “How could he? He’s not well enough.
His concussion-“

“His concussion?” Miyako frowned. “Is he still confused? He’s conscious, right? Where is he?
How did you get separated? Really, he should be better by now, if it’s only a mild concussion…
And if it isn’t…” She stopped short and looked at him worriedly.

“Better? But it hasn’t been that long, only a few hours…is it really supposed to be better that
quickly?” He bit his lip. Ken hadn’t been improving that much, not that he could tell, he’d still
thrown up when he’d left him, so did that mean it was worse than they’d thought?
Miyako frowned. “A few hours? Iori, it’s been days since I last saw you!”

He gaped at her. “D-days? No, no, that can’t be, I only left Ken yesterday evening… and you hadn’t been gone that long…”

It was her turn to stare now, but she recovered quickly. She turned around, asked Andromon if she could borrow a computer, and then hurriedly set to typing. “…something’s really wrong in the Digital World, Iori. I think it’s possible that time has just gone haywire.”

“How can time go haywire?”

“Well, time is a complicated concept in our world already, but here in the Digital World, it’s made up of data just like everything else, so if something is corrupting the Digital World’s core date, it’s bound to affect time as well…”

Iori frowned. The world he’d seen from above while flying on Kaiser’s Airdramon had certainly looked wrong. And hadn’t the Gotsunmon said something about distortions? He mentioned it to Miyako who just nodded. “That sounds about right.” She pointed at the screen in front of her. “There’s mistakes in the data – some terrible, others just minor. Or, well, it’s not so much mistakes as a different kind of coding. I can’t read it and I can’t really figure out what it’s doing… it would be really helpful if I could talk to Ken or Koushirou-senpai about it…” She trailed off. They both knew that neither was really an option right now. “Anyway,” she cleared her throat, “if that desert was really a distortion – a space where this different kind of coding is dominating – it would make sense that time would run differently there. It’s almost like a pocket dimension – no need to be in sync with the rest of the Digital World. And it did feel weird inside of it, didn’t it?”

Iori nodded. The moment they’d entered the red desert, his perception of the world around him had ever so slightly shifted. He just hadn’t worried about it too much, back then. After all, they had still been together and he’d been confident that they’d figure out together whatever was wrong with that desert or with the Digital World as a whole. “It was strange. As if we weren’t even in the Digital World anymore…” He looked up at her. “And that’s exactly what happened?”

She nodded. “Looks like it. But I still have no idea what it all means.”

“Things are changing in the Digital World.” Both looked up at Andromon. The Digimon looked back with a serious and solemn expression. “More and more Digimon are afflicted by a mysterious illness. They lose themselves and become violent. They won’t even speak, only roar.” Andromon bowed his head sadly. “Many of my friends were infected, too. That’s why you have to be careful within the city boundaries as well. Some of the Guardromon will attack friend and foe alike.”

“The Gotsunmon said something similar. And I saw Digimon fighting on the ground, too, while we were flying…”

Miyako nodded. “I saw that, too, on my way here.”

“It increases whenever the Dark One is around. But I think the infection itself is being spread by a Digimon that he follows or that follows him.”

Iori looked at the Digimon curiously. “The Dark One? Do you mean the Digimon Kaiser?”

Andromon shook his head and was about to start an explanation when Miyako beat him to it. “I think he means Gennai-san…”
“Gennai-san?! But-”

“I’ve seen him. Just after I left the desert. He was dressed in black and…he didn’t look right. At first, I thought I could go to him for help. I thought he’d come back with me and help us find Daisuke, and get out of there, but-“ She shuddered. “He just didn’t look right. Like he was possessed. It was eerie.”

Gennai-san, possessed? If that was true, they were in even more trouble than he had thought. Gennai-san hadn’t often been of much help since he tended to leave the children fight on their own, only intervening when he absolutely had to, but at least, they could always trust that he’d be on their side, ready to step in if necessary. But if that was no longer the case…

“Yes, he certainly looks like Gennai-san. But I do not think that he is the same as he used to be,” Andromon said. “He assembles Digimon around him – by what means he persuades them, I don’t know – and he talks about you, Chosen Children. He is saying terrible things about you. But he takes care not to be seen by too many, I think.” Andromon shook his head sadly. “I don’t think that many Digimon, apart from his followers perhaps, know that he might be connected to the illness. But the infection itself is spread by a Meicoomon. I think he chases after it, but I am not sure. They might be working together.”

Miyako looked at him, the question already clear from her expression before she even said anything. “Have you ever heard of Meicoomon before? I sure haven’t, what’s that supposed to be?”

Iori bit his lip and hummed softly. “I…ah…is it an orange cat-like Digimon?” he asked Andromon, who nodded in agreement. “The Digimon Kaiser had a copy of it on a disk, I think. And he was using it to open a window to our world.”

Miyako whistled sharply. “I don’t think that was a window, I think that’s probably another kind of distortion. I saw them when I was walking around trying to find a way back to you and Ken. They just open up in mid-air – I saw glimpses of Odaiba and Haneda airport. Thought I was losing it, really, but apparently it really was portals!” She sighed. “I saw a Kuwagamon fly through one… I hope it didn’t cause too much damage in our world…”

Iori hummed again and turned his cup of tea around in his hand. This was all too much for him to comprehend. Distortions, violent Digimon causing trouble, time itself being corrupted… And Gennai-san at the heart of it all? And what about that cat-like Digimon? Or was Gennai-san trying to stop it, maybe? Was he chasing after it, as Andromon had said, to stop the spread of the infection? But how did the fake Digimon Kaiser fit into this? Was he an enemy of Gennai-san’s who had assumed Ken’s evil persona as a disguise – and who had now managed to capture that so-called Meicoomon? Or had the Kaiser been controlling it all along? His head was whirling with so many conflicting thoughts and questions that it was starting to hurt. He slumped forward a little bit, utterly drained.

Miyako noticed it immediately. “You should try and get some rest…I’ve already been able to recover a little thanks to Andromon, but you haven’t had a break since…since…” She stopped, unable to refer to the dreadful battle with Alphamon that had started all their troubles.

He shook his head. “It’s okay… I want to know how you got here, first. What happened when you left us?”

“…if you’re sure... Well, I walked around the desert for a while, trying to find Daisuke.”
“Any traces of him?” Iori asked hopefully, but Miyako shook her head. Just before, though, there was a moment of hesitation. A quick glance to the side as if she didn’t want to meet his gaze. A chill spread through him from deep inside. He didn’t want to think about what that little hesitation could mean.

“I was just about to turn back to you when I saw a flickering in the air. I walked towards it, and suddenly, the desert was just gone. I was on a meadow, flowers, deep blue sky, sunshine – it was almost like a picture book, but I could only think about you two. How to get back to you if I couldn’t even find the desert anymore… I must have been shouting at thin air for hours until a few Floramon came by and asked me what I was doing. I asked them if they could tell me how to get to the red desert but they didn’t know of any red deserts, only normal ones, and pointed in a direction.” She shrugged. “Since I didn’t have any other option, I walked that way for a while, hoping I’d find you somehow…” Iori looked at her cautiously. She tried to sound casual but Iori could see that she was fighting hard to remain in control of her worries and fears. Was it for his sake, he wondered, because he was the youngest and she thought she had to protect him? Or did she have to do it in order to remain calm for her own sake? He pushed Miyako’s tea cup, which she’d left standing on the metallic table, in her direction. She gave him a small smile, took the cup with both hands and drank a little of the hot liquid. “It probably was much the same for you, Iori? But I think I might have left the distortion at a different location. You said you flew here on the Kai- on that Airdramon?”

He nodded, and so did she.

“I walked here. It took me three or four days, I think. As soon as I saw these distortions showing up, and the fights going on, I had to slow down, though. I didn’t want to be attacked so I had to move carefully. I was really lucky that I met Andromon outside the city dome.” She looked at the Digimon gratefully. “He carried me here. He helped me with my arm, too.”

She flexed her arm and then winced. “Still a bit raw, though. What about you, Iori?” She moved closer to him. “You were injured, too weren’t you?”

“It’s not so bad-“

“Shush! We had to take care of Ken ‘cause he was bleeding so bad, and my shoulder, so we couldn’t really check up on your injuries, I’m sorry-“ She paused. He could see a look of pain on her face and could guess what she was thinking about. They were reunited now, but Ken was still alone, and no matter what she now said about tending to Iori’s injuries – Ken was still worse off and now he had no one to help him.

“Anyway,” her voice sounded tight, “I’ll help you if you tell me what’s wrong.”

He finally allowed her to see to his ankle – still swollen and angry-looking – and let her bandage it with Andromon’s kind assistance and some duct tape from his storage room. After that, Miyako used it to tape a tissue to the scratch on his arm even though it had already stopped bleeding.

Andromon, who had watched them tend to their injuries, suddenly got up and, when he returned laid two futons on the floor of his living room. At their astonished looks, he smiled. “I am well aware that my idea of comfort is not necessarily for everyone. Especially not humans. And I have always wanted to be prepared in case my friends from the human world ever came back to visit,” he said, gently. “Sleep now, you must both be tired.”

Miyako and Iori thanked the Ultra-level Digimon for his hospitality but he waved their gratitude
aside. “I am always happy to help the Chosen. You have done much for this world, and I hope you will find a solution to its current illness as well.” With that, he wished them good night – Iori dimly noted that he had no idea what time it was but he was so tired that it might as well have been midnight – and left them alone.

As soon as Andromon was out of the room, Iori let himself fall onto the futon. Miyako sat down next to him. “You okay?” she asked softly. Iori blinked at her, but didn’t answer. She still nodded as if understanding and laid down at his side. Andromon needn’t have bothered with two futons. Miyako wrapped her arms around him and Iori was more than willing to let his friend comfort him. He didn’t think he could have slept at all if it wasn’t for her hug – as if that hug would be able to protect him from whatever dangers they would still have to face. He knew, of course, that she couldn’t protect him, but for now, they were safe, and having her that close reminded him that he wasn’t alone. He sniffed a little. “Miyako…?”

“How?”

“Do you think…do you think they’re alright? Daisuke and Ken?”

She didn’t answer directly, and Iori felt that chill creep up inside him again.

“…of course they’re going to be alright. Daisuke… Daisuke’s probably too stubborn to die, anyway.”

She didn’t say anything else, and he didn’t press her any further. Instead, he listened to her breath, trying to focus on that rather than on the distant bangs and cracks he could hear now that everything else was silent. Were they coming from outside or was it just his memory of the battle with Alphamon coming back to haunt him?

After a while, he managed to ignore those noises, wherever they came from – but he could still hear Miyako crying softly, and he was sure he heard her whisper “Hawkmon” into the futon. Her quiet sobs were the last thing he heard before he drifted off to sleep.
they just ran on. They had to.

It seemed like an eternity to Iori, but eventually, they reached the city gates – unguarded, so they could escape unhindered. They ran on for a while even after they had left the battle ground, not allowing themselves a break until they were well away from Andromon’s city.

Iori’s ankle hurt and he was out of breath and nearing collapse when they finally stopped. They had reached a grassland area and Miyako looked in all directions – probably to find out where they had ended up now. “It looks like Gear Savannah. Koushiro-senpai mentioned that once, but I thought we were on the Server Continent. Gear Savannah is on File Island.” She was frowning. “I wonder if that is because of the distortions as well…”

Iori hardly listened. He dropped to his hands and knees, trying to breathe normally again. She had stopped talking and knelt down in front of him. “Iori? Iori? Are you okay? I’m sorry… Did I push you too hard? Were we going too fast? I just wanted to get away from that city, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” She hugged him and he flung his arms around her, quietly sobbing into the remains of her shirt. “Shh… we’re alright… we’re going to be okay…” He could feel her shifting, but didn’t move. “Look, there’s a… I think there’s some trees over there. Let’s go there, they’ll hide us a bit, and we can rest and decide what we’re going to do next. Okay? Maybe we’ll find some fruit to eat, too…”

Slowly, he nodded. She helped him to his feet, and together they walked towards the little wood – oddly out of place in the middle of the savannah, but at least not extraordinarily so considering the standards of the Digital World. They sat down in the shade of an apple tree. Miyako reached up to pick apples and handed him some, but he didn’t feel hungry. He didn’t feel much right now except for that dreadful cold.

Miyako sat down again, cross-legged, and went through the bag she’d grabbed when they’d escaped Andromon’s home. Iori saw now that it was the olive-green bag she always had with her when they entered the Digital World. Inside it were her D3, a bottle of water, a few bits and pieces from Andromon’s technical equipment and a small laptop she must have pinched from Andromon’s storage room. He saw something else glinting in it but Miyako quickly closed the bag.

She had caught him looking and grinned weakly. “What about you? Got anything useful with you? What about your digivice?”

He shook his head and looked to the ground. He hadn’t seen his D3 since the battle with Alphamon. It must have been thrown away from him and then got buried in the sand. There was no hope in finding it now. He hung his head even lower. What kind of Chosen Child was he? No digivice, no partner. He was of no use, couldn’t help his friends, couldn’t help himself. Without Miyako he’d be dead already. Like Armadimon. He gasped for air – breathing had become so hard and he felt an oppressive weight on his chest. If only he was stronger, if only he didn’t care so much, didn’t grieve so much. He thought he understood now, maybe for the first time, why Ken had found it easier to turn into a tyrant, feared but alone, instead of dealing with that searing pain that accompanied the loss of a loved one.

Miyako put her arm around his shoulders. “We’ll find your D3. We have to go back, anyway, you know, to find Ken. And then we’re going to find Primary Village, and our partners’ digi-eggs. I bet Wormmon and Armadimon and H-hawkmon will be happy to see us again, don’t you think?”

She still didn’t mention Daisuke or Veemon, but Iori was too scared to ask her why.
“What do you say? Should we stay here or go on? It’s a good shelter, but still a little too close to the city if you ask me…”

He just nodded. He didn’t really care what they were going to do next – one option seemed as good or bad as any other, at least as long as they had no clear idea what was happening to them and why. He let her decide for them both and allowed her to help him up and support him as they slowly walked on.

They’d walked across the savannah for most of the day, occasionally sharing a sip from Miyako’s water bottle when mountains had become visible on the horizon. They’d decided to get to them as quickly as they could, in the hopes of finding a spring to re-fill their water bottle with, or maybe a friendly Digimon who could help them on. Maybe they’d even find a TV set that could serve as a portal to their world – not to return, they couldn’t do that without Daisuke and Ken, but to send a message to the other Chosen. They hadn’t come to their aid when they’d been attacked by Alphamon and they hadn’t tried to contact them so it stood to reason that they didn’t know anything was wrong yet. Maybe the time in their world was passing much slower than in the Digital World now, like it had done when Taichi and his group had first traveled here? That had to be it. It was hardly plausible that they’d been missing for weeks - and it would be weeks, counting the days they’d spent in the Digital World before coming across Alphamon in the red desert and the few days that Miyako had spent alone while Iori and Ken – and Daisuke, probably – had been trapped within the distortion – without the others noticing. Hikari and Takeru would be so worried if Daisuke and Miyako hadn’t come to school or if Iori failed to show up in their apartment house. Not to mention their parents who’d be beside themselves with fear for their safety. No, the most plausible explanation was that hardly any time had passed at all in the real world. They would only have to send out a message to their friends and as soon as they were alerted to what was going on, they’d come to their aid.

Iori and Miyako made good progress. The sun was shining, but it wasn’t too hot, and there was even a little breeze to cool them. It was almost pleasant, and only the occasional scorch mark on the grass reminded them that anything was amiss in the Digital World. That is, until a giant red countdown appeared in the sky.

“What is that?!” Iori and Miyako both looked up in alarm. A giant red “10:00” had appeared in the sky – several, actually, they were repeating themselves all across the sky, as if designed to be visible to everyone on the digital globe - and now it was slowly counting down. Iori looked up at his friend, hoping that she’d have an explanation that didn’t sound too much like “Giant Bomb Explosion”.

“What the heck…?!” Miyako pulled the little laptop out of her bag and then took a few of the electronic tidbits from Andromon’s place. “I need to…I need to access the code for that somehow, find out what it’s doing,” she murmured frantically, while Iori stared at the numbers slowly decreasing.

“Miyako!”

“What?”

“The Digimon Kaiser… when he opened a window to our world, he talked to a woman, and she said something about a reboot…what if that-”

“A reboot? But…how would that even be possible…no, that…” She was typing on the little stolen
laptop now. Apparently, she’d found a cable that would connect to the little device – and she’d plugged the other end into her digivice, which was beeping urgently now, though Iori had no idea what it was doing.

“The Digital World can’t be rebooted like a faulty computer, that’s ridiculous,” she was still muttering to herself. “But… I mean, it could be…the scans add up…” She raised her head and the look on her face scared Iori. “I don’t know if it’s actually possible, but if it’s a reboot, I don’t know what will happen to us…we’re not a part of this world’s original design, we won’t be in its original data…”

“What…what does that mean…?” He knew what it meant, but he refused to acknowledge it. He clenched his fists to stop his hands from shaking. She didn’t answer his question, but she grabbed his hand again and pulled him close, bending over him protectively.

“Just…just stay close, okay?” Huddled together, they watched as the numbers neared zero. Miyako’s digivice between them began vibrating and emitting a warm light, but he hardly paid it any attention, eyes fixed on the terrible countdown. When the timer hit “00:00”, there was a flash of bright white light, and then-

Chapter End Notes

The Iori-POV chapters are set a tiny bit before the main plot, but they have almost caught up now - so I hope that wasn't too confusing, especially with the post-reboot Interlude in the middle of it! However, considering the time-is-going-haywire theme I have going on, I thought it was oddly appropriate ;-) Anyway, you'll see soon how the different narrative strands are leading up to one another, I hope! :}
Contamination

Chapter Summary

The Chosen Children are slowly figuring out the nature of the reboot, thanks to Ken’s account of what’s happened so far - but what caused the infections in the first place? Why did Alphamon attack and just what exactly is contaminating the Digital World?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 4 Contamination

Every step took an enormous amount of effort, as if he was wading through water. He was slow and the others had to take turns to walk next to him so that he wouldn’t fall too far behind. Perhaps they thought he was being a nuisance. Ken bit his lip. It was true that they’d probably be a lot quicker if he’d let himself be carried. He was still weak, he was feeling dizzy and his head still hurt, but as soon as he had been able to stand up and walk more or less straight without throwing up, he’d insisted on walking himself.

He hardly spoke to any of them. He couldn’t, he didn’t know what to say. Even if they were his real friends, they weren’t the same. Not if they couldn’t remember any of the others, couldn’t even remember him before they’d found him. And he still wasn’t sure if their story was true, if he could trust them at all. They were walking through wet grassland now – fertile and green because of several little brooks flowing through it. They were following one right now, thought he didn’t quite know why or if the others had a certain destination in mind that they were trying to reach. He hadn’t bothered to ask after they’d managed to leave the desert behind them. He hadn’t even noticed when they’d made that transition because he’d still been too disoriented to notice much, anyway. Taichi had carried him most of the way, but at some point, he’d become too heavy and Yamato had offered to take over. Ken’s head drooped at the thought and he pressed his lips together in shame. Taichi had been very careful not to move him too much or too quickly when handing him over to Yamato – and he’d been grateful for that because he didn’t exactly need the further embarrassment of vomiting all over Yamato as well, but at the same time he had never felt so weak and helpless, not capable of even protesting while the two older boys essentially had to treat him like a little child.

He had been so engulfed in his own thoughts that the sudden touch of a hand at his elbow made him yelp and flinch back in alarm. It was Hikari. Ken just stared at her, unsure what she wanted from him. Only belatedly did he realise that the way she looked at him probably meant that she had said something and was waiting for a response.

“…sorry…” he said and had to clear his throat – he could hardly hear himself. “…I am sorry, what did you say?”

Hikari looked concerned and he regretted not having heard her question the first time while at the same time desperately wishing to be left alone. He didn’t belong to them, not anymore. Maybe he never really had. Clearly…clearly, those eight shared a connection that he just didn’t. They didn’t
care about him, Daisuke, Miyako and Iori as much as they cared about each other – how else could they have forgotten them?

“I asked how you were feeling, Ken-kun,” she said slowly, and he almost missed it again, “...and whether you are still okay walking? Niisan said he could carry you again if you wanted...”

“No!” He’d have shaken his head vehemently, too, if he hadn’t known that that would cause him another piercing headache. “I can walk.” He chose not to answer her question about how he was feeling. He hardly knew himself.

Hikari didn’t look like she was satisfied with his answer, staying close to him, and shooting him worried glances occasionally. Ken walked on. Slowly, uncertainly, but as steadfast as he possibly could.

“Ken-kun, you look so pale, are you sure you can go on...?” She was only worried about him, he knew that, but he couldn’t bear her questions. He wished they weren’t trying so hard to keep him with the group when he couldn’t keep up and was clearly only a burden to everyone. “Feel free to go ahead if I’m too slow,” he said, perhaps a little too sharp. Hikari opened her mouth and closed it, too startled for a reply. Ken looked at her. Plotmon was snuggly cradled in her left arm, so obviously content. He took a wider step forward because he needed to get away from Hikari, suddenly unable to look at her and her partner. He regretted it instantly as his dizziness became more pronounced and his injured leg wasn’t strong enough to fully support him, causing him to wobble on his feet. Hikari was immediately at his side, using her free hand to steady him. He shouldn’t have been so irritated with her... “I’m fine, I’m fine...” he mumbled, no longer sharp, but miserable.

“No, you’re not, and you know it. Ken-kun, why won’t you let us help you more? We’re your friends...”

But you’re not, he wanted to say. If you were, you’d know Daisuke, too.

He cleared his throat. “I think the others have stopped.”

For a moment, she only looked at him, as if processing what he’d just said, and then she turned her head. “…they must have found a nice spot for a break...” She didn’t let go of his arm. “Come on, we’ll go to them together...” Hikari said softly. If she was angry because he had snapped at her before, she hid it well. Too tired to protest anymore, he allowed her to support him while they slowly walked to the others. Plotmon had woken up and was looking at him with curiosity. His vision was blurring again, but it had nothing to do with the concussion. He was glad that Hikari said nothing.

Ken sank down on the grass as soon as they reached Taichi, Yamato and the rest of them. Nobody seemed to expect him to help set up camp – whether it was only for a short break or for longer since he had no idea what time it actually was – so he remained where he was and watched them make the little spot where they stopped more comfortable. Hikari, Plotmon still in her arm, had walked away from him – good, he couldn’t cope with her concern – and stood with Takeru now, quietly talking. They looked in his direction, but he avoided looking back. Taichi was giving instructions, or so it seemed, while Koromon sat on his shoulders and whined about being hungry. The Digimon needed to eat soon in order to evolve to their Child form at least, he realised, or else they’d be completely defenseless if they were to be attacked. Ken shivered slightly and had to close his eyes for a second and count to ten to keep his breath even. When he opened them again, the
others had almost finished making their preparations. Sora had spread a blanket on the grass and Yokomon was helping her setting out food from her bag. Clearly, unlike Ken, Daisuke, Miyako and Iori, they had known they were going to the Digital World and prepared for it. He wondered what had happened in the Real World while they had been gone… How long had they been missing anyway? Or not missing, just gone, if no one had even noticed…

“Ken-kun?” He looked up to see Yamato extending a hand to him. “Come sit with us on the blanket. We’re finally going to eat and you sure look like you could need some food.” He took Yamato’s hand to get up, but let go of it as soon as he was standing. He was not too weak to walk a few steps to the blanket… Yamato still walked with him, apparently ready to catch him should he fall. What good was their concern now? Maybe if they’d looked for them earlier…if they’d been with them in the first place… Ken hated those feelings welling up in him because he knew where they could lead… but he couldn’t help wondering…if the others had fought with them…if Takeru and Hikari had been there, if their Digimon had Jogressed with Miyako’s and Iori’s partners, then maybe they would have had a chance…

“…we didn’t…we didn’t forget you completely, you know… I asked the agents about you, they said you were okay… I don’t know why they lied to us…” Yamato had never been one to speak much, but he seemed to have a strong need to explain himself to Ken. What was he expecting? That Ken would say that all was fine now that they’d found and helped him? That they were all together again? They weren’t, regardless of what they remembered or didn’t. He didn’t reply, but he didn’t complain, either, when Yamato made him sit down on the blanket and took the place next to him. Tsunomon was sitting on Yamato’s lap now, looking almost bashful, but certainly still pleased, making Ken wonder what this so-called reboot had actually done to the Digimon. They might not remember their past experiences, but the bond between their human partners and them still seemed to exist.

“Can’t I have more, Jou? I’m so hungry.”
“No, I told you, Bukamon, we need to ration our supplies carefully…”

“Mh, boring!” The little seal-like Digimon ruffled his partner’s hair with affection, and Ken had to look away. So it seemed that the partner Digimon didn’t remember their partners – or anyone else they had met before –, but were still as attached to them as before. Would Wormmon remember him? He gripped his chest – there was an aching hole in it, an empty space, which filled him with dread and made it hard to breathe. Wormmon… He’d tried his best not to think of his best friend, not to think of how Imperialdramon had been there one moment and then completely gone the next… but how could he not think of Wormmon when everyone else around him was cuddling, arguing, talking with their Digimon?

“Would you like some onigiri and some tea?”
The question startled him. Suddenly, the offered items were placed on the blanket in front of him and Sora softly laid a hand on his shoulder, smiling sadly. He wished they’d stop.

“Thank you, Sora-san,” he said and slowly took the onigiri. Maybe eating would distract him from the distressing thoughts whirling in his head.

Koushiro had sat down on his other side and was setting up his laptop once more, clearly not much interested in the food available, either – or anyone else, for that matter, at least not as long as he
was still preoccupied with his computer. The other Chosen had all taken a seat as well and started eating. Ken took a slow bite out of his onigiri, but it seemed completely tasteless to him. Still, he knew he had to eat if he didn’t want to become even weaker. Watching the others as they settled down on the blanket made him realise for the first time that not all was well between the Older Chosen, either; they didn’t seem as close as he’d first thought. Mimi was sitting a little apart from the others, only with Palmon at her side. She hardly ever looked in his direction, but it looked to him as she was avoiding Yamato and Takeru as well. Ken frowned. What was going on?

“We need to talk about the reboot, the desert, and about what happened to all of us.” Ken turned towards Koushiro, who, despite having spoken to all of them, had his eyes still fixed on the screen. “You are probably wondering why we had to leave so abruptly and what kind of danger the Red Desert posed to us. During my calculations at our camp site, I realised that we were inside a pocket dimension. The Red Desert is not a part of the Digital World, nor is it completely separate. I have not yet decoded it enough to be certain of its exact nature, but what I have found it so far made our speedy departure absolutely essential.” All eyes were fixed on Koushiro, but he hardly took any notice. “It seems that time is defined differently within the pocket dimension, which means that it is not necessarily synchronous with the time in the Digital World or in the Real World. However, unlike the time difference during our first adventure as DigiDestined, the time inside the Red Desert was passing considerably slower than elsewhere. I do not know how much time has passed in the Digital World, or in the Real World, for that matter, while we were inside, but it is entirely plausible that one could spend only a day within and be gone from the outside world for years. The connection also seems less than stable, which means that the flow of time may speed up or slow down, so there is no guaranteed way of calculating how much time has actually passed. You will all agree with me that leaving quickly was our only option.”

“Are you telling me we could have got out of there and be, like, a hundred years in the future?!?” Taichi looked a little spooked at the thought.

“That would indeed have been possible, Taichi-san. But I do not think it likely that our time lapse has been so extreme.”

Koushiro pointed towards Ken. “Ken-kun’s remarks about the reboot first led me to explore the coding of our then-current location further, so we have him to thank for being able to identify that threat and react promptly. However, I have not found out as much about the reboot itself as I would have liked. I do know that Ken-kun is correct, though – a complete reboot is not logical, given what we know about the nature of the Digital World. I do not know why I even thought it was conceivable in the first place.” Koushiro paused and looked at his listeners, probably checking if they were still following. Ken was listening intensely, glad that his reeling mind had found a distraction to latch on to.

“Which leads me to our third main issue. Our minds. As we know, the reboot has reconfigured our partners’ memories – whether they were actually deleted, as we first thought, or merely hidden, I do not yet know – but it seems obvious that our own memories have been manipulated prior to the reboot as well. I could find no information as to who might have done it and how, but then, I could mainly access codes from our surroundings. I would most likely have to tap into our brains to find out more about how this was possible, but this is probably too risky at present…”

“Probably, he says… you’re not getting into my brain, that’s for sure…”

Yamato wasn’t very loud, but Ken distinctly heard him whisper “you’d have to have one for that, Taichi…” They weren’t taking this as seriously as they should, Ken thought. How could they still be making jokes when the world around them might crumble at any moment? They had no idea what they were up against, no idea if they could ever be strong enough to face whatever was so
clearly working against them… Why did they not understand…?!

“Ken-kun, would you help me look through some of these codes and perhaps tell me a little bit more about what happened to you? It would greatly help my research into our situation if I had as much information as possible.”

He was surprised at the request. “I…yes, Koushiro-senpai,” he said, uncertainly. He wasn’t sure if he could tell him much about what had happened – he could hardly bear thinking about it – but it was certainly preferable talking to Koushiro alone rather than having to answer everyone’s questions. He moved a little closer so that he could look at Koushiro’s computer screen, which was currently filled with binary code. He knew he should know how they functioned, but at the moment, he couldn’t quite grasp their meaning. Except… “…are there really 2s in that code?”

Koushiro nodded. “Yes, that seems to be what causes the infections. This is essentially not binary, but trinary code. I cannot tell what caused the codes to switch, though.”

“…what kind of infections?”

“Ah. You were not aware of them?”

Ken very slowly shook his head, even though he wasn’t entirely sure if it was actually true. There had been…certain encounters even before they had met with Alphamon in the red desert. But they had been few and not that serious – mostly Child level Digimon, which hadn’t posed any real danger, even though they had been unusually aggressive and strong. It had struck them as odd and Ken, Miyako, Daisuke and Iori had debated whether those Digimon were the reason that they had been called to the Digital World once again, but they hadn’t considered calling it an infection. And it hadn’t seemed to last for long, all the Digimon that had attacked them had turned normal again after a while… but he couldn’t quite remember if it was something that any of their partners did or if the affliction had simply changed in intensity since then.

Ken was about to add that, but since Koushiro had already started a lengthy explanation, he closed his mouth again and just listened.

“These altered Digimon have been entering our world and wrecking havoc. We have faced several Kuwagamon, Ogremon, and-“ Koushiro paused. Ken couldn’t decipher the look on his face but it made the feeling of anxious little pinpricks return to his arms and he clenched his fists. “I am sorry, Ken-kun, Taichi-san mentioned that you said something about Alphamon earlier?”

Again, Ken only nodded. His mouth felt suddenly dry and he didn’t think he could have said something even if he’d tried.

Koushiro nodded. “He attacked us as well. We barely managed to push him back through the distortion and we were six people and partners fighting. It makes sense that you did not have a chance against him if you were only four.”

Ken’s breath had become more laboured. He pressed his lips together and dug his fingernails into his palms. It was true. They wouldn’t have been defeated if the others had been with them. The original Chosen might have only barely managed to defend themselves alone, but if all twelve of them had been fighting together – as they should have been, they should not have been left alone like this – then everything would have turned out differently. Why had the four of them been left alone?

“It is certainly odd that Alphamon would attack any of us. According to old legends, he is
supposed to be a protector of the Digital World, so he should not be fighting against Chosen Children… perhaps the infection has affected him as well and he views us as a threat? As contaminants?”

Koushiro lectured on, gathering information and theorising more for his own sake than for Ken’s or anyone else’s. Ken, however, had stopped listening. He hardly felt the pain of his fingernails breaking skin. Daisuke, Miyako and Iori were no threat to the Digital World, had never been anything but its saviours. But he…he was…he was dangerous. What if Alphamon had picked up on that, had recognised his past? What if this was all his fault?

“I assume you do not wish to discuss the attack any further.” Koushiro sounded a little worried, but Ken only dimly registered it and only slowly turned his head towards Koushiro.

“Could you provide me with some information on our friends? I am currently lacking the necessary data due to our memory loss, but I might be able to feed any information you might give me into my laptop and use it to locate them if they are in the Digital World by now.”

Ken raised his head slowly, ever so slightly, catching his breath. “Can you…can you really do that?”

“I can try.”

“Please…! Please… Daisuke, he’s a little smaller than me, not much, he-“ Ken closed his eyes and swallowed. He had to be as calm and as thorough as possible. He didn’t know if it was actually possible for Koushiro to find them via his laptop just through Ken’s descriptions. Deep down, he even suspected that Koushiro was merely trying to distract him from thinking about the attack itself, but he was desperate to try everything. “He wears Taichi-senpai’s old goggles, he never goes anywhere without them… and he wears a bomber jacket with a fur collar and red flames on it…and he’s always so optimistic, and…and…” He had to stop himself again. “Iori’s the youngest of us all… He's...very serious...very clever" Why did he have to tell him all this, why didn't he know? He should. He should not have been able to forget them that easily. Still, he tried his best to describe their appearance, but he kept talking about their personalities, realised that his emotions were creeping into his descriptions, that he wasn't coherent at all. He wondered if Koushiro would be able to use any of this... Suddenly, an idea struck him. "...Miyako…she still has her digivice…you could try locating her through that…?”

Koushiro nodded almost enthusiastically. "That is likely to be an excellent way of locating her,” he confirmed and started typing again so fast that Ken would almost have struggled to keep up even when he was still under the influence of the Dark Spore. He tried to make sense of what appeared on the screen, anyway, but really, all he could think of were his friends. He didn’t care what had caused the infections, not really. He didn’t understand how a reboot could have taken place when that was not supposed to be possible. He didn’t know why any of this had happened – even though he was starting to believe that maybe he was being punished for his sins. He had been too happy, clearly. He didn’t deserve such good friends, he didn’t deserve Daisuke, and that was why he had been taken from him. But he wasn’t desperate for answers anymore. He hardly cared about Koushiro’s theories what the ‘reboot’ might have actually been if it wasn’t an actual reboot and who might benefit from it and he only half listened as Koushiro elaborated on them. He still remained at this side, looking at the screen, but not really seeing anything. His hand was on his neck, fingernails digging in, but he didn’t notice when he drew blood. The only thoughts providing a constant in his otherwise chaotic and confused mind were for Daisuke, Miyako and Iori. At least, Koushiro’s typing provided a calming background noise that allowed Ken to ignore everything and everyone else, distancing himself from the others. He was alone with his thoughts, only occasionally responding to Koushiro’s questions, but not really paying attention.
Please let them be safe.

Chapter End Notes

Originally, this was part of a much longer chapter, but I decided to split them up because it seemed (to me) to make sense content-wise. I'll upload the second part in a couple of days, hopefully, so you'll be able to decide for yourself!
Chapter Summary

Ken is determined not to abandon his missing friends - but what can he do when his health and well-being are deteriorating rapidly? And what's with that tiny voice inside whispering of strength and vengeance? The sound of waves is threatening to engulf Ken in an ever darkening whirl of thoughts and emotions - and soon enough, everything is starting to spiral out of control. If Ken ever had any control to begin with.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 5. Halted Heart

He’d spent hours describing Daisuke, Miyako and Iori to Koushiro, trying to help locate them, but without success. Koushiro had tried using Hikari’s and Takeru’s D3s together with Ken’s descriptions of Miyako to find her, but either the input wasn’t enough or she wasn’t in the Digital World. Talking about them had increased the hole in his chest that was their absence. He was constantly aware of how alone he really was, even while surrounded by his supposed other friends. But they just didn’t understand…they didn’t even remember half of what they’d been through together, and Ken was too tired to keep telling them. Still, he didn’t want to sleep, as Sora had suggested. He didn’t know if he could and even if he did manage to fall asleep, he was likely to have nightmares – he could see Alphamon towering over him whenever he closed his eyes and there was no reason to assume that it wouldn’t be worse in his dreams. He stumbled through their make-shift camp – Takeru was talking to his brother now, Mimi was standing together with Jou, whispering something in his ear. Was it just his imagination, his paranoia? Or was she eying him suspiciously? Ken wrapped his arms around himself; he felt so cold.

Over by the stream, he spotted Taichi who was currently kneeling beside the running water, trying to clean his shirt. Ken winced uncomfortably – he’d have felt ashamed to be seen vomiting at all, but it seemed ten times worse that he’d thrown up all over Taichi, even though he knew, rationally, that he couldn’t have helped it. Still, he felt he had to say something to him, at least. Ken walked over to him.

Awkwardly, he cleared his throat. “T-taichi-senpai, I’m sorry I threw up on your shirt…”

Taichi looked up at him with a friendly grin. His goggles were hanging around his neck, glinting in the sunlight. “Don’t worry, it’s no big deal.”

Ken should have felt relieved that he had got his apology out and that it had been accepted, but he could only stare. For a moment, he didn’t see Taichi kneeling by the water, but Daisuke. Daisuke with his messy hair, goggles around his neck, grinning madly. “Don’t worry, Ken, we’ll be fine.”

He only realised he’d started crying when Taichi stood up with alarm on his face and quickly came over to him. Slowly, he touched his own cheek, numbly feeling the wetness on it when he was
suddenly pressed against warm skin, arms tightly wrapped around him. “Hey, Ken, don’t cry, it’s really not a problem, I don’t mind…” he heard Taichi whisper helplessly. Normally, he’d have flinched back. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Taichi, but he was not very used to being touched by others who weren’t his family or Daisuke; as it were, though, he allowed the hug and sobbed into Taichi’s shoulder. He was only vaguely aware of being led to a small rock and gently urged to sit down. He couldn’t see through his tears, but he could still feel Taichi rubbing circles on his back, even though it hardly brought him any comfort. He hid his face in his shaking hands and bent forward, unable to contain his feelings anymore.

When he felt like he could breathe again, Ken noticed that Taichi was still holding him, hadn’t moved from his side the entire time. He edged away from the older Chosen without so much as looking up. “…sorry…” he croaked, “I’m sorry…”

Tears were still streaming down his face, but they were silent now, not accompanied by the violent sobs which had shaken him before. “I want to go home, I just… I want…” He couldn’t put it into words. He only wanted… he wanted everything to be back to normal. “…I don’t want this, why is this happening…” If only—if only… if only Daisuke were here. Miyako. Iori. He needed them to be alright, he couldn’t- What could he do alone? How could he help find them? It was all his fault, it had to be. He’d made them disappear, like he’d made his brother disappear. He was shivering now.

Please… please let them be alright. I don’t care if I die, just let them… let them be okay.

Ken wasn’t looking up and he wasn’t going to, but he could tell by the feet surrounding him that his little breakdown had attracted an audience. Ken couldn’t bear to face them now, he felt ashamed. He had moved away from Taichi in embarrassment, but now he could feel the weight of two people sitting down next to him on the little boulder. But he still wouldn’t look up. “I’m sorry…”

“It’s okay, Ken…” Hikari, on his left side, very softly touched his arm. Takeru didn’t say a word, just sat by his side, very, very slightly leaning against his shoulder in support.

“Takeru, could you come over for a sec?” Yamato had called his brother over and Takeru stood up and left with an apologetic smile towards him, but Hikari remained at Ken’s side, her hand still holding his. Plotmon had left together with Patamon, though – the two were playing on the grass a few feet away from them.

“She inclined her head. “Yes…?”

“…do they really not remember you…? Your partners, I mean…”
She nodded.

“That… that must be hard…” Ken didn’t know how he would cope if Wormmon couldn’t remember him… how he’d react if Wormmon came back and he was nothing but a stranger to the small caterpillar…

“It is… but it’s not so bad… at least, they’re still with us…and I think Plotmon is a lot happier than before…”

Ken bit his lip. Of course…! How could he be so selfish… Wormmon, too, would be much better off with his memories erased… no memories of Ken’s harsh words and insults, no memories of the whip and his boot, kicking without mercy. It would be so much better for the small Digimon to forget that the Digimon Kaiser had ever existed… And yet… and yet, Ken couldn’t imagine having to face those loyal blue eyes and seeing in them no recognition. Maybe it would be better if they were never reunited. Better for Wormmon, at least… Ken wiped his eyes with his sleeve, blinking furiously.

“You miss Wormmon.” It wasn’t a question. He still nodded.

“Yes…yes, of course.” But there was nothing he could do. No way to find his partner. It wasn’t like before when he had travelled directly to Primary Village. What had been so painful back then now seemed almost too easy. Now he couldn’t just travel to the Place of Beginnings through a computer screen. Now he couldn’t even be sure if Wormmon was going to be reborn at all. What if the reboot had changed all that? Perhaps it was his just punishment, three years late, but inevitable. Hikari squeezed his hand again, but he said nothing else.

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It was still early morning when everyone was getting ready to move again. Ken had already been sitting up when the first ray of sunlight touched their campsite. Takeru, who had taken the last watch together with Hikari, had tried to talk to him, but there just hadn’t been much to say. Especially not after Ken had overheard their whispered conversation when they’d thought he was asleep.

“Did you get much sleep?” Takeru had asked.
“No… not with everything that’s going on… Ken-“

There’d been a short silence and Ken, eyes still closed, had imagined Takeru nodding enthusiastically, both united in their judgment of Ken.

“He cried almost the whole night, did you hear-?”
“Yes… I felt so awful… oh! I think he’s waking up.”

Ken had stirred deliberately – he hadn’t wanted to hear anymore, didn’t want to know how awful he made them feel just by being there. He’d already heard too much, the tight knot in his stomach becoming tighter and tighter the more he mulled over Takeru’s and Hikari’s words in his head. He couldn’t have helped crying during the night, but he was determined not to appear so weak again if
he could avoid it.

He rubbed his aching eyes, but the dull burn would not leave and there was a low throbbing in his forehead, quite different from the piercing pain radiating out from his wound, which had started at some point during the night and would not stop, not until he properly slept, Ken suspected, but he didn’t even bother to try. The older Chosen Children seemed more rested than their younger counterparts, but they, too, were weary and slow while packing up their things. He watched them, knees drawn up to his chest, chin resting on his folded arms. He had not belongings with him, no Digimon to take care of, no one to talk to, so he just sat and watched and waited until everyone was ready to move again. After a while, Ken became aware of a discussion going on between some of the boys.

Hikari must have told her brother about what Ken had said the day before because Taichi was debating with Yamato and Koushiro whether it would be possible to use their Digimon to cross Net Ocean in order to reach File Island and check Primary Village for Wormmon’s digi-egg in a reasonable time.

Ken didn’t know what to think of it. He wanted to see Wormmon so badly; he wanted to hug the little caterpillar. But he didn’t know if he could bear seeing Wormmon without any memory as to who Ken was. Or worse, reaching Primary Village and finding that there was no digi-egg of Wormmon’s at all. His head had begun hurting again.

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They’d started following the little brook as soon as they’d been ready to leave camp. The brook had become steadily bigger, and they were now approaching its outlet into the sea. Ken was still slow, but not as far behind as before, even though his shirt chafed painfully against the burn marks on his chest. He still found it a little difficult to breathe but not nearly as much as in that red desert when he had been struggling for each breath, half convinced that he was dying. Now that his head felt less fuzzy and unfocused, he realised that it had mostly likely been the beginning of a panic attack and that he had never been in any actual danger of suffocating. At least, he thought so, his burns couldn’t be quite so severe or else he’d still be unable to walk. His leg still hurt, though, and he couldn’t put his full weight on it, but he’d managed to keep up – behind the group, but not too far behind. Close enough to hear the discussion between the three boys leading them still going on. Close enough to notice the tension between Mimi and Takeru. Vaguely, he wondered if that was his fault, too. In any case, they both kept glancing back at him with a confusing mix of emotions that Ken couldn’t quite read.

The group had stopped. Ken looked up from his feet. They’d reached a small sandy beach, waves softly crashing in. Taichi was standing almost at the shoreline, glancing at the horizon. Yamato was beside him, frowning hard, while Koushiro was typing again Ken knew what they had to be thinking about. If they really wanted to reach File Island, this was the right moment to begin that journey. They could now either cross the ocean or change directions, but they had to make a decision now.

For a moment, everything seemed calm. Ken closed his eyes, listening to the soft sound of the surf. The light breeze on his face relieved some of the dull pain in his forehead, cooled his eyes while he rested them a little. Suddenly, there was a loud roar and he opened his eyes again. Several Seadramon had reared their heads above the water, eyes flashing red. They attacked without warning, spouting water and ice.
Ken’s eyes went wide with shock and his legs gave way underneath him. Everyone around him seemed to be in movement – digivices out, partners ready. It didn’t take a minute before everyone was evolved and battle-ready. Soon, all of the Chosen’s Digimon were fighting. Ken whimpered and instinctively put his hands over his ears. It was too loud, too loud.

“Nova Blast!”

“Needle Spray!”

“Harpoon Torpedo!”

A broken-off icicle only narrowly missed Ken’s face – one of the Seadramon was attacking with Ice Blast – and he crumpled in on himself, wishing he could disappear. Blinding lights shone all around him – too bright, too much – every Digimon evolving further.

“Giga Blaster!”

“Phoenix Claw!”

Ken had his eyes closed, but he felt someone kneel down by his side and touch his shoulders. “Ken? It’s okay, we can defeat them, we’ve had stronger enemies…” Sora. “I think he may be displaying symptoms of a post-traumatic stress disorder.” Koushiro. “Koushiro!” “I am sorry, I am only trying to help-“

Ken felt another hand awkwardly rub his back. He whimpered again.

“Spiking Finish!”

“X-Laser!”

Red earth explodes all around them, and Ken grips his digivice more fiercely. He exchanges a look with Daisuke, who’s standing next to him. He’s looking grim, but determined. They both nod. Their D3s buzz, and in an instant, Ken feels that connection, always there as an undercurrent, ten times more powerfully; he hears Daisuke’s heartbeat almost louder than his own. There is a blinding light, and Paildramon is standing between them and Alphamon. Once again, their D3s react, and Imperialdramon is ready to defend them at all cost.

“Positron Laser!”

Powerful blasts go both ways. He feels the heat on his face, feels the sand whirling all around them, getting into their clothes, eyes, hair.

Aquilamon attacks from the air and Ankylomon is trying his best from the ground, but they don’t have a chance against Alphamon, their levels are too low. Miyako is shouting something he can’t quite hear. Iori is also talking but Alphamon’s thundering attacks drown out every other sound. It isn’t looking good. Imperialdramon is retreating. Aquilamon and Ankylomon aren’t even fighting anymore, only dodging blasts now. Ken looks at Daisuke again. He’s never seen him look so worried, but when he catches Ken looking, he tries to smile. Daisuke grabs his hand, and they look towards Imperialdramon again, just in time – Imperialdramon gets hit. Ken hears someone screaming, no, he is screaming himself. Imperialdramon dissolves. Imperialdramon is gone. Wormmon-

Daisuke grips his hand so hard that it almost hurts. He’s crying. Daisuke’s crying… Alphamon is still attacking, but now, no one is fighting back. Ken can hardly see anything anymore, there’s too
much light from the attacks, too much noise, too much sand in the air, too much blood — blood? He catches sight of Daisuke’s goggles, and there’s blood on them, too, he must have been hit — no, no, no.

Another blast. And another. In their direction. “Dai-“ He wants to tell him to duck, but the whirling sand fills his mouth, he can’t breathe, and then they’re hit. Blinding lights. Heat. Pain. Ken is whirled through the air, he loses his grasp on Daisuke’s hand, he flies, and then — darkness.

When he came to again, the lights and the noise had gone. Ken blinked in confusion. It was dark, now. Dark and much cooler than before. He looked up and could see eight pairs of eyes looking down on him, concerned.

“What-?”

“Hey, there, Ken-kun. You’re with us again? We thought we’d lost you for a second…”

Numbly, Ken sat up — he hadn’t even noticed he’d been lying down — and slowly looked around him, careful not to move his head too much since he had a throbbing headache once more. They seemed to be in a cave. He looked back up at Taichi, who had bent down a little to face him at eye level, and was still looking worried.

“You completely phased out on us when the Seadramon attacked…”

Ken didn’t reply. He was too busy trying to take in his new surroundings. He could still hear the soft rushing of the waves and smell the salt in the air, so they couldn’t have gone far from the beach where they’d been attacked. At the entrance of the cave, the rock turned into bright white sand. He looked at Taichi again, who seemed even more worried than before. “Ken-kun? You’re freaking me out a little…”

“I’m fine.” Ken didn’t sound like himself, not even to his own ears. He spoke in a low monotone, almost coldly, but he couldn’t bring himself to muster up any other emotions. He only felt tired.

“Right…” Taichi didn’t sound all too convinced, but it hardly mattered. “I’m going to have to talk to Jou. And Koushiro. And probably Yamato. You just stay here and rest, okay?” Ken merely nodded and watched as Taichi straightened and walked towards the entrance of the cave where Koushiro was apparently sitting outside and typing.

Hikari and Takeru were sitting at his side again, both looking equally worried. Did they think they had to take care of him because they were the same age? Because they had been the ones whose absence had been most crucial in their defeat by Alphamon? After all, if Hikari and Takeru had been fighting alongside them, alongside their supposed team, then they’d have had three Jogress evolutions, not just one. They wouldn’t have been so helpless. He drew his knees up to his chest, arms folded, and rested his head on them. He was so, so tired.

“Here…” Mimi was offering him a plastic bottle with a brownish liquid in it. “Oolong tea. I brought it along for — ah well, it doesn’t matter. Drink. You look like you could need it…”

What did they all want from him? Couldn’t they tell he wanted to be left alone? And why was Mimi being nice now? Hadn’t she looked at him strangely before, like she suspected him of wrongdoing? Like she knew that it was all his fault, had to be, because it was always his fault, his punishment for being bad…

He didn’t take the bottle, didn’t move at all and ignored the worried glances of Mimi, Sora, Takeru and Hikari who’d all remained in the cave with him. The sound of the waves from outside seemed
to be getting louder, almost drowning out the others’ voices. When he closed his eyes, he could almost see the waves, they sounded so close… Perhaps the tide was coming in.

“Ichijouji-kun?” Ken looked up. Jou had come back into the cave and crouched down next to him. “How are you feeling?” Ken just shrugged. There just was no good answer to that anymore. “Listen, Koushiro-kun has been working on something, and we think we know how to get you some help.” Ken frowned.

“Koushiro’s been working on opening a portal.” Taichi had come back as well and squatted on Ken’s other side, so as to be on eye-level with him. “We’re going to take you back to our world so you can get proper help. No offence, Jou, but I think it wouldn’t hurt for Ken to see an actual doctor… At first, we thought we could travel to File Island together, see if we can find Wormmon’s digi-egg, but you’re clearly not up to such a journey… I think it’s best for everyone if we take you back where you’ll be safe.”

Ken stared at Taichi, trying to figure out if he was actually joking.

They couldn’t be serious…! They couldn’t seriously be suggesting returning home, not now… He shook his head. It still hurt, but the movement was now bearable. “No! We can’t go back to our world!” How could they even think that?!

“I NEED TO FIND MY FRIENDS!” He was breathing heavily, his shoulders set in anger. “How can you be so disloyal?! I told you, they are your friends, too!” What were they thinking?

“Ken-kun, please calm down…” Taichi spoke in a level, calming voice. “We never said we were leaving them behind, okay? Yamato, Koushiro and I are going to stay behind and look for them. Just you and the others will go home…”

He was still shaking his head. How could they expect to search for his friends if they had no memory of them, didn’t know what they even looked like?

“Come on, we promise we’ll do our best to find them. We’ll be quicker with searching the Digital World without you guys…” Without him. That was what Taichi meant. He was holding them back, was hindering the search for his friends. He was a burden, a weakness, that was what Taichi was saying. Maybe he was right, maybe he was endangering Daisuke, Miyako and Iori even further, but how could he just go home as if nothing had happened?

“Besides, your parents will be worried about you, don’t you think? You should get back to them as soon as possible…”

Ken scoffed. “They probably don’t remember me. You didn’t, so why should they?”

“Maybe…” Taichi sounded reluctant to admit it. “But that also means they’ll remember you as soon as they see you. You must miss them, Ken-kun. How long have you even been here? It’s hard to tell with the distortions and everything…”

Ken’s eyes narrowed, almost as if in disdain. “Perhaps it’s better if they don’t remember me. Perhaps they’ll be better off without me. I’m broken. You said it yourself, I’m not well.”

Taichi groaned. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Come on…” He grabbed Ken’s arm
and gently pulled him to his feet, then slowly led him towards the cave entrance. Ken didn’t resist, but then again he didn’t react much at all. Everyone else, humans and digimon partners alike, followed.

Koushiro looked up at them as soon as they reached him. “I think I’ll manage to open it in a few minutes, thanks to Hikari-kun’s and Takeru-kun’s D3s. But you’ll have to be quick since the connection is likely to be very unstable.”

Ken closed his eyes in frustration. How could they, even for a moment, believe that he would just go home with them and leave Daisuke, Miyako and Iori to their fate? Did they think that he was so weak, that he was such a coward that he’d escape from the Digital World without looking back? They had to be stupid, unfeeling. *Insects.*

He felt the blood drain from his face, dizzy once more. Where had that thought come from? It frightened him. The others gaped at him. Had he said it out loud? He didn’t want to know, he couldn’t – they had been proven right, he really was evil, but he didn’t, he hadn’t wanted to say that. He didn’t want to be like that.

Ken shook off Taichi’s hand, bolted out of the cave onto the beach and ran.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to agree with Taichi here - Ken's definitely not well and desperately needs help. Let's hope that he finds someone who'll be able to pull him back from the abyss of Darkness. It's a good thing that his crest is Kindness - one of the strongest, in my opinion, or else he'd have succumbed to his inner darkness long ago. As is, we're going to see him struggle for a while longer, I'm afraid. I am sorry for torturing him so much, but, you know... Light is born of darkness.
Interlude: Determination

Chapter Summary

While the children are travelling through a changed Digital World, the adults in the real world are fighting their own battles...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude: Determination

“Mochizuki-hakase!”

“How can I help you this time, Ichijouji-san?” the white-haired man said with an exasperated sigh. She took it as a sign of victory. They were slowly starting to wear him down, him and the government that apparently supported his actions.

“You know perfectly well what I want from you.”

The short woman had made her way to Mochizuki’s office with almost stubborn determination, refusing to be stopped by secretaries, office workers and even government officials. She would not be turned away.

“And what would that be?”

“I want to know where my son is.”

The professor sighed again. “How exactly do you expect me to answer this? We simply do not know his exact location.”

She wouldn’t accept that. She had heard him say it so often in the last few weeks, but she knew that the professor’s unwillingness to help had nothing to do with a mere inability to find them. She just knew that he knew more about her son’s disappearance than he would admit to.

“And what measures are you taking in order to look for him? Or his friends? Four children have disappeared – at least four! And you’re not doing anything at all. You won’t even tell us what you know!”

The professor shook his head and shot her a look that she could only describe as condescending. “I do not know anything, Ichijouji-san. Ichijouji Ken, Motomiya Daisuke, Inoue Miyako and Hida Iori have in all likelihood exited the real world and are missing in action in the Digital World. This is the extent of what we know – and you have already been informed of this.”

It was her turn to shake her head now. “No, There is more. You are hiding something from us. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t stop us from talking to the other parents.”
They had had no problem contacting the families of Daisuke-kun, Miyako-kun and Iori-kun at all. In fact, it had been Motomiya Jun’s phone call, which had first alerted them to the fact that it wasn’t only Ken who hadn’t made to school that day. But as soon as they’d had tried to contact anybody else, the government had stepped in.

She watched him closely. He was tense; hands not balled into fists – that would not have suited the cultured and sophisticated image the professor no doubt wanted to cultivate – but they were pressed onto the table in front of him with considerable force so that she could see the veins sticking out from the back of his hands.

“The other Chosen Children have been informed as well,” he replied curtly, “And they know that we are doing everything we can to find their friends. Don’t you think it’s best to have our agency deal with this rather than send a couple of untrained high school students on a rescue mission to another dimension? If they are even in the Digital World, Ichijouji-san. Teenagers are known to run away from home occasionally… Make pacts to…disappear.”

She felt a hot wave of anger rush up, fill her throat with bile. “My son would never-!” She clenched her teeth, trying to keep herself from attacking the man – whether only verbally or otherwise, she did not know anymore. Did Mochizuki know how much he could hurt her with those words? She didn’t know how much the government knew about what happened to her son and the other children before the recent events. But if they had had even an inkling of what was going on in these children’s lives – in Ken’s life – she’d like to know why they were only stepping in now… Still, most of the blame lay with her, to be sure, and she wondered if Mochizuki knew. If he knew how she had let down her child, had neglected Ken when he’d most needed her. Never again. She would fight for him until her very last breath.

She closed her eyes and tried her best to regain her composure. Eyes narrowed, gaze fixed on her opponent, she coldly said, “No. If you truly thought they might still be in our world, you would let us look for them. Why would you care what we do if this has nothing to do with the Digital World? Why would you stop us from speaking out? Force us to be silent? No. There is something going on and you are hiding it from the public. There’s been sightings of “monsters” in our sky, technology is going mad – stop pretending this isn’t related to our children’s disappearance.”

The man pressed his lips together, closed his eyes for a second before looking at her again.

“Fine. You are correct. It is most plausible that your son is indeed in the Digital World. But, Ichijouji-san, if you believe this to be true… What would speaking out accomplish? Are you seriously considering filing a missing persons report? You know as well as I do that the police cannot find them there. At this point, news reports of missing children would only cause a panic, nothing more. What you call “force” is merely our attempt to keep the situation under control.”

What he said, may have sounded reasonable, but she did not trust this man, not at all. He was hiding something from them, that much was clear. He wasn’t just trying to keep everything under control, as he claimed, and he certainly wasn’t doing everything he could to find her son. At times, she even felt like he was actively trying to prevent them from looking for their children. Why else were they being monitored? Why else would the government have stopped them from contacting the other Chosen Children’s families? For all she knew, the older Chosen Children were missing, too, but there simply was no way to tell. She only knew that her Ken-chan was gone. Ken-chan and his closest friends.

“Ichijouji-san, these young men and women have saved the world on multiple occasions, surely there’s no need for you to worry-“
“Children!” She interrupted the man without much regard for politeness and respect. She found herself losing her patience more frequently these days, and she didn’t think that that would stop until she had found her son again. “Don’t talk to me about “young men and women”, they are children. Miyako-kun is fifteen. Ken and Daisuke-kun are fourteen. Iori-kun is twelve! You are not going to tell me that a twelve-year-old boy is a man, are you?!”

Mochizuki frowned. Was he angry that she had dared to remind him that they were talking about children? Or merely inconvenienced by her insistence on being seen and heard with her complaints?

“Their age doesn’t change the fact that we simply cannot do anything from here. Unless you can provide me with an active gate to the Digital World and the means to travel through it, my hands are bound…”

“You could send the other Chosen Children… they might find a way. I know, I know, they are just high school students. But Ken, Daisuke, Miyako and Iori – they’re young men and women. Mochizuki-hakase – you are contradicting yourself.” She raised her hands and let them fall again, uncertain as to what to do with her frustration, her disappointment – her fear and her grief. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I will not give up, do you hear me? I will not give up on my son.”

The white-haired man put his fingers to his temples, slowly rubbing beneath his glasses’ frames. He exhaled audibly. “Is that it, Ichijouji-san?” He was done with her for now, wouldn’t tolerate her presence much longer. She knew. Soon, some young agents would turn up and escort her out – her questions unanswered, her requests unheard. But she would be back before long.

“Am I going to have the pleasure of seeing you again tomorrow, Ichijouji-san?”

“No.” She smiled as his shoulders dropped a little and he looked up at her in surprise – and, perhaps, relief? “You’ll be seeing Motomiya-san, I believe.”

“Ah.” It sounded tired, but the way he looked at her… There didn’t seem to be any tiredness in his gaze, but something else instead, something deeper, darker, like some hidden kind of malice. Maybe she was imagining it.

A young man in a lab coat had arrived, almost painfully polite and friendly – she’d have no trouble believing him if he’d told her that he was sorry that her son was missing, if only for the fact that he seemed a little naive. But she shook his hands off nonetheless. Turning towards Mochizuki again, she bowed. If she hadn't been such a docile and gentle woman, the bow would have seemed almost ironic.

“I’ll see myself out.”

Chapter End Notes

Time for another short interlude before Symbiosis comes out - or has it already aired in Japan? I'm not sure, but as long as I haven't seen it yet, this still isn't an AU, right? ;-

I love Ken's parents - sure, they made pretty serious mistakes in the past, but I do feel they would do everything for their son these days. Certainly not forget about him like some other characters...
Chapter 6 Respite

“Is it over?”

Miyako opened her eyes when she heard Iori’s question – and it made her realise that they couldn’t be dead because how could Iori ask questions if they were? She was still holding him tight, and he had his arms around her middle, both turning to each other for protection. Obviously, though, it wasn’t their hug that had shielded them from the reboot. Miyako loosened her grip on Iori and looked around her. They were no longer in the savannah-like landscape they had been in before. Instead, they seemed to be in the mountains, high enough to be able to get a good glimpse of the continent Server – Miyako was sure now that was where they were – but still low enough to see the highest peaks towering above them.

“…Miyako, you can let go off me now.”

“Ah! Sorry, Iori.” She released him from her embrace and smiled at him, somewhat sheepishly, before observing their surroundings once more. A few feet below them, a vast and dense forest begun, and in the distance she could see sparkling light reflect off of something – probably the ocean. Iori beside her also looked around, still somewhat dazed from what they’d just gone through.

“What happened…?” He sounded scared, and Miyako remembered that, despite his maturity, Iori was still just 12 years old, and she gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. “I think a reboot or something like it did happen. And that’s why Server looks like Server again. I think.”

“But…but shouldn’t we have been…” Iori seemed to trail off, then, very quietly, continued. “…deleted?”

She nodded. “Technically, yes, but I’m still not convinced it was a complete reboot. It just doesn’t make sense…Besides…” She glanced down at her D3, lying between them on the ground, still plugged into the little laptop. Its screen had cracked long ago – probably when Alphamon had defeated them, even though she hadn’t noticed it immediately – but it would still turn on, had been beeping in alarm just before the reboot. And then… “Didn’t you feel that warmth?”

“Yes…there was light, too, wasn’t there?”

“Yes. I think it came from my D3… It must have shielded us.” She couldn’t explain it, though. The D3 had been malfunctioning ever since the attack – not that she had had much use for it without Hawkmon… When she’d plugged it into her laptop, she’d only hoped to be able to use its programming to tap into the Digital World’s code, but it surprised her that the digivice was apparently still able to protect them.

“So what happens now…?” She looked towards Iori again and realised with a jolt that she would have to lead now. With Daisuke and Ken gone, it was up to her to make decisions now, make plans as to how they would go on. It scared her. She pushed her glasses higher up her nose – cracked as they were, their familiar weight on her face felt comforting – and nodded towards the forest. “Let’s go there. Into the forest. Maybe we’ll find a Digimon who’s willing to help us, mh?” Hopefully
none of those that they’d seen fighting from afar when they’d escaped from Andromon’s city. But maybe the reboot had taken care of that, filtered out whatever had been causing the Digimon to go wild in the first place… She wondered if Andromon was himself again now… Or had the reboot led to all the Digimon being reborn? Were they perhaps alone on this vast continent and all the Digimon in Primary Village on File Island? She shuddered at the thought, but before she could finish wondering about the exact nature and mechanics of this reboot – how massively complex was the coding behind the reboot of an entire world? Could all the Digimon in the Digital World fit into Primary Village at the same time? Or would they be reborn in a specific order? – there was a flash on the horizon that caught her attention. She was on her feet immediately.

“Did you see that?!”

“Yes…” Iori stood close behind her, both children cautiously eying the direction the flash had come from. There, another one. It was far, far off, but the battle that was raging in the distance was fought by such massive creatures that Miyako could still make out black and white armour flashing in the sunlight.

Alphamon.

Miyako couldn’t be sure, but she couldn’t take any risks, either. She quickly grabbed laptop and digivice and threw them into her bag. “Come on. I don’t like it out here in the open.” With these words, she strode towards the treacherous shelter of the forest, glancing back frequently to make sure that Iori followed her and wasn’t ever too far behind. She never mentioned Alphamon and neither did Iori, but his anxious silence made her think that he might have seen it, too.

They trudged through the dense forests for what seemed like hours. The eerie silence made her wonder if they truly were all alone here, after all. Maybe Alphamon was the only Digimon left on Server – Alphamon and its mystery opponent. She wished she could have seen them more clearly, just to be certain who had been fighting, but at the same time, she was glad that they were far away from the scene. Far away, and relatively safe, at least as safe as they could be, all alone, stranded in the Digital World, without any of their friends.

She bit her lips, wondering if there was anything that she could say or do to make Iori feel better, at least. So far, they had been travelling in silence. She’d never been too good at cheering people up, though always willing, always trying. But she was awkward and more often than not made things worse by saying inappropriate things at inappropriate times. Daisuke would be so much better at this than she was… Instinctively, she reached for her bag, but withdraw her hand quickly when she realised what she’d been about to do. She didn’t want Iori to worry.

“Wasn’t the ramen spring somewhere in this forest?” she asked, too cheerfully. “I could do with some ramen right about now. Couldn’t you?”

Iori smiled a little – probably out of politeness, but still. “If we find it, we could have lunch there,” he agreed, before frowning. “Is it lunch? I don’t know anymore…”

She glanced up. The sun wasn’t that high up anymore, though not quite setting yet. Miyako shrugged. “Dinner, maybe, but who cares. I’m so hungry I could eat a horse. Or, well, drink the entire spring, I suppose.” She wanted to keep talking, if only to drive away the silence, but she knew she had to be careful. Her stomach was already grumbling, so it was probably best to change the subject before she’d made both of them fully realise how hungry they actually were.

“We’re walking towards the ocean, aren’t we?” Iori asked.
“Mh,” she huffed in agreement. “I thought that maybe-“

“That maybe we could build a raft and travel to File Island.”

“…yeah. Sort of the opposite journey than the one Taichi-senpai and the others made when they first came here. If they could do it, then why not us… I mean, yeah, okay, we’re fewer people, but we could manage, right?”

“It’s as good a plan as any,” Iori replied diplomatically, and they continued walking. She had no idea if they could actually build a seaworthy float, let alone navigate it across an entire ocean, but they wouldn’t really know unless they tried. She was pretty sure that Daisuke would have said something along those lines as well… Her breath hitched a little and she felt a sudden pain in her chest.

“Miyako? Do you need a break?” Iori asked in concern, but before she could reassure him, there was a sizzling noise in the air, like an electric current, and suddenly round portals opened up in a clearing a few hundred feet away from them. The reboot hadn’t done away with the distortions at all, but that wasn’t the most astonishing thing about all this.

“Mimi-neesan!” She practically screamed the older girl’s name. She was just about visible in the nearest opening, standing on top of a plateau, close to – Gekomon’s palace, was it? Miyako burst into a run towards the opening. “MIMI!” But she didn’t hear her, didn’t even seem to realise she was there. Still, it was only a matter of time before she’d look through the opening on her side, realise that Miyako and Iori were here, desperately needing help. She’d come through, they’d be reunited, they’d be safe, and then they could find Ken and… and maybe Daisuke. Everything would be fine. Before they’d reached the clearing, they could see the other Chosen Children, too. Yamato and Koushiro seemed to be peeking through one portal, Taichi and Hikari waved from another. Was that Takeru in Primary Village? Miyako practically jumped up and down with glee. Finally! Finally something good was happening.

They reached the clearing. The portals with their friends on the other side were a bit higher up from the ground, but surely one of them could lend them a helping hand and draw them up. Miyako and Iori were both shouting their names now, shouting them at the top of the lungs. Above them, eight Chosen Children laughed, smiled at each other and happily planned their reunion before jumping through the portals to meet up with each other. Miyako screamed for Mimi and Sora, for Hikari, until her throat hurt, and she could hear Iori screaming, too, but then the portals closed.

Miyako sank to the ground and stared up at the perfectly ordinary sky above her. They hadn’t even seen them.

“They…they weren’t looking down, that’s why they didn’t notice us,” Iori stammered.

“Mh,” Miyako huffed.

“But now we know that they’re here! That…that’s good, right? They’re probably here to find us. We must have been missing for quite some time and they want to rescue us.”

“They didn’t look very worried,” Miyako remarked, but she knew there was no point in complaining now. They had to go on. With a sigh, she got back to her feet. “Come on. We need to find shelter. Or preferably the ramen spring. I think it’s gonna be dusk very soon.”
Slowly, they walked away from the clearing.

Unfortunately, they hadn’t been able to find the ramen spring – nor the corresponding Chinese restaurant for that matter, but that was probably too much to ask. She didn’t have any dollars to pay with anyway, and she highly doubted that Iori was in the habit of hiding American currency in his clothing, either. So, a couple of apple-like fruit had to be enough for dinner and the largest branch of an old and mighty tree had to be their shelter – even though Iori had mumbled “Not again,” under his breath, much to her amusement.

Still, it could have been worse. They were huddled together for warmth and were leaning quite comfortably against the massive trunk. It could have been an almost peaceful night, but, all of sudden, that silence that had accompanied them almost all day was gone, replaced by a furious roar. All the trees around them were shaking as if from a storm, but there was no wind. “What is that?!?” Iori clung to her and she clung to the tree to stop them both from falling.

“I don’t know, I- Where is it even coming from?” It wasn’t close, but it was powerful. And then she saw it streaking across the dark sky – purple stretches of corrupted code, ripping the world apart. Portals were opening and closing, to different places within the Digital World, different places within their own. Their eyes were fixed on the chaos taking place above them, but it stopped as quickly as it had started. But purple streaks were still chasing across the sky from time to time, albeit less frequently now, and also deep within the earth – Miyako could see flashes of purple sometimes when she looked down. If there had been any doubt before as to the current state of the Digital World – even though the portals earlier should already have told them so – it was gone now: the corruption was still there and it seemed to permeate the Digital World right through to its core.

The morning after the purple storm had been deceptively calm. The Digital World, as tainted as it might actually be, had looked relatively peaceful, and so they had travelled on, now hoping to reunite with the other Chosen Children rather than trying to reach the ocean and build a raft all on their own.

After two days of slow walking because of their still aching injuries, they reached the big lake in the middle of the forest. They’d gone off the course Miyako had first set for them, but at least now she knew exactly where they were and could navigate more accurately. It was early afternoon and they hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast. Miyako idly wondered if they could capture some fish from the lake – though she hadn’t really thought through how they’d do that.

“The ocean isn’t too far away anymore, is it?” Iori asked, his sprained ankle dipped into the cool lake water.

“No. We just veered off to the side a little bit. Do we still want to go there, though?”

Iori shrugged. “We have no idea where the others might be… Or did you see which portal they eventually went through?”

“Nah…so we might as well continue towards the ocean, you’re right…” She sat down beside him, pulled off her green boots and let her feet dangle in the water now. She let herself drop backwards into the grass. “It’s almost like before. Ordinary and peaceful. Like we’re here on a picnic…”

“But it isn’t. It isn’t normal, and it isn’t really peaceful, either.”
“No.” She snorted. “But it is almost like before, we have no clue what’s actually going on.”

“Miyako-“

“Like when we didn’t know why Ken’s towers were reactivating or who Arukenimon was, or-“

“Miyako!”

The alarm in his voice made her shut up and sit up straight. “What?” she whispered.

“A noise. In the forest over there…”

She got up as quietly as she could, not bothering to put her boots back on. “Stay here,” she told Iori and hoped that he wouldn’t protest. Slowly, she walked in the direction Iori had pointed out to her.

There, a shadow. A glint of eyes reflecting the sunlight. A slim figure lurking among the trees. Blue, disheveled hair…

“KEN!”

Forgetting all caution, she ran straight into the woods and threw her arms around her friend as soon as she reached him – and he hugged her back just as fiercely. There had been a time when such a reaction would have excited Miyako. But now she knew that it was testament to how shaken Ken must have been. She knew her friend was usually shy and cautious, not prone to overly obvious displays of emotion, yet now he was clinging to her as if his life depended on it. “Ken…are you ok?” He didn’t answer, and she didn’t want to pressure him to speak. Instead she just held him silently until Iori reached them, and threw his arms around his two friends in turn. Exhausted but glad to be reunited once more, the three children sank to the ground, a mess of limbs wrapped around each other.

They stayed like this for quite some time. Miyako had one arm around Ken, the other around Iori. She could tell by the subtle shaking of Ken’s shoulders that he was crying, and soon enough she felt the remains of her sleeves, which still covered her shoulders, grow damp.

She sniffed herself, and pressed her face into the crook of Ken’s neck, feeling the heat emanate from it – her glasses collided painfully with her closed eyes, and she knew already that she’d have to wipe the drops off them later, but she didn’t care. “Oh Ken…” she whispered. She could hear him clear his throat, then felt him stiffen slightly, before he finally pulled back a little.

He was pale and there were dark rings under his red-rimmed eyes, but he smiled through his tears as he looked at her. “Miyako…Miyako…you’re okay. And, and Iori, you, too…” He extended a hand towards Iori, and the youngest Chosen Child took it gladly. Miyako smiled when Iori rubbed his free hand across his eyes twice before fully looking at Ken again, beaming with relief.

She turned back to Ken in order to continue her observation. His hair was disheveled; he looked tired and still shaken. Relieved, she noted that his head had been bandaged – and there was something wrapped around his middle as well. Good, his burns had been treated somehow.

She smiled at him, and took his other hand in hers. “We’re so glad you’re okay… We were so worried.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have left you alone, I’m so sorry. Suddenly, I was out of the desert and then I couldn’t get back, and I’m so sorry, are you okay, Ken? Ken?” Iori was crying again so Miyako just grabbed his hand as well. They were forming a neat little circle now, almost childish, yet at
the same time not childish at all. Despite her joy at seeing Ken again, Miyako felt that something important had shifted within her. She’d never be a childish little girl again, she thought, and part of her felt sad about it. Sad that adulthood had had to come to her like this, like a bomb strike in the night, bringing death and destruction. It shouldn’t be like that, not anymore, not these days. Children shouldn’t fight in wars, and yet that was what she’d been doing since she was 12, even though she’d never really had to face the realities of it quite like this before.

Ken had looked down when Iori had asked if he was okay, had replied in a very quiet voice that he was fine. But he had sounded so uncertain that he might as well have said no. She sighed a little and squeezed his hand once again, well aware that it was just like Ken to play down his own distress.

“Let’s get you to the lake. The water should be drinkable, and I think we could all do with a wash.”

She got up first, then Iori, and the two of them helped Ken to his feet. Together, they walked towards the water. She could tell that Ken was still struggling with dizziness, his concussion still affecting him, but not as strongly as before.

Ken got to his knees slowly, still careful not to move too much, and washed his face, hiding it in his hands for a second too long, perhaps, before dipping his cupped hands in the water again to drink. Miyako joined him at the waterline and washed her face in the clear cold water. It felt good. Maybe she should wash her hair, too. Iori knelt down beside her, cupping his hands and drinking.

“So…what happened to you? How did you get out of the desert?” she asked gently, when she saw that Ken had finished cleaning. She didn’t think he could have walked out of there alone, especially considering that time had been going slower, apparently, within the distortion. He’d have been suffering too much from the concussion to get out of their on his own. Perhaps the reboot had deleted the desert, placing Ken in a more welcoming place instead?

“T-taichi-senpai found me. Well, he and everyone else…” He wouldn’t look at her when he said it. Miyako frowned, unsure as to what it meant. “Where are they now then? Are they around?” She looked into the woods behind them, even though she knew it was silly. If they’d been with Ken, they’d have joined them by now.

“I…I sort of ran off…” He spoke so quietly that Miyako almost missed it, and even when she did catch it, she thought that she must have misheard something. Why would Ken run away from their friends?

“Are they here to look for us?” Iori asked. He probably hadn’t heard what Ken had whispered.

Ken shook his hand and sniffled. “No…No, they don’t, they…they didn’t remember me at first. They don’t remember you at all. They didn’t even know that you exist, they didn’t even know who Daisuke is…Daisuke…” Tears were rolling down his cheeks but he made no effort to wipe them away. He’d stopped talking, but his lips were still moving silently. He was saying Daisuke’s name.

She grabbed his arm to get him out of his own thoughts again, but before she could say anything comforting, she noticed Iori’s horrified expression and then it dawned on her too. They didn’t remember them. For their friends, it was as if they’d never existed at all. How was that even possible?

“But…but why…? How?”

“I don’t know… they… they said they remembered me as soon as they saw me, but not you. They had no idea. I…I tried to explain, I tried to tell them who you were, but they wouldn’t understand.
They just wouldn’t understand.”

She sat back, trying to work out what to say. Mimi hadn’t just not seen her back at the clearing, she didn’t even know that Miyako was, well, Miyako. She didn’t quite know how to process that.

“Right. Well, shit.”

“How can they just…forget about us?”

“I don’t know…I’m sorry, I-“

Iori and Ken both looked about as forlorn as she felt. “What about the reboot? Were you guys protected by your digivices, too?” she asked Ken, but he shook his head. “No…that had already happened – it must have taken place while I was in the desert. It’s apparently some kind of distortion…”

She nodded. “We know. What about the others?”

“They only came to the Digital World after the reboot or whatever happened.”

“Okay… Can you give me your D3? Maybe we can use it to locate the others. I’ve got a laptop, I borrowed it from Andromon –” When he raised his eyebrows, she said, with a lopsided grin, “oh, we had a short break in his home – he made us tea and fixed my shoulder.” Her grin faltered a little. “I hope he’s okay… Well anyway, I’ve got a laptop and can try to find them, but my own D3 is a little wonky right now. Won’t show any data on our surroundings, so no blinking lights for digivices, either…”

Ken shook his head. “I don’t have it anymore…”

“But you had it when I left the two of you, right? It didn’t get lost in the fight?”

“No…someone stole it.” Both Iori and Miyako stared at him. They couldn’t help but notice the shudder that went through Ken before he spoke again. “He came into the desert, and he…he hurt me. He stole my D3. And he said-“ he pressed his lips together, unable – or unwilling – to continue.

“He hurt you…? Who…?”

“He grabbed my hair and he made me kneel. He took a scan.”

“A scan of what?”

“Who was it, Ken…?”

Miyako saw how he swallowed hard. “…it was Gennai-san. At least, I think it was. Please don’t think I’m crazy, it’s just…it’s just what I saw.”

Iori nodded slowly. “That makes sense.” And now it was Ken’s turn to look up in surprise. “It does?”

They told him then about what they’d heard in Andromon’s home. The Dark One, Gennai-san, and what he’d been doing. Neither of them thought it wise to mention the Digimon Kaiser. Ken, in turn, told them what he’d learnt from Koushiro – mostly about the corruptions, or infections as the older
Chosen had called them, and about the Digimon attacks in the real world, though Miyako had already guessed that something like that might have been happening. It wasn’t much, and it opened up more questions than it answered, but at least they could collect information together and talk everything through now. With Ken’s help, Miyako finally had some hope that they might figure out what was going on eventually. And if they could reunite with Koushiro, too… Her shoulders dropped. He’d forgotten her. Sora had forgotten her, Mimi had forgotten her. They might be able to reunite with their friends soon and then, judging from what Ken had said, they’d remember again, but would she ever be able to forget that her memory had been lost so easily?

She shook her head. Those thoughts were pointless; they led to nothing. “So. Ken, do you think we can make it back to the others by tonight?” She didn’t know how to ask him about his reasons for running away; she hoped he would tell her without prodding. But he just shook his head.

“…okay. So why don’t we just rest here little. We have water and I don’t think we’re in any immediate danger so staying put might actually do us some good.” The boys nodded, and when Iori said he’d go and look for some firewood, Ken offered to help. Miyako stayed behind in the clearing and tried to work out how to best set up their camp for the night. She looked up and saw that the blue sky had suddenly disappeared, replaced by grey clouds. It looked like it was going to rain. “We’ve got no luck at all, do we,” she muttered to herself, before making a mental list of everything they had at their disposal to be used as a makeshift shelter. Most of what they’d got turned out to be entirely useless. So, it would have to be something from their surroundings. Personally, she felt like the Digital World owed them some sort of shelter after all it had put them through, but it hadn’t felt very welcoming towards the DigiDestined at all lately. More like it was actively trying to get rid of them. And it was quite possible that it hadn’t been entirely unsuccessful… She glanced worriedly in the direction where Ken and Iori had gone back into the forest. She’d have to tell them eventually. It meant nothing, of course, it certainly didn’t mean that- No, she had to concentrate now. It was going to rain very soon and they needed shelter. She peered into the undergrowth, and then climbed over some thick roots to see if the forest would yield something useful.

“Ha! Bingo!” There was a giant fern growing just a few feet away from the leg. Its massive leaves were rubbery, and just two of them would be enough to cover herself, Ken and Iori easily. Now it was only a matter of getting them off the fern. She moved to roll up her sleeves, then remembered that she had none left, and shrugged before getting to work.

Sweaty and exhausted (and with some fern stuck in her teeth, too, since she’d had to resort to biting), but equipped with two rubbery leaves and four long branches, she made her way back to the camp just as Ken and Iori returned with the firewood. She instructed them to put the wood under one of the leaves. The first drops were already falling when they started working on the shelter.

They used one of the trees at the edge of the forest as a wall – to lean against when they grew tired, Miyako had told her friends. They fixed the leaves to the tree and the branches with the remains of Miyako’s sleeve. She was glad that she’d thought to keep it even after she’d no longer needed the sling. The rain was becoming heavier, the individual drops already drumming a frenzied rhythm on their improvised rain cover. When they finally sat down, they were already completely drenched, but compared to everything else, this was only a mild inconvenience. At least they were together now.

They got a fire going with three sticks and some friction since Ken had read something about how to make a fire in the wilderness (because of course he had), and before long, they sat huddled together around it, listening to the rain drumming its incessant music and the fire crackling soothingly.
“I think we should look for the others, tomorrow,” she broke the silence. “I’ve thought this through. You said they still had all their partners, Ken, yes? And they don’t remember anything, but they can still evolve. So maybe they can give us a ride to File Island. Then we can… we can find them again.” The hole in her chest still ached, but it had been joined by a small warmth, kindled by her newfound hope. She’d see Hawkmon again, she just knew it. And if he didn’t remember her, she’d just reintroduce herself again. It would all turn out fine, eventually. They’d find them again, find him, miracle boy that he was, and everything would be fine again. It had to be.

But Ken didn’t seem to share her optimism. “I don’t think we can go back to them. I don’t think I can.”

He’d shifted uncomfortably, stiffened up, made himself smaller, moved a little closer to the fire – so he’d be less close to her and Iori. He bowed his head so that his long hair fell in front of his face like a curtain, hiding every single expression. Miyako sighed and felt like rolling her eyes at such obviousness. She wasn’t Daisuke, but over the years, she’d become almost as much of an expert as their goggled leader when it came to reading Ken. Not that he had made it very difficult just now. She knew he was hiding something.

“Okay, spill it out. This is pointless, Ken, I know you need to tell us something, so just go ahead.”

Usually, a “direct attack” like that did the trick. Ken would feel bad, apologise profusely, thus making her feel bad for being mean, but eventually, he’d confess what bothered him. Daisuke, of course, had never needed tricks like that – a mere nudge in the shoulder was usually enough to make Ken tell him almost everything. Almost. She knew that but she wasn’t always certain whether Ken himself did as well.

Now, however, Ken just shook his head, drooping lower until he’d buried his face in his knees. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you to hate me…” came the muffled reply, and Iori and Miyako exchanged a worried look.

“We’d never hate you, Ken…” Iori said in concern, and Miyako could only nod, even though Ken couldn’t see her from behind his curtain of hair. What could he possibly have done to make him think that they’d hate him if they knew of it?

Ken’s shoulders were tense. Miyako extended a hand and carefully placed it on his back. She frowned. He felt hot to the touch, even through his clothing. Was he developing a fever…?

“Come on, Ken, tell us. We won’t be mad, okay?” She could not imagine Ken, always so gentle and kind, doing anything at all that would make her angry. Not properly angry anyway. Slightly pissed off, maybe, like when he and Daisuke had nearly destroyed her phone with a severely misplaced football shot, but nothing more serious than that, surely. “Tell us.”

She could feel Ken’s shoulders rise under her fingers in a deliberate attempt to even out his breath. He was getting ready to talk. Slowly, he lifted his head so that they would understand him better.

“I…the others… they found me, and they tried to help, I know that now, I know, I knew before, too…” She couldn’t make out much sense, but she knew better than to interrupt. The entire story would come out soon enough. “Taichi-senpai, he carried me out of that desert – and Yamato-senpai, too – and I just vomited on his shirt.” She felt bad that she had to suppress a giggle,
especially since she knew that Ken would find the whole thing almost too uncomfortable to bear. But still. Served them right for forgetting them. She kept listening, though – a spoiled shirt wouldn’t cause anyone that much distress, not even Ken, who had the unfortunate tendency to blame himself for just about anything. “But I…I was getting angrier and angrier… They tried to help me, they just couldn’t…but I was ungrateful, too…” He talked about Hikari and Takeru trying to cheer him up, Jou tending to his injuries, Mimi offering Oolong tea, Taichi trying to calm him, and she still couldn’t figure out what worried him so much that he wouldn’t even look at her.

Finally, though, it all came spilling out of him. “…and they wanted to take me back home, but all I kept thinking was that they had to be insane, to leave you behind, that my parents wouldn’t want me back – I had all these thoughts coming back to me, like it was back then – and then I said that they were awful and unfeeling and I called them insects.”

Ah. Well that explained it… Ken was crying. “I don’t… I don’t ever want to become like this again, please, you have to believe me, I would never-”

“Ken,” Iori had knelt down at Ken’s side, almost at the edge of their shelter. Miyako noticed the rain again for the first time since Ken had started to speak. “We know that. We know that you are not that person anymore.” Iori spoke softly and slowly, both arms tentatively extended in Ken’s direction. Miyako watched as Ken slowly raised his head and looked at Iori closely, as if to determine if he was being serious. Ken must have decided that he was because he leaned forward and allowed Iori to wrap his arms around him carefully. She smiled. It was exactly right. Iori had been the last of them to fully trust Ken, the last of the Chosen Children to accept him as one of their own – so it was only right that it was Iori who reassured him now. Only Daisuke could have been more convincing in telling Ken that he needn’t worry about being hated by his friends.

“It’s okay, Ken,” she finally weighed in herself. “You overreacted, that’s all. You’re not a bad person because of it. And if it makes you feel better, we’ll find them tomorrow and you apologise, okay? They’ll understand. They’re not that stupid, you know.”

His sobs had turned into quiet little hiccups. “Do you…do you really think that they’ll forgive me?”

“Yes. Now, come and sit next to me again. I’m getting cold.”

Ken pulled away from Iori, and both boys got up and came to lean against the tree trunk next to her. Impulsively, she put an arm around Ken’s shoulders in affection. “You’re silly, you know. Worrying about nothing.” Ken smiled weakly, but didn’t seem to be entirely convinced. Still, it had to be enough for the moment.

“I’m sorry…”

“Huh?”

“For ‘worrying about nothing’, as you put it…” He said it almost bashfully, and she had to laugh a little at that. “Quite alright. It’s kinda your thing.” Iori was watching them both, his head resting on his drawn up knees, looking tired. She leaned forward to look around Ken at the youngest of their group. “Do you want to sleep?” He shook his head, though. “I couldn’t anyway. Not now.” She watched as Ken carefully placed a hand on Iori’s shoulder, probably drawing as much comfort from the gesture as he was giving. She moved even closer to the two boys, tempted to rest her head on Ken’s shoulders – she felt so tired, but she also understood why Iori didn’t want to sleep, at least not yet. They had only just found each other again, and it seemed a shame to waste time by sleeping right now. But the fire made their little shelter seem almost cozy, and being finally
together with both Iori and Ken had made her feel safer than she had for days, so it wasn’t really a
surprise that her head felt increasingly heavier. She couldn’t sleep now, though, not when Iori
seemed so eager to stay awake, but her head did droop a little, she was warm –

“I miss Armadimon.” Her head snapped up again. This was dangerous territory. Of course, Iori
missed Armadimon like she did Hawkmon, and Ken missed Wormmon, but talking about it was
dangerous, could lead to more crying, and they didn’t need that now, they needed to feel safe, even
if it was just for one night.

“I miss Wormmon, too…” Ken joined in quietly.

“If Armadimon was here, he’d want to play instead of sleeping. Or eat.”

“If Hawkmon were here, he’d scold us for not sleeping.” Both Ken and Iori laughed a little, and
suddenly, it was a little easier for Miyako to fake a smile. Would Hawkmon still be the same after
the reboot, though? Ken had said that the others’ partners had no memory at all of what they’d
experienced together, even though they still seemed close, but Miyako wasn’t at all sure if that
would be true for her and Hawkmon as well. Maybe Hawkmon wouldn’t want to be her friend
anymore, would find her too loud, too ill-mannered for his rather sophisticated nature. She bit her
lips. Or would they have the same instant connection she’d felt when she had first met her partner?
She’d still come find Hawkmon’s digi-egg, no matter what, but what would happen if she wasn’t
good enough anymore, what if she couldn’t cope with Pururumon’s soft baby features, what if
she’d be too harsh from all she remembered and he too soft from all that he didn’t. Iori shouldn’t
have mentioned Armadimon.

“You know…” Ken’s soft voice broke the silence. “I just remembered… I think I missed a
deadline on an English assignment.” Perplexed, she stared at him, not at all understanding how he
could seriously worry about that, now, when she noticed that he was trying to hide a smile. She
had to laugh. She shouldn’t have been surprised really – it was so like Ken to come up with that
kind of distraction.

“You can miss a few assignments, genius boy,” she teased him and nudged him gently in the side.

“Do you think we’ll have missed a lot of lessons?” Iori asked, seemingly concerned, but she could
tell that, he, too, was just playing along. “I’ve got entrance exams to think about…”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry – Ken and I can help you with that, but I am utterly screwed. Who
am I going to ask?” They all laughed. Of course, Koushiro-senpai would have been the obvious
answer, but she couldn’t say that now. Tomorrow would be soon enough. Soon enough to get her
laptop out again and think about all she’d heard from Ken and try to make calculations based on it.
Try to find out what it all meant, how they could have been so easily forgotten… For now, though,
she was content to stare into the crackling campfire and listen to the relentless rain beyond it,
pretending that school was the only thing they had to worry about – that school was something
they worried about at all. It would have to be enough for the moment.

Later that evening, when night had properly fallen, Miyako was still sitting up, thinking about what
to do next. She chewed on her lips, reflecting on everything she’d learnt from Ken. Everything
around her was silent now, the rain had stopped, the fire had been reduced to glowing embers and
her friends were already sleeping.

It was worrying that Ken had called their friends insects out of all the insults he could have chosen
– but not the way Ken worried about it. She didn’t think that he would ever go back to his Digimon
Kaiser persona willingly, but that didn’t mean that Darkness wasn’t going to prey on him again.
She glanced over to the two boys. Iori had fallen asleep with his head on Ken’s shoulder while Ken’s head was resting on Iori’s. She smiled softly and wearily as it dawned on her. She was the oldest. She had the duty to protect Ken and Iori, shield them from harm as much as she could. Lips pressed together, she made a decision. Darkness could go kiss her ass. She would never let the Darkness get any of her friends ever again.

“I’m stronger than you,” she whispered into the night.

Chapter End Notes

I love Miyako, she's one of my favourites - I don't think I liked her that much when I was a kid, but I'm very fond of that bespectacled tech whizz now, so I really enjoyed writing from her POV :D
Chapter Summary

It's so easy to give in when faced with the darkness within... where will the Chosen Children find hope when everything around them seems desolate and bleak?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 7 The Call

In the morning, the rain had stopped, leaving behind a myriad of little droplets on the grass, glinting in the first rays of sunlight, and a crisp blue morning atmosphere. Iori and Ken had already been up when she first opened her eyes. She walked over to the lake disgruntled, and bent down to wash her face, mainly to get her eyes to stop burning, before even considering talking to her two friends. She wasn’t a morning person and now that there weren’t only Iori and her, she felt like she could relax a little again. At least, Iori wouldn’t be all on his own while she was busy waking up.

Ken and Iori were bent over the remains of their fire, trying to get it burning again. “We’re going to make breakfast,” Iori informed her and then showed her some fruit they’d had found in the woods close by. They looked and smelled exactly like eggs, and for all intents and purposes, that was what they were. Iori pointed to one they’d dropped by accident – its yolk running over the grass and pebbles in gooey slowness. Snorting, Miyako noted that the Digital World didn’t seem to have lost all its whimsy after all.

They used a smaller specimen of the leaves which had provided them shelter from the rain last night as a frying pan and managed to make fairly decent fried eggs. They had to eat them with their hands, and it was messy and sticky, but all in all, she’d had worse breakfasts. At least, they had the lake close by to wash their hands and faces after. It was good to share this simple meal, and it finally made them feel alive again.

“I should get one of those egg-trees for the shop,” she said, rubbing her stomach, and Ken smiled.

“I doubt they would grow in the real world,” Iori weighed in seriously, but she stuck her tongue out at him. “Spoilsport.” Ken chuckled quietly, and it almost felt like a picnic after all. A picnic without their partners, and without Daisuke, but as close as they could get to being without worry right now.

“If only we’d have found the ramen spring,” she moaned lightheartedly, trying to guide her thoughts, and those of her friends, away from any darker themes than the lack of ramen. “Maybe we’ll find a tree with ramen noodles for leaves,” Ken suggested in an attempt to join in, and they all laughed. How silly – it wasn’t even that funny, but the light banter served its purpose. They all felt much better sitting around the fire now, hands still sticky from their fried eggs.
The sun already felt warm on her face and she closed her eyes briefly, trying to imagine that they were only here for fun. Hawkmon would be around the next tree, ready to scold her for – she didn’t know, not paying attention to the task at hand or something. After breakfast, they’d started collecting apples, the “egg-fruits” and something like peaches, putting some in Miyako’s shoulder bag, just in case. At least, they wouldn’t have to worry about food as long as they travelled through the forest.

“Miyako?” Ken had approached her, looking strangely wary again. “…did you ever-“ She turned away from the sun and faced him fully. He was biting his lip, eyes darting everywhere, just not at her. “…did you ever find any traces of Daisuke...?”

Miyako swallowed. She had known that she would be asked eventually, but that didn’t mean she was prepared to finally give the answer. Iori had come to stand next to Ken, looking at her expectantly. He hadn’t asked her again when, at first, she’d been reluctant to answer, but now both of them were expecting her to say something. “Uh, well, I-“ It had been easy enough to ignore the burden in her bag when Iori hadn’t expressly asked any questions of her, but could she lie when Ken wanted to know what she’d found out about Daisuke? Ever so slowly, she reached into her bag, her fingers trembling.

She closed her eyes, swallowed hard, then pulled them out.

Daisuke’s goggles, the glass cracked and reddish brown with dried blood, the frames splattered with flecks of brown, too.

Miyako looked at Ken and instantly knew that it had been a mistake. She should have kept them hidden in her bag until they knew for certain what had happened to Daisuke. If she didn’t know any better, she’d have said that Ken had stopped breathing. He stood stock still, completely motionless, eyes fixed on the mangled goggles in her hands. She could see the white clearly around his irises; his eyes were so wide open.

“Ken…?” He didn’t say a word, just stretched out his hand, and she handed over the goggles. He lifted them up so they were closer to his face, holding them gently in his shaking hands.

She felt Iori take her hand and looked down at him. He was shaken and pale. “Why…why didn’t you tell me before…?” he whispered, and she could only shrug.”I… I didn’t want to scare you, and-“ They both looked at Ken again, who seemed completely lost to them. “I’m sorry,” she whispered back at Iori without looking at him. “I should have said something.” If she had, if Iori had already known, then maybe they could have figured out an easier way of showing them to Ken. A way that didn’t make him look as if somebody had shot him in the chest. And yet he was completely silent. Miyako almost wished for a reaction like last night. She could cope with crying, with sobbing, could have hugged him close and rubbed his back, but she couldn’t cope with this sudden silence.

“It doesn’t mean anything, Ken. He… he probably lost them, that’s all.”

“…doesn’t mean anything…” Ken repeated, eyes still fixed on the goggles. She felt him withdraw from them, retire within himself.

“He’s going to be fine, Ken,” Iori added and nudged Miyako in the side.

“…going to be fine…”

“He probably hit his head or something. Head wounds just bleed a lot,” she said, remembering that
she’d said much the same thing to Iori when they’d found Ken in a pool of his own blood after Alphamon’s attack. “And his head’s so thick, he couldn’t crack it open if he tried,” she added, fully aware that she was rambling. “It’s probably just a scratch.” She kept talking, but it didn’t help at all. Ken would just stare at the goggles, occasionally repeating her and Iori’s words, but it was clear that he wasn’t really present.

She and Iori exchanged a look. “What do we do now…?” Iori asked, a seemingly permanent frown etched into his young face now.

Miyako swallowed. „We look for the others. As we said. What else can we do…?”

Iori nodded, and together, they set about dismantling their camp. It would have been pointless asking Ken for help – he still stood exactly where he’d been standing when she’d pulled the goggles out of her bag, seemingly oblivious to anything else going on around him.

When they’d finished, Miyako went over to Ken, gently touching his shoulder. „Ken…? We want to get going now…” Ken didn’t even look up from the goggles, but he made a small noise of affirmation. „Okay…are you…” She trailed off, not even sure herself what she’d wanted to say. Contrary to what she’d claimed, she didn’t even begin moving, not yet. Instead, she shifted around uneasily, watching Ken, wondering if there was something they could do to help him. Just when she was about to reach out again, maybe sling an arm around his shoulders, hug him, he finally looked up. His eyes looked dull and they would have reminded her of the Digimon Kaiser, had there been any malice in them. Instead, he just looked tired. „It’s okay,” he said quietly. „We can go. I am sorry I- Please forgive me for not helping with the dismantling of the camp. I…needed…some time.” He cleared his throat, and though his head was raised, he would not look her directly in the eyes. „I am quite well enough to walk on. Please do not worry.” She whistled through her teeth. Stupid Ken. Of course, she worried, especially after this strangely formal reassurance speech. Still, there was nothing she could do…

„Alright then.”

Miyako wasn’t at all convinced that Ken was well enough for anything, not right now, but what else could she do? She sighed and looked pointedly at Iori, who just nodded and moved a little closer to Ken. They had to be careful. They had to watch him, be there for him; that was more important than getting somewhere, anywhere – they had no clue where to walk anyway.

She hadn’t opened up her laptop once since meeting Ken, even though she had more input now that she could feed into it, to try and find answers, but…what good were answers if they were still suffering? What good would finding out why they’d been attacked do if they wouldn’t be any safer? No, finding answers would have to wait. She wanted to get going now, wanted to find the others and then travel to File Island. Finding their partners would help them. It wouldn’t make things okay again, not by a long shot, but it would help. She knew she’d feel a lot better if she had Hawkmon by her side, and Iori missed Armadimon, and Ken… She just hoped that seeing Wormmon again would help him, too, regardless of whether the little caterpillar remembered him or not.

„Alright,” she repeated. „Let’s go.”

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Ken was lagging behind. Miyako had been leading their small group ever since they started off from the lake, but Iori had so far tried to walk beside Ken – both were slow, anyway, since both had injured legs, but this was different. Now, it almost seemed as if Ken was trying to get separated
from them on purpose. He kept walking slower and slower, and Iori had walked ahead of him twice already before noticing and slowing down. Miyako kept glancing back. Ken didn't look well at all. He was deathly pale with shadows under his eyes, even darker than before, but there were also red blotches on his cheeks, and she didn’t like the look of that at all. She couldn’t see his eyes directly because his head hung low and his long hair obscured part of his face. She could see, however, that he was clutching Daisuke’s broken goggles as if they were his last hope of rescue, his last anchor to reality – and perhaps they were.

There was something strange about him now, some strange atmosphere, but whenever she looked back, he seemed unchanged. Except right now – had it really been-? She exchanged a look with Iori – once again at her side because Ken had fallen behind – and both turned their full attention to their friend. Yes, there it was, a strange flickering around Ken’s form, like white noise on a TV set. And she heard the rushing sound of waves directly in her head.

“No… Ken. Ken, don’t-“

She didn’t know how to reach him. It was obvious that he wasn’t doing this himself, but he wasn’t fighting it, either. The flickering became stronger, more frequent – it was as if Ken himself flickered in and out of existence. Miyako took a step forward to get to him, help him, but she felt a strange sort of resistance in her way. It wasn’t physical. It was more as if whatever was pulling at Ken was actively trying to push her away. But she wouldn’t let it. With great effort, she pushed against whatever it was and just about managed to grab Ken’s hand. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw Iori doing the same thing on Ken’s other side, and then they all felt the pull.

Suddenly, it was as if all colour had bled out of their surroundings. They were – seemingly, at least – in the same forest, but everything around them was grey. Even the blood on Daisuke’s goggles, still held tightly by Ken, was dark grey now. As strange as this would have been to almost everybody else, both Ken and Miyako knew precisely where they were – and Iori could probably have made a well-educated guess, considering that he knew about the Dark Ocean from their accounts. At least, the transition seemed to have woken Ken up from his freeze. His eyes shimmered wet with tears. “I’m sorry…” he rasped, “…this is all my fault, I’m sorry, I brought you here…” He seesawed back and forth, gasping for breath and clearly on the verge of a panic attack. “You should have just let me go, this is where I belong, not you… I’m sorry…”

She gripped his shoulders fiercely. “Get a grip, Ken!” He whimpered, almost as if in surprise, and stared at her. “We chose to go with you, so shut up about that, okay? We knew where you were headed, and we wanted to come here, so if you apologise one more time, I’m gonna hit you.” She said it almost gently, yet with conviction – she wasn’t really angry at Ken, of course not, but she knew that she had to make it absolutely clear to him that there was no point in blaming himself. That he wasn’t to blame. And she also felt instinctively that she had to keep talking if she didn’t want to give in to the Ocean’s strange pull herself. “We’re your friends, Ken, we love you… So if you belong here, then so do we, okay?”

“Okay…” He blinked, and a tear started rolling down his cheeks. She huffed and leant her forehead softly against his, careful not to put too much pressure on his injury. “It really is, you know. It’s okay. We’ll figure something out.”

“Sorry…”

“Do I actually have to hit you?”

“N-no, I-I just…”
“S-so that’s the D-dark Ocean?”

They both turned towards Iori, who looked around wide-eyed. He seemed disoriented and lost. “It feels…it feels awful,” he whispered, before looking straight at Ken, shaking his head almost in awe. “How did you ever find the strength to open the gate to his place again…?”

Ken looked away and shrugged. “I just had to do it…” he murmured bleakly. “I couldn’t have done it without all of you…”

“That doesn’t make it any less brave,” Miyako said to Ken, but her attention was more focused on Iori. His eyes darted wildly in all directions and he shivered badly. “It’s so cold…” He was taking the whole thing a lot worse than she’d expected – but then, he’d never been to this place before, so the shock must have been extreme.

“Come on…let’s…go somewhere. It’ll warm us up.” She led the way, but where they should go she didn’t know. She touched Iori’s shoulder, and he looked up at her, bewildered. “But where…? Where can we go?”

“I…I don’t know…Just…onwards, I guess.” She gently pushed Iori forwards, to get him moving, her hand still on his back. She took Ken’s hand in hers, and they started walking again. When she had first entered this world, she hadn’t been able to grasp what Ken and Hikari were going through. She’d been much too lighthearted – almost dismissive – back then. Certainly, she had not understood the seriousness of it all, not even when she had fallen down that cliff, trying to look for Tailmon’s Holy Ring. But now, she could understand why Ken had screamed in terror at the mere glimpse of the Ocean’s somber waves.

She already felt like she was wading through water even though they were still in the same forest they had been in before they’d changed worlds – or at least, so it seemed. The Dark Ocean world clearly didn’t function the way other worlds did; its geography was treacherous, not constant, not reliable. Miyako wouldn’t have been surprised if the ocean would suddenly appear amidst the trees, replace them even, and she sometimes thought she could her the waves already, but so far, she could only see the forest.

“It’s really creepy…” she said, more talking to herself than to her friends – she couldn’t be certain if either of them was listening anyway – and still she felt that the words fell short of the reality. “Is it getting darker? Or is that just because there’s no colour here?” She was babbling, desperate to hear something other than the soft crunching of shoes against the forest ground. Her voice echoed through the empty woods but it didn’t manage to drive away the all encompassing silence and numbness that seemed to surround them. Warily, she glanced into the deep woods on either side of them. The rustling leaves were hardly any better than the waves would have been – and she knew that those were lurking, too, somewhere. She turned her head here and there, trying to figure out if they were being watched. Hadn’t Hikari mentioned mysterious creatures living in this world, pretending they were Digimon when they were really something else?

Lost in her thoughts, she hadn’t noticed that Iori had wandered off a little, was a few feet away from them now, staring into the darkness of the forest. She wanted to call him back, but she couldn’t speak anymore. Ken didn’t stare into the woods, or anywhere, he was silent and withdrawn, though less rigid than before. She could feel his hand trembling in hers. They had all stopped walking.

The chill of their surroundings crept up Miyako’s bare arms, and she started shivering. She wrapped her arms around herself for warmth, but that meant that she’d had to let go off Ken, who stumbled a few steps away from her.
She would lose him, she would lose them both. Ken was only standing a few feet away, but he already seemed so distant that she didn’t know how she could ever reach him again. She turned away from him, only for a second – she needed to look for Iori. He was still ahead of them, still looking around in shock, but now he turned towards her. Miyako could tell that he was deeply unsettled, but still he slowly walked towards her, doing what she couldn’t. She couldn’t move anymore. She was a failure. She couldn’t help anyone, couldn’t protect anyone from Darkness, not even herself. Invisible waves were lapping around her ankles even though they were still deep inside the forest. Iori stood by her side now, but she was too ashamed to look at him. She’d failed them both. Her vision was blurring. Why, why couldn’t she move? Why couldn’t she reach out? They needed her, and she was frozen on the spot, useless.

“Miyako, please…you need to help me, please Miyako, I need your help…”

She slowly looked up. Ken had spoken, though his voice had barely been audible, gasping and sore from crying. He was shivering and bent over, his left arm gripping his chest as if he was in pain. His eyes were closed, and beneath those long dark lashes, thick tears rolled down his cheeks. His right hand, though, was extended towards her, reaching for help. Finally, she felt like she could move again. Quickly, she took his hand and pulled him close, at the same time wrapping an arm around Iori. As soon as she’d touched Ken’s hand, she could see the waves that she had only felt before. They were rising around Ken, threatening to engulf him, but she pulled him closer to her, where the waves were only reaching her ankles – and now, even they had started to recede.

“What was that…? What’s going on?”

“It’s this place…it’s because of this place…” Ken whispered into her shoulders. She could feel him still trembling. “I just…I don’t know what – what to do...I can’t...I need him to be alright, Miyako, I need Daisuke...I can’t handle this, not again, no...” She held him tighter. Iori was pressed against the two of them, shaking as well, and she herself could feel the tears welling up once more.

“Guy...guys...we shouldn’t- he’s going to be ok, alright? He’s Daisuke. As long as we don’t know...” She couldn’t make this any better. She couldn’t help Ken with his grief, both fresh and still deeply buried within his heart. She certainly couldn’t stop her own fears, or make Iori’s worry for Daisuke go away, either. But at least she could hold onto her friends and stop them all from drowning. That was something. But she was glad that Ken had called out to her when he did – she wasn’t sure if she could have moved ever again if she hadn’t heard him.

“This place,” she whispered to her two boys, “we’ll overcome it. We will get back from here...as long as there’s somebody who wants us to get back.” It had worked when they were younger, at least, when it had been Hikari to say it to her. Of course, neither Hikari nor any of the others could be their anchors now if they could only remember Ken, and that only barely. But Daisuke. If Daisuke was alive, he’d want them to come home, he’d need them. They just had to concentrate on that.

When they moved on, they kept holding each others’ hands, suddenly overly conscious of the fact that one false step in this world could mean that they’d be lost and alone forever. Together, they felt safer.

Soon, the forest became less dense. Miyako was still leading, drawing the two boys along by their hands, but she went a lot slower now, aware that she had to tread carefully in a land where you couldn’t trust that the forest would stay the forest and not turn into ocean at a moment’s notice. When the forest stopped altogether, they came to a cliff that Miyako recognised instantly. Only now, she could see the ocean right away where before she had only seen trees. They walked over to the edge – too close for her liking, really – and gazed at the disturbingly grey beach in front of them. In the distant, a lighthouse shone a solitary dark beam across the waters.
Miyako sat down and pulled both boys down with her. She didn’t really like seeing them so close
to the sharp drop downwards to the beach, especially not Ken. “We never really talked much about
this place, did we?”

Iori shook his head. “I was aware that it existed, of course, but that’s about it…” He looked up at
Ken. “What is this place exactly…? Is it where all Darkness comes from…?” She bit her lip at that
and glanced towards their friend. Was it really wise to broach that subject now…? But Ken didn’t
seem to mind – he looked exhausted, grieving, but not panicked as he’d been before when they had
had to face Darkness itself. “No,” he answered softly, “not at all.” He gazed towards the ocean, still
trembling, but his breathing more normal than before. She found that being able to see the ocean
lessened her anxiety a little bit – it was still dark, ominous and creepy, but at least, as long as she
could see it, it couldn’t come creeping up at her, like the waves had done when they’d still been in
the forest. She wondered if Ken felt the same.

“I think we made this world…”

She frowned. “I hope you don’t want to take the blame for creating this hellish place – you
couldn’t. Besides, there’s already others living here, sea creatures masquerading as Digimon,
Hikari said so-“

“No. I meant us all. Humans. And I’m not sure it’s hellish, either. Or that there really are any
creatures here beside us…”

“There’s at least one,” Iori stated quietly, and the three children shuddered, suddenly reminded of
their former enemy.

“We should look for shelter,” Miyako was up in a second, but when the beam from the light house
failed to touch them, blocked in its way from something more massive, casting an even darker
shadow, she stopped mid-movement. As if summoned by their thoughts, the daunting figure of
Daemon rose before them, seemingly gliding out of the Dark Ocean’s endless waters.

Oh crap

Low, guttural laughter filled their heads. Ken and Iori scrambled to their feet to stand beside
Miyako – and she tried to get in front of them, to protect them; only Ken and Iori were clearly
trying to do the same. They ended up a shivering, frightened mess instead of imposing, brave
DigiDestined, ready to face their enemy. Ah, who was she kidding – with no partners and one
digivice to share among the three of them, they might as well have bowed down before their new
master there and then. Not that they ever would, but resisting whatever Daemon had planned for
them was probably going to have the same results, eventually. They were done for.

HAVE YOU COME TO PRESENT YOURSELF AS A SACRIFICE TO ME, ICHIJOUJI?

His voice echoed inside their heads, vastly more ethereal than it had been when they had encounter
Daemon in the real world. Ah yes, that was what the creature had wanted back then, to get at the
spore which sat within Ken’s neck, same as Oikawa who’d eventually kidnapped her friend. They
had never found out what Daemon had actually wanted with it. Come to think of it, they had never
really found out what the spore was in the first place. Ken, next to her, had placed his hand over his
neck, even though that would never be enough to protect him from the demanding presence in front
of them. He stared at Daemon, and though she could still see his fear in his taut shoulders, his
shaking fingers and trembling knees, there was something else in his face, now – defiance.

“Never! But you’re not as powerful as you pretend anyway, so don’t try and make us believe that,“
He smiled slyly. “If I hadn’t come here myself, you’d never have come close to getting the spore –
you can’t leave here, thanks to me.” Probably not the wisest move to taunt a devil-like being, but since they had no chance anyway, they might as well provide as much resistance as they could. She braced herself, expecting an attack, but Daemon only chuckled.

YOU ARE AN ODD SPECIES. YOU WHINE AND WHIMPER AT THE MERE THOUGHT OF ONE OF YOUR EASILY DESTROYABLE COMPANIONS HAVING SHED HIS MORTAL COIL – he laughed as they flinched – YET YOU SHOUT AND SCREAM IN DEFIANCE AT YOUR SUPERIORS.

The hooded figure raised his right arm, and Ken shrieked in alarm as he was lifted from the ground, hovering in front of Daemon.

I HAVE YOU AT MY MERCY, ICHIJOUJI, MAKE NO MISTAKE. I COULD RIP THAT SEED FROM YOUR BODY AND YOUR LIFE WITH IT IN AN INSTANT.

Miyako had her balled fists raised, ready to pounce – she would die punching this monster if she had to, but she would not allow him to kill Ken unchallenged. Iori had his hand on her arms already, trying to hold her back, when Daemon flicked his hand and dropped Ken unceremoniously back onto the ground.

I HAVE NO DESIRE TO DO SO. RULING OVER THIS WORLD SUITS ME MORE THAN I COULD EVER HAVE SUSPECTED – YOU HUMANS NEVER FAIL TO PRESENT ME WITH MORE DARKNESS TO RULE OVER.

He spread his arms wide. THIS IS EVER-GROWING SPACE, AND IT IS GLORIOUS. AS FOR THE SPORE IN YOUR NECK… He waved his hand dismissively. I RELINQUISH ALL CLAIMS.

Shocked, Miyako noticed that there was something else beside condescension behind Daemon’s words. Something very much like fear.

I HAVE NO WISH TO FIGHT FOR IT.

“Fight who? Fight who??!!” Ken screamed, as much in fear as in anger, and the tortured “why?” was as apparent to Miyako as the words he’d actually said. Why was this happening to them? Why him? Why, why?

But Daemon only chuckled. YOUR FIGHT WILL BE IN VAIN AS WELL, HUMAN. THE FEVER WILL NOT LEAVE YOU UNLESS YOU GIVE IN.

The giant being turned its back on them. FEEL FREE TO STAY IN MY REALM AS LONG AS YOU WISH. I WOULD IMAGINE YOU TO BE SAFER HERE THAN ANYWHERE ELSE. THOUGH YOU HUMANS SEEM TO HAVE SUCH DISTASTE FOR THE DARKNESS. YOU NEVER REALISE THAT IT IS AS MUCH A PART OF YOU AS ANYTHING ELSE.

She stared after Daemon as he floated over the waters away from them, so stunned that it took her a moment to realise that Ken had stumbled passed her, hurrying to get away from the cliff’s edge and the vast Dark Ocean behind it. He tripped before he could make it far, falling to his knees. Miyako and Iori rushed to him.

She could see it now – the fever flushing his cheeks and brightening his eyes unnaturally. She should have realised before, every time she’d felt that heat when she’d touched him. “What did he mean, Ken? What fever?”
His eyelids fluttered as if he had to fight to keep them open, and his breath was heavy. Whatever was wrong with him, it seemed to have increased with Daemon’s words. Or maybe it was because they had been here for too long. She put a hand to his forehead – he was burning up. Iori helped him sit down, and then they both looked at Ken in concern. He seemed to observe them for a long time, first looking at Miyako then Iori, with such a weary and vulnerable expression that it itched Miyako to hug him, kiss him, comfort him, knowing full well that she couldn’t.

“Well…”

Ken sighed and then started loosening his collar. His movements were slow, his hands shaking – whether from fear or from the fever she could not tell. He bent forward, his hair falling down on each side of his face, leaving his neck uncovered. It was dark-grey and angry-looking. Miyako had not doubt that, were they in the real or the digital world, it would look red and infected.

“How long-?” Iori asked, but Ken shook his head.

“I don’t know… I didn’t even know that there would be something visible… I thought that maybe I was imagining it… It… it might have been reactivated when that man – Gennai-san – when he took the scan? I can’t tell. It’s been… affecting me for a while now. I think. I didn’t notice it right away. Tried to ignore it... I thought I was just…” He trailed off.

Miyako gently touched the spot, retracting her fingers at once when she saw Ken flinching. His neck felt blazing hot. “Is it- Will it turn you into-?”

“No. That’s… that’s not how that works…” He shuddered, looking tired and dejected. “It won’t turn me into anything. It never has. Miyako… Iori… you know, I’m sure you do, that that’s not… I was never possessed or anything. The D-digimon Kaiser-“ his voice shook badly when he had to say those words “That was all me. The Spore didn’t create him out of nothing; it just… amplified my worst thoughts. It’s whispering to me now… Metaphorically,” he added, somewhat drily, and Miyako closed her mouth – she’d wanted to ask what the voices sounded like, wondering if it was some sort of possession, after all – it would explain so much better why her friend, normally the living embodiment of his crest, could ever have been capable of the cruelties he’d inflicted as a child. “It’s not possession,” he repeated as if he’d read her thoughts – it wouldn’t have surprised her; they knew each other so well -, “it’s more like an infection, I think.” She stirred at this choice of words, even though she could not entirely tell why it seemed so significant. Ken drew a shuddering breath. How could she not have noticed how ill he really was? Or had it taken a turn for the worse since they got here? There was sweat on his brows and on his upper lip. His eyes were glazed over a little. “I’ve been fighting it – I don’t ever want to listen to those thoughts again…” he whispered; all strength had left him now, all spent while standing his ground against Demon.

“Like an immune reaction,” Iori stated. “The Spore wants you to give in to your darkest thoughts. And you have a fever because you and your body are fighting against that.” Ken made an affirmative noise. He allowed Miyako to come close and hold him, leaning his head against her shoulder in exhaustion.

“Then you should give in.”

Both Miyako and Ken stared at their younger friend.

“I mean it. You’re ill, and it’s only getting worse the more you fight it. You should give in.”

Ken coughed, and his slight frame shook in her arms. “No, never!” He looked terrified at the mere thought of it. “Don’t you understand? I’d become...him again… how could you ever forgive me for
that...again.”

Iori looked at him seriously. “We’ll just help you again. We’ll help you win over darkness, like you did before. I know that you can win, Ken. And there’d be nothing to forgive because we’d know that you had no choice.”

Miyako gazed at Iori with pride. He was right, of course, that was what they should do. She didn’t want Ken to keep suffering so it was best if he gave in and they would just rescue him as they had before.

“N-no…” Ken was leaning against her heavily now. “I can’t – you couldn’t get me back anyway. Only Daisuke could.” He straightened himself a little, obviously trying to look less helpless and pained. “I can’t ever give in to those thoughts. I promised Wormmon I’d be kind…” He was struggling for breath, and Miyako was terrified at his rapidly worsening condition. It had to be the Dark Ocean’s influence, it had to be that, but how could they ever get out?

Out of nowhere, Ken smiled. “Anyway, it’s like you said,” he murmured weakly, and Miyako wondered whether he was suddenly delirious. In any case, his fever seemed to have risen, she could feel the warmth all around her – and Iori seemed to feel it, too, even though he wasn’t touching Ken. “We can get back as long as someone wants us to.”

The warmth was expanding. She could see the colour creep back into Ken’s pale face, could see colour spreading over Iori’s battered shirt, and then, without a moment’s warning, Ocean and forest had both gone, leaving them in an entirely different world once more.

Chapter End Notes

So, a definite turn towards crisis, despair, but after that - well, we'll see...
I was very glad to see the Dark Ocean world reappear in tri, but I had planned its reappearance in my story long before that. I feel that there is much more potential to it than was explored in 02, but I always liked it for its metaphorical meaning - the one I assume anyway.
Frustration

Chapter Summary

Taichi has never felt so hopeless. With Ken gone, Meiko still a prisoner and the Chosen Children's memories still incomplete, his team seems to be falling apart... Questions pile up with no answer in sight...and how do you fight an enemy you do not even know?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 8 Frustration

“AAAAHHH!”

Taichi kicked the pine tree at the edge of the forest with ferocious force. He’d been at it for the last few minutes and he didn’t feel like stopping. Breathing heavily, he attacked both tree and the shrubbery growing in that transitional space between wood and beach where he’d had to give up his pursuit. How could he have possibly been outrun by a fourteen-year-old with a concussion?!

“Dude,” Yamato was standing behind him, watching. “This isn’t helping anyone.”

“It’s helping me.”

Except, of course, it wasn’t. Exhausted, he leaned his forehead against the tree’s bark and gave it a final punch. Yamato was right. He shouldn’t let his anger at the situation control him. His fury wouldn’t hide his helplessness, his fear – his guilt. The only thing it did was make his knuckles hurt, and, potentially, cause them to be perceived as even more of a threat by the Digital World.

He felt a tug at his trouser leg and looked down to see Agumon gazing up at him worriedly.

“What’s wrong, Taichi? Why did your friend run away? Why are you so angry?”

Taichi forced a smile and patted Agumon softly on the head. “I’m not really angry…” He chose to ignore Yamato’s raised eyebrow. “I guess I just needed to blow off some steam…” He turned around, leaning his back against the tree now – he felt so tired all of sudden – but finally facing his friends. They all looked about as helpless as he felt. Worry etched in everyone’s faces. Everyone had followed Taichi and Ken, including the Digimon, even though Taichi didn’t think they understood what was going on. Ken’s sudden flight had taken all of them by surprise, but at least Taichi and his human friends had a vague idea what had caused it. Taichi bit his lip and groaned. He’d only stopped for a second when Ken had bolted off – too surprised at first to react quickly – and then he’d immediately run after him, but Ken had been too quick. Taichi didn’t know if it was the adrenaline or whether Ken was really influenced by the spore in his neck again – hadn’t that given him superhuman speed? The only thing he knew was that Ken was alone once more, and that he’d failed him.

“I’m sorry,” he said to no one in particular. “I should have...caught him. I should have stopped him
from running off in the first place…” Yamato looked as if he wanted to say something but then chose not to. Taichi snorted softly. They’d never been that great at communicating with each other…

“It’s not your fault…” Sora, Piyomon in tow, came up to his pine tree and placed an arm around his shoulders. It reminded him of their old, simple companionship back when they were children playing soccer together. When had things become so difficult?

“Isn’t it? I’m not terribly good at keeping this team together. You know, as team leaders go… Ken’s run off – and he shouldn’t even be able to do that, physically – Mochizuki is lost, maybe captured, maybe-“ No, he didn’t want to say that, not yet. “And we’re missing three people we can’t even account for because we have no idea who they are. That pretty much sounds like a failure in leadership to me…” He leant his head back and stared into the blue sky above him. Sora gave his shoulders a comforting squeeze. “We’re all equally guilty then… You don’t have to take the blame all on your own, you know…” He shot her half a smile but before he could dwell on their guilt some more – shared or not -, Koushiro cleared his throat.

“Taichi-san. Should I still open the gate to our World?”

“Oh shoot, you can still do that?” He’d completely forgotten about that option, but now that he felt less angry, he saw that Koushiro was still clutching his half-opened laptop, and he idly wondered how Koushiro had caught up with them so quickly if he had carried his most precious possession along with him. Then again, he had no idea how long he’d been kicking that poor pine. Tentomon hovered close to Koushiro’s head, his wings buzzing softly. “Of course, Koushiro-han can still do that. He is very intelligent, Taichi-han,” the Digimon informed him proudly. It almost seemed as if not much had changed, as if their partners’ memories were still intact – until Tentomon continued, almost affronted. “I don’t personally understand why your friend said “insects” as if it is an insult, though… and why he had to go away so suddenly.” Taichi raised a finger and started thinking about a way to explain, but quickly gave up the endeavour. “Yeah no. We really don’t have the time to go into this right now.” He turned to Koushiro instead. “If you can still open the gate, then I think you should”; he said, deciding quickly what he thought best for the team.

Hikari seemed so shaken… and Takeru didn’t look much better, the arm he’d laid around her shoulders as much a comfort to her as it was a support to him – or so it seemed to Taichi. Even Patamon looked slightly depressed, spread flat across Takeru’s blonde hair, his ears drooping sadly despite the fact that he probably didn’t understand the situation any better than Tentomon did – but he reflected his partner’s feelings neatly. Mimi looked nervous, biting on her fingernails, moving from one foot to the other constantly. Jou just looked strained, which, in turn, seemed to worry poor Gomamon.

“I think we should probably stick to the plan as closely as possible. You should all go home. I’ll stay here and look for Ken-kun.” He nodded towards Koushiro. “I’d ask you to stay, too, so we can get back somehow, but I understand if you don’t want to. We’ll figure out a way back on our own, I’m sure.” He gazed uneasily at Yamato. He’d be a lot less worried if he had him at his side, especially since Agumon and Gabumon could, at least theoretically, still Jogress, but he didn’t really know how to ask for it.

“I’ll stay.”

Taichi couldn’t help but grin in relief, but before he could instruct Koushiro to finally get that damned gate opened, he was faced with a prettily manicured finger being jabbed in his face. “Don’t be stupid, Taichi! We’re all going to stay, of course!”
“Uh, Mimi, I thought you’d be happy to get back home—“

“Rubbish! We shouldn’t separate!” He was glad to see her finger disappear from his personal space. Mimi had put both hands on her hips and shook her head at him. “Do I have to spell it out for you? Obviously, whoever our enemy is this time, they want us to be apart!”

“Mimi-san is most likely correct,” Kou shiro joined in, blushing as he said it, “That would be a very plausible hypothesis concerning the reason for our memory loss. One can speculate that we have been manipulated to forget Ken – and our remaining friends – in order to keep us away from each other. It is only because we were not fighting together that Ken and his group have suffered what I presume to be a devastating defeat. It is quite possible that we would also have fared better if we had all our friends at our side.”

“…Right.” Mimi and Koushiro weren’t wrong, but he just hadn’t expected either of them to argue so firmly for staying in the Digital World. Especially not Mimi.

“But I don’t want Sora to leave!” He turned to Piyomon, feathers flustered and wings stemmed against her side.

“I thought you’d accompany your partners back, actually…”

Piyomon’s wings fell. “To your world?”

The Digimon looked at each other, and then back at Taichi. He could see Tailmon move closer to his sister, while Patamon seemed to cling to Takeru’s hair with more force – he was sure he’d seen Takeru wince a little, but of course he wouldn’t say a word. Gomamon, currently nestled in Jou’s arms, wriggled about nervously, while Palmon had stretched a tentative vine towards Mimi. The only Digimon who seemed more or less calm were Tentomon, Gabumon and Agumon – with a jolt, Taichi was reminded of the fact that their partners weren’t the Digimon they’d known for so long anymore. They had never been to the real world and, naturally, feared going to that strange and foreign place. He sighed and glanced at Hikari-chan, but before he could even say something, she already shook her head. “Forget it, Niisan, you can’t just send me home. “ He certainly wasn’t going to try sending anyone back to the real world against their will again.

“…Alright then. You lot,” he crouched down to be on eye-level with those Digimon who weren’t in their partners’ arms – or on their heads –, “don’t look so scared. It looks like nobody’s leaving – I seem to have lost my authority,” he added drily, causing Yamato to snicker. He chose to ignore it.

“Well, you heard them, Koushiro. Noone’s going home today.” Despite his previous conviction – especially when they’d still had to think of Ken’s injuries – that the majority of them would be better off if they would return to the real world, he couldn’t help but feel that it was the right decision after all. They had never fared well alone in the Digital World. And if it was true what Koushiro had theorised earlier…if the Digital World considered them threats, then wasn’t it possible that Alphamon would attack them again? Meicrackmon was also still a possible threat, and who knew what else might be about to attack… Not to mention Gennai-san, if the man who had attacked them was actually their old guide. He’d disguised himself as the Digimon Kaiser, so it was absolutely plausible that “Gennai-san” was only a mask as well. But then, who was their enemy? He scratched his head helplessly. They still had no clue what was going on, were more lost than they had ever been before… No, it was probably best if he had the whole team behind him. Or rather what was left of it...

“I think our first priority should be to assemble as much data as possible to give as a better idea as to what is currently happening and to aid my research into the matter.” Koushiro was clutching his
laptop – only still closed because he didn’t want to get sand into it, Taichi suspected – and seemed to have entered full-on lecture mode. “We should attend to the following questions: Who is our main enemy? Is it Gennai-san, and if so, what has prompted his new animosity towards is? Secondly, who has been manipulating our memories and why? For how long? By what method? How could we be so completely unaware of anything amiss when, in fact, our memory loss has been substantial? Were our families affected as well?”

Taichi raised his hands to stop Koushiro from going on – they had more pressing matters to attend to right now – but he didn’t even have to say a word since Mimi was already taking care of that.

“That is absolutely not our first priority, Koushiro! Our first priority should be to look for Meimei and Ken-kun! They’re in danger – who cares why?!”

Koushiro looked flustered, but Taichi didn’t pause to offer him any comfort, even though he was sure that his friend hadn’t meant any harm – he simply sometimes needed a little help sorting out his priorities.

“It’s not that I don’t agree, Mimi – but Meimei and Ken? I’d have thought you’d feel proven right after what just happened…,” he asked her quietly. He didn’t want to cause any more conflict, but he needed to know everyone’s opinions now before they set off on a searching mission and then broke into a quarrel again because they still weren’t sure who was a friend and who wasn’t. “After all, he did call us insects…”

Out of the corner of his eyes he could see Takeru move about, open his mouth – was he going to defend him again or would he go back to his earlier suspicions? – but Yamato put a hand on his brother’s shoulder and stopped him. He wondered whether Yamato had caught on to what he was doing… Ignoring the two brothers, he looked at Mimi again.

Her stunned silence certainly didn’t last long.

“Come on, Taichi, do you really think I’m that stupid?! Mimi said, with a hint of hurt in her voice. “Of course I don’t think Ken-kun is our enemy just because he shouted at us. I should never have suspected him in the first place, that was wrong of me,” she bit her lip, looking contrite, but it didn’t do anything to soften her anger at his accusation. “But you were attacking Meimei and I had to defend her!” She puffed up her cheeks in mock outrage, but he could tell that she was still being serious, despite her demeanor. “…I’m not selfish enough to insist on what I said earlier when I’ve seen that it isn’t true… he was scared not evil.”

Taichi nodded, relieved. “I’m sorry, Mimi, but I had to ask. There’s so much going on, and we have no way of knowing who to trust – at least all of us should be on the same side. And that goes for both Mochizuki and Ken-kun as well. And the others, too…”

He couldn’t help remaining a little wary of Mochizuki, though – the way she had integrated into their group almost seamlessly, the mere fact that no one had ever wondered that there suddenly was a new Chosen Child in Tokyo… It unnerved him, but he was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. Even though her partner had been the one who caused all of this, in the first place, but if she hadn’t known what consequences it would have… she couldn’t have foreseen it if she really was just an innocent ally, a Chosen Child like them… and not Gennai-san’s partner in crime. And if she wasn’t their enemy, she was in danger and they had to help her, just like they would have to help their other friends.

“We should start our search right away.” Taichi looked at Jou, who held Gomamon in his arms nervously and kept looking towards the seaside forest. “I don’t think Ichijouji-kun will have gone
far – in his state, he can’t keep running like that forever, but with the Digital World in its current state, even after the reboot, being alone is a risk, no matter how long. And he’s already in a vulnerable state.”

“And he doesn’t even have his partner…” Sora added worriedly.

“Agreed. We’re gonna look for him right now.” He waved his hand in the direction he’d last seen Ken. “He went this way, but, of course, he could have changed direction once I lost of sight of him. We should probably split up to cover more ground…”

He chewed on his lower lip, hesitating before splitting them into groups. How could they keep in contact, how would they know if one of them had found Ken? How could they make sure that they wouldn’t get lost in the forest? If they got separated while searching for Ken, they might as well have sent everyone home, after all… He was almost certain that there had once been a way, an easy way, of keeping track of everyone, but he couldn’t remember. How had he not noticed how much he didn’t remember? When had he lost so much control over himself?

“If I open my laptop, I can monitor everyone’s digivices,” Koushiro spoke up. “That way, I will know where everyone is – and Tentomon can fly between groups to give instructions if needed.”

“Great, let’s do that!” Taichi was glad at having been presented with such an easy solution, even though he was sure that Koushiro keeping track of everyone alone wasn’t really what he’d had in mind… “Koushiro, Hikari, you stay with me. We’ll be going straight in. Yamato, Takeru, you can take over the right. Jou, Mimi and Sora can cover the left side of the forest.”

And with that, they set off.

Koushiro had conjured up a rough map on his screen, and Taichi could see tiny dots of light indicating where everyone was. He’d seen that before, he was sure, on a smaller screen. But he couldn’t concentrate on that now – with Koushiro’s eyes glued to the screen, someone had to make sure he didn’t run into a tree. And look out for any traces Ken might have left in his flight. At the moment, Agumon, Tailmon and Tentomon seemed to be much more focused on the task at hand than their human counterparts. Taichi knew they had to find Ken, and quick, but there were so many other things to think about, so many riddles to solve… It made his head swim and his ears buzz… For a moment, he thought he felt a vibration at his hip where his digivice hung, but he’d probably imagined it. Where could the Kai- where could Ken have gone? Think, Taichi, think…

“Are you okay, Taichi?” Agumon sounded worried.

He smiled at his partner. “Yeah, don’t worry… Just worried about Ken…” He cocked his head and looked down at the little orange dinosaur a little more intensely. “You’re sure you don’t remember him at all?” Ken had taken Agumon prisoner, after all, had subjected him to cruel experiments and turned him against Taichi… Why was he thinking about that now? Taichi pressed his hand against his forehead, wishing the buzzing noise would quiet down.

“No… Should I, Taichi?”

“Nah… Don’t worry about it.” He pressed his lips together. He had to keep thinking of Ken as he knew him now, as their friend, had to keep the other thoughts at bay…

“You are noticing it, too, Taichi-san, aren’t you?” Koushiro hadn’t looked up from his computer, trusting Hikari and Taichi to keep him on the right path, but evidently, he’d still been paying enough attention to his companions to notice that Taichi was struggling.
“It…you mean whatever has been manipulating our memories.”

“Yes. It seems like our altered memories are threatening to take over once more, now that we do not have Ken among us any longer. If we are not careful, we might soon forget why we are looking for him.”

“Yeah… we’re gonna start thinking he’s our enemy again or something…”

“But that’s horrible!” He looked up to see Hikari had turned towards them, face pale and frightened. “Niichan! We can’t let that happen! Poor Ken!”

Taichi only nodded. They’d already failed him so much…

“We will have to actively resist the manipulation. If only I knew how the alterations to our memories are produced, I could perhaps disable it. There must be some sort of device influencing us… As is… Tentomon? Could you fly over to the others and tell them to be wary of any beginning changes of their memory? It is of the utmost importance that we resist any further loss of memory now…”

The bug digimon nodded at his partner and buzzed off. Taichi trodded along, occasionally kicking some loose leaves and pebbles, looking all around them in the hope of catching a glimpse of blue hair among the trees. Hikari looked around nervously and with furrowed brows, while Tailmon was jumping from branch to branch, using the higher ground to get a better overview of their surroundings. Koushiro was still fixed on his computer, muttering silently to himself. He had another window with code opened, next to the one showing their eight digivices, but even to Taichi it seemed like he was getting nowhere. If Koushiro couldn’t figure out what was wrong with their memories, then how would anyone else even stand a chance?

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Some hours later, the children had had to abandon their search. It had started raining heavily, and even though they didn’t mind the wetness, the rain fell so densely that they could hardly see the trees, let alone lost friends wandering about behind them. They’d found a little valley within the forest, through which a brook ran – the gorge it formed through the forest was deep enough to contain a little cave, in which they’d taken shelter. Taichi felt that, by now, he’d been in enough caves to last for a lifetime, but at least, they were somewhat safe inside – both from the rain and from potentially hostile Digimon, who could, after all, only attack from one side now.

Taichi leant against the rocky wall of the cave entrance and peered out into the rain. It looked like the little brook opened up into a lake in the distance, but he couldn’t be sure. Maybe they could check it out once the rain let up.

He could hear some crunching and pebbles shifting, so he looked up to see Yamato join him at the entrance, leaning against the other side of it. The others had gathered around a little fire further inside the cave, sharing the last of their provisions and some fruit they’d collected on the way.

“So what do we do next?”

He shrugged. “Good question. I’d say we continue looking for Ken-kun,” Yamato nodded, “but while it’s raining we should probably start with what Koushiro suggested earlier – trying to find out what the heck is going on.” Of course, Koushiro had said it much more politely and in a more refined manner than Taichi – something about data collection and research, but surely that was the
“Dunno how much we can actually find out,” Yamato said. “Nothing the agents told us was of any worth, anyway. But we don’t have anything else to do, so...” Taichi nodded and turned his gaze away from the outside world to the others sitting in a circle around the fire. Koushiro had his laptop ready – he kept it very close to himself, and Taichi suspected that his friend felt even more protective of it than usually after having to hide it frantically in his backpack from the rain earlier.

“I have started a file, in which I will collect everything we know,” Koushiro said, sounding efficient and professional, as usual. “From our perspective, this all started a year ago, when the Digital World closed its gates to us. At that point, we assumed that it was because we had fulfilled our tasks and the Digital World was safe for good, but I am beginning to think that, quite to the contrary, this was when the issue first arose. After the Million Points of Light incident, the barriers between our worlds should have become easier to cross, not more difficult. After all, quite a few more children received their partners that night, and we must assume that they, too, have been separated from them in the meantime. Yet we did not think to inquire about any of them at all.”

A quiet mumbling arose – Hikari and Takeru had their heads bent together, Sora and Jou were talking – he could distinctly hear her say “Oh yes, those children…there was something wrong with them, wasn’t there?” and Mimi seemed to mumble about “Michael and Wallace back in America.”

Koushiro nodded. “Yes, we did not think of the other children with Digimon partners as much as we should have. And while our memories of our final battle with MaloMyotismon have not entirely disappeared – which makes me assume that MaloMyotismon, at least, is not our enemy in this scenario, or else he would have deleted the memories of his defeat – I have not thought of it and its consequences as much as I should have recently. I am finding it hard to remember it as we speak. This may be connected to the fact that our friends, who we currently cannot entirely remember, would have been present at the battle, but there might be another underlying reason, too.”

Takeru gasped. “Those children…! The new ones… we were following them because they had been given…they’d been given the Dark Spore by Oikawa!”

Koushiro nodded. “Yes. Thank you, Takeru-kun. Oikawa had taken a scan of the Seed within Ken’s neck and implanted it in the children, which, in turn, caused changes to their abilities and personalities. What concerns me most is that I never thought of taking a scan from Ken and examining it, to find out the nature of the Dark Seed or Spore. As a result, we have no idea what it really is, other than that it caused Ken to turn into the Digimon Kaiser.”

“But we saved those kids, they were fine. And so was Ken. You had not reason to investigate further.” As much as Taichi appreciated Koushiro’s scientific skills…wasn’t he going a bit too far back when, really, they should have been concentrating on what was causing the distortions and why they had all been attacked by Alphamon?

“Taichi-san, with all due respect. This is how you think. It is not how I think or ever have thought. I should have been excited at the prospect of finding out more about Ken’s affliction. Or at least been aware of the importance to study it further. The fact that I didn’t makes me think that, unfortunately, our minds have been altered for a long time now, albeit not to the same extent as at present.”

“So it has to do with Ken-kun after all?”
Taichi almost thought he’d have to stop Takeru from tearing into Mimi again, but Koushiro simply replied, completely oblivious of all tensions within the group. “In a way, Mimi-san. But I don’t think he is involved in this in any other capacity than as a victim. I believe that it is possible he and his group were attacked first precisely because of the Spore in this neck. Alphamon might have been manipulated or infected as well – either way, I think it plausible that our enemy – possibly Gennai-san – used the attack to get at the spore, which would also explain how he could transform into Ken’s form as the Kaiser.”

“But why?” Sora asked. “Why the Kaiser? Was it only to make us fight among each other? To think that Ken had betrayed us?”

“Unlikely. For that to work, we would have to have retained all memories of Ken in the aftermath of his Kaiser days. As is, we only remembered him as the Kaiser when we saw him – and we only remembered him as Ken when we found him in the desert.”

Taichi’s brain was whirling with thoughts. There was so much to process, so much to think about. Nervously, he tapped a quiet rhythm against his digivice attached to his waist, the familiar piece of electronics as source of comfort in his confusion.

“I don’t get it. What’s all this got to do with the distortions? What’s Gennai-san got to do with them if Meicoomon was causing them and he didn’t have access to Meicoomon before captioning Mochizuki and her partner?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that, either, Taichi-san. Shall we continue with what we do know?”

He nodded, and Yamato moved from his spot on the other side of the cave entrance to crouch down beside Koushiro. “The distortions started – Digimon coming to our world, causing trouble. And then we were contacted by those agents, who probably know more than either of us. They’re at least part of our enemies.”

“Partly, yes, but I’m not sure they’re behind all this. Or even if Nishijima-san is as involved and as informed as Himekawa-san.”

Taichi couldn’t help but feel a little relieved. He’d been quite fond of his teacher – and he wouldn’t have liked it if his ability to judge people had let him down so much.

“Well, either way, we can’t trust whatever they told us.” Yamato had his hand fisted in his hair. “I specifically asked about Ken, and they said he was fine, that they were monitoring them. Shit, I’m pretty sure they said ‘them’. How did I not pick up on that?”

“We are being tricked and manipulated, Yamato-san. That is why. Whatever has been controlling our memories and thoughts still has some effect on us, and I cannot fix it unless we find out how it is being done. At the moment, we have no other choice but to be very, very careful about what we will accept as our shared reality. And everyone of us will have to work to keep our memories of Ken intact, or at least as intact as they are now. He seems to be, at least partly, at the centre of this all. It’s certainly possible that the Spore is also connected with the infection – and with Meicoomon’s data corruption as well. It really is crucial that I get a chance to examine it.”

“So you’re saying our priority is to find Ken, not just because we’re his friends and he might need us, but also because he might provide us with answers?”

“Yes.”
“So all our little ‘data collection’ here has yielded so far is that we were right in looking for Ken first?”

“Essentially.”

“Terrific…” Taichi muttered, leaning his head back to stare at the ceiling. They truly were running in circles here, and no one seemed to know how to break out of it. Sora was asking about the reboot and what it was if not a complete restart of the Digital World – underlying her question was the worry whether they could get their partners’ memories back after all, he was pretty sure – he worried about that as well. Out of the corner of his eyes, he noticed Hikari frowning as she listened to Koushiro’s theories about the reboot. He wondered why…he’d have to ask her later on.

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In the morning, the rain had stopped but because they were so many – and the Digimon so deeply asleep – it took a while before they were ready to go, already almost approaching noon. Taichi led the way towards the lake he’d thought he’d seen the night before. When they reached it, he was sure that they were being lucky for once – there were traces of a campsite, dismantled now, but enough traces of footprints in the mud and charred earth where a fire had been – the ground surrounding it less damp than the area around it, so there must have been some shelter – to tell him that someone had spent the night here. And the footprints were of three people at least – Ken’s age and younger, judging by the size of them.

“Ken must have been here, and he must have found his friends! Our friends, I mean. Look,” he pointed out the footprints to the others, and though they may have had some doubts whether they’d truly been made by their friends, he remained positive. Who else could have got into the Digital World? It must have been fellow Chosen Children, must have been the ones they were so desperately looking for. He simply chose to believe it and wouldn’t budge from this position until it was proven otherwise. What else could he do?

They decided to follow the footsteps in the hope of rejoining them soon. Taking into account Ken’s injuries, there’d be no way they could be anything but slow. They followed the footsteps until they suddenly stopped. Puzzled, Yamato and Taichi went ahead but couldn’t find any further traces of them despite the fact that the ground remained as wet and soggy as before. Taichi kicked the mud. They’d been so close, and now what. Had they suddenly taken flight?!

He glanced back and immediately noticed that something was wrong. Hikari stood where the footprints had stopped, stiff and pale. Alarmed, he jogged back to his sister but before he could reach her, she flickered and disappeared. “HIKARI!” He had shouted her name at the same time as Takeru, both rushing bewildered to the place where she’d just been, but before they could even think about what to do next, how to find her, rescue her, she was back and collapsed onto the muddy ground.

“Hikari-chan!” He had her in his arms almost immediately. “Hikari-chan, what happened, are you okay?! Where did you go?” He could feel her shivering, her body cold and clammy. “Niichan… Niichan…” She pressed herself into his shirt, and he pulled her into a tighter hug. “Shh, it’s okay…I’m here…I’m here…”

Agumon was standing at his shoulder, looking almost as worried as Tailmon who was hovering over his sister, close to tears. “Hikari! Hikari! Don’t leave me alone, Hikari!”

She was crying. He could feel that now. “Niichan, I saw them! I saw them; they’re in the Dark Ocean.” Everyone else had gathered around brother and sister crouching on the ground, alarmed by
the commotion. She freed herself from his hug, but kept clutching his shirt. Her eyes seemed hollow and wounded, tears flooding from them freely. “Oh, Niichan, how could I ever forget her? She’s my best friend…!” Confused, he looked at her, waiting for her to calm down enough to explain.

“Miyako, Iori and Ken. I saw them. They must have been pulled to the Dark Ocean... Oh, Niichan, we have to save them, they must be so scared. Something must have happened, they were all crying…”

“Ah...the Dark Ocean...we went there before...” He looked up to see Takeru gazing into the distance, trying to remember. “There were creatures who wanted to get you, Hikari-chan…”

“Yes...and then we went again, Miyako, Ken and I, but we were able to get back because you all wanted us to. We have to get them back as well.”

“But how?” Taichi was looking at Koushiro, but his younger friend was shaking his head.

“Ken’s D3 was able to open a gate deliberately rather than by accident, but as far as we know, that is still in Himekawa-san’s possession.”

Hikari was leaning against him once more, still sniffling. “We’ll...we’ll figure something out, don’t worry, Hikari-chan...” he whispered soothingly. “We know where they are now, that must be useful...somehow...and you’ve seen them so you remember them now, right? That’s gotta help in some way...”

“Why did they go there in the first place?” Takeru was biting his lip nervously, alternating between looking at Hikari and at the place where the footprints stopped in concern. “It can’t have been planned...”

Hikari shook her head. “Something must have happened,” she repeated, “something really bad. I think... I think something must have happened to Daisuke...”

Daisuke. Another name he felt he, in particular, should remember but didn’t. “Wait, but you said you only saw Miyako, Iori and Ken? What about this Daisuke, then, can you remember him, too?”

She shook her head again. “Not really, no, but... I know that I should, I know that there is something in there, in my memories... it’s like I can almost see him in my mind, now that I’ve seen the others, but not quite...”

It was enough to make him want to tear his own hair out. The knowledge that there was something – someone – that they should remember but who had been taken from them. Their friends. Erased from their memories, and they hadn’t even been aware of it. The lack of control over their own minds – it was infuriating. And even now, he could still feel it. That tiny voice in his head that seemed to come from outside and insisted that Ken was an enemy, the Kaiser, that there was no one to remember because no friends of Ken could be friends of his – he couldn’t tell where it came from, but now that he was aware of it, he knew he had to fight it at all cost.

He helped Hikari to her feet and was reluctant to let her go. She looked so pale and fragile, but when he wanted to hold her arm and support her, she softly pushed his hand aside, smiled weakly and shook her head. She was still wiping away some stray tears and her hands were trembling slightly, but she seemed determined not to break down. It struck him how similar his little sister and Ken were – two sides of a coin, some might say, but to Taichi, it was more as if they represented two aspects of the same thing, light and kindness...
Takeru had joined his sister, a look of permanent concern on his face. “…I should remember them, too, shouldn’t I…” Taichi couldn’t stop listening, his own guilt mirrored neatly in Takeru’s words. “…we were close, weren’t we…Daisuke…Iori…but I can hardly grasp any of them, only Ken…” He watched as Hikari took Takeru’s hand in an attempt to console him, but then he had to draw his attention away from his sister – they couldn’t keep standing here forever.

He cleared his throat and turned towards the others. Everyone looked weary – even Sora was kicking loose pebbles about in frustration while Yamato was moving his fingers nervously, playing an invisible guitar no doubt; he always did that when he didn’t know what else to do. They kept failing. How long had they been in the Digital World now? Four, five days? And what had they accomplished? Next to nothing. No answers, and no rescues, either.

He wished he could ask the others for suggestions what they should do next, but he knew that they were looking at him for precisely that kind of direction. And he couldn’t stay paralysed with fear, he had to ignore it, but he couldn’t make decisions without considering the consequences, either, even though that had once been his kind of leadership…

“I say we keep going for now… Until we figure out a way to get to Ken and the others, there’s really no point in staying here…” He glanced at Hikari, still worried that she might be affected by that place where the two worlds seemed to have briefly met. “Let’s move that way,” he waved in the direction Ken and his friends had headed towards, “and try and find friendly Digimon who might be able to help us along…” Everyone nodded their agreement, but no one seemed to feel like saying something, their mood dampened by Hikari’s brief visit to that other dimension. Silently, they started walking again.

“Taichi?”

“Yeah?” He smiled at Agumon, walking by his side.

“Why do you want to meet friendly Digimon? We are friendly Digimon, aren’t we?” Agumon extended a claw and Taichi followed the gesture and had to chuckle a little at the sight: Patamon was flopping on Takeru’s head, Gomamon chattering in Jou’s arms, Tentomon buzzing around next to Koushiro’s shoulder, quietly talking – bouncing ideas back and forth, perhaps –, while Piyomon walked wing in hand with Sora, finally reconciled. Gabumon seemed to have overcome his shyness towards Yamato at last. Mimi and Palmon were walking together without talking, but Palmon’s tendrils wrapped softly around Mimi’s arms. Tailmon kept as close to Hikari as possible, clearly still worried about her. Taichi looked back down at his own partner and patted his orange, scaly head softly, fighting the urge to stop walking and pull the little dinosaur into a hug.

“That’s right, but you don’t know any more about what’s going on than we do – I was hoping for slightly more informed Digimon, ya know?”

He was always more confident when Agumon was close, and he felt like he had always felt that nothing much could go wrong as long as they were with his partners, but now he couldn’t quite quell his doubts. Clearly, there were threats that even the Digimon could not handle, could not protect their partners from as before… The Chosen Children might have grown stronger over the years, but so had their enemies – and this time, they didn’t even know who they really were.

Chapter End Notes
I took a bit longer with updating this time - and since I'm in quite a busy phase at work at the moment, that trend might continue... But I do know where I'm going, so, hopefully, you'll come along!
I hope you enjoyed this switch back to the original Eight - it was time to see what they've been up to, even though Taichi might feel that he hasn't accomplished all that much...
Interlude: The Agents

Chapter Summary

Once again, it's up to children to save both the real and the digital world from destruction... But what about the ones who have already sacrificed so much for that cause? Those who have already fought their battles, grown up but never forgot what happened to them because they were Chosen Children?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude: The Agents

Daigo sat in the office he and Maki worked from – alone. The light was switched off and the whole building seemed silent. Maki was gone, and he didn’t know where… No. That wasn’t true. He was fairly certain that she’d followed the Chosen Children to the Digital World. He didn’t know what she thought she was doing – but he couldn’t deny anymore that it likely wasn’t anything good.

His gaze fell on the flickering screen on his desk, the only source of light in the office. Motomiya Daisuke. Location Unknown. Ichijouji Ken. Location Unknown. Inoue Miyako. Location Unknown. Hida Iori. Location Unknown. He couldn’t count how many times he’d told Ichijouji-san and the other families that they simply didn’t know where their children were, that the information on the computer screen was entirely correct – unknown longitude, unknown latitude, unknown, unknown – that they were doing all they could to find them. And now he didn’t know anymore if any of this was true. If the Incorporated Administrative Agency really had been doing all they could to locate the missing children, shouldn’t they have found a clue by now? They were, after all, monitoring both worlds, even though they couldn’t enter the Digital World directly. So if the children hadn’t travelled to a parallel universe – and even though Daigo knew that there was some evidence for the existence of those, he sincerely doubted that that’s where the missing Chosen were to be found – then the Agency should have found at least some traces of them, in either of the two worlds. Yet there was nothing. Either that, or nobody had told Daigo.

He swiveled his chair around to face the wall. There was no official work he had to do, nothing but watching the computer do scans, monitoring the Digital World for Motomiya, Ichijouji, Inoue and Hida, but increasingly he felt that all the scans were monitoring was a fake reality. He should have picked up on it earlier. He should have seen the signs. Should have noticed that Maki had deliberately left Meiko-chan and her partner alone shortly before the Digimon Kaiser had made his return and kidnapped Meicoomon. Should have found it suspicious that she kept disappearing on mysterious missions, talking furtively into her phone, closing her laptop when he came close… Should have questioned why she suddenly had Ichijouji-kun’s D3 and D-Terminal. Actually, he had questioned that, but just when he was about to demand answers from her, she was gone.

Suddenly, the computer let out a loud whirring sound like it was about to crash, and Daigo turned his chair around quickly. The connection to the Digital World, as frail as it had been, was now completely gone. Instead of the usual desktop, the screen showed quickly moving lines of zeros, ones and twos – the corruption code. He stared at it for a minute, then jumped up and grabbed his
coat. He couldn’t do anymore “monitoring” anyway and there was no one around who could give him another task – he hadn’t seen Mochizuki the whole day, and Maki had disappeared together with the kids.

Hastily, he ran down the stairs of their office building and into the busy streets. He didn’t quite know what he should do next but something pulled him towards his flat. On the way, he could see multiple ad screens glitching. Back in the office, he’d thought that the contact between the two worlds had been completely severed – but it seemed like it was only their access to the Digital World that was gone. On the screens all around him, trinary code flashed, and then, in between circles of code, windows into the other world. So far, the people around him seemed to think that it was a marketing campaign – but Daigo had the disturbing thought that the windows wouldn’t stay windows but would become doors instead.

With these unsettling prospects in mind, he reached his flat. For a while, he paused, his eyes fixed on the drawer where he kept his most precious belongings. He hadn’t opened it in a long time.

He probably couldn’t have entered the Digital World anyway. But he had never tried, either. He’d missed Bearmon, of course, but out of respect for Maki and her loss, he’d left all thoughts of returning behind him. After all, he hadn’t even been sure if Bearmon - no, Baihumon - still remembered him. Slowly, he opened his drawer. In it, his digivice lay waiting, dusty but never forgotten. Carefully, he took it out of the drawer. Another whirring noise caught his attention – he must have left his laptop on standby when he left this morning.

Daigo raised his digivice just when the trinary code on his laptop’s screen had formed another circle, another window. And then he felt the pull, and he was gone.

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The low chuckle of her companion made Maki uneasy, uncomfortable and, though she hesitated to admit it, scared. She hadn’t gone out to look for Tapirmon, hadn’t wanted to face her partner again now that her partner was a stranger. And she hadn’t known where else to go, either. So she’d stuck with Gennai-san, even though she knew by now that he most likely wasn’t Gennai-san and that he certainly wasn’t her ally.

She couldn’t help but chuckle herself, and it sounded dreadfully hollow to her own ears. How had she ended up like this?

“Everything is still on course,” Gennai-san stated smugly. “Your world cannot access the Digital World any longer – communication and all digital systems on earth will soon fail completely.” He was still coding while he spoke – she could see the ones and twos and zeroes crisscrossing on the screen. “Then I only have to take care of these interfering children… and then the world will be ready for takeover.”

She’d given up wondering why he was telling her all of this. He probably assumed that she was so deeply involved in his schemes that she couldn’t afford going against him all of a sudden even if she wanted to. He was right.

“I must say I’m surprised that the ones attacked by Alphamon have made it so far. I’d have assumed that they all would end up like their pathetic leader. But it hardly matters.”

She shuddered when she thought of the injuries the boy had sustained. His chances of survival had, to her, appeared almost non-existent when she had first seen him in Gennai-san’s prison cell, but then he had intervened, had put him in a sort of tank and set a repairing code in motion. Maki had no idea what could possibly have motivated the man – he seemed so intent in his hatred of humans
that she would have expected him to rejoice at the prospect of the boy’s imminent death. She certainly hadn’t expected him to act when she begged for him to do something, anything, rather than leave him on the cold floor of the cell, slowly bleeding out.

Gennai-san had smirked – “Since when are you so sentimental?” – but then there’d been a flash in his eyes, some trace left by that other Gennai she used to know, perhaps – and he had done as she’d asked.

Now, the boy was stable at least, even though she didn’t know if the changes the programme had written onto his injuries – the patches and fixes – would translate neatly to the real world. Perhaps it didn’t matter. Perhaps neither of them would ever make it home.

“Are you not listening again?”

She looked up to see a flash drive held out to her by Gennai-san. Puzzled, she stared at it and didn’t move.

“Take it,” he snarled. Confused, she did as she was told, uncertain as to what he wanted her to do with it.

“It’s the scan I took from Ichijouji. You’ll insert it into the tank’s data port and start the installation. Then programme his D3 - should work just like the others. Perhaps even better, considering that you have direct access to it. You won’t need to do anything else; it will set itself in motion and that will deal with Ichijouji, Inoue and Hida.”

Maki’s mouth hung open, her eyes were wide, and she could only sputter. “But…but…you can’t possibly… Gennai-san, that is cruel!”

He laughed. “I find it amusing. Besides, I need to focus on the children remaining on Server. I’m sending him to deal with the leftovers.” A manic grin was stretched wide on his face, like the exaggerated features on the face of a ghost or demon. “At least, the scan will serve further uses, now that my own disguise has been discovered.” He looked at her with cold disdain. “Go now. Install the programme, set him loose.” The laughter that followed sent shivers down her spine and she rushed to get away from his presence.

As if in a daze, she made her way to the cells, the weight of the flash drive almost physically slowing her down. She knew that Gennai-san had kept the original copy of the scan, and she wondered what else he was doing with it. It was improbable that he had only taken it to use Ichijouji’s form as an avatar. No, like so many others, he’d wanted to get at the Dark Spore imbedded in the boy’s neck, but she knew no more about what it was, what it signified and what it could do than any of the Chosen Children.

What was his ultimate goal? Was it really to install Digimon supremacy over the human world? Somehow, she didn’t think that this Gennai-san, whoever he really was, held the Digimon in much higher esteem than their human counterparts… And she had no choice but to assist him in whatever mad plan he followed…had walked his path for far too long in her dogged obsession to resurrect her Tapirmon…

What else was he going to do to these children, what new tortures would he devise until this was all over? What further sins would she have to load upon herself before he was done with her?
Another short interlude, but one that does propell the action forward - and maybe has given you the first hint to a question you've all been asking for so long? ;-) I hope you enjoyed it and are ready for all that's coming!
Reunion

Chapter Summary

Having left the Dark Ocean, Miyako, Ken and Iori reach a temporary haven of peace and tranquility. But with only one out of three D3s, how will they be able to resist the mysterious stranger coming to attack on his Airdramon?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 8 Reunion

The last time they had gone to the Dark Ocean – Miyako, Hikari and Ken himself – they had left it at roughly the same location where they had gone in. This time, however, they had made quite the journey, and Ken realised once more that the Dark Ocean did not function at all like a normal world, not even geographically.

The bright colours almost hurt his eyes after the dull grey of Daemon’s dark realm, but the soft squishiness of the ground was calming. He smiled weakly at Miyako’s and Iori’s stunned faces because he already knew perfectly well where they had ended up. But then he had had an advantage all along.

*Ken-chan…!*

That soft and gentle voice had called to him, was still calling out for him inside his head. He felt it almost physically, like a gentle tug at his sleeves, urging him to get up and look for the egg that was speaking. His smile disappeared.

“Are we…?”

“Is that really…?” Miyako and Iori looked around wide-eyed, but really, there couldn’t be any doubt as to where they were. The friendly pastel colours, the soft ground, elastic like a bouncy castle… the giant toy blocks… and, of course, thousands upon thousands of eggs and cradles spread across the landscape.

He nodded without looking at them, eyes fixed on the eggs before them. “Yes,” he said quietly. “We’re in Primary Village.”

Slowly, Miyako’s and Iori’s expressions changed. From surprise to disbelief to unbridled joy. In less than a minute, both were beaming at him excitedly.

“But that means we can find our partners!” He smiled a little when he saw Iori’s eyes light up at the thought. He was glad for them. Miyako was already jumping up and down on the bouncy ground. “I’m going to see Hawkmon again! That’s fantastic! Best thing to happen to us in weeks! Oh! Oh! But…they might not remember us…Ah, I don’t care, I just want to meet him again…!” She smiled happily and her eyes were shining just as brightly as Iori’s.
“They remember us,” Ken stated softly, not bothering to explain how he knew. “You should go look for their eggs…”

He didn’t need to say it twice – he’d hardly finished before Miyao and Iori were off to look for Pururumon and Tsubumon.

Ken-chan, where are you? Come find me…

He could still hear Leafmon’s voice and he was beginning to wonder whether that was altogether normal. Neither Miyako nor Iori seemed to have heard anything, or at least they hadn’t said so. Maybe he was imagining it. Still, he should have gone to look for Leafmon’s egg just the same but he couldn’t move.

He still held Daisuke’s goggles firmly gripped in his hands and he looked at them with something quite like obsession, turning them in his hands, moving his fingers across the silver frames, the black leather band holding them together. The blood had mostly dried, but he could still feel some of it rub off and stain his fingertips. Blood on his hands… It wouldn’t be the first time.

Maybe he shouldn’t go to find Leafmon anyway. What good was he for the little soft Digimon? Leafmon was so kind, so gentle, so pure. So forgiving. And Ken? He was forever tainted by darkness. He led his friends to the Dark Ocean not once but twice. And he could still hear its waves whispering to him. He wasn’t well, Taichi had got that much right, but he hadn’t quite grasped the full extent of it. He was broken, he was shattered. He could hardly cope with his own life, how could he be responsible once more for that tiny, friendly being that was Leafmon?

He let out a shaky breath, and the pieces of glass from Daisuke’s goggles, which were still more or less intact, still somewhat see-through, turned foggy with condensation. Daisuke… how could he ever be complete again if Daisuke wasn’t found… how could he live-

“Ken? You should have told us that you needed help getting up!” He raised his head to see Iori standing in front of him, a happily bouncing Tsubumon enfolded safely in his arms. Iori looked conflicted – reproachful, guilty and happy all at the same time, or so it seemed.

“Hello Ken, how are you, where’s Leafmon? Da’gya!”

There was a ghost of a smile hovering on Ken’s lips, but before he could reply to Tsubumon – or to Iori for that matter – Miyako joined them. Pururumon was nestled on top of her head and she had one hand up permanently, gently caressing her partner’s soft baby feathers. Pururumon opened an eye and nodded a greeting at Ken.

“Oh Ken, why haven’t you looked for Leafmon yet? I bet he can’t wait to see you!” She smiled at him brightly, for a moment oblivious to his inner torment. “You were right, by the way, they do remember us!”

Had he been with Taichi and the others, he might have resented their bright smiles and excitement. He’d have accused them of forgetting about Daisuke already, about not caring enough… But they did care, they only focused on their partners right now because they had to, they had to if they didn’t want to become as consumed by fear and grief as he was. He could see that in how quickly Miyako’s smile faltered when she saw the goggles he was still clutching.

“Ken…” She knelt down by his side and Iori quickly joined her. Now that he’d been drawn out of his own thoughts, he realised how parched he was and how hot and dry his face still felt. His
breathing was a little easier than it had been in the Dark Ocean, but the fever certainly hadn’t left him. “I, I decided not go look for Leafmon,” he blurted out, lowering his gaze.


Miyako was much more practical. “Don’t be stupid.”

She tried to take Daisuke’s goggles, and he nearly flinched and tried to get them out of her reach, but then she had them in her hands. Before he could protest, she’d pulled them gently over his head so that were hanging in front of his chest like a necklace. “Daisuke would tell you to stop being such an idiot and look for Leafmon right away.” She was undoubtedly correct.

“But…I…” He shook his head. Why didn’t she understand that this was best for everyone? “You…you have your partners… that should make us much safer than before… a-and we can’t J-jogress anyway…” The tremor in his voice had increased when he’d mentioned their Jogress. “…and besides… I’ve only ever been bad for Leafmon. I’d be bad for Leafmon now… I’m…I’m too…sad to be a Chosen Child any longer. I can’t care for him like I – like I should.”

He’d almost said he couldn’t care for him like he used to, but then, that wouldn’t be true, would it? He’d never cared for his partner like he should. Instead he’d kicked him, insulted him, killed him even.

She sighed, and for a moment he thought that she had finally enough of him and his constant, pathetic whining.

“I don’t think it matters, not for Leafmon. Leafmon will want to be with you, no questions asked. Leafmon will want to be by your side, even if – no, especially if you’re sad. That’s what friends are for, aren’t they? I think you should look for him”

She took his hand, and Iori took the other, adding, “We’ll help you!”

Someday, they would get sick of it. They’d get sick of his constant need for reassurance, for assistance and support. They’d realise that all he ever did was take; take their friendship, take their love, take their comfort. One day, they’d understand how much of a burden he really was, but for now, they were here and he tried as best as he could to accept the help they offered.

He had to lean on them since his legs felt weak – fever still raging in his already damaged body – but he quickly pointed them in the direction from where he felt the tugging and when he could see the white egg with the pink hearts on it, he let go of his friends’ hands.

He stumbled the few steps forward, dropping to his knees in front of the little egg. Trembling, he stretched out his hands.

All of a sudden, he was tackled by a red shape and he fell to the side in alarm. Eyes wide, mouth gaping and flat on his back, he stared up at Elecmon, who growled at him angrily, his nine tails spiked in anger. For a moment, he thought that the Child level Digimon might be infected, but his eyes were clear blue.

Ken didn’t know what to say. In his daze, the only thing he could think of was how glad he was that Elecmon had hit his uninjured side – or else he would have screamed.

“And what do you think you’re doing?!” Miyako scolded and, without much ado, took the Digimon by the scruff of his neck and pulled him off Ken’s stomach. Numbly, Ken got upright and sat cross-legged, ignoring the little strain it put on his wounded thigh.
“I am protecting these eggs!” Elecmon replied, tails still bristling.

“Not from us, you dolt! We’re their partners!”

Elecmon rose up on his hind legs, crossing his paws in front of his chest. “Well, I don’t know what that is, but I’m protecting these eggs!”

Iori had walked up behind Elecmon and tapped his finger on the rookie’s shoulders politely. “Excuse me, but you haven’t tackled us when we found or partners’ eggs and watched them hatch. Why Ken?”

Ken thought he could have given a pretty good answer if Iori had asked him instead – he used to be the Digimon Kaiser, after all – but when Elecmon looked at him again, there seemed to be no recognition in the Digimon’s face and the fact that he was, indeed, a being called Ken seemed news to him as well.

“I…don’t know,” Elecmon eventually admitted, looking rather sheepish. “I think there was something about these eggs…someone came here before…” he muttered, scratching his head in confusion. “And I think he took them and they hatched, but I don’t know who he was and what he did to them, but they reappeared here shortly after.” If at all possible, Elecmon looked even more confused now than before. “I didn’t even remember that until you asked me just now,” he added in Miyako’s direction. “It was from before… before…” But Elecmon trailed off, evidently not quite so certain before what exactly.

Ken frowned. What Elecmon was remembering right now…it must have been a memory from before the reboot, reasserting itself. And that, in turn, meant that the reboot had not only left their partners untouched, but that even in the Digimon who had been affected, the memory loss wasn’t necessarily permanent. He’d have to ask Elecmon what he thought had triggered the memory, and then they could use that input to calculate what they would have to do to restore the Digital World in its entirety. Maybe he could tell Koushiro once he had apologised and then they could figure something out together with Miyako. This right here was something he could deal with, a riddle to be solved – and he could help the other Chosen with that new knowledge even if he couldn’t help himself.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. “Oi Ken,” Miyako had bent down to face him. “If you could rejoin us for a second – Elecmon just said that you can take the egg now.”

“Oh…oh right…” he murmured. He had been grateful for the interruption, for the delay. But now he couldn’t wait any longer, couldn’t keep ignoring that precious little voice at the back of his mind. Yet he felt his anxiety stir. Miyako and Iori were at his side now, instead of a few feet behind, and both were watching him.

Shaking, he crawled forward until the white-pink egg was directly in front of him. Ken-chan, you’re nearly there! He cautiously wrapped both his hands around it, lifted it up – and could already feel the warmth exuding from it. And then there was a light, but not a blinding one, like the attacks… Instead it was a soft, gentle glow that felt almost like a hug. The light faded and on his hands rested a tiny pale green baby. Leafmon.

Ken could already feel his eyes grow wet, and then Leafmon launched itself at Ken in his excitement, pressing his little face into the nape of his neck. He let the tears fall and reached up to hold his partner to him gently. Leafmon’s familiar weight and warmth soothed his aching heart. “Ken-chan! Ken-chan! What took you so long? I missed you!”

…I-I missed you too…” he stammered through his tears, leaning his cheek ever so slightly against
the back of Leafmon’s leafy tail.

“You’re very warm, Ken-chan!” A sudden fear gripped him, and he pulled Leafmon carefully away from his neck, away from that cursed spore that could and would destroy everyone he loved. Instead, he cradled his partner in his hands, looking at his blurry form in wonder.

“I wanted you to come find me! I wished and wished for you to come so much, I think I made you appear!”

He let out a sound between a chuckle and a sob. “Yes…Yes I think you did just that.” He smiled and cried equally, unable to stop either..

The first excitement about their reunion had soon worn off and now Leafmon was glancing up at him in concern. “Ken-chan? Are you alright…? You’re still crying and you don’t really look very happy even when you smile…Are you not happy to see me…?”

He drew in a sharp breath. “Of course I’m happy to see you!” He never ever wanted Leafmon to feel unwanted ever again, but the shaky thickness of his voice revealed all too clearly that, even though he was genuinely glad to have his beloved partner at his side again, he was far from alright.

“Is it because you got hurt in the battle, Ken-chan? I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you…” He quickly shifted Leafmon’s weight to one arm and used the other to wipe away his tears as much as he could. “No, no…you did all you could…really, you… you were so very brave…” Gazing at Leafmon’s tiny black button eyes – shimmering with tears – he tried fervently to banish the image threatening to take over, that of Imperialdramon dissolving in front of them. He tried to smile at Leafmon.

“Hey Leafmon! Welcome back.” Miyako tickled him softly on top of his leaf.

“Welcome back, Leafmon.” “Welcome back, da’gya!” Ken watched fondly as Leafmon greeted Miyako and Iori a little shyly and then exchanged a friendly nuzzle with Tsubumon. Miyako lifted Pururumon from her head so that the three Digimon could talk among each other for a bit, but she wouldn’t take her eyes of him. It embarrassed him that he constantly caused his friends to worry, but he also couldn’t help feeling grateful that they cared so much for him.

“Ken-chan?” Ken looked down at his partner’s curious face. “Yes, Leafmon?”

“Where’s Daisuke?”

“We don’t know, he got lost.” He only realised he’d stopped breathing for a second when Miyako stepped in to help.

“Oh. Well, should we look for him then?”

Miyako had crouched down in front of them both to look at Leafmon directly. “Yes, we thought we might do just that once we found you guys,” she explained patiently, and Ken was glad that he didn’t have to do any talking.

“Can we take Chicomon’s egg, too?” Ken looked down at Leafmon and then at the light blue egg that had rested just beside Leafmon’s. “I’m sure Daisuke would be happy if we had Chicomon with us once Daisuke isn’t lost anymore!”

“I…I’m sure h-he would be…” Almost absent-mindedly, Ken reached for Chicomon’s egg – he’d wanted to lift it up and hand it over to Miyako so she could put it in her bag, but as soon as he touched it, he felt the same warmth he’d felt when Leafmon’s egg had been in his hands. Suddenly,
instead of an egg, a round blue blob was sitting there. Stunned, he blinked at Daisuke’s baby partner.

“Ken! Hello!” That seemed to be enough politeness for Chicomon who promptly proceeded to jump against Ken’s chest for a hug. Confused, Ken complied, now hugging two Digimon close to him. “Where’s Daisuke?” Chicomon asked, just like Leafmon had. Helplessly, he gazed over to Miyako, Iori and their partners, who seemed at least as nonplussed as he felt. “He…he got lost…” Ken repeated Miyako’s words, failing to come up with an explanation of his own. I lost him. He’s lost. I lost him. He had to close his eyes again, press his lips together, or else he’d have cried out loud.

“Oh. Can we go look for him, then?” Ken only nodded, and that seemed to be enough for Chicomon. Quite happily, he snuggled up against Leafmon, both Digimon safely pressed against Ken’s chest.

“Ehem. Would you like something to eat?” All three children and all four Digimon turned their heads at Elecmon, who seemed quite bashful about his earlier aggressiveness.

“That would be lovely, thank you,” Iori said with a short bow.

“Fooooood!” The babies bounced up and down excitedly, causing Elecmon – and their partners – to smile.

Elecmon had led them to a wendy house, just big enough to contain Elecmon’s bedroom, a snug little living room and a well-stocked kitchen. They were sitting on the floor around a small table – on it several empty bowls and a few half-full ones from which Leafmon, Chicomon, Tsubumon and Pururumon were still eating.

Ken sat between Iori and Miyako, leaning against a wall. He felt exhausted and numb, but the warmth of his friends on either side of him at least made sure that he didn’t slump to the side and the pressure of their arms against his made him hold on and keep awake. The dull throbbing pain in his neck reminded him that the spore wouldn’t just go away, would perhaps be with him forever. Would he always be in pain from now on? His fingers found their way almost instinctively to the goggles around his neck, their weight simultaneously calming and suffocating him.

“Here.”

He opened his eyes – when had he closed them? – to see Elecmon offering him a steaming mug. He took it in both hands.

“What is it?” Iori asked and peered into the bowl.

“A herbal tea. It brings down fevers,” Elecmon explained and when Iori looked at him quizzically, he explained “Your friend looked a little peaky, so I thought he might need something like that.”

Ken bowed his head weakly and murmured a quiet “thank you” before drinking a little from the brew. He grimaced. “Not exactly a delight.”

Elecmon grinned. “The babies don’t like it either. But it helps, I promise.”

Ken nodded and took another sip. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“I hope you feel better soon. Sorry about the tackle…” Elecmon scratched his head in
embarrassment. “I don’t know what got into me. You seem like a very kind person, actually.”

He looked away, uncomfortable about accepting the well-meant compliment. Elecmon had no idea who he really was. He had no idea that Ken didn’t deserve to be called kind. He always tried to be as kind as possible – but he knew that he could never really live up to his crest anymore, not after all that he had done. “Thanks…” he murmured.

“Ken is a very kind person!” He kept his gaze lowered, quite focused on watching their partners still enjoying their meals – even when she put an arm around his shoulders. “He just has a hard time seeing that about himself so it’s always a good idea to say it.” She sounded cheerful but he could tell by the slight squeeze she gave his shoulders that she meant every word. “…thank you, Miyako…” he whispered without looking up.

Iori didn’t say anything, just touched Ken’s arm for a few moments.

Elecmon looked from one to the other to the next, clearly unsure as to what was happening between them, but seemingly deciding not to worry about it.

“So. I trust that you are all warm and fed now?”

They all nodded. The food had been soft and mushy, clearly meant to nurture the babies Elecmon raised in Primary Village, but it had been warm and tasty, and, Ken supposed, had made them feel as safe and as comfortable as was possible under the circumstances. The Digimon were finally done eating, too, and returned to their partners, Tsubumon jumping in Iori’s arm and Pururumon stretching out his limp wings so Miyako would pick him up and sat him on her head again. Leafmon and Chicomon had both settled on Ken’s lap and Ken had gently wrapped his arms around them.

“Do you know someone called Takeru? He was here a while ago. He also talked about a Digimon being his partner.”

He exchanged a look with Iori and Miyako.

“Yes…” Iori replied quietly. “He’s a….he’s a friend.” Ken noted his hesitation and he bit his lips worriedly. It wasn’t that he couldn’t understand it – on the contrary, he understood perfectly why Iori wouldn’t be so sure if Takeru truly was their friend anymore, and that was what worried him. There was a rift between them now, and he didn’t know if it could ever be fixed. He hated it and he felt responsible for it – after all, the spore was somehow involved in this whole disaster, so it stood to reason that it had been his fault. Ken didn’t know whether these thoughts, this self-hatred, were genuinely his or stemmed from the spore’s influence, but he couldn’t suppress them either way. They haunted him day and night now – even when he was sitting in a warm living room, surrounded by his friends.

Leafmon pressed closer to his stomach, and Ken looked down only to find his partner’s worried face gazing up at him. “Ken-chan, don’t be sad…we’ll be okay…” Chicomom nuzzled his right hand. “Yes, don’t be sad, Daisuke will be cross at me if I don’t cheer you up!” His lips twitched, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “…I’m sure he wouldn’t be cross…” he replied in a whisper, then turned his attention back to Elecmon, Miyako and Iori.

Miyako was asking Elecmon about any unusual events in Primary Village, but other than the memory of someone coming to collect Leafmon’s and Chicomon’s eggs, Elecmon remembered nothing that had happened before the reboot.

“And what about the eggs? Are there more here than usual?”
“Oh yes, quite a lot more. It looks like almost every Digimon has been reborn.” Elecmon paused. “But I don’t quite know how I know that. I’ve got nothing to compare it to.”

Miyako looked pointedly at Ken, and he nodded. “There was a reboot. It may have caused you to lose your memories, but we don’t know how exactly it worked…”

Elecmon nodded. “That makes sense. Takeru said something like that as well. He said that I knew him back then, him and his partner Patamon, but I couldn’t remember anything.”

“But you remembered something, didn’t you?” Iori asked. “When you tackled Ken – you said you had done that because someone had come and taken Leafmon’s and Chicomon’s eggs. That was before the reboot, wasn’t it? Can you tell us all that you remember?”

“Yes, I think it must have been. I don’t remember much at all, it feels like I am very, very young. But I don’t think I am. And I don’t think the person coming and taking the eggs happened after I was born. I mean after my memories started. So that must have been before that reboot?”

Miyako nodded. “Sounds like it. So, that person. Any idea who he might have been?”

Elecmon pressed his eyes shut like he was trying hard to conjure up some image. “He was a little shorter than you –“ he pointed at Miyako, “and taller than you,” a nod at Iori. “I think he was your height, Ken. And he wore a long blue coat.”

He didn’t miss the glances between Miyako and Iori, their raised eyebrows and pale faces. Their eloquent silence. Ken himself felt a cold shiver grip his heart, but he chose to ignore this ominous feeling that made his throat close up. A coincidence. What else… and yet… Gennai-san had taken a scan, a copy of himself…his entire self. He wondered what he could have done with that. How powerful, how perfect was the copy?

Ken cleared his throat. “…did they hatch when the stranger took them?”

Elecmon frowned, and then nodded. “I think so. But it’s all very vague.”

He nodded and looked at Leafmon and Chicomon next. “And what about you?” he asked gently, “do you remember anything?” Both shook their heads – or rather their entire bodies, as it were. “No, Ken-chan, I only remember us fighting as Imperialdramon against Alphamon. And then I woke up and you were there.” Chicomon looked a little sad. “Before we got here, Dasiuke was crying, wasn’t he…? The battle we were in was really bad?”

“Hmm.” He stroked them both, but didn’t say anything. He wouldn’t ask Miyako and Iori what they knew about this mystery person – the same height as Ken and in a long blue coat. Judging by their expressions, they wouldn’t answer truthfully anyway.

Slowly, he took up his mug again and drank the rest. It didn’t taste any better cold, but he figured he just had to get it over with. He was quite aware that the fever was putting a strain on his body and he didn’t know how much longer he could keep up without proper medical help – if there was anything medical to be done about mysterious spores embedded in one’s neck.

“If you’ve drunk the whole tea, you should lie down and rest,” Elecmon said. “You can sleep in my room if you want to.”

“Thank you. I think that would be best… if that’s alright with you two?”

“Oh absolutely.” Miyako smiled at him. “You take all the time you need. I think we’re safe for
now. Iori and I are going to walk around Primary Village and maybe a bit beyond – I want to try and see how the corruptions have affected File Island. And maybe I can get some calculations done. We gotta find out something about, well, something. The reboot, the corruptions, the infected Digimon… anything will do really.”

He nodded, smiled briefly at his friends, and then followed Elecmon to his bedroom. In it, there was a small mattress – not quite large enough for Ken, but if he curled up, it could be quite comfortable. He thanked their host with a bow, and then lay down. Leafmon and Chicomon snuggled up against his stomach and he put an arm around the two little ones.

Soon enough, he fell into a fitful, feverish sleep.

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He was in a long, lightless hallway. His steps echoed in its hollow emptiness as he made his way towards the room at the furthest end of the dark corridor. He was wearing a black suit and tie, and he carried in his hands a framed photograph, adorned by two black ribbons in the top corners, signifying something he chose not to think about. He wouldn’t look at the picture. He couldn’t. Instead, he kept walking until he reached the door. A faint light shimmered underneath it, and then it swung open.

He entered the chamber. It was a hospital room, but it seemed to him almost sepulchral, like a crypt or a catacomb. In the corner, there was a stretcher and, upon it, a human figure. Trembling, he went to it.

A strangled sob escaped his throat. Daisuke lay on the stretcher, eyes closed, his skin a pale grey and almost wax-like. No movement. Glass shattered beneath his hands and he let the frame drop to the floor. And then his legs crumpled underneath him and he fell, but when he hit the ground, it wasn’t the tiled, disinfected coldness of a hospital floor, but the hot, blistering sand of a desert.

Above him, the worried faces of Wormmon, Veemon and a human boy whose name he’d forgotten.

“Ken, what happened? You were hit…!”

He tried to answer, but no words came out of his mouth. His neck was blazing hot and the pain from it extended into his head and shoulders. He gasped for breath, and then he was lifted up.

“Oh no, Ken, I think whatever hit you must have been poisonous. You’re burning up!” the boy said, holding him close. He heard Wormmon shout from somewhere under him, “We have to find Gennai-san, maybe he can help!”, and he saw a blue shape running next to Ryo’s legs, just as worried as Wormmon. Ryo, yes, that was the boy’s name. Only his face wasn’t bent over Ken anymore, no friendly brown eyes looking out for him. Instead, there was a swirling darkness, a giant creature of chaos, but he couldn’t make out its true form, could only see the menacing grin and swirls of corrupted data whirling around it. “YOU WILL REGRET DEFEATING ME, LITTLE ONE: YOU’VE WON THE BATTLE, NOT THE WAR. I WILL COME FOR YOU. YOU WILL NEVER ESCAPE. OH, BUT YOU WILL SERVE ME!” It felt like tendrils reaching out into Ken’s
body, entering from his neck, gripping his heart and squeezing, rose-coloured glasses on his nose
suddenly, a car horn, brakes screeching, a cold scanner pressed to his neck, hands gripping him,
attacks hitting, Daisuke’s voice crying out to him, “I will never let you!” “Let me? Who do you
think you’re talking to? Your friends’ lives are in my hands now... If you want to save them... let’s
see... bow down to me!” Daisuke on the ground, Veemon’s foot on his head, and then his own
crazed laughter, and the laughter of the beast, he couldn’t distinguish them anymore

Ken jolted upright from his dream with a gasp. Both Digimon tumbled away from him in alarm.
Breathing heavily, it took him several moments to realise where he was.

“Ken-chan! Ken-chan! What’s wrong?”

Gasping for breath, he turned towards his partner. Minomon – evolved through the good food and
rest – seemed almost frantic with worry. “You were crying, Ken-chan, please don’t cry...!”
Chibimon was climbing up to his shoulders, but Ken caught him before he could reach his neck
and took him in his arms. Looking at Daisuke’s partner cradled in his arms just made him cry
more. “I...I had a nightmare.” He could still see Daisuke’s pale face in front of him, could almost
feel the frame of the photograph in his hands. “Where...where are Miyako and Iori?”

Miyako poked her head inside Elecmon’s tiny room. “I’m here, I heard you moaning. What-?”

“What if he’s dead?” he interrupted her, not bothering to tell her that he’d had a nightmare. That
much should have been obvious. “What if Daisuke’s dead, what then?” Miyako stared him, opened
her mouth and closed it again. Not one of them had said it before. They’d stopped their sentences
short every time. They’d used euphemisms. Lies. He got hurt, he got lost. But what if he got killed?

“Isn’t he going to be reborn, then?” Chibimon asked in concern.

“No. No, not like you, that’s not how it works for humans.” Ken found it hard to talk, hard to
breathe even.

“He isn’t“

“Miyako, you don’t know that. Answer me. What then?”

She took a deep breath, then crawled through the door and sat down beside them. “We’d go on
somehow. What else could we do?”

“I can’t.”

“You’d have to, Ken. But it isn’t certain-“

“Look at his goggles, look at the state of them.”

“Is that what your nightmare was about? Daisuke being dead?”

He nodded, still trying to get his breath under control. “Yes, but not only.” And he told her
everything he’d seen and heard in his sleep. Things he understood and those he didn’t. He didn’t
even leave out the part where he’d become the Kaiser again – that, too, had to come out in the
open.

“That other boy...who was he?”

Ken was grateful that she didn’t press him any further on the part where he’d carried Daisuke’s funeral picture nor on the screeching car brakes – remnants of his brother’s death, which sat on his soul like badly healed scar tissue. Now that he had said it once, said it out loud that Daisuke could be dead, he wanted to bury that fear once more, try to hold it back in the recesses of his mind.

“...his name was Akiyama Ryo. I think.” He glanced at Minomon who hovered protectively in front of his face. “We travelled with him when I came to the Digital World for the very first time, didn’t we?”

“Yes we did.” To his surprise, it wasn’t Minomon but Chibimon who had spoken. “I travelled with you and Ryo! But I don’t remember much of it because that was before I was reborn to be Daisuke’s partner! I think, maybe, I didn’t remember it at all until just now when you said Ryo’s name!”

He didn’t quite know what to make of that, but when he looked at Minomon to share a look of surprise, perhaps, his partner only nodded. “Huh. Right.” He turned to Miyako whose eyes were fixed on Minomon.

“You remember, though, don’t you, Minomon?” she questioned. “This must have been when Ken was infected with the spore. Do you remember that? Can you tell us more about what happened and why?”

Minomon visibly squirmed, clearly not happy about Miyako’s insistence. “I do remember that. He was hit by it after a battle because he tried to protect Ryo-san. He pushed him to the side because that’s what Ken-chan does. He protects others and he doesn’t think about himself. Not enough.”

“But what is it? What is the spore and why can it make use of people’s darkest thoughts in that way? It would really help us to get closer to the meaning of all of this, if we knew, Minomon.”

Minomon shook his little head so forcefully that his entire body seemed to shake with it. “I can’t, I can’t tell you. Ken-chan has to remember himself, I can’t say anything.” With a sudden movement, Minomon was clinging to Ken’s collar in distress. “I was told that I couldn’t say a word. That there’s a reason you can’t remember, Ken-chan and if I told you what happened just like that, it could hurt you! So I never said a word about the spore!”

“Everything seems to be about memories this time!” Miyako threw her hands up in frustration. “And who told you not to say anything to Ken?”

“Gennai-san did.”

Miyako snorted. “Of course, he did. But which one?”

“What do you mean, which one?” Minomon sounded troubled – quite possibly about Miyako’s sanity. “There is only one, Miyako-san...”

Ken lifted his free hand to hold his trembling partner – in his other hand, he was still cradling Chibimon. “It’s okay, Minomon. Don’t worry. You don’t have to say anything if you think it’s a bad idea... But can you tell me if I’m right or wrong when I ask you questions?”

Reluctantly, his friend nodded. “I was ill back then, too, wasn’t I? I asked you this before but I
hadn’t realised...it was a fever like this one, right?”

Minomon nodded and huddled against his collar. “You were very ill for a very long time. I was so frightened, but Gennai-san and Ryo-san took care of you. And eventually, you could go home. And when you came back, you-“

Minomon didn’t say anymore but he didn’t have to, either. They all knew perfectly well what had happened next.

Miyako hummed and pressed her palms against her face underneath her glasses for a few seconds, before letting out a heavy sigh and looking at Ken.

“Hey, why don’t you come outside with me? We’ve got a lot to think about, but some fresh air can’t hurt, right?”

He slowly nodded. “I’ll be along in a few minutes. I need to...compose myself first.” She reluctantly agreed and crawled out.

Ken closed his eyes and listened to his own heartbeat and breath. Still too quick, too laboured, but he couldn’t suddenly change that, no matter how hard he tried to be “composed”. Before he could leave Elecmon’s tiny home, however, Chibimon had scurried up his arm and onto his shoulder, evading all of Ken’s attempts to catch him before he got too close to the spore. “You know what, Ken,” he whispered into his ear, and nuzzled Ken’s hair fondly with his little dragon face. “I don’t think Daisuke’s dead at all. I don’t think I’d have been reborn if he couldn’t come back to me.”

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Iori, Armadimon and Ken were watching Wormmon and Veemon play a very unconventional game of soccer with the little ones – all their partners had evolved to Child level again after another hearty meal from Elecmon’s kitchen.

Elecmon’s tea hadn’t cured his fever – he doubted anything could while they were still where they were, still facing unknown enemies, still waiting for any trace of Daisuke to turn up – but it had soothed it a little, made his headache less piercing and more dull, had driven away the numbness that seemed to distance him from everything. Even the rushing of the Dark Ocean’s waves could be kept at bay a little with the help of Elecmon’s medicine and the happy, playful shouts and screams by the Digimon babies all around them. Elecmon had lent him a blanket, and he’d wrapped himself up in it. In short, he was as comfortable as he could be right now and he was grateful for it.

“How many babies are here? Were you able to count them?”

Iori shook his head. “I gave up. They are far too many, and of every imaginable kind. Whatever the reboot did or didn’t do, it certainly reset a lot of Digimon lives to zero.”

“But not our partners. I wonder why. The other Chosen Digimon weren’t spared.”

“Maybe because they were already in their eggs when it happened. Maybe that protected them.”

“...how ironic.” He wondered what it all meant. Would Alphamon be furious that his ferocious attack had actually led to something good? He shuddered. Hopefully, it wouldn’t come here to try and finish the job – he never wanted to see the monster again, even though he couldn’t actually be certain that Alphamon was on the side of the enemy, not just corrupted and infected by whatever forces pulling the strings in the background. Still, he’d gladly abstain from any further meetings.

“How are you feeling, Ken?”
“Better, thank you.” Iori wasn’t convinced, but then, neither was Ken, so they were probably equal. “I wonder what the others are doing... they must still be on Server.”

“They’re probably worried about you... At least, they remember you.” There was a hint of bitterness in Iori’s voice, and it made Ken’s heart ache. Iori shouldn’t be bitter.

“Why would they? I insulted them and ran off, remember?”

Iori sighed. “I don’t think they’re holding that against you. And, well, if they are, they’re not really worth our worry anyway.”

“Iori…”

“It’s true. You won’t convince me otherwise. But I’m not saying they are holding it against you, anyway.”

Ken’s lips twisted into something very like a smile. “You’re still quite uncompromising, you know that?”

“I guess. Daisuke keeps telling me to lighten up.”

“…Mh.”

Iori touched his elbow, probably only because he couldn’t reach Ken’s hand or wrist under the blanket. “We’ll find him. We, eh, just have to get back to Server somehow.”

“Yes, that’s going to be fun. Fancy a swim?”

Iori raised an eyebrow. “Not really. And I don’t think I’d particularly enjoy a trip back through the Dark Ocean, either, to be honest.”

Ken snorted. “Don’t worry. Without my D3, I cannot open the portal. And even if I had it, I don’t think I’d be able to. So unless you want to try and ask Daemon for a lift, that option’s probably out.”

Iori smiled and leant against one of the squishy ABC building blocks that were scattered around Primary Village.

“It’s almost idyllic here…” Ken mused. “Like none of this really happened…” They had seen a few flashes of purple code in the sky and on some nearby trees, so File Island hadn’t been spared from the corruption, but it seemed like Elecmon had done a truly marvelous job at protecting his charges.

“Did you hear that?”

Ken turned to Iori instantly, recognising a tone of alarm in his friend’s voice. “No. What-?” But then he heard it, too. A distant roar that sent shivers down his spine precisely because it wasn’t some unknown mystery noise but a very familiar sound to him. “That’s an Airdramon. And not a very happy one.”

Iori nodded. “I thought so. Come on, we need to get the babies inside and tell Elecmon that we need to get ready.”

Ready for what, Ken wanted to ask, but there didn’t seem to be the time. And really, they had only just managed to get the babies underneath the shelter of a castle-like climbing frame, when they
saw the Adult level Digimon approaching. On top of it stood a familiar figure, with an arrogant stance and a long blue coat flowing in the wind.

Ken’s heart gave a sudden lurch, and he couldn’t quite explain what it was. Veemon and Wormmon had noticed something, too; they seemed unsettled and disoriented. He put a hand on his chest, trying to figure out what the feeling was that had gripped him.

Miyako and Iori had come closer to him – perhaps they worried that he would collapse. He actually couldn’t say for certain that he wouldn’t, but for now he kept staring at the figure on the Airdramon while they came closer and closer to the Village. Spiky blue hair, glasses – he was sure they would be golden-rimmed once the Airdramon came close enough for them to be clearly visible – a dark blue coat with gold inlets. Cuffs that looked almost like shackles, gloves…

“What is this…?” He whispered, hand still on his chest. “What-“

“Ken…? Please don’t freak out, we should have told you earlier. We just didn’t think you’d cope too well.”

He looked back and forth between his friends and…the figure. The Kaiser. Himself.

“We think it’s probably Gennai-san. It would fit if he was the one who took the scan from you… He’s been using this disguise for a while… Ken? Are you listening? Please don’t be scared, Ken. It…it isn’t you, after all.”

Iori had taken hold of his free hand and squeezed it anxiously.

“…Gennai-san…” Ken repeated this new information thoughtfully. Of course…of course, the scan Gennai-san had taken from his neck – or rather from his entire body. Ken shuddered when he remembered the pain that had run through him, back when he was still alone in the desert. So Gennai-san was using the scan to disguise himself as the Digimon Kaiser, was that it? But why use the disguise now? If he knew where to come in order to attack them, then he must have known that he, Ken, was with his friends, too, and that his mask would have less of an impact because they all knew it had to be pretence…

There was a mighty roar and an attack hit the entrance to Primary Village, its building blocks melting in a pattern that was almost grotesque. It was frightening to see but it also meant that the Airdramon had come close enough now so that the figure upon it was clearly visible. Still, it couldn’t have been a visual cue, Ken knew that, it had to have been something else, but as soon as he could see the Kaiser more clearly, he knew who was behind the mask and why the mask had been necessary. And he knew that what he’d felt earlier hadn’t been a minor heart attack at seeing the resurrection of his former self, but a second heartbeat joining his own.

“Ken, don’t stand there like this. Don’t keep staring at him, it’s no good, we need to do something.” Miyako said and Iori tried to drag him with them, perhaps to the shelter where Elecmon and the babies had taken refuge, but he refused to move.

“I’m not scared, and I’m not freaking out, either, don’t worry. I know it isn’t me,” he stated calmly while still watching the Airdramon’s approach. It roared again, and by now it was closer still, close enough for Ken to see the red eyes indicative of infection. So Daisuke was being controlled, most likely by Gennai-san, which would also explain his Kaiser attire. Gennai-san must have taken the scan to craft the disguise onto Daisuke. Ken bit his lip. But the scan… had it included the dark spore or was it merely visual? Logically, if Gennai-san had used the scan for himself, there would be no sense in keeping the spore attached to it. Who would want to infect themselves with that? Besides, the spore could hardly make Daisuke attack them just like that, could it? No, he was
being manipulated. That had to be it. It had to be- He felt a tug on his trouser leg and looked down to find that Wormmon had attached himself to nearly half his lower leg, thus standing almost upright. “Ken-chan, Ken-chan! You need to stop thinking so hard. Miyako says we need to move and protect the babies!”

He slowly nodded, then turned to Miyako and Iori. “Go to Elecmon, make sure they’re all safe. I’ll stay here, I’ll deal with this.” He didn’t say that the Kaiser was Daisuke. He didn’t dare because he feared that, really, he wasn’t, and this was just a delusion on his part, wishful thinking born out of the desperate desire for Daisuke to be okay.

“You? No, Ken, if anyone stays, it’s got to be me and Hawkmon! He’s the only one who can evolve to Adult level if, and that’s a big if, my D3 is still functional enough for that.”

“I wasn’t going to fight the Airdramon, Miyako, but I have to help him…”

“Help- Ken, have you lost it? Remember, he isn’t you.”

He wanted to reply that he knew that, perhaps work up the courage to say that he thought it was really Daisuke, but he didn’t get the chance. With a final, deafening roar, the Airdramon had come to a halt directly in front of them and low enough for the Kaiser to jump down in one of those daring moves that had coined Ken’s own style three years ago. Ken kept his eyes fixed on him once more. He had to figure out what was going on, had to find a way to stop whatever was controlling Daisuke. His mind was seemingly working at full speed again for the first time since he’d suffered the concussion and he intended to put it to good use. Only vaguely did he notice that Miyako and Iori were still trying to talk to him, to drag him away, but his attention was focused elsewhere.

“Well hello there, Chosen Children,” the Kaiser said with a smirk, and Ken shuddered when he realised that he sounded exactly like him. “It’s been a long time.”

Ken closed his eyes and drew in a long breath, trying to quench the rising panic. It’s not you. It’s not the Digimon Kaiser. It’s Daisuke. “Hello,” he replied as calmly as he managed to, still observing, still watching.

“You may surrender immediately,” the Kaiser continued, ignoring Ken’s casual greeting. “With four Child level Digimon only, I hardly think that you are worth my Airdramon’s effort.”

Miyako had her D3 up in the air before Ken could say or do anything to stop her. “Oh yeah? We can stop you on our own, thanks very much! Ready Hawkmon?” Miyako’s D3 buzzed and only a second later, Aquilamon was hovering in the air. Just for a second, Ken saw red desert sand, but he pressed his eyes together until the vision was gone. He couldn’t have that, not right now. He needed to be alert.

Both Digimon took flight and attacked, Aquilamon with a “Blast Laser!” and Airdramon with an unintelligible roar.

“No! We need to stop this, we can’t fight!”

“We have to, Ken!” Miyako sounded desperate. “I don’t want to, either, I just want it all to stop, but… but…”

He shook his head. “No, no, you don’t understand, you-“ One of Aquilamon’s attacks had hit the ground next to the Kaiser and he had jumped out of its way with an elegant, fluid movement, but it had made his coat move up and reveal what Ken had looked for all along – Daisuke’s blue D3,
vibrating and throwing out sparks, permanently at work. “Brilliant…” he whispered. “Absolutely brilliant. He could control all of us with this…”

“What, Ken, what are you talking about?!” Iori had knelt down next to Armadimon, frightened to be stuck in yet another battle, this time with even less protection than before.

“Stay back, take cover,” Ken instructed them – there was still not time to explain, he had to end this quick, “You, too, Wormmon, Veemon. Miyako, you and Aquilamon handle the Airdramon.”

And with that, he pounced. Neither his friends nor the Kaiser had expected that – he heard them gasp behind him, but the Kaiser quickly hid his surprise, already smirking again before they hit the ground. It was almost irritatingly soft, but what the ground lacked in threat the Kaiser made good in aggression. Ken had hardly been on top of him for a second when he was grabbed hard by the shoulder and whirled around. He stared up at his own face for a second before he gathered all his strength to push back. Ken and the Kaiser rolled forward in their struggle onto the meadow with the still unborn eggs. Ken was already panting in exhaustion but he wouldn’t allow the Kaiser to prevail. They rolled around once more until the Kaiser slammed Ken into the ground with surprising violence – his vision was black for a moment before the face hovering much too close above his own reappeared. He raised his fists to fight back but he couldn’t put all his force into it – he didn’t want to hurt the eggs around them and he didn’t want to hurt Daisuke either. Their hands were clasped, each trying to gain the upper hand. Ken’s head swam with nausea and his stomach protested at the weight of the Kaiser, who’d trapped him underneath, knees boring painfully into Ken’s side, which seemed to be bursting into flames again. Ken grunted with effort. He only had to…only had to get the D3 – he got one hand out the other’s grasp – the wrong one to reach the D3, but he took a swipe at the Kaiser’s face, managed to wrestle his other hand free. He had it! With a quick flip of his wrist, he threw it as far away from them as possible. He heard it hit something, perhaps one of the cradles, at least he hoped so. Still gasping for breath, he looked back towards the person sitting on top of him and realised that the Kaiser was completely still. All fighting had stopped – even the battle between Airdramon and Aquilamon had seemed to come to a halt.

Ken tried hard to get his breath back under control while waiting for a response. Nothing happened. He heard Miyako and Iori run towards them, they were shouting his name.

And then. The Kaiser gripped his own head with an anguished scream, and mid-scream the voice changed tone, became less and less like Ken’s, and then his hair started changing colour. Ken let out a half-hysterical laugh, bordering on a sob. He watched as Daisuke clutched his head, fighting off whatever hold Gennai-san’s control might still have on him. Suddenly, he let his arms drop, lowered his head and stayed like this for far too long.

“…Daisuke…?”

Ken’s relief was marred by worry. Had he fought too hard? Had he injured his friend? Gently, he reached up to touch Daisuke’s cheeks, moved up his fingers to remove the glasses as gingerly as he could. “Daisuke, look at me.”

He did. And his eyes were so warm and so alive and so Daisuke that Ken felt tears welling up again.

“Ken…?” Daisuke sounded distraught and now that Ken could see him properly, he saw that there were tears in his eyes as well. “What…what happened? What-?”

Soft, gloved fingers touched Ken’s forehead, and he winced. When Daisuke drew his hand away again, there was blood on the glove. “Did…did I do that?” Daisuke asked, horrified. Ken only
blinked in confusion and then he realised that there was a little bit of blood trickling into his eye again. “Oh… oh that must have happened while we fought…”

Daisuke let out a frightened sob and scrambled off of Ken immediately. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Ken, I didn’t mean to-“

Ken sat up, groaning from the renewed pain in his side, but choosing to ignore it. “Daisuke,“ he said, and he could hardly speak at all, “Oh, oh, Daisuke…“ Instinctively, he threw his arms around Daisuke’s neck and drew him into a desperate hug. “I’m so, so glad you’re here, you’re alive,” Ken sobbed into Daisuke’s neck. There was a moment of hesitation, but then Ken felt Daisuke wrap his arms around him, and the two boys sat pressed against each other for what seemed like eternity.

“What the heck is going on?!”

With a jolt, the boys broke apart. Miyako was standing right next to them, arms stemmed against her hips in outrage. “You think you could have said something, Ken?! I thought you were trying to get yourself killed! And you!” She moved a hand from her hip and jabbed her index finger into Daisuke’s stunned face. “What do you think you’re doing, scaring us half to death and then turning up in this…this stupid masquerade! You’re all idiots, idiots!” she screamed and then punched Daisuke weakly in the shoulder before collapsing onto the grass next to them and throwing an arm around them both. “Stupid idiots!” she sobbed helplessly. Ken noticed Iori standing a bit further away from them, frozen on the spot, and he extended a hand towards him – that was enough: Iori ran to join them in their confused, muddled heap, and so did Armadimon, Veemon – “Daisuke! Daisuke! I knew you were okay!” – and Wormmon, who clung to Ken’s shirt like he intended to stay there for the rest of his life. “Ken-chan, you’re hurt! Ken-chan, are you going to be okay?” Gently, he caressed the spot between Wormmon’s antennae. “I’m already okay,” he said, smiling despite the nausea that had set in again.

Daisuke pulled him into a tighter hug and Ken happily leant into his best friend’s arms. “I’m so glad you’re all here, that you’re okay. Ken. My Ken.” Daisuke let out an uneasy chuckle. “Well, at least, everyone who matters is here. Not very team-oriented of Takeru and Hikari not to show up to that battle, is it?” And Daisuke squeezed a little harder, tormented, Ken thought, by the memory of their battle with Alphamon – perhaps still even fresher for Daisuke than it was for them. But there was something in his voice that made Ken pause. At first, he’d thought that he was only joking – it was so unlike Daisuke to bear a grudge, and it wasn’t like they had chosen to go to the Digital World and Takeru and Hikari had chosen to stay behind, anyway –, but there had been a very real bitterness to his tone that made Ken raise his head and observe his partner more closely.

“Miyako-san,” Aquilamon’s grand voice interrupted them. “What about the Airdramon?” Everyone turned to look at the winged serpent still hovering in the sky. Everyone but Ken, who was still staring at Daisuke. Just for a moment, it seemed as if the light had gone out of Daisuke’s eyes, leaving them lifeless and dull. Ken couldn’t help but flinch when he saw it but it was gone before he could be sure. Of course, Daisuke had noticed his reaction.

“Ken? Hey, Ken, you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” His eyes were back to normal, warm and caring as usual.

“Huh? Oh...Oh, I’m fine, don’t worry. It’s fine,” he said, in an attempt to hide how unsettled he suddenly felt. “It’s all good now.” And surely, it was - together, they could figure out what to do with the Airdramon and how to proceed. Nothing could be so bad now that they were reunited. Could it?
Well, that ended up being a rather long chapter! But splitting it apart wouldn't have worked and I don't think it contains much padding, either - I did shorten it down a little, but there we go!
I hope you enjoyed it and are hopefully sitting on the edge of your seat again to see what'll happen to Daisuke, Ken, Miyako and Iori. Especially now that Daisuke's back and everything seems fine... but not quite!
Daisuke has always been on the front lines - how can he not when he's the leader of their little group, second only to Taichi when it comes to courage. But when the battle ends in devastating defeat rather than victorious triumph, as he's used to, being on the front lines can quickly prove fatal...

When his eyes fluttered open again after the attack, his first conscious thought was for the pain that seemed to crush his entire body. His second was for Ken. Was he hurt? Scared? Where was he? Daisuke’d been holding his hand, that much he knew. They had been right in the centre of Alphamon’s final blast, and when the attack had hit them, he’d wanted to shield Ken from the worst of it, but he couldn’t remember whether he had actually managed to move in front of his friend in time.

Where was he? He couldn’t see anything except a vague red blur. Faintly, he tried to shout Ken’s name, but all that escaped his lips was a weak, wet gurgle. His mouth tasted of bitter metal. That couldn’t be good.

He coughed and could hear the blood splatter out, but he couldn’t see it. There was still only that red blur where the sky was supposed to be. Gotta turn myself around, he thought, lying flat on his back wasn’t going to achieve anything, but when he tried to move, he realised that he couldn’t. Only his fingers moved a little, clenched a bit, but not enough to make a fist, only just about far enough for him to feel corns of sand drizzle between them. He gasped for air but what he inhaled seemed to be at least half sand, which made him cough again. His chest hurt, but he kept breathing despite the pain – the alternative was unthinkable.

“Ke-“ he tried again, but to no avail. “V-“ Why was it so hard to get enough air inside his lungs to speak?! Breathing had never been so hard before, he’d never had to struggle for it. He felt tears well up in his eyes. No, no, no… this was all so wrong. This shouldn’t happen. He shouldn’t…he shouldn’t feel so afraid. His eyes darted frantically from left to right and back, but his vision remained roughly the same – red, red, red everywhere, and a stinging pain in his head when he moved his eyes too much. How ridiculous… How could you be in pain from just moving your eyes?

Despite the stabbing sensation in his chest that every taking in of breath cost him, he couldn’t help but breathe increasingly quicker, shakier. Where were the others? Were they looking for him? Were they hurt? Where was Ken? Ken had been standing right next to him, if he was this hurt, then surely Ken was injured as well? Or had he managed to protect him like he’d wanted to? Daisuke heard a tortured whimper and realised with a shock that it had been his own voice. What was going on? Why couldn’t he move? Why couldn’t he see?
He could still hear, though, and he heard sand crunching beneath heavy steps. Not Ken, no, definitely not, and not Miyako or Iori, either. This was an adult marching steadily towards him. What business could an adult have in the Digital World, anyway? A shadow darkened the red blur that was his vision, and he could feel hot breath on his wet cheeks.

“What a wreck,” a voice said, but it didn’t sound commiserating. It sounded gleeful. Daisuke screamed a voiceless scream when heavy boots collided with his aching sides. And then he was picked up – every fibre of his body lighting up with fire – and thrown on a hard surface.

“We will take him to the base.” While the voice said it, Daisuke noticed that the “surface” he was draped across was swaying slightly. A living creature, a Digimon perhaps? But he still couldn’t see, couldn’t move, so there was no way of finding out. And then there was a downward movement and Daisuke felt the adult crouch down on top of the creature beside him, pinning him down.

“Take flight. Ichijouji can wait – he won’t go anywhere.”

NO! Daisuke wanted to scream. NO! Stay away from Ken! But no sound escaped his dried up lips. And he couldn’t move anyway, couldn’t do anything to help his best friend. He could only lie on whatever Digimon was carrying him and feel the air hit his burning skin hard as the creature rose, and they sped away from the red desert.

He slipped in and out of consciousness on the way to the base the voice had been talking about, and when he came to once more, he was lying on a cold, tiled floor. When he moved his fingers a little, he could feel a wet warm liquid. It seemed to be underneath his back as well and provided some warmth, some protection from the cold, but it didn’t reach his insides. Daisuke shivered. It felt like he was slowly freezing over. Maybe that was why he couldn’t move, maybe he was being turned into ice. Was that a thing? Was he being cursed, like in an old legend, perhaps?

The red blur had changed; it was more like a dull white now, more clinical. He coughed when his mouth seemed to be too full with bitter iron once more, and the noise of the fluid spluttering out was the only thing he could hear amidst eerie silence. He was alone. So alone. Daisuke whimpered again. He didn’t want this; he wanted to be with Ken, with Miyako, with Iori. He wanted to have Veemon by his side, like it was supposed to be. This, this wasn’t right. He was only fourteen! He didn’t want to die. There was so much more that he had to do, so much more he needed to say…

Footsteps. Ringing hollow in his ears, or maybe it was the empty coldness of the tiles that made them echo so much. Voices, but Daisuke could hardly make out what they were saying.

“…do something…dying…!”

“So?”

“…blood…boy…”

“…not…problem…”

“…please…!”

The conversation seemed to be over. Daisuke heard the footsteps approaching, and then he was being picked up – not at all gently, but it was still a comfort not to be on the cold floor anymore. He was being carried somewhere.

His hearing seemed to slowly fade away. He could hardly even hear the footsteps anymore, could
only feel the vibrations of the person walking. And then he was fully immersed in liquid. At least, that was what it felt like, and then the white light he had still been able to see faded, became smaller and smaller until there was only a small dot of white in his vision left. And then everything was gone.

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His hearing returned first. He could hear incessant beeping, but not much else. He couldn’t make sense of it. And then the visions came. Daisuke knew that he wasn’t really seeing anything – the world around him was still as black as it had been when he lost consciousness in that tank of liquid he’d been placed in. But that knowledge didn’t mean that the images he saw were less oppressing, less frightening.

The giant towering form of Alphamon rose before him. Its shape was vaguely humanoid, and once engaged in combat with Imperialdramon’s fighter form, they had both seemed to Daisuke like samurai fighting in a war. Only, when he had read the stories or seen them on TV, it had felt very different. Here, there was no glory, no bravery, no nothing. Just violence and the desperate need to survive.

He saw Alphamon raise his arm and fire an attack. Sand spouting upwards at them from the impact. He felt Ken’s hand in his, and then it was gone, Ken was gone, and he could only see Alphamon again.

Lines of code in the sky. He didn’t understand them.

Imperialdramon, dissolving. Ken screaming. Tears on his cheeks.

Distortions splattered across the landscape like blood. Rifts. The Digital World was torn, bloody, dangerous. What was he thinking, what was he seeing? He couldn’t make sense of it.

The images that replayed in his head were mostly of Alphamon, and those he understood. But then he saw Kimeramon, and he didn’t understand anymore. Kimeramon was defeated, Ken’s unholy creation was forever gone, banished by Magnamon’s power and the crest of kindness. But there it was, in all its terror. Or was it? Kimeramon, but somehow different…wasn’t that…didn’t that look… Taichi-senpai had talked about one of their former enemies, a sort of dragon with canons on its back…Mugen-something…or other…didn’t it look a bit like that? And then it was gone from his mind’s eyes, replaced by a different beast, surrounded by chains of data, and he still didn’t understand. Where did those images come from?

Then, they were gone again. Attacks replaced them, red hot fire from Alphamon. Unlike Ken, he’d always known that the Digital World wasn’t a game, but it had never felt so viciously real to him, either. Dangerous.

Images and visions kept running through his foggy mind, but eventually, those calmed down, and he seemed to fall into a sort of slumber. He was still vaguely aware of the liquid surrounding him and the soft beeping that seemed to be accompanied by a vague tingling that had started in his limbs and was progressing through his entire body, but it hardly bothered him.

And then he dreamed.

“Yosh! That’s awesome!” Daisuke was beaming at Ken, utterly elated that his boring green school uniform had been replaced by his cool Digital World clothes: His jacket had been updated a little, it fit his fourteen-year-old form – almost grown-up! – and it looked a little more like those awesome American jackets he had seen on TV sometimes. Sporty, for people like him who were
great at soccer and all that. It didn’t matter, anyway. He looked cool and amazing, like the true
leader that he was – what more could he want?

Ken smiled, but seemed more serious than Daisuke. But then, when didn’t he?

“I don’t know, Daisuke. It probably means that there is something wrong here that we have to
fix…”

“So? Then we’ll fix it! That’s our job, eh?” He wrapped an arm around Ken’s neck and pulled him
closer – pausing slightly when he heard Ken yelp in surprise, but continuing to hold his best friend
like this when he saw the delighted smile on Ken’s face that told him he could go on with his
antics. In fact, Ken even giggled a little, clearly influenced by Daisuke’s own good mood.

The TV set they’d tumbled out of mere minutes ago turned on again with a whirring sound and the
screen spat out Miyako, shortly followed by Iori – both landing in an undignified heap on the
ground.

Daisuke grinned as if he hadn’t just been lying on that same spot with Ken sprawled over him.
They really had to work on their dramatic entrances – in both worlds.

“Yo! Miyako, Iori! Welcome back!”

He watched as his two friends scrambled up from the ground and looked around in confusion.

“We’re in the Digital World?”

“Did you get sucked in through your laptops, too?”

“…I’ve got a maths test today.”

“Maths! Come on, Miyako, that’s totally not important right now. We’re in the Digital World,
there’s gotta be stuff to do!”

When Ken had said something along the same lines to him mere moments ago, it had sounded like
something to worry about, but in Daisuke’s words, it seemed more like an exciting adventure,
waiting for them.

“We gotta find our partners!” Daisuke said, linking arms with Miyako, who still seemed a little
disoriented, but not altogether displeased.

“Calm down, Daisuke, you don’t have to convince me!” She grinned. “I can stand missing a maths
test, but I wouldn’t miss seeing Hawkmon again for the world.”

Iori still looked a little concerned, mumbling something about school and his mother being
worried, but even he couldn’t help but look pleased at the thought of being reunited with their
partners.

“We should probably wait for Hikari and Takeru, shouldn’t we?”

Daisuke nodded. “Good idea, Iori, they’re gonna be pissed if we don’t stick around until they’re
through.” There had been no reason at this point to assume that they wouldn’t be pulled through,
just like them. After all, the six of them were a team. It taken a few hours of waiting around the TV
set for them to realise that something was wrong.

Miyako had tried to reopen a gate back to their world, but to no success.
“I guess they must’ve come through somewhere else.”

It didn’t really make sense, what with Takeru, Miyako and Iori even living in the same building, but not everything had to make sense all the time, he supposed. They’d slowly wandered off, glancing back at the now inactive TV set once or twice with a little bit of unease.

Daisuke saw Veemon running towards him, throwing himself against Daisuke to be whirled around in circles. Ken hugging Wormmon tearfully had to be one of the most endearing things he’d ever seen, Daisuke thought smiling, but then something changed.

In reality, they had had a few days of peace after that. Sure, they’d been worried because none of the TV sets they’d encountered had opened up gates to the real world and because there’d still been no trace of Takeru and Hikari – or any of the others, for that matter. But overall, they’d still been optimistic that they would be alright, even Ken. After all, they always had been. But Daisuke’s dream world had different ideas about the sequence of events.

Suddenly, the light around them changed colour, turning into a glaring, menacing red. The air grew hotter, the wind lost its refreshing quality and became aggressive instead, ripping at their clothes, tearing them. Miyako screamed, Iori clung to her in fear. Ken just froze, and Daisuke only stared as Alphamon seemed to appear out of nowhere, attacking without any warning sign. And then the earth itself was ripped open beneath their feet, the Digital World itself split apart. His friends were taken from him, every single one, and then he fell into the deep red depths below.

Daisuke woke up from his dream – half memory, half nightmare – with a scream, but when he opened his mouth, no sound escaped and water seemed to pour in instead. He thought he was going to drown, but he didn’t. From outside his liquid prison, he could vaguely hear a voice again, distant through glass and water and pain.

“…sorry…” The voice said. “…so sorry…” He heard a click, like something was being inserted into…into something else. His mind was still too hazy to figure out what it was. And then the beeping got louder, more frequent. He saw lines of code as if they came directly into his mind, changing into something else, changing him. The nightmare faded away. So did the pain and the fear. Daisuke gave in as the programme did its work. And when the coding was done, there seemed to be nothing left of Daisuke.

The Digimon Kaiser obeys orders. That is what he was created for. Where the orders come from, he does not know, but when he is told to mount an Airdramon and fly to File Island to deal with the meddling children there, he complies.

He stands on the head of the Airdramon and watches the waves underneath him fly by. He feels powerful. He is a true ruler of the Digital World. All must obey him. When they reach the village of beginnings, he doesn’t even need to give the order – the Airdramon attacks, melting those silly building blocks that mark the entrance of Primary Village. It looks grotesque and he enjoys the sight. The Airdramon descends, and the Kaiser jumps down – elegant, powerful. The children are there, just like the orders specified.

He hardly looks at them; he doesn’t need to.

“Well hello there, Chosen Children,” he says, pleased with himself. “It’s been a long time.” He doesn’t know why he adds that – he has no past – but the orders said so, and he has no reason to do anything but what the orders say.
The girl shouts at him, but he hardly listens. She raises her digivice and orders her Digimon to attack. His Airdramon reacts promptly, and the Kaiser smiles. He has nothing against a good fight before the Chosen Children’s inevitable defeat.

But then something happens that the orders haven’t prepared him for. The boy ignores the Airdramon and attacks him directly…goes directly for the leader…now, where has he heard that before?

They fight viciously. The Kaiser doesn’t hold back – why should he? He slams the boy into the ground, hits him with all his strength. He deserves that for attacking him, the perfect being. He presses his knees into the boy’s sides because it makes him gasp in pain and the Kaiser enjoys that.

But the boy doesn’t give up. He tries to hit him in the face – weak, pathetic – and then he grabs something from the Kaiser’s belt and throws it away.

And the world stops and shifts.

Daisuke woke up to an excruciating pain in his head. He clutched at his hair and screamed. Ken…!

Ken was screaming, too! But Daisuke still couldn’t move…could only scream. And then his voice broke, and he couldn’t hear Ken anymore, only himself. Slowly, ever so slowly, the pain became less, and he let his arms drop and felt himself crumple. For a few moments, all he could do was breathe. He had no idea where he was and what was happening to him. Soft fingers reached up to him, touching his cheeks. Had they been less gentle, he might have flinched, but the fingers moved so carefully that Daisuke didn’t budge and allowed them to remove those glasses from his nose.

Only then did he manage to look down and see who was there. Ken. Always Ken.

“Ken…? What…what happened? What-?” He couldn’t make sense of it all. Why was he straddling Ken, why did he look so pale? Why was he bleeding, where were they? Daisuke was shocked at how whiny his own voice sounded, but he couldn’t help it, couldn’t help the tears coming up, either.

Frightened, he extended a hand to touch Ken’s forehead as softly as he could. When he saw Ken wincing, he withdrew right away, gazing at the blood now on his gloves with fear.

“Did…did I do that?” he whispered, almost inaudible. It couldn’t have been him. He would never hurt Ken. But why did he think to ask it, then, and why was he sitting on top of Ken in the first place? Daisuke pressed his eyes closed when the images came pouring in, but it didn’t help. He remembered now that he thought of himself as the Digimon Kaiser but he had no idea why, remembered following orders without understanding where they came from. But he…he’d never hurt Ken, would he?

Ken, however, confirmed it, and it shook Daisuke to the core. He moved off of Ken so quickly that he nearly lost his balance. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Ken, I didn’t mean to,” he was babbling, but the sheer thought of it was so horrible that he could hardly speak at all. But Ken didn’t seem to mind. He sat up – was that a groan? Was Ken in such much pain that he couldn’t move without feeling it…? – and looked at him with tears in his eyes and a delicate smile on his lips.

It only took a couple of seconds before Daisuke felt Ken’s arms wrap around his neck, felt Ken trembling, crying…

But he hurt Ken…! What right did he have to that embrace?
Still. Ken didn’t seem to want to let go, and so Daisuke slowly wrapped his arms around his best friend in turn, Ken’s warm body pressed against his, and he choked out a sob.

“…sorry…sorry…sorry…” he whispered, unsure if Ken could even hear him. His breathing was laboured. He was so frightened, so horrified at what he’d done. He’d fought Ken, had caused Ken pain… and he’d enjoyed it. What kind of delusion could ever make him act that way? How did he become convinced that he was the Kaiser?

Daisuke flinched and abruptly drew back from Ken when Miyako approached them. In a daze, he listened to her diatribe, allowed her to punch, then hug him, and didn’t move when Iori, Armadimon, Wormmon joined the group hug.

It was only when Veemon almost launched himself onto his stomach out of pure joy that he could react again. “Veemon! Dude! I missed you!” He let out a shaky laugh, squeezing Veemon fondly. He sniffled, feeling the tears flow freely across his cheeks, then gazed at Ken who was smiling at Wormmon. Daisuke just had to pull him in tighter, hold him close. He was so glad that Ken was okay – he had been so worried. And he had so many questions…What happened after they were separated? Was he badly injured? He hadn’t liked the look of pain on his face earlier, not at all… Especially not since he had caused cause at least some of it… But now was not the time for that, now they should be glad that they were back together again.

“I’m so glad you’re here, that you’re okay. Ken. My Ken,” he said, glad to be able to call Ken’s name and have him answer even though the guilt still lay heavy in his stomach. An uncomfortable chuckle bubbled up in his throat. “Well, at least, everyone who matters is here. Not very team-oriented of Takeru and Hikari, not to show up to that battle, is it?” The chuckle turned into a little scoff. If Takeru and Hikari had done what they were supposed to – fight alongside their so-called friends – none of this would have happened. He wouldn’t have hurt Ken. They would never have been in this situation in the first place. Nothing could have defeated them, not even Alphamon, not if they had had three Jogress evolutions on their side, like it should have been…! It was all their fault, really… He caught Ken looking at him strangely – pale and worried. He didn’t like that look at all. “Ken? Hey, Ken, you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Ken obviously wasn’t fine and the look on his face made Daisuke uneasy, but he couldn’t concentrate on that now. Not when Miyako shook his shoulders and told them both to stop whispering and help deal with the Airdramon instead. Daisuke gazed up at the Digimon still hovering in the stay above them.

“What’s wrong with it…?” he asked uncertainly.

“It’s probably infected…” Daisuke glanced at Ken, who’d turned towards the Airdramon and was observing it closely. “Corrupted, if you will. A lot of Digimon have been affected this way – they start attacking randomly, acting like wild beasts rather than sentient beings. We don’t know for certain what’s causing it, but…but Gennai-san seems to be using the infections for his own purposes…” Ken summed up what he’d heard from the other Chosen Children and what conclusions Miyako, Iori and himself had come up with, but Daisuke was still mostly confused and not much else.

“Then why isn’t it attacking?”

“I thought you’d have been controlling it. Because, you know,” Miyako gestured at the imperial clothes Daisuke was still wearing, “the whole Kaiser business.”

Daisuke nodded, then glanced down his own body, then turned his gaze to Ken, utterly stunned. “What the-?!” It was one thing to remember acting as the other, but it was quite another to realise
that he was still wearing the clothes. Ken gave him a lopsided grin. “I prefer your usual attire. But
you’re here. That’s all that matters.”

“But…but…”

Miyako sighed. “Priorities, guys! We can talk about questionable fashion choices later. What about
the Airdramon?”

Iori had settled down next to Ken, with Armadimon in his lap, and was looking up at the beast in
the sky fearfully. Daisuke understood why. It was creepy, the way it hovered above them, not
moving about freely, like it would if it was a normal Airdramon, but not attacking either.

“Miyako. Maybe Aquilamon can check if something’s off? I mean… I mean apart from the
obvious.”

She nodded and asked her partner, who circled the Airdramon as slowly as possible. “Nothing,
Miyako-san. The Airdramon doesn’t acknowledge me at all.”

Miyako turned to Daisuke. “Maybe you can order it to land or something? It brought you here,
after all.”

“What, you want me to tell it to sit like a dog?”

She shrugged. “Worth a try, eh?”

He shrugged back, but before he could follow through with her suggestion, they were joined by a
frantically hopping red Child level Digimon. Daisuke recognised it as Elecmon and then realised
that they must be in the village of beginnings. Uneasily, he glanced towards the entrance with the
melted building blocks and shivered at the thought of what he might have done if Ken hadn’t
stopped him.

“I’m glad the fighting’s over, but can someone tell me what’s going on? Are the babies safe?”

“The babies are safe,” Ken replied softly, shifting slightly so that he was directly between Daisuke
and the small Digimon. “And Daisuke’s not a danger, either. It was… a misunderstanding.”

Daisuke could almost feel Elecmon eying him suspiciously, but he seemed to accept Ken’s
explanation. “We just don’t know what to do about the Airdramon,” his best friend added and
glanced up at the Digimon once more.

“Well, I suppose Aquilamon could deal with it,” Elecmon suggested, sparks going off from his
nine tails, while he looked back to the shelter where Daisuke could now see the hiding baby
Digimon.

“We can’t just attack it when it isn’t doing anything!” Iori protested, even though he still seemed
less than fond of the Airdramon. Miyako moved about uncomfortably, shifting from one foot to the
other. “But we can’t just let it stay up there forever, either…”

“We have to figure out how we can help…” Ken said quietly and then tried to get up, but he was
hardly standing before he wobbled on his feet. Daisuke was on his feet in an instant and took hold
of Ken’s arms to steady him. “Ken? Ken?” He didn’t reply, head lowered, eyes hidden by his long
hair, but Daisuke could hear him retching. He looked at Miyako and Iori for help.

“Ahh shit,” Miyako was at their side in an instant. “He’s got a concussion – and he hit his head
again when you were fighting.”
Daisuke held on to Ken a little tighter, but he couldn’t help shivering himself. What if he’d seriously hurt Ken? He…he was useless…completely useless.

“…it…it’s okay…” Ken whispered weakly. “…don’t worry about me, please…” He pulled himself up with Daisuke’s help, but he wouldn’t let go of him – Daisuke was pretty sure that he couldn’t stand alone. He said nothing when Ken rested his head on his shoulders.

“Help me to the Airdramon, yeah?”

Daisuke would rather not have allowed Ken to move at all but he knew quite well that Ken could be surprisingly stubborn – and he’d rather guide Ken to where he wanted to go than have him try to get there by himself. Wormmon crawled along, worriedly huffing and making tutting noises about Ken being unreasonable – Daisuke wholeheartedly agreed. Veemon followed as well.

They both stared up at the hovering monster. Daisuke thought he could see lines of purple code flash across his body but he didn’t know what it meant. Ken was frowning and his eyes darted up and down the Airdramon. “It’s definitely infected…see the code? It’s a trinary one – that means it’s not good, Daisuke – and its eyes are red, too. But I don’t understand why it doesn’t do anything… The infected Digimon, they cannot be controlled… unless Gennai-san has found a way…” Ken bit his lips, lost in thought, but Daisuke had to try his hardest just to keep up. Gennai-san? What did he have to do with everything? What did those infections mean? And how did Alphamon fit into it all? He wished he was smarter, like Ken… And then he had an idea. “He did something with my D3. It was controlling me somehow – so maybe that’s how he controls the Airdramon as well?” He wasn’t sure how he suddenly knew this, but not only had he suddenly grasped that Gennai-san could use digivices to control Chosen Children, but he also remembered very clearly that the man who had found him in the desert had been a dark-clad Gennai and that he had debated Daisuke’s own survival with a young woman in a suit. Daisuke was surprised at the clarity with which he remembered that now, but he had no time to ponder it – nor the time to notice Ken’s concerned look – because Iori had run up to them, Daisuke’s D3 in his hands.

“I heard what you said,” he gasped, slightly out of breath. “Can you use it to help the Airdramon?”

He put Daisuke’s D3 in Ken’s hands, and Daisuke watched while his friend examined the little device. There was a crack across the screen, and even though it was faintly glowing, it seemed largely inactive. Daisuke had no idea what Ken could possibly see from pressing its buttons, but he assumed that he was trying to get a look at the software code.

Suddenly, the Airdramon roared and its trance was broken. Daisuke pushed Ken out of the way and grabbed his D3 from him. “Veemon!” He had no idea if Veemon could still digivolve but they had to try. With violent glee, Daisuke pushed his fist into the air when he saw XVeemon rise where Veemon had just been standing.

XVeemon took flight and joined Aquilamon in the air, both attacking the Airdramon. He grabbed Iori by the shoulder and dragged him along to Ken, who’d thrown up after all. Daisuke felt an inkling of guilt, but he knew that he had to push him out of the range of the Airdramon’s attack – he’d had no other choice.

With his two friends in relative safety – and Miyako cheering on Aquilamon from further apart – Daisuke turned his attention to the battle above.

The Airdramon was wild, but Aquilamon and XVeemon made a good team – this time, they wouldn’t lose. “GO GET IT, XVEEMON!” he screamed in support, and when his partner’s X-Laser made the Airdramon dissolve, he acknowledged it with a savage grin. They’d won. They were getting stronger again. They had to. Weakness only led to defeat, and he couldn’t have that.
He had to protect his friends.

His feelings of triumph were only dampened when he looked behind him and was startled by the realisation that Ken had dropped to his knees, hugging Wormmon to his chest – and that he’d started crying. Confused, he rushed to his side. “What… what’s wrong, Ken? We won!”

Ken shook his head. “Daisuke… Daisuke, the Airdramon… he couldn’t help it…!”

Daisuke didn’t know what to do. He hated it when Ken cried; he hadn’t meant to upset him. And he did regret that the Airdramon had to die, but what other choice did they have? Gently, he drew Ken into a hug, with Wormmon snuggled up between the two of them. “Hey…it’s okay… I’m sure it’s going to be reborn… But we had to protect ourselves, right? I had to keep you safe…” He’d meant it as a comfort, but Ken’s trembling didn’t stop.

“I really don’t know what else we could have done…” he whispered, but he could see from Miyako’s and Iori’s distraught faces that they, too, had trusted him to find an alternative.

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They had decided to spend a little more time in Primary Village, enjoying Elecmon’s hospitality. They had no other choice, anyway – Ken could hardly move without retching anymore, and they’d all agreed that he needed at least a night’s rest before they could even think of moving on.

Daisuke looked over to Ken, who was leaning against a tree, wrapped up in blankets, and bit his lips. Ken was so pale, except for the red blotches on his cheeks – Miyako had told Daisuke that the spore was active again, and it just added to his worries. He knew that Ken was…less than stable sometimes. And with the spore affecting him again, Daisuke couldn’t tell if he might be in immediate danger. What could the spore do if Ken kept resisting it?

His physical condition wasn’t much better, either, Daisuke thought, wincing. He still didn’t know what kinda damage he had done since Ken refused to admit anything but the obvious – the bleeding wound on his forehead. They didn’t have any other bandages than the ones Ken had already got from Jou so they had had to wash them as best as they could, clean the freshly re-opened wound and then re-bandage Ken’s forehead, but it looked shifty at best. Probably not at all hygienic – and didn’t wounds like that need stitches? And then the burns … Daisuke remembered, with a sharp pain of regret, how he’d pushed his knees into Ken’s sides precisely because it had made him groan. It didn’t help that he hadn’t been himself when it happened – he had still done it. Yet Ken didn’t seem to mind at all. Didn’t flinch when Daisuke came close, didn’t blame him in the slightest.

When he caught him looking, Ken smiled and Daisuke returned the smile readily, but he couldn’t ignore the feeling that they were both hiding something. He had his own guilt to struggle with, but even though he didn’t quite know what was bothering Ken, he could clearly see that, beneath the smile, his friend was worried.

Daisuke flinched when he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was only Miyako.

“Hey, I’ve looked at our D3s, and I need you to tell me exactly what happened to you while you were being controlled.”

Daisuke still only vaguely knew what exactly had happened so he wasn’t quite sure if the little he did remember was going to be of any use to Miyako. “I dunno – I wasn’t really myself…”

“Yeah, but why? Ken says it’s not the spore because it couldn’t have controlled you like that, so
what was it?"

“How do you expect me to know?!” Daisuke already felt irritated even though Miyako had hardly begun asking questions. What exactly did she think he could say?! He had thought himself the Kaiser, he wasn’t going to come up with a perfect explanation as to why that happened. Even though he did have that thought about the brain waves earlier on… but that was probably just fantasy – how would he come up with something like that if Miyako couldn’t?

“I don’t – I just want you to tell me what it felt like, if you noticed something coming from your D3… anything like that. Why are you being so testy?!”

“I’m not!” He felt Veemon’s claws on his arm, and the sudden weight as his partner hoisted himself up. “Don’t fight, you two!” Veemon’s voice allowed Daisuke to calm down enough to take a deep breath and remind himself that Miyako certainly didn’t mean any harm.

“Alright, alright, I don’t wanna fight…” Miyako said, almost too gently. Daisuke was troubled by the way his friends kept looking at him – like he’d died and had come back from the dead. Ken in particular sometimes had his eyes so fixed on him that Daisuke could have worried that they were going to fall out. Ken looked so haunted – just like he had when Wormmon had dissolved in his arms, just when he’d stopped being the Kaiser. And now he looked just as distressed again, as if he expected everything to keep getting worse – and wasn’t it true in a way? Ken had already suffered so much, he didn’t deserve any more pain and heartbreak… Daisuke had to make sure that nothing bad would ever happen to Ken again – and he had to ensure that, personally. There was no one else he could rely on.

“Daisuke?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry, I was… I was just thinking…”

“…well?”

“Well what?”

“Well, what did you feel like when you were the Kaiser? Ken says he saw that your D3 was active and that’s how he knew you were being controlled through it, but now it’s cracked – and that’s probably why you are yourself again, but I can’t tell at all what made the control work in the first place!”

Daisuke only shrugged. “I told you I can’t say much. I didn’t… I just didn’t feel right, I wasn’t myself, and… I felt distant. So I wouldn’t be able to tell you what control via digivice feels like because I was feeling so little, anyway.” Truth be told, there was still a part of Daisuke that felt oddly distant from his friends. “Could I have a look at my D3? Maybe… I don’t know, maybe I’ll remember something.”

“Sure,” she tossed it over to him almost casually, and Daisuke had to grin because he recognised all too well what Miyako was doing – pretending that everything was perfectly normal, great even, in the hope that reality would soon follow suit, a strategy that had worked for him more often than not in the past.

He could the D3 and turned it around in his hands. The screen would still lit up when he pressed a button but there was a large crack right across it – much like the one on Miyako’s D3, caused by the attack. It still worked, Veemon’s digivolution had proven as much, but clearly it was damaged enough to prevent further mind control. Now that he held it, he seemed to remember a faint buzz at his hips while he was the Kaiser. That must have been the control – was it electromagnetic waves
or something like that? Some sort of connection between the digivices and the children’s brains, a
digital link that enabled them to make their partners evolve, but also opened them up to outside
manipulation. If his digivice could have been used to alter his character so much that he’d
deliberately cause pain to his friends, then it wouldn’t be such a big leap to assume that digivices
could alter their memories as well. Couldn’t they? Was it possible that that was what had happened
to the other Chosen Children’s recollection of Daisuke and his friends? Miyako, Iori and Ken had
told him that none of the others had noticed that they were missing, that they hadn’t been worried –
but they had been adamant that it was because of their joint amnesia. Daisuke had to press his eyes
closed – his head was whirring with so many different thoughts, all vying for his attention, and he
wasn’t used to so much noise, so much to deal with at the same time, so many strange and foreign
concepts – mind control via digivise… who’d have come up with that?!

Daisuke cleared his throat. “It’s getting late. We should probably, I dunno, lie down and sleep…”

Miyako didn’t seem pleased. “I need to keep researching our D3s, and scan the environment, and-“

Daisuke shushed her, then looked pointedly towards Ken. “We’re tired.” And just like that, he left
her and walked over to Ken, who was still leaning against his tree, softly whispering to Wormmon.

“Hey.” He crouched down next to Ken.

“How are you doing?” Ken smiled at him, and Daisuke felt the numbness lift a little, like it did
when Veemon talked to him, and he felt less cold.

“I’m good. What about you? What were you and Miyako talking about?”

He let his hand flutter in the air dismissively. “Ah, not that important. She just keeps playing
around with my D3. Hopes to get answers, but I told her those can wait until tomorrow. You tired?”

“Quite,” Ken confirmed, and Daisuke noticed the dark rings under his best friend’s eyes.

“Want me to carry you over to our shelter for the night?”

Ken blushed almost instantly. “No, no, I can walk, I-“

“It’s no trouble. It’s my fault your concussion got worse anyway, isn’t it?”

“You don’t have to carry me, Daisuke.”

“No, but I want to.”

Finally, Ken relented and put his arms around Daisuke’s neck so that he could more easily hoist
him up. He was surprised at what little effort it took – Ken had never seemed so light to him. He’d
picked him up plenty of times before, to tease him or out of joy, and while he had always managed
to carry him, it had never been so easy before; it was almost like Ken didn’t weigh anything at all.

Ken leant his head against Daisuke’s shoulder, eyes closed, and he took care to walk as slowly and
evenly as possible. It took no time at all to reach the little house – not Elecmon’s, but one near
enough to the Digimon’s home, where the four of them could spend the night in relative safety.

Carefully, Daisuke helped Ken to settle down on the mattress Elecmon had already provided for
them. Wormmon immediately settled down in Ken’s lap again while Veemon threw himself on the
mattress next to Ken, hopping up and down until Daisuke gently placed a hand on his partner’s
head and playfully pressed him into the soft futon.

“Are you okay? Not too dizzy?”

“It’s fine. You walked a lot more steadily than either Taichi-senpai or Yamato-senpai,” Ken replied, and Daisuke frowned.

“What, they made you dizzy?!”

“They didn’t make me dizzy, Daisuke, I think they were just struggling with my weight, that’s all. They hardly did it deliberately – that would have been quite stupid unless they enjoy being puked on,” Ken stated, somewhat drily. Daisuke couldn’t help smirking a little.

“I guess I’m stronger than them now,” he boasted, grin widening. He was glad if they’d really been puked on – although it did mean that Ken had been miserable. Served them right, though. Neither Yamato nor Taichi had helped them in any way, but that was to be expected of weak people, wasn’t it?

“I guess you are…” Ken seemed like he wanted so say more but he didn’t. Instead he craned his neck and looked out of the little window. Daisuke followed his gaze and saw Miyako and Iori helping Elecmon impose bedtime on the babies, dusk slowly setting in over Primary Village. Beyond them, Daisuke could see the melted remains of the entrances and wondered faintly if they should try and fix it in the morning…

“Daisuke?”

He looked back to Ken, who looked at him expectantly.

“Come on, sit down next to me. I’ve got to give you something.”

Daisuke did as he was told, and sat down, careful not to crush Veemon, who was still rolling around on the mattress.

“I’m surprised you haven’t asked for them already,” his friend continued, and for the first time, Daisuke noticed that there was something hanging around Ken’s neck. He slipped it over his head and handed it to Daisuke – only then did he notice his old goggles. They looked absolutely awful. Blood had dried on them and most of the glass had all but shattered. They weren’t fit to wear anymore, yet Ken held them up to him as if he expected him to put them on right away. Daisuke blinked and took the goggles only because Ken practically shoved them into his hands.

“…they were pretty badly hit, huh?” he finally said, quite aware of the omission – that as hard the goggles had been hit, he had been hit harder.

“Yes… you will have to get them fixed when we return home.”

“Not sure if that’s worth the bother. I mean, look at them. They’re so messed up.” He didn’t notice Ken’s shocked expression at first. “Let’s just throw them away – you don’t need to drag them around anymore.” It wasn’t as if he still needed them. What for? They had been given to him by Taichi-senpai – as a token of their friendship, as a sign that the leadership of the team had passed onto Daisuke. But that was all worthless now. It didn’t mean anything. Taichi didn’t care for him at all. He’d forgotten all about him. And as for leadership? Daisuke hadn’t been able to keep his team safe; he hadn’t even been able to keep them all together – why else had Takeru and Hikari not been drawn into the Digital World together with Daisuke, Miyako, Iori and Ken? No, he should get rid of those goggles and all they had once meant. They were without value.
“Throw them away?” Ken’s voice broke through Daisuke’s hurried thoughts. “But…but you can’t…Daisuke!”

He looked at Ken more fully and was taken aback to see tears in his friend’s eyes. He was confused. The goggles hadn’t been a gift of Ken’s – he’d never throw them away if that had been the case! – so why was he so upset?

“Those goggles…they belong to you…!”

Daisuke shook his head helplessly. “They’re so broken… I can’t wear them like before, I’d hurt myself on the shards – you could get hurt if you keep wearing them like that.”

He’d have tossed them aside already if Ken hadn’t looked so utterly heartbroken.

“But they’re important to you…” Ken whispered, and Daisuke could only shrug. “Maybe they used to be. When I was younger. But now… I don’t need them. We don’t need any of them,” he added, much quieter.

A quick look at Ken told him that his friend wasn’t having any of that. Daisuke sighed. “You keep them then, and we’ll see if there’s anyone in Tokyo who can fix them once we’re back, okay? Even though I really doubt that…” He gently put them back in Ken’s hand, wondering if Ken clung to them so much because he’d been worried about Daisuke for so long and the goggles had been the only remaining sign of him. Ken slowly put them back around his neck, staring at Daisuke so intently that it made him quite uncomfortably. He seemed so unhappy and Daisuke thought he saw a slight shudder pass through him.

He couldn’t think of anything else to do, so he put an arm around Ken and drew him closer.

“Ken-chan? Is something wrong?”

Wormmon was looking at both of them with such obvious concern that Daisuke had to smile. “No, it’s all good, buddy. Ken’s probably just tired, eh?”

He didn’t notice Wormmon and Veemon exchange worried looks. But he did notice when Ken shivered and snuggled up to him, yet wouldn’t look into Daisuke’s face. Ken leant his head against Daisuke’s shoulder once more, which pushed the high collar of his coat sharply against Daisuke’s cheek. He stretched out his free arm and was startled because he was still wearing the blue-and-purple gloves with the grey shackles. He hadn’t thought about it much but now that he had been reminded of the Kaiser’s attire, he longed for his flaming jacket with such a passion that it scared him. Softly, he moved a little so that he and Ken were leaning against each other rather than just Ken leaning on him. Together they waited for Miyako, Iori and their partners to join them for the night.

Chapter End Notes

Well, well, well… Ken may have thought that the Kaiser’s mask was merely on the outside, but things are never as easy nor as quickly resolved, are they? We’ll continue to see how the spore can influence Daisuke as we move along...

I enormously enjoyed finally, finally writing from Daisuke’s point of view after he’s been missing from the story for so long. I hope I got him right and you enjoyed the
chapter!
Resentment

Chapter Summary

Daisuke has only just returned to his true self, but already everything seems overwhelming. He knows he should be carefree and optimistic, should cheer up his friends and lead them to victory, but he has started realising that optimism doesn't always win the war - fighting does. And so he fights, not only the enemies that might be lurking around every corner, but also himself and the increasingly dark thoughts that plague him...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 10 Resentment

They were all huddled together in the little playhouse. Miyako had curled up into a ball, firmly clutching Hawkmon, who had looked uncomfortable at first but seemed more than willing to be crushed in Miyako’s arms if it meant that his partner found some much needed sleep. Iori was wedged between Miyako and Ken, with Armadimon curled up next to his head. Both were asleep.

Ken’s head was resting on Daisuke’s shoulder – his arm had started prickling a while ago since the weight of his friend was enough to restrict the blood flow, but Daisuke, much like Hawkmon, was more than willing to be uncomfortable if it meant that Ken felt safe.

Daisuke couldn’t say the same thing about himself. He didn’t seem to know what ‘feeling safe’ meant anymore. They were in relative safety, yes. Elecmon’s hospitality had provided them with ample food and a roof over their heads – and, surrounded by the babies and their guardian, there was no reason to assume that anyone around them meant them any harm. But they couldn’t be certain that no one would come here and seek them out just to attack. Alphamon had attacked them out of nowhere, after all. Alphamon could come back. Gennai-san could send infected Digimon after them, for all they knew. No, they weren’t really safe, no matter how cosy their current shelter might feel.

He turned his head a little – slowly so he wouldn’t wake up Ken. They hadn’t been sure if it was alright for him to sleep – Miyako had read somewhere that it was dangerous for concussed people to fall asleep, but she couldn’t remember why or what one was supposed to do about that – and Ken had been so exhausted that it would have been cruel to try and keep him awake. And so Daisuke had another reason why he couldn’t sleep – he had to watch over Ken.

He slowly raised his hand, ignoring the pins and needles caused by every movement, and softly touched Ken’s dark hair. Ken moved about a little until his head rested even closer to Daisuke’s face – his hair tickled Daisuke’s nose, but he didn’t mind. Wormmon had settled in the little nook created by Daisuke’s side and Ken’s curled up body, safe and sound as if it was a little nest just for the small caterpillar. Veemon, on the other hand, had all four limbs stretched out and was sprawled over Daisuke’s stomach. It felt a little weird, like he knew that Veemon’s weight should hurt him, since he had been so injured not so long ago, but it didn’t bother him at all.
Daisuke sighed. Even though he was surrounded by his friends, he couldn’t properly relax – instead, he felt tense and alert. He draped his arm around Ken’s shoulders, holding his friend a little closer, and kept staring at the ceiling. He could hear Miyako softly whimpering, and when he looked to the side, he could see Iori frowning, murmuring something that sounded alarmingly like “please don’t hurt us”.

It wasn’t fair. Taichi and the others hadn’t had to live through the same stuff. They’d been together the entire time, they hadn’t nearly-

Daisuke stopped himself before he could finish the thought, concentrating instead on Veemon’s soft snoring.

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He hadn’t slept all night, but his friends didn’t look much more awake than he was when they got up in the morning to have breakfast together with Elecmon. He wasn’t surprised, either. All three of them had had nightmares during the night, though only Ken had woken up. He’d started moaning in his sleep and then promptly sat up with a loud gasp, startling Daisuke, who, while not asleep, had at least dozed a little.

It had taken Daisuke a while to get Ken to calm down again.

Miyako and Iori had both started crying at some point, but they didn’t wake up on their own, and just before Daisuke had resolved to shake them awake, they had each quieted down again. Daisuke was sure he’d have had nightmares, too… He might not have suffered as much as his friends – after all, he’d been pretty much out of it ever since being captured by Gennai, and he’d only really woken up when Ken snatched his D3 away from him. Still, the battle with Alphamon had rattled him enough to ensure that his dreams would have been haunted.

“Daisuke?”

He turned to Iori, who sat on a blanket next to him. They’d mostly finished eating and Elecmon had run off to wake the babies or bring them to the designated playground for today – something like that, anyway – but Daisuke still felt like he could eat an entire breakfast again. There seemed to be a hole in this stomach waiting to be filled.

“Yeah?”

“I just – I just wanted to say how glad I am that you’re back with us, that you’re okay.” Iori smiled a little uncertainly. They hadn’t talked much yesterday, not after the Airdramon incident. And Daisuke was sure glad that Iori didn’t seem to hold it against him anymore. Out of all three of them, Iori’s reaction had perhaps been the least surprising. He was still so young – and battling with the aim of killing the enemy had never sat well with him. Not that Daisuke, or XVeemon, for that matter, had battled with the aim of killing. It had just so happened that he’d had no other choice but to finish the Airdramon. Eventually, Miyako, Iori and Ken would understand why it had to be done.

“Thanks, dude!” Daisuke grinned at him and was pleased to see that it seemed to cheer Iori up. His smile became a little more relaxed, a little broader. “I’m glad that we’re together again, too. Was a little boring without you guys.” He could tell by Iori’s frown that he might want to question that,
but Daisuke didn’t want to dwell on how long exactly he had been unconscious – or someone other than himself.

“How’d you get here, by the way? I mean, File Island? We weren’t anywhere near there when we got…separated. Right?” He was pretty sure that they’d been attacked on Server, but since Miyako had said that the desert in which their battle had taken place had been a ‘distortion’, maybe that explained it? He still only knew bits and pieces of what his friends had been through while he was…out of it.

Armadimon seemed just as curious about the answer as Daisuke was – of course, his friends had only reunited with their partners shortly before he himself had joined them. Iori looked a little uncomfortable, glancing in Ken’s direction.

“What-?”

But before he could question Iori further, Miyako joined them. She hadn’t yet eaten anything. Instead, she’d gone off to a brook nearby after Elecmon had shown her the right direction, and now she was back, hair dripping – and she was carrying a bucket of water.

“Where’ve you been?”

“There’s a river nearby – I washed my hair if you want to know all the details.” She dipped her fingers in the bucket and splashed some of the water in Daisuke’s direction. “Oi, that’s cold!” he complained, and laughed – he only had to force himself a little.

Miyako knelt down next to Ken, offering him the bucket. Daisuke and Iori watched while Ken washed his face with the water from the bucket and Miyako dipped a piece of cloth in it and draped it across Ken’s neck despite his protest and a fairly undignified yelp. “Daisuke’s right, this is too cold…,” he muttered, and Daisuke had to grin.

“Come on, budge.” Miyako shushed him and then shooed Ken closer to Daisuke so she could sit down next to him. Daisuke smiled as Ken slid close enough for their arms to touch, and he felt certain that Ken was as eager for them to be close to one another as he was.

It was only when Miyako cleared her throat that Daisuke noticed he had been staring at Ken for perhaps a little too long.

“So, what were you talking about while I was at the river? Anything important?”

Ken cocked his head carefully and looked at Daisuke and Iori expectantly. “Yes, I didn’t quite catch what you were discussing… I…might have been a little absent-minded…” Daisuke bit his lips – he’d noticed Ken’s hesitation and he was fairly certain that what his friend really meant was that he’d been unable to focus because of the concussion or something like that.

“But you were about to ask me something, I think? You were both looking at me when Miyako came back…”

Daisuke scratched his neck. He wondered if Iori’s reaction meant that the answer to his question would upset Ken, but it wasn’t like he could pretend he’d never asked now, anyway.

“Just wanted to know how you got here, is all…”

“Oh.” For a moment, Ken said nothing else – and both Miyako and Iori looked uncomfortable, but then Ken continued. “We…we got – I got drawn to the Dark Ocean. Miyako and Iori came with me.”
Daisuke’s breath hitched and his eyes went wide. “You went there? Alone?”

“Not alone, Miyako and Iori-“

“I’m so sorry, Ken, I-“

“What? What are you talking about…? It wasn’t your fault…”

But it was. Daisuke felt the guilt churn in his stomach. He should have been with Ken. Hadn’t he promised, long ago, that Ken needn’t be afraid of the Darkness anymore…

“I…I’m just… I’m sorry you had to go through this again, and I just wish…” While he spoke, Ken had taken hold of his hand and squeezed it reassuringly. “I just wish I could have been there for you, you know? I always thought that…if you ever had to go there again, that I’d be the one to help you get back…” He paused and swallowed hard. “But I wasn’t much use in the end. I wasn’t with you, and when I come back, I hurt you even more. I’m really useless…” He didn’t like how his own voice sounded, quiet and weak… He had to become stronger if he wanted to protect his friends. Daisuke closed his eyes and tried to summon the feeling he’d had yesterday when he’d been carrying Ken – he’d been strong, and sure of it. Stronger than Taichi and Yamato, in any case. When he opened his eyes again, he could tell by Miyako’s and Iori’s shocked expressions that he was worrying them when he really should be cheering them up, as usual.

“You’re not useless, Daisuke!” Ken had leant over to grab his arm with his free hand and was staring at him with unexpected intensity. “Please don’t ever believe that…”

He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Veemon jumped right onto him, making him gasp instead. “Woah. Might I remind you that you’re not currently Chibimon – and that means you’re absolutely not in the right form to pull a stunt like this?” he chided his partner – he’d never minded roughhousing with Veemon, of course, and he trusted that his partner knew this, but in this moment he sure would have appreciated a warning.

“Sorry!” Veemon said without even a hint of regret in his voice. “I just thought you looked a bit down and thought I’d cheer you up.” Daisuke smiled again, but without much sincerity. Veemon, too, needed him to be stronger. None of his friends wanted to see him like this – weak, fearful, pathetic. They wanted to cheer him up because they needed him to be the ever optimistic and invincible Daisuke, not – not anyone more complex than that, more conflicted… They might not care much for him if they ever found out what he really felt like, but still, there was nothing he wanted more than be able to protect them. He didn’t really know what to think.

“Daisuke…?”

He looked up. Ken was still holding his hand, and he seemed unsettled. There was something still left in Daisuke that told him he was being unfair. Ken looked at him in genuine concern because he cared for him, not because he needed him to be the perfect leader, a near mythical force of unrelenting optimism and goodness. He couldn’t be that anymore anyway. He couldn’t but he didn’t know what else he might become.

Daisuke looked away from Ken and tried to discreetly wipe his eyes without anyone noticing, but he felt Ken’s hand tighten around his own. He cleared his throat. “So, eh, how did you get back? And why here? I’m guessing you weren’t here when you got sucked in.”

“I think our partners called for us…” Ken replied, softly, and lifted his hand from Daisuke’s arm to stroke Wormmon’s carapace. The little caterpillar nodded, nuzzling Ken’s knee fondly.
“I don’t know much about how the Dark Ocean World works, and I’ve only been there once, but I do know that I wanted Ken-chan to be with me so much. And then Ken-chan came and found me.”

“I think it is fair to say that we all wanted you to return to us with as much passion as Wormmon did,” Hawkmon stated with his usual seriousness, prompting Miyako to throw an arm around him and pull him into a crushing hug.

By now, Daisuke had calmed down enough to smile a little. “Well, I’m glad it worked out that way… but do you guys think it’s got something to do with all that mess? The Dark Ocean, I mean?”

Ken shook his head slowly. “No…no, I don’t think so. I do think the forces of Darkness are involved somehow…aren’t they always?” It was Daisuke’s turn now to squeeze Ken’s hand a little harder, especially when he felt a slight tremor pass through Ken’s slender fingers. “But not the Dark Ocean… It called to me because… because of the way I was feeling…” Ken didn’t go into any more detail, and Daisuke made a mental note to try and get him to open up later on. “…but the infection…the corruption…A-alphamon… No, that’s something else. Daemon seemed to know something about it, but he didn’t tell us much. I think he was afraid.”

“Wait, what? You met Daemon? How on earth did you manage to defeat him without your partners?”

Ken’s lips twitched. “He was surprisingly amiable, actually. We had a fairly pleasant chat. In comparison, you know…”

At this point, Daisuke wondered if Ken was having him on. Daemon, one of their fiercest opponents, the one they had only been able to defeat with three Jogress evolutions and Ken’s remarkable bravery? And he’d just sat there and had a chat?

“I think Ken’s right, Daemon seemed afraid of something,” Iori added. “He was completely satisfied with staying in that dreadful world, which makes me think that what’s happening to the Digital World and our world at the moment must be very dangerous – if even Daemon’s frightened.” Iori bit his lips. He was frowning again, looking much too serious for someone his age, Daisuke thought.

“Daemon did say something, though.” Daisuke looked at Miyako, who had spoken up. “He said he didn’t want to fight for the spore in Ken’s neck. That means that there is someone or something more powerful than Daemon who wants it. Daemon also said that we might be safer in the Dark Ocean than here – so maybe all the shit that’s been happening in the Digital World really has to do with the Dark Seed?”

Ken’s shoulders visibly dropped. Daisuke could imagine what he was thinking – he was blaming himself. Ken’s thought processes were surprisingly easy to figure out, considering that he was such a genius. If the dark implant at his neck was somehow at the centre of this all, then Ken was bound to think that it was his fault, that he had brought all of this down on them – Alphamon’s attack, their separation, and perhaps even the infections and the interference with the real world the others had told him about. That was all complete rubbish, of course, but it was just what Ken would be thinking in a moment like this. Daisuke wanted to say something right away, to stop these kinds of thoughts from festering, but Miyako continued before he’d had a chance.

“What about your nightmare, Ken?”

“Miyako…” Ken seemed very reluctant to talk about it. He glanced in Daisuke’s direction, but Daisuke wasn’t sure why. Ken knew he could talk about any nightmare with him, always, didn’t
he? He trusted Daisuke... at least, he used to...

"You mentioned this swirling mass of corrupted data talking to you. That wasn’t just a nightmare, was it? Just like the boy? That Akiyama Ryo?"

"I...yes, I think that was all based on a memory. But what good is that if that’s all I remember? And Wormmon won’t...well, can’t tell us what happened, either..."

Daisuke noticed the small Digimon burying his face in his partner’s battered shirt and thought that Wormmon looked equally scared and determined. “Why can’t Wormmon tell us?”

“It’s too dangerous!” the caterpillar piped up. “Ken-chan might get hurt. Because of that horrible, horrible spore!” And that was all Wormmon would say on the matter.

And so all the children could do was speculate. As far as Daisuke was concerned, they didn’t know anything at all, and that wasn’t likely to change. Something had caused Alphamon to attack them. Something had caused Digimon to become infected and feral. Something had weakened the borders between the real and the digital world. Something had turned Gennai into their enemy. And Ken’s spore had reactivated, causing him problems – was that just caused by the situations they’d been in? They’d been in danger before, but there had never been a hint that the spore could be a problem... so had something woken it up again?

Miyako’s questions didn’t help either. What else did Ken remember of his first journey to the Digital World? Nothing much. Was the swirling mass of data a Digimon? He thought so. Maybe. Was it an enemy they’d encountered before? No, certainly not, at least not all of them, as a team.

Team. Daisuke scoffed. What a great team they were... The others didn’t take the threat as seriously as they should – Ken had hinted at that. And why would they? They were together, had their partners at their side the whole time...what did it matter that they didn’t remember because of that “reboot” or whatever had happened? They were together, and that alone meant they could treat their stay in the Digital World like an extended camping trip.

Daisuke was interrupted in his thoughts when Elecmon came hopping back to them.

“Did you like your breakfast? Good!” The Digimon smiled at them. “I can brew you another cup of tea for your fever,” he offered with a nod in Ken’s direction, who accepted it with a soft smile. Elecmon then turned to Daisuke – was it his imagination or did he still seem a little wary?

“I hope it’s not a bother, but it would be very helpful if you could fix the gates... I mean, you did melt them in the first place, so...”

“Yeah no worries.” Daisuke moved to get up. He had considered fixing those gates last night, anyway, but it did vex him a little that Elecmon had thought fit to ask. After all, he hadn’t really meant to destroy anything since he hadn’t been himself, so it wasn’t really his responsibility to fix what had been broken. It was more his own helpfulness that made him act – and it would have been nice if Elecmon had waited for him to offer. Still, he was a Chosen Child and fixing the Digital World’s problems was his main job, in a way.

“You’re ready for some heavy lifting, Vee?”

Veemon responded with enthusiasm. “Yes!! Building stuff is great!”

Ken also wanted to get up but Daisuke gently pushed him back to the ground by the shoulders. “Forget it. You stay here, drink your tea, and, I don’t know, tell the babies a bedtime story. Miyako, Hawkmon, Iori and Armadimon can help me.”
Immediately, Miyako and Iori started putting the chopsticks and bowls they had used for breakfast away and got ready to go over to the village entrance with Daisuke. Before they left, Daisuke turned to Wormmon. “You make sure he stays put. Sticky-net him to the ground if you need to,” he added with a grin that only widened when Ken stuck his tongue out at him.

Laughing, he turned away, but he was still close enough to hear Wormmon whisper – full of earnest concern – “You won’t try to get up, will you, Ken-chan? I really don’t want to sticky-net you at all…” and Ken chuckle in response before he reassured his nervous partner.

The repairs were quickly done. Daisuke and Miyako had helped their partners to evolve so that they could do the heaviest stuff, while Daisuke and Miyako themselves as well as Iori and Armadimon had done all they could to restore the entrance to what it had once been. The melted building blocks themselves had to be discarded – Elecmon had instructed XVeemon and Aquilamon to carry them to a site further away from the village, where they might eventually be “recycled”. They had then set up new ones until Primary Village had a proper gate once more.

Why, Daisuke wondered, did they always have to fix the Digital World’s messes?

Even after all they had done, it wouldn’t release its hold of them.

Miyako, Iori, Daisuke and their partners walked back to where Ken was resting.

The others were walking a little ahead of him when he paused. He’d felt something underneath his foot. Daisuke bent down and picked it up. It was the Kaiser’s glasses – scratched but otherwise intact and certainly in much better shape than his former goggles. Instinctively, he’d put them in his pocket, and then quickened his pace to catch up to the others.

After Elecmon had thanked them for their help – quite right! It was about time that the Chosen Children, who actually did the work, were being appreciated – they had decided to inspect their surroundings. Miyako and Iori had already walked around File Island outside of Primary Village, but Miyako had mentioned that she still wanted more information on the state of the island after the reboot.

Initially, Daisuke hadn’t wanted Ken to join them. He needed rest, and he’d never get that if he kept walking around with them, but he’d looked at him with such despair at the thought of being left alone, even if it was in the peaceful Village of Beginnings, that Daisuke could only sigh and start helping him up.

As it was, they were moving along rather slowly, but they didn’t really have anywhere to be, so it hardly mattered. Besides, Daisuke was glad to have Ken at his side, even if he didn’t think it was wise.

It was a nice day for a walk. There still weren’t that many Digimon about outside of the village thanks to the reboot, but Elecmon had already worked hard on raising the little ones and so there were a few Child Digimon playing around in the surrounding forests.

“It’s really calm. You wouldn’t think that this world can be so deadly, just walking around like this…” he remarked.
“It isn’t always deadly, either…” Ken replied quietly. “Just because of what… just because we were attacked… we shouldn’t view this world as our enemy…”

“That’s right. We’re still Chosen Children, we protect this world. Because we love it.”

“Mh,” Daisuke looked at Miyako doubtfully. Love this world? Yes, he had, once, he remembered that, but had the world ever loved him back? If it did, then why did everything seem so intent on getting rid of him now? Alphamon had wanted to kill them; there could be no doubt about that.

“I’d be much more eager to see it that way if we weren’t literally trapped here.”

As if on cue, Iori exclaimed, “Look! Over there – it’s a TV set!”

Miyako and Iori ran towards it right away, with Armadimon following on the ground and Hawkmon having taken flight. Daisuke, who was still supporting Ken, was, of course, a lot slower, and their partners stayed with them, but both boys walked quicker at the sight of a possible gateway home.

When they’d reached their friends, Miyako raised her hand and tried to open a gate, but whether it was because of her damaged D3 or because the Digital World was still unwilling to let them go, the screen remained black.

Daisuke sighed. He hadn’t really expected it to work – why should it? – but a change in their fortunes would have been nice. They wouldn’t have left this world forever, of course. They’d come back to fix whatever was wrong with it, like they always did because it was their duty, but it would have been so much better if they could have had a little rest first. Strangely enough, Daisuke found that he missed Jun fiercely.

Ken slumped against him.

“What’s wrong?” Veemon asked. “Did you want to go home already?” It hadn’t been too long ago that Veemon had hatched again so it was only natural that very little time seemed to have passed for the little dragon – Daisuke understood that; he himself had hardly felt the passage of time in the same way that his friends did.

But he missed home.

“You could have come with us, all of you. We just… we just wanted to see our families, I guess…”

Miyako stared at the TV despondently, and Iori looked equally hopeless. Ken beside him drew in a shuddering breath. They needed a break.

“Come on, guys, you didn’t really expect it to work, did you?” he said, trying to sound as optimistic as he used to. “We just have to hold on a little longer, that’s all. Let’s… let’s try and make plans, okay? What do we have to do next?”

For a moment, they were all silent. Daisuke wondered if the others were as disappointed as he was – even though he knew perfectly well that he shouldn’t have been hopeful in the first place – and whether that disappointment was preventing them from thinking clearly.

“We should get back to Server and try to find out more about the distortions and infections and stuff. We ought to find the others so we can pool resources and fix all this.”

He still didn’t think that Taichi and the others could contribute much since they hadn’t done anything at all so far, but he was willing to go with Miyako’s idea regardless.
“How can we?!” Iori’s outburst took Daisuke by surprise. “We can’t do anything! We can’t fix things, we can’t fight, we…we can’t even leave File Island. How could we? Ken and I don’t have our D3s, our partners can’t evolve… we don’t have our D-Terminals, either, so Armor evolution is out of the question, so we can’t use Submarimon to cross the Ocean, and Imperialdramon is not an option either, and we’re totally helpless, we-” Iori had started sobbing. He didn’t look at any of them, just clung to Armadimon for support.

Ken peeled away from Daisuke and stumbled the few steps towards Iori. He dropped to his knees next to him and put an arm around the younger boy’s shoulders. Miyako had crouched down opposite the two of them and put a hand on Iori’s arm.

Daisuke felt helpless. More than anything, he wanted his friends to be okay, but there seemed to be so little he could do. As if mirroring his thoughts, Veemon looked up at him nervously. “Daisuke? What do we do?”

“We…” he cleared his throat, trying to give himself time to think. He was the leader. He had to come up with a plan. “Well. Well, that tells us what we need to do, right?”

Miyako looked at him like he’d lost it.

“We need to find our D-Terminals and your D3s, right? Where did you last see them?” he asked, feeling lame even as he said it, “Do you think they’re still in the desert?”

“No… Mine definitely isn’t. Gennai-san took it from me,” Ken sounded a little hoarse, “And that’s probably a good thing, I don’t think we could get back there if we tried… Remember what we told you? It’s a distortion, it’s not really a part of this world…”

“Riiight. Well, then…then we need to find Gennai’s base, he’s bound to have one, break in, get our stuff and see where we go from there.”

Miyako raised an eyebrow. “Are you suggesting we break into our enemy’s headquarters as a first step? We don’t even know where they are. If they exist.”

“Do you have a better idea?” She hadn’t. And so they decided that, rather than waiting for Gennai to find them, they would find him first. Of course, they would have to figure out a way to get from File Island to Server before they could do any of that, but Daisuke was confident that they would find a way. They were resourceful after all, and they had each other’s backs, unlike their other so-called friends…

Miyako led the way back to the Village of Beginnings so that they could say goodbye to Elecmon – and perhaps getting some provisions from him – Ken walked with Iori, Wormmon and Armadimon on either side of them, while Daisuke and Veemon walked last.

“But what if my D3 still is in the desert…,” he heard Iori say, “What if it’s lost forever? How can I be a Chosen Child without a digivice?”

“Iori, don’t worry about that, da’gya! You are a Chosen Child, so your digivice will always come back to you, da’gya! Always!”

At that moment, Daisuke realised that he truly was on the right track – of course, getting their D3s back was the first step they should take. Miyako could scoff all she liked…they needed them to be able to fight. And fight they would.

They just had to get to Server first.
It was already early afternoon when they reached the beach.

They had said goodbye to Elecmon, who had apologised because he could not leave the babies for long, but he had given them pretty clear directions – they had only got lost once, probably because they’d been so tired that they hadn’t been paying attention, but they had quickly regained the right path. Daisuke had found it increasingly easier to match Elecmon’s descriptions to the landscapes they passed through on their way to the Ocean, and he’d felt like he’d regained some of his credibility as a leader when he guided his friends to their destination without much incident. The dogging tiredness had lifted, too. Daisuke could have walked much quicker, in fact, he’d have liked to run, bursting, suddenly, with energy, but he had repressed the urge.

He was still on his feet, pacing up and down while they discussed what they would do next.

“I still think we should fly on XVeemon and Aquilamon. They’d get us there in no time.”

“It’s too far, Daisuke, I don’t think they’d manage – they’d each be carrying one additional human and Digimon, too…”

Why did Miyako always have to disagree with him? He made good decisions, he really did… he couldn’t have known that going into that desert, pursuing that signal would lead to- no, he wasn’t going to think about that now. He wouldn’t think about that at all – it wasn’t like him.

Instead, he looked at Ken again, who was sitting on the sand, knees drawn up to his chest, leaning against Iori. Wormmon was attached to Ken’s legs, looking up at his partner with a mixture of adoration and worry that Daisuke found surprisingly easy to understand.

He paused in his pacing and brushed against Ken’s shoulders with his fingertips. Ken looked up, still with those awful dark rings under his eyes and those worrying red blotches on his cheeks, but he smiled anyway, and Daisuke relaxed a little.

“What do you think, Ken?”

“Well… it’s not impossible… it depends on how fast XVeemon and Aquilamon will be able to fly with all the added weight… Server Continent is approximately 3,000 miles to the west from here, so-“

“So XVeemon and Aquilamon would have to fly at a speed of about 200 miles per hour to reach Server in less than a day - I think a day is the most they can go without rest, but if XVeemon can keep up the same speed constantly, that should get us there in, what, 15 hours? That should be fine, then! XVeemon flies at 300 miles per hour without added baggage. Even if we facture in Wormmon’s, Ken’s and my weight, we should still be fine and I’m sure Aquilamon could yield similar results.”

For a moment, no one said anything, and Daisuke didn’t know why everyone was suddenly staring at him – even Veemon. “What?”

Daisuke didn’t miss the glance shared between Iori and Ken, and he wondered what he was missing. No one said anything, until Hawkmon offered politely, “Well, Daisuke-san, I believe that we are wondering how you arrived at these conclusions.”
Daisuke couldn’t help frowning. “It’s an easy enough calculation!”

Miyako snorted, and he glared at her.

“What now?!?”

“Since when do you do “calculations”?”

So that was that. They didn’t think he was capable of working out how long it’d take them to get to Server. Everyone always underestimated him. Only Ken had never made fun of him because he could be slow sometimes, and even he looked doubtful now. Anger simmered in his stomach. “Feel free to swim if you don’t like my plan!” he told them, turned around on his heels and started to walk off, in no particular direction – just away from them. Veemon followed him worryingly.

“Daisuke? What’s wrong, Daisuke?” his partner asked, and the uncertainty in his voice made Daisuke stop mid-step. What had he been doing? He’d overreacted…surely, they hadn’t meant to hurt him. They were his friends…

Suddenly, an arm was wrapped around his shoulders. Ken.

“I’m sorry, Daisuke… we were just surprised,” his friend whispered softly. “It’s a good plan. We should at least try it…”

He let Ken lead him back to the others, and even as they walked back, he found that he couldn’t remember why he’d reacted the way he had. Miyako was constantly teasing him, and he was teasing her back. He really shouldn’t have been so offended by her comment… Not only had he snapped at his friends, his behaviour also seemed to have troubled Veemon. He was walking with Wormmon, but he didn’t look as carefree as usual. Instead he kept glancing back at Daisuke.

Miyako, Iori, Hawkmon and Armadimon were waiting for them, looking as if they expected Daisuke to do something, but he didn’t know what. He concentrated on his shoes, digging quickly disintegrating holes in the sand with the tip of his sneakers.

“So…eh… are we gonna try this, or do you wanna try something else, I don’t know, like building a raft?” he offered sheepishly.

“Well, from what I can tell, you’re probably not far off with your…calculations…,” Miyako conceded, “…so we might as well try it. But if Aquilamon and XVeemon devolve in the middle of the Ocean because it’s too far for them, and we all drown, I’m going to kill you.”

“Noted,” he replied, then raised his head. Miyako grinned at him, and, after a moment’s hesitation, he grinned back. He really didn’t know why he had been so angry just a few minutes ago.

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Miyako, Iori and Armadimon rode on Aquilamon, while XVeemon held Daisuke, Ken and Wormmon and his arms. Daisuke supposed XVeemon could have carried Ken in one arm and himself in the other, but they’d stuck together almost instinctively – both craving the closeness. As it was, his partner kept all of them safe in his embrace while Daisuke had his arms wrapped around Ken and Wormmon in turn. He watched as the waves of the Ocean sped by beneath them. Daisuke personally almost found it exhilarating but he supposed it could be dizzying as well.
Ken didn’t look down. Instead, he pressed his face into Daisuke’s collar and Daisuke could feel him shivering. “…are you okay? Didn’t know you were afraid of heights…”

“I don’t need to be afraid of heights to find our current mode of travel less than safe,” came the muffled reply. “Also, I’m still feeling sick.”

“I’m sorry…”

Ken shifted a little. “Don’t… it’s not your fault…”

He didn’t agree. So what if Ken had been injured before – *he had* slammed him into the ground, after all… But it wasn’t only the concussion that worried him. He could feel Ken’s breath hot against his neck, could feel heat emanating from his body – that fever wasn’t going to break, not on its own…maybe not at all until that spore had what it wanted. Iori had been the one to tell him what had happened while he was gone. That Ken’s spore was affecting him…that the fever was a reaction to Ken’s refusal to be influenced by those dark thoughts the same way he’d been influenced all those years ago… He’d have agreed with Iori – that Ken should just give in and they’d draw him back from the edge of darkness again – if he hadn’t known that Ken would not survive another stint as the Kaiser. Ken still carried that guilt around with him. He didn’t always show it, and perhaps Daisuke was the only one he really talked to about it, but Ken had never really left behind all his self-loathing, his guilt, his insecurities… To go through that again… No, Daisuke had to make sure that Ken would never have to suffer like that ever again.

“Daisuke…?”

“Yeah?”

“About those calculations...are you sure you’re not…” Ken paused as if not quite sure how to continue. “I mean, you don’t think you could be influenced by something like...like the spore?”

At first, Daisuke had no clue what Ken was talking about and even wondered if he had misheard because of the wind rushing by their ears and because of his own thoughts. How would Ken’s spore influence how Daisuke did calculations?

Wormmon’s feet tickled Daisuke’s stomach because the Digimon – wedged safely between Ken and Daisuke – shifted to get a better look at Daisuke while he tried to make sense of what Ken had said. And then he realised it, and he felt all hot and cold inside.

Ken was worried that the programme that had given him the appearance of the Kaiser had given him a lot more than that. Ken thought he needed supernatural help to understand speed and distance. Ken thought he was stupid.

His first impulse was to let go. Not so that Ken would fall, of course not – besides, XVeemon still had his strong arms around them both, so even if he let go off Ken, he wouldn’t fall far. Just enough to give him a little, well-deserved fright.

Daisuke very nearly stopped breathing. He tightened his hold around Ken, and closed his eyes for a moment. He had *not* just contemplated letting Ken fall just because he’d asked him a question. Why would he ever think that way?!

“I…no…why…? Do you think I’m too dumb to figure out how to get to Server otherwise?” He’d tried to make it into a joke, but he couldn’t stop a little hint of bitterness creeping in. Ken’s answer was prompt.

“You are NOT dumb. That’s not what I meant, Daisuke, you know it isn’t…”
Of course he knew. Ken wouldn’t hurt him, Ken had always believed in him. Daisuke shouldn’t doubt him like that… He tried another joke.

“Besides, I thought you liked my plan?” Daisuke let out an awkward chuckle.

Ken was silent for a moment.

“I said we should try it, not that I was particularly thrilled about it,” he eventually replied, sounding dry and slightly teasing. He was letting it all go, Daisuke could tell, was accepting Daisuke’s joke as what it was – a kind of peace offering.

Of course, Ken wasn’t entirely wrong. Flying over an ocean just like that – no resources, no way of resting – was probably not the safest way of getting to Server. But it was the quickest, and they needed to get back their D3s and D-Terminals quickly. They couldn’t risk being defenseless much longer. Who knew what else this World was going to throw at them?

“It’s going to be fine, don’t worry,” he said quietly, even if he wasn’t so sure anymore himself. Ken merely hummed and clung to Daisuke a little more firmly. Wormmon wriggled around a bit – Daisuke couldn’t imagine that it was very comfortable for Ken’s partner, sandwiched between the two boys like that, but it was certainly the easiest way to make sure that he wouldn’t slip. Ken was right, after all, they were fairly high up and Wormmon was small enough to slip through XVeemon’s grasp if they weren’t careful… Daisuke gulped. Wormmon could easily have fallen if he had let go, even for a second.

Angry at himself, he didn’t say another word until nightfall. Ken didn’t try to talk, and Miyako, Iori, Armadimon and Aquilamon weren’t close enough to hold a conversation over the wind and speed with which they were going, so no one noticed his sudden and morose silence – or at least, no one mentioned it.

The sun had just set when XVeemon’s altitude seemed to drop.

“Daisuke?”

“What’s up, buddy?”

“…is it…much further?”

He looked up when the strain became all too clear in XVeemon’s voice. “I… I don’t think so…” he murmured, then bit his lip. “Just…just keep flying a little longer…” No, no, no, this wasn’t good… His calculations had to be correct… Server couldn’t be much further, could it?

“…XVeemon is getting tired, isn’t he?” Ken, anxiety already thickening his voice.

“He’s gonna make it, don’t-“ He couldn’t see anything but the quickly darkening ocean beneath them – still far beneath them. If XVeemon devolved right now…

“…I wish I could evolve to Stingmon…” Wormmon mumbled against his dark jumpsuit, and Daisuke let out a nervous chortle. If only Wormmon could – with Imperialdramon, they’d have been on Server within minutes, but that was just why they needed their D3s so desperately… they really hadn’t had another choice.

“MIYAKO!” he called out, hoping she would hear him. “OI, Miyako! How’s Aquilamon doing? All good?”

“He’s getting tired!” was her shouted reply. “How much longer, Daisuke?” Her voice was just as
strained as Ken’s. *Crap.* They had to reach land soon, they just had to…

“Not much!” he yelled, trying to be optimistic, positive, despite the distinct stinging in his eyes. XVeemon’s flight was becoming more and more unsteady. Ken’s fingers curled into his collar – as if they wouldn’t both fall if XVeemon failed to hold on…

“Land!” All four of them looked up when Iori’s still high-pitched voice rang through the night. “There, I can see it! It must be Server!”

Daisuke laughed triumphantly. “YOU HEAR THAT, XVEEMON? WE’RE ALMOST THERE!”

XVeemon and Aquilamon both accelerated, land finally in sight and with it the promise of relief and rest. Wind rushed past Daisuke’s face, and Ken still clung to him, and then they both thudded into damp sand, XVeemon having just enough force left to press his feet onto the ground and cushion their landing before he tumbled forward, devolving into Chibimon mid-fall.

“Ken? Wormmon?” His best friend nodded reassurance, and that had to be enough for the moment. Daisuke scrambled to his feet and ran towards his tiny blue dragon.

“Chibimon! Chibs!” He lay half-buried in the sand, motionless. Quickly, Daisuke picked him up, cradling him gently in his arms. Chibimon tiredly opened one eye. “That was…almost too much, Daisuke…” he murmured, then snuggled into Daisuke’s arms. “I know, buddy, I know… I’m sorry… you did great,” Daisuke whispered, but Chibimon was already asleep. Shaken, he walked back to where Ken was now sitting in the sand. He was relieved to see that the others hadn’t landed too far away from them. Miyako was already holding a sleepy Poromon, and Iori was brushing off sand from his tattered clothing while Armadimon – quite rightly! – pointed out the futility of that. Daisuke laughed again. They’d made it, they’d all made it… He dropped into the sand next to Ken, beaming at his best friend. Ken looked tired and dishevelled, sand sticking to his cheeks and sprinkled all through his hair, but relief was plain on his features.

Miyako walked over to them, Iori and Armadimon following not far behind.

“That was really risky,” she said, collapsing next to them. “And stupid. Very stupid.”

“But we made it, right?” Daisuke shot back, still grinning.

“Barely,” she muttered, but he was willing to ignore it. Iori knelt down next to him, then hugged Armadimon tight to his chest. “Is everyone alright?” he asked in a small and shaky voice that made Daisuke throw an arm around his shoulders and pull him closer. “We’re all fine! We did it!”

Ken’s shoulders had started to tremble but before Daisuke could wonder if he was going to cry again, he let out a shaky chuckle, and then suddenly, they all burst out laughing, relief and exhaustion finding their expression in shared mirth.

Suddenly, though, a noise like thunder came from far above and further inland, startling them back into alarm. They all looked up. Violet code streaked across the sky like lightning, a hole opening in the fabric of Digital reality – they could see several Kuwagamon pass through before it closed again.

“...that was Oi Thermal Power Station, wasn’t it?”

“Huh?”

Ken was still looking up at the sky, looking concerned. “It’s a power plant in Shinagawa – that’s where the Kuwagamon were headed, I think…”
“So what do you think they’re going to do? They can’t do much damage, can they?”

“I don’t know,” Ken replied bleakly, “but there’s no one left in our world who could stop them, at least no one with any experience fighting, or their Digimon with them as far as we know – they can do whatever they want in Japan now...”

They all kept staring at the patch of dark sky where the door to their world had been just moments ago, but then another ‘thunder’ rolled, violent, violet code streaking across the sky once more, attracting more infected Digimon. Iori was the first to get up. “We should seek shelter now...”

The narrow strip of beach they had landed on was encompassed by rocky cliffs, and Daisuke wondered how they would get up – tired, carrying two sleeping training-level Digimon when they needed rest more than anything. Would it really be so bad if they just stayed on the beach for the night? But then he saw Ken whispering with Wormmon, a clever smile on his lips.

“Silk Threat!” The little caterpillar Digimon used his attack until there was a thick, strong rope connecting him and Ken to the rocks above. “That should do it, shouldn’t it?”

“Brilliant!” He beamed and clapped Ken on his back enthusiastically. Miyako, Iori and Armadimon readily agreed, and Ken and Wormmon simultaneously blushed, looking embarrassed at the sudden praise. “It’s nothing,” Ken said awkwardly, “it was obvious, really,” but he still smiled and Daisuke was happy to see Ken pleased with his own ideas for a change.

“Right, off we go, before there’s another one of these purple thunder-and-lightning thingies!” he declared, ushering the others to start climbing.

They’d spent a restless night hidden in the branches of a giant tree. Daisuke felt as if only Digimon had found some sleep – well-deserved admittedly, and it was certainly a relief to see Chibimon restored to Veemon by a good night’s rest and a couple of egg fruit they’d found on the way. Still, he’d have liked to get some sleep himself, but the intermittent bouts of thunder, lighting and rips in-between the two worlds they cared about so much stopped all of them from closing their eyes for more than just a few minutes – not to mention the nightmares that would come if they did fall asleep for a while...

Daisuke thought the night would never end, but end it did, and the morning that came could have been called peaceful if it hadn’t been for the distant sounds of explosions... There were battles going on in this world, now, though he couldn’t tell where exactly and who was involved. If it was the others, they could fend for themselves, for all he cared. Miyako, Iori, Ken and he had managed, if only barely, and so could they.

Miyako had used the night to work with her laptop and D-3, and although she looked at him with bleary eyes, she seemed content with her results.

“So? What’ve you got?”

“Aquilamon saw some lights in the North last night. We think it might be Gennai’s headquarters, but maybe you know...” Daisuke’s face must have looked troubled at the thought of his brief imprisonment, as foggy as his memory of it all was, because Miyako quickly stopped, murmuring “never mind” before continuing with her findings. “I scanned our surroundings, and it shouldn’t be
too far off – we can make it in less than a day walking… well, maybe a bit more,” she added, looking worriedly at Ken.

“Okay… that sounds good,” he replied cautiously, sensing that there was something else Miyako wanted to say.

“Good, well, if you still think infiltrating our enemy’s fortress basically defenseless is a good idea, that is,” she sighed, “but I’m guessing you do think that. Okay, then. We should at least come up with a plan…”

“Right!” That was something he could work with! He was sure he could come up with something brilliant any second now…

“…we should swap clothes…” He whipped around to look at Ken, who was very studiously avoiding looking back up.

“’scuse me?”

“…your disguise wore off, but that doesn’t mean we can’t still pull off the “Kaiser took everyone prisoner” trick…you’ll have to wear a hood over your face, though, so no one will think that you’re with us…”

“Ken…”

“…it’s the best way to get inside, isn’t it…?”

Well, that was one way they were not going to use to try and get inside the enemy headquarters. Ken looked so dejected at the mere thought of donning Kaiser clothes again – there was no way in hell Daisuke was going to let Ken try and act like the Kaiser only to pull off a ruse. Luckily, he didn’t have to say anything.

Miyako softly flicked a finger against Ken’s cheek. “Nah-huh. No disguise is going to make anyone think Daisuke’s you, stupid.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, either, Ken-chan…”

“But-“

“Besides,” Iori joined in, “isn’t it believable enough that Daisuke’s hair colour changed back, but the mind control didn’t break? We could get away with it…”

“Yeah!” Daisuke beamed at Iori. “That’s more like it, I’ll take you prisoners, and we’ll get in no questions asked!”

Miyako rolled her eyes. “It’s not going to be that easy! But I suppose it’s better than no plan at all.” Elaborate plan ready to be executed, they marched off in the direction Miyako thought most likely to be correct.

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They needn’t have worried about a plan, as it turned out, when they reached the building. Daisuke
had never seen a place like it before in the Digital World. It was massive, much bigger than Ken’s fortress had been, and much bigger than the regular houses Digimon used as habitations. It wasn’t particularly somber-looking; instead it gleamed metallically in the sunlight. But it did look like a sore in the landscape. Its edges seemed to bleed into their surroundings, disrupting the order of the world around it, throwing it into little pockets of swirling chaos.

It felt weird, and out of place, and it sent unfamiliar shivers down his spine. But other than that menacing feeling, there was not much that posed a threat to the four children and their Digimon partners. It also looked entirely empty.

“Maybe that’s his old headquarters and he moved on?” Iori suggested tentatively.

“He might be out with the Digimon he controls, fighting the others…” Ken added, looking nervously into the distance where the crashing and thundering sounds of attacks could still be heard.

“Or it might be a trap,” said Miyako.

“We have to go in, anyway.” Daisuke insisted, feeling irritation rise at such negativity. “We need our D3s, guys – especially if you still want to go after the others and save their sorry asses…”

Nobody looked pleased, but they followed Daisuke inside nonetheless. The hallways were just like the building’s exterior – metallic, clean, almost clinical, but somewhat odd and decidedly ‘wrong’, as if the building itself was already corrupted. Daisuke had to struggle to keep his breath even; going back was affecting him more than he cared to admit, especially since he thought it was a stupid reaction... he hardly remembered being here in the first place, so why was he getting scared?

They met no one until they reached a control room. They would have thought it empty, too, but then there was movement, and they were all startled to see an adult woman sit in the chair in the middle of the room, looking at nothing and no one in particular, seemingly lost to the world. They exchanged confused glances. Who was she? Was she working with Gennai?

Ken took a step forward – and Daisuke actively had to stop himself from pulling him back, so worried was he that Ken might be putting himself into harm’s way if he approached the woman.

“Miss?” Ken said softly, and the woman turned her head. Daisuke flinched. She was surrounded by a troubling aura, familiar and strange at the same time. Her outline was flickering, and Miyako, Iori and Ken drew in sharp breaths.

“What-?”

“…it…it’s the Dark Ocean…it’s pulling her in…” Iori murmured, and Daisuke put a reassuring hand on the younger boy’s shoulder.

Ken took another step in her direction.

“…you made it here…” the woman said in a dull, monotone voice. “I didn’t think you would, but I’m glad I was wrong…” Her gaze met Daisuke’s and there was a sudden glint of light in her eyes. “…you didn’t attack them, did you? That’s good…” She closed her eyes again. “I didn’t want him to do that to you, but I couldn’t stop him…” She sat up a little straighter, then opened her eyes again to look at the children. “Why did you come to me?”

“Our D3s… do you have them?”

Why was Ken telling her what they were after? She could use that against them, surely…
Instead, the woman merely nodded. “Oh yes, yours and the other boy’s,” she looked briefly at Iori, who took a step back in response. “Yes…we used yours to open the gate to this world… it’s very good at that, better than the others… I wonder why…” Slowly, she rose from her chair, walking over to a display with a small counter underneath. Vaguely, Daisuke recognised Digimon fighting on the screen. WarGreymon, wasn’t it? And MetalGarurumon… but he couldn’t see who they were fighting…

The woman grabbed the two D3s just lying there – Daisuke hadn’t even seen them before. She fiddled with them.

“Hey, stop that!” he shouted instantly, “What are you doing to them?”

She didn’t seem startled, just slowly turned in his direction. “I’m disabling the control Gennai-san has put on them. Surely, you don’t need any more manipulation…” she stated matter-of-factly, and Daisuke, unsure as to what he should make of it, let her continue.

“Your D-Terminals must be somewhere around here, too,” she continued, still sounding oddly disconnected. “I suppose you want them, too.”

“That would be very helpful,” Ken said, and Daisuke wondered why he spoke so gently to that woman, who was undoubtedly on the side of their enemies.

“Yes, yes…” the woman said, nodding, “I’ll go get them for you…” She seemed disoriented, but she still managed to type something into the keyboard in front of her. A little hatch opened in the wall, and for a moment, nothing happened, but then a conveyor belt started running, depositing four D-Terminals into the woman’s hands before long.

“There you go, there you go,” she murmured. “I suppose you want to go help your friends…” She smiled, but it looked so sad that even Daisuke felt a hint of pity for her – he’d almost forgotten how that felt.

“What’s with our friends?” Miyako asked, concerned. “Where are they?”

The woman gestured towards the screens behind her, and Daisuke now saw that all of them showed the same battle taking place, from different points of view.

“Gennai-san, he…He took the Libra to them, to…to deal with them, he said. I think he wants to get rid of them once and for all. He certainly wanted to get rid of you, and he almost succeeded… I don’t know how… I don’t know if he’s controlling Alphamon, but Yggdrasil and his knight certainly seem to contribute to the success of Gennai-san’s plans, that much is clear…”

Daisuke’s head was whirring. What on Earth was that crazy person talking about?

“We need to get going,” Iori said, “I don’t think the battle is going well for them.”

“Yes,” Miyako agreed, “Yes, whatever happened, we can just leave them to die.”

The woman’s smile broadened. “Good kids… you’re such good friends… the Digital World should be proud to call you its Chosen Children, its protectors, unlike-“

Ken stepped closer to the woman, and Daisuke desperately wanted to call him back, but he didn’t even look his way. “Yes, we are going to them, but I think you should come with us.”

The woman looked up in surprise, and so did Daisuke.
“No, no, you don’t understand,” she protested, “I’m your enemy. You have no idea what I did… the things I did… you wouldn’t say that if you knew…” Daisuke was inclined to agree, but Ken didn’t seem to think that way.

“Perhaps… but perhaps you can tell us what you did and why when you come with us…” He even extended a hand towards her as if he expected her to take it. “I just don’t think you should stay here alone.”

“Why… I’m dangerous, Ichijouji-kun… I hurt you and your friends, I-“

“She’s right, Ken, she was working with Gennai, I remember that now,” Daisuke cut in, but Ken only shook his head.

“But she isn’t working for Gennai-san now. There’s more to it than that… and the Dark Ocean’s pull… no one deserves that.” Ken seemed more determined than ever. “Please,” he said, holding out a hand to the woman. “We want to help.”

Ken was too kind for his own good, Daisuke realised. He wanted to help that woman, of course, he wanted that because he was good and kind and sweet, but the woman definitely wasn’t. She was dangerous, and – and now she’d started crying, leaving Daisuke completely baffled. He could deal well enough with his friends’ crying, though he always hated it, but at least he also always knew that he would comfort them somehow. What he was supposed to do with that adult stranger’s erratic sobbing, though, he didn’t know. Ken took her hand and slowly led her away from the harsh glare of the screens, drawing her towards Miyako, Iori and Daisuke himself.

Daisuke watched in a daze as his friends and their Digimon coaxed out the woman’s name – Himekawa Maki – and the fact that she’d been a Chosen Child just like them once. He found that hard to believe.

There was a tug on his sleeve, and he glanced down at Veemon. “What is it?”

“Why are you being so distant, Daisuke? Don’t you want to help?”

“Why would I want to help her? She’s the enemy!”

“So was Ken once…”

Daisuke frowned, anger rising up to this throat once more. “That’s completely different!”

“Maybe, but-“

“It is! Ken was never like her!”

Only when the others stared at him, he realised that his voice had become louder and louder while talking to Veemon.

“Daisuke? Are you alright?” Ken asked, concerned. Sweet, gentle Ken; Daisuke had to make sure he was safe – he clearly couldn’t keep himself out of danger on his own, was far too trusting…

“I’m fine. But I don’t think it’s a good idea to take her with us,” he said sharply. “She was with Gennai when he inserted me with that programme. The one that made me attack you, remember? In fact, I think she might have put it in herself!”

“Yes, she just said she did. She says she regrets it…’
“Great! I hope she regrets that we all got nearly killed, too!”

“Daisuke…”

“Well, drag her along if you want to, but we shouldn’t lower our guards around her. She might be part of a trap.”

“We’ll be careful…” Ken promised. “We should get going, though, it seems like the others might need us… Himekawa-san says Gennai-san went to attack them together with the Digimon that’s been causing all the infections…”

“Yes, Meicoomon,” Himekawa confirmed, voice still shaky, but not as monotone as before. “I need to – I need to go and free Meiko-chan, though, she’s one of you, a Chosen Child.”

Daisuke shook his head. What now, one of them? Another Chosen Child he’d never heard of before? “Yeah right…”

“I’ll go get her…” the woman murmured and turned to leave, but Daisuke grabbed her arm.

“Hold on, how do we know you’re not getting back-up, or something?!”

“Armadimon and I can accompany her,” Iori offered. “I’ve got my D3 now, so Armadimon can evolve if she tries something funny…”

Daisuke slowly nodded.

“I’ll go, too, I’ll make sure she’s not dangerous,” Veemon said, looking pointedly at Daisuke.

“Alright, fine…” he conceded, although he didn’t really like it. And shouldn’t his gut feelings account for something? He was their leader, after all…

They went off into another corridor, the one opposite the hallway through which they had entered. Miyako was observing the screens together with Hawkmon, trying to make out what was happening to their so-called friends, Daisuke assumed.

Ken had sat down in the chair the woman had been using – he was probably too ill to be standing for so long. He should be home really, home and safe with his parents. Daisuke wished he could do something to help.

Wormmon had jumped up on his lap, clearly just as worried about his partner as Daisuke was, but Ken seemed distracted all of sudden. He was fiddling with his D-Terminal, a deep frown settling in on his brows.

“What…what’s that?” he said, voice less steady than it had been when he’d talked soothingly to that woman.

“What’s what?” Daisuke asked, and Miyako paused with her analysis of the screens to look over Ken’s shoulders at his terminal’s display.

“You know what it is, Ken,” she said slowly, but Ken shook his head with conviction.

“No, I don’t,” he said, higher-pitched, “It’s got the Crest of Kindness on it, and I have no idea what it is!”

“Dude,” Daisuke said, just as slowly, having realised what Ken must have been looking at. “We found it just before Alphamon attacked, don’t you remember?”
“No, no, I don’t remember!” Ken all but shouted, eyes darting uncertainly between Miyako and Daisuke. “Why don’t I remember?”

“Relax, Ken, so much happened after that, you must have forgot…” Miyako said, putting a hand on Ken’s shoulder. “Or maybe it’s your concussion…” She exchanged a glance with Hawkmon.

“It is also possible that you forgot because the attack happened immediately after you picked it up, Ken-san,” Hawkmon added, “there was not much time to process our discovery at the time…”

Miyako nodded. “Right. The attack happened – maybe that’s even connected, maybe Alphamon attacked because we found it-“

Daisuke boxed her in the side. “Stay focused!” he told her, turning his attention back to Ken, who was clearly hovering on the verge of a panic attack.

“But what is it?! What is it, tell me!” Ken demanded, growing more and more agitated.


Chapter End Notes

It took me quite some time to write this chapter, but in the end, finishing it flowed rather quickly today!
I hope you enjoyed reading it! A lot of stuff had to happen, so it’s quite a long one, but I do think every scene I left in is necessary...

A quick note on canon (and also, SPOILERS, if you happen to read the notes first): so far, I have followed it fairly closely (up to the end of Loss, of course), but this time I made a conscious choice to diverge from it - there's this audio drama "Michi e no Armor Shinka", which I originally intended to include into my personal canon for this story, but then I decided that it would be challenging to use it as an explanation for Ken suddenly having a Digimental, considering that not everyone will have listened to it - and so I discarded the audio play and made the discovery of the Digimental a part of my own story, albeit keeping some of the motifs of "Michi e no Armor Shinka"... (you should listen to it if you get the chance, Ken awkwardly trying to get out of a tap dance is certainly something!)
Interlude: Before

Chapter Summary

Before everything began - the attacks, the corruption, the reboot - four children were sent ahead into the Digital World... Stuck there for days without any real task to do, frustration sets in... And just when they think that things are finally looking up, disaster strikes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude: Before

They had already been stuck in the Digital World for more than a week, and the first thrill of adventure had long worn off. Miyako wasn’t sure anymore how long exactly they had been here, but she knew it was long enough for their parents to start to worry. If they were normal children with normal parents, they’d have already been declared missing. As it was, they weren’t normal children, they were Chosen – and it was to be expected that the Digital World sometimes needed them to come and help. Usually, though, it didn’t happen as a surprise and without any active participation – she hadn’t consciously opened a gate and neither had any of the others, they’d established that early on – but through Gennai who told them if something was wrong and needed fixing, or because the problem was so obvious that Koushiro’s checking system alerted them to it by itself.

This time, none of that had happened. She’d got ready for school one morning, had reached for her D3, as she did every day – and had been about to leave her room when suddenly her computer had turned itself on, a bright light had emanated from the screen and she’d been sucked in.

It had been much the same for everyone else.

Daisuke even had his football with him because he’d been playing with it on his bed when the computer had sucked him in, and he was still carrying it around with him because he refused to leave it behind (“It’s my football, Miyako! I’m gonna need that when we get back!”). At least, they all had their school bags with them, so they could carry whatever fruit they found on the way and keep it for later – if they didn’t come across a restaurant that would take Yen. Only two days ago, they’d had delicious ramen at a restaurant by crossroads in the woods.

All in all, then, it wasn’t so bad, being stuck here. Even the weather was pleasant – blue skies, a light breeze. Neither too hot, nor too cold. Perfect, really, for an extended camping trip. She only wished she could have told her family that she’d be gone for a couple of days, perhaps weeks, and she wished that she knew what they were actually supposed to be doing.

She looked at her friends.

Ken and Daisuke were walking ahead, and while Veemon and Wormmon were playing tag in-between their partners’ legs, the two boys were figuring out which way they should go next. Not
that it mattered. They had been wandering the Digital World’s fields and forests for the last few days, and they could have continued for days with no further clue as to what they were doing and where they should be headed. Nothing seemed obviously wrong and there was nothing that they, the Chosen Children, could, ostensibly, fix.

And yet… it wasn’t just a peaceful camping trip, either. She could feel it. Could sense it in the air, perhaps, that something was wrong. Of course, she also knew that something had to be amiss. Why else would the Digital World be closed to them for a year and then suddenly open up and suck them in like that if there wasn’t anything going on?

“Miyako?”

She glanced to the side. Iori and Armadimon were walking next to her, while Hawkmon, always a little more private and in need for quiet, flew overhead and kept an eye on her from above.

“Yeah?”

“You’re thinking about our task.” It was a statement, not a question. She smiled.

“Yeah. I just wonder… we’ve got to do something… we can’t just keep walking around aimlessly.”

Iori nodded. “I’ve thought much the same, and so does Ken. The gates won’t open for us, so we’re stuck here, but there must be something we can do… That we should do to help.”

“And what does Daisuke think?”

“Much the same, I guess, even if he keeps telling me to just enjoy the time off school…”

She snorted. Further ahead, Daisuke was just about to drape his arms across Ken’s shoulder in an exaggerated, outlandish gesture, throwing their friend off his balance with his exuberance. She shook her head, smiling. “Typical.”

Iori smiled, too, but he looked a little worried.

“You okay?”

He nodded. “Yes… I’m just…still thinking.”

She raised an eyebrow, and he smiled a little more.

“You know… about why we’re here… and why Takeru and Hikari didn’t come through, too… They must be so worried, don’t you think?”

Miyako nodded. “They’ll have noticed by now… Hey, that probably means that Koushiro is already working on something to get us back, right?” She wished she had her laptop with her, but she didn’t normally take it to school, so of course it had remained behind. It would be so useful to have it with her as a tool… the D3 could only tell her so much, and the D-Terminal was nothing more than a glorified map at this point – they certainly couldn’t use it to communicate anymore… every single mail sent to any of the others had failed to be sent through.

“Right…” Iori said, seemingly unconvinced, and she knew that, even though he had spoken of their friends being worried, he’d really thought about someone else. Iori’s mum was very protective, and she was bound to freak out if Iori didn’t get back home soon. Iori’s grandfather was more laidback, but hadn’t he been ill lately? Iori must have been worrying how his disappearance would affect his grandfather’s health…
Miyako herself was lucky in that her parents and older siblings were probably confident enough in her capability to care for herself for a couple of days so that they wouldn’t worry too much, but the longer they stayed here the more they would fear that something could have happened to her.

As for Ken… Miyako was actually surprised at how little he had talked about his parents. She’d have expected him to feel extremely guilty for disappearing into the Digital World once more, causing them to worry, and he certainly looked guilty whenever their conversations turned towards their families, but he hardly said a word himself about his parents. Weird.

“Do you think it’s connected to the Child Digimon that attacked us?”

Miyako shrugged. “I guess it has to, but it can’t be very serious, right? I mean, not ‘stuck in the Digital World for days’ serious, anyway. They’re hardly dangerous… and they all stopped acting wild after a bit.”

“The last ones didn’t…”

That much was true. The last bunch of attackers, a small group of Kunemon hadn’t stopped going after them with their Electric Threads, and since none of them really wanted to fight the normally harmless insect Digimon, they had had no other choice but to run. What made the Digimon act like that, feral and beastlike? Miyako had thought that maybe finding that out might be their task this time, but unfortunately that hadn’t yet given her any ideas as to what they could practically do to achieve that rather than what they were already doing – aimlessly meandering about.

And even that seemed to have come to a halt right now.

All of a sudden, Daisuke and Ken had stopped. They’d reached the edge of the forest, but now they were bent over something, examining it intently.

Miyako hastened her steps to catch up to them. “What’s going on?”

Ken looked up, puzzled and confused. “My D3 – it just started buzzing.” He held up so she could look at it. It was gently vibrating, and a soft pinkish violet glow emanated from it.

“Huh. Well, that’s weird.”

Ken nodded in agreement then went back to staring at his glowing D3. It had also started beeping in regular intervals.

“Oh! That noise sounds familiar…” Iori had caught up as well. “Doesn’t that sound just like…”

“Like ours did when we found our Digimentals!” How could she not have noticed it right away? Iori was absolutely right, it was exactly the same sound…

“I bet it’s showing us the way to your Digimental, Ken!” She beamed at him, but Ken seemed considerably less enthusiastic.

“I don’t know… why would I even have a Digimental? I don’t think that’s it…” He looked to the side, ignoring Daisuke’s obvious excitement and Miyako’s own beaming grin.

“Oh, I hope it is, Ken-chan! I wonder what my Armor evolution will look like…”

“Maybe you’ll throw flames, like me!” Veemon said excitedly.

“Maybe you’ll get wings like Stingmon, but… but four legs like Raidramon, da’gya?” Armadimon
suggested, and soon enough, all four Digimon were engrossed in a very lively debate as to what Wormmon would eventually look like.

Ken was still turning his D3 around in his hand with a thoughtful look on his face.

“Aren’t you curious?” Daisuke prodded him. “Come on! I wanna see what your Digimental looks like. I bet it’s, like, pink and flowery, and…has dragonfly wings or something.”

Ken raised an eyebrow. “And you base that on what exactly?”

“Your crest and – I don’t know, I just think dragonfly wings would look cool on it.”

Ken smiled. “I don’t think it’s a Digimental… but we should follow it anyway… it’s not like we have any other plans, eh?”

“Which direction should we go?” Miyako tried to get a glimpse of the D3’s display to see whether a helpful dot marked the Digimental’s location – Ken really was the only one still doubting that it was just that.

He gestured towards the open space beyond the forest. “That way, I think.”

Miyako stretched her neck to see beyond the trees. They were almost on the crest of a little hill, and where the trees stop, descending rice fields started.

“Hey Hawkmon…could you fly ahead and see if you spot anything that might hide a Digimental?”

“Yes, Miyako-san.”

Her partner took flight and headed towards the rice fields, rising higher and higher until he must have a pretty good vantage point of their entire surroundings. Soon enough, he headed back.

“There is a small shrine at the foot of the hill. Could that be the place we’re looking for?”

“Let’s find out!” Daisuke had barely said it before he bounded down the hill, Veemon running after him with gleeful laughter. Miyako could tell that Ken’s first impulse was to follow suit, but he stopped himself, bent down to pick up his partner, and made sure that Wormmon had a firm grip on his shoulders.

Then he was gone, bolting after Daisuke. She could hear him shout, “Wait up, Motomiya! If it is my Digimental, don’t you think I should be first?!”

Miyako and Iori grinned at each other before following at a much more leisurely pace. Daisuke and Ken were almost tumbling down the hill, but as chaotic as their impromptu race was, they still ran in almost flawless synchrony. Miyako had never reached that kind of symbiosis with Hikari, despite being Jogress partners, and she wasn’t even sure if she wanted to. With anyone else, she’d have found it creepy, but the intensity of Daisuke’s and Ken’s connection seemed to fit them both perfectly. Sometimes, she wished that she… that she could be just as close – but no. They were both her friends, and she loved them. She couldn’t let stupid jealousy get in the way of that.

Almost instinctively, she sped up. There was no reason for her to run as Daisuke and Ken did – she wouldn’t catch up to them anyway and it didn’t matter when they reached the shrine since they had all the time in the world to get there. But the promise of a new development, the whiff of adventure made her break into a jog, and she could see that Iori was doing the same. The wind made her hair flap behind her, the terraced rice pads were rushing by. She was sure that something good was about to happen – finally, a clue! Surely, they were about to discover Ken’s Digimental because it
was going to help them along with whatever they had to do…

Miyako was so excited at the prospect that she failed to give the patch of sand just beyond the shrine more than a passing glance. It looked like a desert had been dropped in the middle of the rural landscape, but it was so tiny that it could hardly be of any concern. It might have been a sandbox if it hadn’t been so uncontained, eating into the surrounding fields… Miyako didn’t pay it any more attention, and when she saw a purple flash struck out from it, she put it down as a trick of the light.

Iori, Miyako, Armadimon and Hawkmon reached the shrine where Daisuke and Ken were waiting for them – although it was possible, she thought, that they were only still outside because they were so engaged in friendly bickering.

“I was first! You’re not so fast any more, are you, Ichijouji?”

“You also ran off first! That hardly counts!”

Miyako wrapped her arms around the boys’ shoulders. “If you’re quite finished, why don’t we go in?”

Ken nodded, easily switching from banter to this solemn seriousness of his. “I’ll go first.”

Daisuke was visibly fighting with himself not to make another joke, but he just about managed to restrain himself, and they all followed Ken inside the shrine.

It was a very small building, much smaller than the Mayan pyramid, in which Miyako and Iori had found their Digimentals three years ago. A small stone staircase led them down into the inner room, and there, on a weathered old rock – an altar of some kind – was it.

Miyako had to smile. Except for the dragonfly wings, Daisuke had been spot on. It was shaped like a rose and had a soft pink colour, with a magenta crest of kindness imprinted on all outer petals.

“Ohh, ohh, Ken-chan, it is your Digimental! I can Armor-Evolve now – I’m going to be strong and fierce…!”

“You don’t have to be…” Ken replied softly, still looking as if he couldn’t quite believe it himself. He stared at the Digimental much as he had stared at his buzzing D3 earlier on.

“What are you waiting for, dude, come on-“

Miyako drew Daisuke back by the collar. “Don’t be an ass. Take your time, Ken…”

Ken took a few careful steps forward until he was directly in front of the Digimental. Finally, he looked less skeptical. A hint of wonder had entered his expression as he stretched out his hands slowly. Wormmon had followed and was clinging to his ankles.

Miyako, Daisuke and Iori watched him touch the Digimental’s sides silently. He picked it up without effort, a soft smile on his lips.

She had wanted to ask him if he also felt that same warm feeling in his chest that she had felt when she had first held the Digimental of Love, but she never got the chance.

There was a rush of wind from outside, loud enough to make them all turn their heads toward the stairs leading out of the shrine. Red light shone inside, and judging by the noise, the bright summer’s day had been replaced by a raging storm within minutes.
Out of the corners of her eyes, she saw Ken enter the Digimental into his D-Terminal, but she was already halfway up the steps.

“What the-“

The rice pads were gone. So was the forest. All they could see was a red, scorching desert. Even the sky had changed colour. The four children and their partners emerged from the shrine to a changed world. Wind was whipping the sand into their faces. Hot, blistering air made breathing hard.

“What the heck happened?!“ Daisuke finished his previous thought, staring at all the sand in bewilderment.

“Could that… could that have been a sudden sandstorm?” Iori suggested, but he sounded unconvinced.

Miyako turned around herself. In all directions, only sand. And then the ground started quivering. Amidst the blasts of sand whirled around by the storm rose a stark, giant shape, black against the red sky, glancing down at them without mercy.

Alphamon.

Chapter End Notes

Since Ken couldn't remember finding his Digimental, it was about time to jog his memory a bit - and give you all a glimpse into those precious few days the 02 kids spent in the Digital World before Alphamon.

I hope you enjoyed this little interlude - even though it's part of my little "breaks in the narrative", it's a little longer than the previous interludes, and, due to Miyako's POV, a lot closer to the main narrative. At the moment, all the clues and hints as to what is going on with Alphamon, Yggrdasil, Gennai and the real enemy behind all this, are building up, but it might still take some time until the children will be able to piece everything together...
Mayhem

Chapter Summary

Taichi and the others keep wondering the Digital World without much aim or focus. They can neither find their friends nor their enemies - instead, they have to try and navigate an increasingly hostile world while their partners are still young and vulnerable without their previous memories. How will they be able to survive?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 11 Mayhem

Taichi sat by the fire. Agumon was leaning against him, already fast asleep again, even though he had woken up for their watch and had been quite earnest about helping Taichi keep everyone safe. Now, though, he was snoring. Taichi smiled a little and went back to surveying their surroundings.

Dawn was slowly creeping up on the wide open meadow surrounding the gentle slopes of the hill where they’d set up camp for the night. After Hikari’s short trip to the Dark Ocean, they had left the path in the woods as fast as possible. Taichi had led them away from the lake, worried that, if they remained there, his sister might again be summoned to that world and he would lose her forever. He had no evidence that the place itself was somehow closer to the Dark Ocean or if it would have happened anywhere, but he hadn’t wanted to take any risks.

Wooden areas had turned into rural landscapes and fertile meadows, but their trek had been far from pleasant. Mudslides, torrential rain and actual hail had slowed them down – or tried to wash them off the face of the Digital World if Koushiro was to be believed. They were foreign objects now, “contaminants”, and as such, they had to be cast out or “eliminated” – again, Koushiro’s words. So far, the Digital World hadn’t succeeded in getting rid of them, but Taichi was wary of what might happen to them next. He’d have preferred a less open camping space, too, but at least the rising ground provided them with the advantage of having a good overview on everything around them. At the same time, however, they were just as exposed, visible for miles as they must have been on that small hill of theirs. He’d insisted on shifts for a sort of night watch, and even though the night had been calm, he still thought that it had been a necessary precaution, no matter how much the others might have grumbled.

He watched the sun rise higher, slowly warming the air beyond the parameters of their fire. Suddenly, he spotted something unusual in the distance. A dark figure, walking across the wet grass, accompanied by a smaller one, yes, definitely two of them. Taichi stood up, ignoring Agumon’s protest at losing his backrest. He had to see more clearly who or what was coming closer. If only he’d thought to bring his old binoculars – it seemed that he had been a lot more resourceful at age eleven than at age seventeen.

As the pair approached, he realised that it was a human and Digimon. His first thought was Meiko and Meicoomon, his second Ken and Wormmon – and he wondered vaguely if it should have been the other way round or not – but it couldn’t be either pair, really. Meiko was still a prisoner, as far
as they knew – hoped because the alternative was so much worse – and Ken was presumably still trapped in the Dark Ocean, but even if he wasn’t, he wasn’t alone anymore; Hikari had seen them with their friends, and even if Taichi wasn’t altogether sure if he could recognise any of them while they were only existing as vague blobs in his memory, he was reasonable certain that he’d at least spot them in the distance.

No, the figure had to be somebody else, but who could even enter the Digital World apart from them? The other chosen children, those from around the world – they couldn’t open gates, could they? Or was that just something Taichi had forgotten?

“Is that-?!” He looked up to see that Yamato had woken up and stepped next to him, grim face set in anger. “That’s one of the agents!” He spat it out in disdain, and Taichi realised that if it was one of the agents, he would probably have to personally ensure that Yamato wasn’t going to murder them.

He shielded his eyes and peered into the figures’ direction once more. He could make out dark hair and a white lab coat now.

“Yup, it’s Nishijima-sensei,” he said, amazed at how casual he managed to sound, even though his mind was still reeling, trying to make sense of it all.

“That bastard, wait till I get to him-“ Yamato seemed intent on getting to him sooner rather than later, but Taichi grabbed his arm and held him back.

“Come on, let’s at least question him before you beat him into a pulp.”

“He LIED to us, Taichi! He told me they were okay, that they were monitoring them… that we shouldn’t worry. And so we didn’t, and look what happened…!”

“I know… but we need to find out what he knows, okay? Maybe we can force him to tell us what’s really going on, that’s gotta be better than just attacking him, right?”

He hoped that they were wrong, that there was an explanation for the agents’ behaviour. He had no such strong opinions on Himekawa-san, but he liked Nishijima-sensei, even felt some kind of kinship with him. He couldn’t imagine that his teacher was actively trying to harm his students, especially since he had also once been a Chosen Child. The young man had to be on their side somehow.

“The Digimon at his side is a Bearmon,” Koushiro had joined them, apparently wide awake within minutes of waking up. He was already balancing his opened laptop on one hand, typing with the other. “It’s technically on Child level, but the analyser states that it is centuries old, so it might well be much stronger than our Digimon…”

“So Digimon can still be centuries old, despite that reboot?”

Koushiro nodded. “We already established that the reboot must have been far from complete by necessity. The Digital World is far too complex to allow for a complete reset. As far as I can tell, it is only certain structural elements and details that have been affected – our partner’s memories among them, but also the general geography of the world as well as the status of most – though not all – Digimon. They must have mostly reverted to egg-form, which is why Server is so empty, and-“

“Thanks, Koushiro.”

Koushiro looked startled at being interrupted mid-lecture, but Taichi clapped his shoulders
jovially. “Not that that’s not very interesting, but I don’t think we can really focus on the science behind the reboot now, we gotta deal with Nishijima first.”

Koushiro briefly looked like he wanted to protest, and Taichi also paused for a moment. There always seemed to be something else going on whenever Koushiro wanted to do what he did best – figure out what was going on, what motivated their enemies, what went on in the Digital World in general and how they could fix it… But every time he had tried to make progress, something else had come up. It almost seemed deliberate, like fate was trying to stop them from understanding… Hadn’t they even talked about that before, him and Koushiro? Maybe…maybe it was all… but Taichi couldn’t concentrate on the issue any longer, could hardly catch what Koushiro was mumbling – “…just like with Mochizuki-san’s digivice… I should have analysed that, too…” – but he had to make sure that Yamato wasn’t going to attack their teacher the moment he arrived at their little hill.

Behind the three boys, the others were starting to stir. Agumon, still sleepy, had toddled up to him and was tugging on his sleeve. “…can we have breakfast now, Taichi…?”

He smiled. “Not now, Agumon, in a bit, I hope…”

Taichi looked at the others. Mimi was sitting up yawning, clutching a still sleeping Palmon in her arms. Sora was stretching, but at the same time looking back at Taichi with a frown.

“What’s going on, Taichi…?”

“We have visitors. Sora, can you stay here and watch over the camp and the others? Yamato, Koushiro and I are going to… greet them.”

“What-?”

“It’s Nishijima-sensei – we don’t know much more, either yet, but we’re gonna find out.”

“O-Niichan…?” his sister mumbled drowsily, still half asleep. She was still so pale, and for a moment, he wondered if he should stay behind with her, but a glance at Yamato’s dark scowl told him that he had to make sure the interaction with the agent was going to be as peaceful as possible. He gently placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay, don’t worry. Takeru is going to stay with you…”

“Huh…” Takeru was still on the ground, Patamon flopped over his face, but he’d wake up properly soon enough.

Taichi turned back to Koushiro and Yamato as well as their partners.

“Come on, let’s go and see what he’s up to!”

They walked quickly. Taichi could see the tension in Yamato’s clenched fist, and he couldn’t help but feel tense as well. As much as he wanted Nishijima to be on their side, he couldn’t be sure of it. And the fact that he was being accompanied by a potentially centuries-old Digimon didn’t exactly help ease his concern.

When they approached them, though, he seemed just as friendly and affable as he had at school. Perhaps even relieved at seeing them.

“Yagami-kun! Ah, and it’s Ishida-kun and Izumi-kun, too. I am so glad to see you’re okay!” The teacher said with a bright smile, but Taichi could clearly see that he, too, was tense. He couldn’t yet work out why that was, though.
“Yes, we are doing fine,” Yamato replied coldly. Gabumon hid behind him, looking scared of Nishijima, but also scared of Yamato’s aggression. “But I suppose you knew this, didn’t you? I expect you were “monitoring” us as well?!”

Nishijima’s face fell. “…you found out about Motomiya and the others, didn’t you?”

“No, actually!” Yamato’s voice rose dangerously. “We don’t know who Motomiya is, but now that you mention it, the name sounds familiar – and that isn’t at all how it’s supposed to be, is it?!”

Nishijima stared at Yamato in what Taichi thought was honest confusion.

“What do you mean, you don’t know… you were asking-“

“I was asking about Ken!”

Stunned incomprehension was the most dominant emotion on Nishijima’s face. “But… I don’t understand…”

He was being genuine, Taichi thought. Whatever had manipulated their memories, Nishijima had had no part in it, hadn’t even known that it was happening… but why? And who else was behind it if not the agents after all?

“Our memories were altered,” Koushiro explained to the teacher, but he, too, was unusually curt. Taichi couldn’t blame him – as much as he had felt some sort of connection with Nishijima, he simply couldn’t deny that neither agent had been honest with them. Yamato, Koushiro, all of their team were completely justified in being suspicious. And as their leader, it was Taichi’s responsibility to be at least cautious, no matter how surprised Nishijima looked.

“Memories altered? But… but how?”

Taichi shook his head. “We don’t know. And we’d like to ask you some questions about what’s going on.”

Nishijima nodded, seemingly ill at ease. “Of course… I’ll tell you all I know…” A small smile crossed his face. “This is Bearmon, by the way. My partner.” His voice had grown softer and he looked at the Digimon by his side fondly. “He doesn’t remember, either, but we’ve made friends again…”

So the connection would never stop. Taichi looked down to Agumon, standing next to him, and he instinctively patted his head. He was somehow glad to know that he could one day soon be an adult like Nishijima and still love Agumon just as fiercely as he did now.

Yamato gave him a pointed look, and he nodded, clearing his throat. “Alright. Well, follow us to the camp,” he ordered awkwardly, not at all used to treating an adult like that – he’d been used to having authority, but only over his friends and only because it was his responsibility to keep them safe. This was different.

He turned around, and noticed that Nishijima followed straight away, not questioning him at all. Koushiro walked more or less beside Taichi, Tentomon buzzing along near his head, and Yamato went behind their teacher, still looking grim, still looking determined to keep him almost like a prisoner.

Everyone was up when they returned, and their camp site was already cleaned up with everyone ready to go.
Takeru, who’d been sitting next to Hikari, stood up immediately, eying the agent with fierce distrust, mirroring his brother’s glare. “I thought I was still dreaming when you woke us up, Taichi, but he’s really here! What’s going on?”

Taichi opened his mouth to answer, but Yamato spoke up first. “Ask him, not us,” he snarled.

Poor Nishijima looked almost shell-shocked – clearly he hadn’t expected that kind of treatment. “I…well… I came to the Digital World almost by accident – I just, well, I just tried my digivice and it worked and brought me here,” he explained. “I was worried because I couldn’t contact Himekawa, and Meiko-chan was missing, too…” He paused and looked at the teens facing him. “She’s not with you, either, is she…?”

“No,” Taichi shook his head. “She has been captured. We met with her briefly, but we don’t know where she is now…”

“Right…”

“Do you know who’s holding her prisoner?”

“No…” Nishijima said, but not quickly enough. Taichi had noticed the slight hesitation. He cocked an eyebrow at the teacher.

“…it’s not Himekawa, is it?” Nishijima sounded like he desperately didn’t want her to be the enemy, but wasn’t sure anymore.

Taichi shook his head again. “At least not directly. It was Gennai-san. I suppose you have met him?”

“Gennai-san…! But…surely he is our ally? I mean your ally. The Chosen Children’s ally…”

“We thought so,” Sora had interrupted Nishijima’s ramblings. “But no. He isn’t. Not anymore.”

Nishijima shook his head in disbelief. “I had no idea. Really, I didn’t-“ He stopped and closed his eyes for a second. “I had my suspicions. But I didn’t want to believe that Himekawa had anything to do with… with everything. But I think she’s involved somehow. She must be. I’m sorry, I should have acted sooner…” The regret in his voice sounded real enough to Taichi, but he knew that it wasn’t enough; they couldn’t trust him just yet.

“Well, what do you know?! You have been hiding things from us, don’t think you can pretend it was all Himekawa’s doing.” Yamato wouldn’t let Nishijima off the hook, and Taichi was more than happy to let him interrogate the man. At least, they’d get some answers that way, everything the agent himself knew, at least.

“Ah...yes...you’re right,” Nishijima admitted, glancing at his partner for support. “We knew that your friends were missing.” He looked at them all. “You really don’t remember them at all?”

Hikari, with Tailmon in her arms, took a step forward. “Not much,” she answered quietly, “I am the only one who even remembers Miyako and Iori, but as long as we’re not with them, it’s…it’s really hard to keep remembering them.” Mimi and Jou behind her both nodded, and everyone else looked like they knew exactly what Hikari meant. Taichi himself had to fight to remind himself of Ken, had to struggle to keep the names Miyako and Iori in mind, even if he could not match them to any faces. As for the fourth…

“Motomiya Daisuke. Inoue Miyako. HidaIori. Ichijouji Ken,” Nishijima stated, just as quietly, with an almost solemn tone. “Those are your friends. They went missing two weeks before the
infections started affecting our world. I’m sorry, I- I didn’t think you –“ He cleared his throat. “I wasn’t aware that you didn’t remember them at all. I did think how odd it was that only you,” he nodded towards Yamato, “who came by to investigate, but I figured… I figured you maybe already knew that they’d been summoned to the Digital World?”

They were all shaking their heads now. “We didn’t know anything,” Taichi said, feeling the guilt of this oversight weighing heavily on his shoulders. He sighed. “But we have met Ken in the meantime.” Again, Nishijima looked so surprised that Taichi didn’t think it could be fake.

“Where is he? I didn’t see-“

“He’s not with us, he ran off.” Taichi wouldn’t explain anything else – what Ken had said was only between himself and the other Chosen, none of Nishijima’s business. “But he wasn’t well when we found him, I can tell you that. What happened to them, do you know?”

Again, Nishijima shook his head. “No… we were monitoring the Digital World for them, just as we told you, but… no results. Well, at least no results as far as I was aware,” he added, somewhat bitterly.

“Who kept it from you?”

Nishijima looked equally bitter and miserable now. “Himekawa… it must have been her. She was…she wanted the reboot, that’s why she was working with whoever has been causing all this…”

“Wanted the reboot?” Mimi, quiet until now, seemed outraged. “Why would she want that?! None of our partners remember us! I thought she was a Chosen Child, too – she ought to understand! And the reboot didn’t even solve the thing with the infections!”

Nishijima sighed. “She does, believe me. She does understand. She wanted her partner back, that’s all. I don’t think she cared all that much about the infections and whether a reboot would stop them or not.”

“What happened to her partner?” No human had spoken, but Gomamon, perched on Jou’s shoulder, had apparently listened and now cocked his head curiously.

Another painful sigh. “Her partner died. Back then, when we first went to the Digital World, we fought the Dark Masters, like you did. But we almost lost. The only option…” He stopped, seemed to think about his words, then started again. “Do you all know about the Holy Beasts?” The Digimon shook their heads, the children nodded after a moment’s pause.

“That was our partners. They were turned into them with the help of Tapirmon’s remaining life force. Tapirmon died, and the rest of us were separated from our partners… until the reboot, that is…” Another soft smile for Bearmon.

“That cannot be what happened!” Taichi turned towards Koushiro. “According to the legends of the Digital World, the Holy Beasts have been guarding and protecting it for centuries, so how could they be your partners?”

“Ah, well, it was centuries ago. In the Digital World, that is.”

Koushiro slowly nodded, obviously still thinking about the new information, but seemingly satisfied with that explanation for the moment.

Taichi couldn’t say the same for himself, his head was swimming with everything Nishijima had
just said, and it was hard for him just trying to make sense of it all. Everyone else was very quiet. Sora was absentmindedly caressing Pyomon’s feathers, while Mimi had sat back on the ground with Palmon clutched tightly in her arms. Takeru was particularly pale, head lowered, careful not to look at anyone. Taichi knew what everyone was thinking; he knew because he himself couldn’t help but wonder to what lengths he’d go if he had to face losing Agumon forever – not just that, knowing that Agumon was dead, gone for good. He didn’t need to see him ever again, as long as he knew that his partner was safe and happy… He dropped to his knees himself and threw an arm around his little orange dinosaur.

“Sorry,” Nishijima said with an awkward chuckle. “That was pretty grim, wasn’t it?”

Taichi took a deep breath. “Well. It is what it is.” He got up again, but not after telling Agumon, who’d become more and more worried by Taichi’s odd behaviour, that everything was gonna be okay.

“The camp site is already dismantled, so we might as well go on. You’re coming with us, Nishijima-sensei,” he said, still a little awkward himself. He even blushed when Nishijima asked him what his plans were.

“We need to find out who’s behind the infections – we know that Meicoomon is transmitting them,” he added, when he saw Nishijima trying to say something, “but we think that something must have caused Meicoomon to become – well whatever she is… So that’s high on our list of priorities. Other than that… find our friends and not forget them in the meantime. If you can open up a gate back to our world with your digivice, that would be great actually, once we find them. Ichijou- Ken-kun needs medical care.”

Crap. He really had to be careful what he was thinking. He couldn’t risk losing his memory of Ken once more, or worse, think of him as the Kaiser. They had to keep remembering what was real and what wasn’t…

“I don’t think my digivice can do that… I didn’t even know it could get me back here…” Nishijima sighed. “But perhaps we’ll find a way on our journey. We really should find your friends as soon as possible – it will be good seeing them alive and well…”

Taichi didn’t comment on that. He had no idea if they actually were either of those things at this point…

Unsure of what to say, he turned away from Nishijima and towards the others to see how they were doing.

All of them were ready to leave within moments. Taichi could tell, though, that none of his friends were really comfortable with Nishijima’s presence. Be it suspicion, mere caution or even pity because of what they had been told, there was a tension in the air that added to the overall feeling of unease that had already accompanied them for so long.

Taichi went ahead as usual, leading his team, but without really knowing where to. Not that that was anything new, either… Agumon walked next to him, but he seemed even more clueless than Taichi felt. Ever since they’d reconnected with their Digimon, it had seemed to him as if not only their memories of their partners had been affected, but even their knowledge of their own world. They were acting so young, so innocent… it was a wonder that most of them had managed to evolve to the Mega-level, when they seemed like children to Taichi.

A few feet behind him, Hikari walked side by side with Takeru. She was carrying Tailmon and Patamon was perched – as usual, as if nothing had changed – on Takeru’s hat. They were deeply
engaged in a conversation, and, out of curiosity, Taichi slowed down to listen in.

“Inoue Miyako... she’s...she’s a year older than us. She wears glasses, and...” A pause. “HidaIori, he’s...connected to you somehow?”

To his surprise, he found Hikari talking about their missing friends in a never-ending whisper, and Takeru listening so intensely as if his life depended on it.

“...I can’t remember Motomiya Daisuke at all...” his sister, murmured, with a pained tone to her voice. “I feel like I should, but there’s just nothing... it’s a little better with the others, but...”

“Because you’ve seen them, and not him,” Takeru replied. “It’s just as hard for me with Inoue and Hida... I can only really remember Ken, and even with him, I have to keep reminding myself...”

Taichi slowed down some more.

“What are you guys talking about?” he finally wanted to know. Hikari looked up; she must not have noticed Taichi coming closer before.

“We don’t want to forget them again...so we have to keep talking...” Her voice trembled, and Taichi could immediately tell that she was worried, disturbed, and he knew exactly why.

“We just can’t do that to them again, O-Niichan...We can’t.”

He nodded, but didn’t say anything. But he kept walking close to Takeru and Hikari after that, listening in.

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The shelter they reached by that evening was very familiar, at least to Taichi and Hikari. It was a cave within a gorge – quite close to a wall full of screens displaying nothing but static. Taichi balled his hands into fists. Had they walked all this way only to turn full circle? He had been here together with his sister before they’d lost Mochizuki to Gennai-san – no, before they had even known that Mochizuki was in the Digital World with them. Yet at the same time, he knew that they hadn’t exactly left this place the traditional way, so the feeling of having walked in circles probably wasn’t entirely accurate. It didn’t help him feel better in the slightest, though.

In the sky, they could sometimes see purple lightning, coupled with distortions showing gateways to someplace else. It made him glad that they’d have at least something over their heads this time, even though it probably didn’t offer much in the way of protection.

They had run out of matches, but Sora made a fire anyway (“Meiko-chan showed me how”), and they sat down around it. What little food they had left, went to their Digimon, which was just as well. Taichi didn’t feel very hungry, and he wouldn’t be surprised if everyone was else was much the same.

For a short moment, everyone was silent, looking at Nishijima in apprehension. The agent and teacher was fiddling with the hems of his lab coat, turned half away from them and focusing mostly on his partner – who, despite his apparent old age, was almost as greedy when it came to food as Agumon.

“Nishijima-sensei,” Koushiro started. The agent turned towards him. “You said that your partners were turned into the Holy Beasts, correct?”

Nishijima nodded.
“And the reboot has reversed this transformation?”

“Yes, as I told you before…”

“This would explain why Gennai-san was able to attack us with the help of MetalSeadramon and Machinedramon, albeit not why he could apparently control them with a snap of his fingers. They were resurrected by the reboot and are now completely uncontrolled.”

Nishijima looked a little more worried, but nodded.

“Well, it’s certainly interesting to know the reasons behind their appearance,” Jou interrupted politely. “But we already defeated MetalSeadramon and Machinedramon, so how does that help us any further?”

“…there are still two left…” Takeru said, head lowered, while caressing Patamon in his lap with slightly trembling hands. Yamato gently placed a hand on his younger brother’s shoulder.

“Piedmon and Pinochimon,” Taichi stated quietly.

“WHAAT?” Jou’s voice betrayed a mix of outrage and worry. “We might have to face them again?!”

“It’s worse than that.” All eyes turned to Nishijima. “They could enter our world and attack our capitals if they wanted to.” He gestured towards the sky beyond the cave entrance. “Those distortions – they’re gateways.”

Koushiro frowned. “Where do you extrapolate this from?”

“I have seen the gates from our side – before I left the real world – the disturbances in our networks are getting worse, and gates are opening up. The barrier between our world is growing porous, there’s no doubt about that…”

Koushiro slowly nodded. “Three years ago, I believe the two worlds were already set to converge. But not in that way. The Million Points of Lights incident suggested – “

“A much more benign development, I know,” Nishijima conceded. “I don’t know what went wrong… Perhaps Himekawa does…”

Taichi tipped his head back and stared at the cave’s ceiling. Excellent news, that all was…

“Taichi?”

“Mh?”

“What is a million points incident?” Agumon wondered, scratching his chin. “It sounds pretty.”

“It was pretty, Agumon. Very…” He glanced at his partner – so small he seemed now, even though Taichi knew that it was him who had grown. Would they ever reach the unity again that he had felt back then? It hadn’t been just a union with the other Chosen Children all around the world, but between Digimon partners and humans, between the Digital World and the Human World as well. It had felt just as glorious and brilliant as the light from their digivices had looked.

He couldn’t fully believe that he would ever feel it again.

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When they woke up in the morning, it looked as if the night hadn’t fully passed. The sky was a
dark grey, and it was raining again. They had no other choice but to stay put.

“What if the gorge fills up with rainwater?” Jou had fretted, but Taichi had still decided not to leave the shelter of the cave for now. With the purple lightning flickering above their heads more and more frequently, and low rumbling sounds in the distance, as if the earth itself was splitting apart, Taichi hadn’t wanted to risk leaving what little safety they had found, at least for now and with no clear destination in mind.

It turned out that he had once again made the wrong decision when, in the early afternoon, their feet turned wet with the rising water – dark and murky, not clear as he would have expected rainwater to be – and the sky above them darkened even further. Hikari looked faint and pressed herself against a wall with Tailmon poised on a rock in front of her, ready to slash whatever was coming. They all felt a peculiar tension in the air, like something else was coming, a storm perhaps.

Taichi stepped out of the cave before anybody else. At first, he could see no change beyond the worsening weather, but then, there was a roar in the sky – and an Airdramon flying towards them. Without his binoculars he had to wait for it to come close enough to recognise that the figure who stood on its head was Gennai-san.

Gennai-san’s arrival worried him but it didn’t disturb him as much as his companions did – just as they had feared, Piedmon and Pinochimon had made their return.

The closer they came the louder was Gennai-san’s maniacal laughter. “Well, well, well, Chosen Children. I hope you did not think you had seen the last of me!”

“It really is Gennai-san.” Nishijima suddenly stood next to him, looking at their former guide in horror. Taichi had no time to help him with the jarring experience of saying someone they had trusted with their lives as their enemy.

Instead, he exchanged a look with Yamato, and they both nodded. This was a time for Omegamon, if they could still manage it. Their digivices lit up in light, but Agumon and Gabumon didn’t merge yet, only evolved into WarGreymon and MetalGarurumon respectively, as they had before. Still, they would be okay, they had to be – the other Digimon were almost all evolving to their mega levels now. Surely, with seven ultimate level digimon and one on perfect level – no! two – out of the corner of his eyes, Taichi could see Nishijima’s digivice glowing in his hand and Bearmon evolving – they’d be able to defeat even Piedmon and Pinochimon.

The only thing…the only thing that worried him that Gennai’s grin had become bigger, freakishly stretched across his face, as he watched them evolve their partners. He couldn’t possibly be happy to face 8 mega level Digimon in battle even if he did, by some means, control the two remaining Dark Masters?

He snapped his fingers. And Piedmon and Pinochimon disappeared. “What the-?!” Koushiro next to him audibly gasped, and then quickly typed something on his computer. “Taichi-san, they were jus holograms…!”

“Holograms! But…why? What does he-“

A near deafening roar arose from behind the Airdramon and from it sparked a thousand purple flashes, filling the air with static. And then Meicrackmon emerged from behind Gennai.

Taichi shook his head “This is insane… Meicrackmon can’t…can’t possibly defeat all of us…”

“I would not be so sure about that, Taichi-san. The infected Digimon are stronger than uninfected
Digimon of the same level – and Mochizuki-san’s partner has always displayed exceptional strength.”

Above them, Gennai snapped his fingers once more, and it must have done something to Meicrackmon because the Digimon roared in anger and then lashed out with his claws, firing attacks in their direction.

Instinctively, Taichi pushed Koushiro to the side when some rocks, loosened by Meicrackmon’s actions tumbled towards them. Then he whipped his head around to look for Hikari. She was safe – for the moment. Above their heads, their Digimon started firing attacks at Meicrackmon.

“Stay away from her!” Taichi yelled in WarGreymon’s direction – everyone’s direction really.

“She’ll make you ill, don’t touch-“

*Don’t touch her!* He’d wanted to say, but they were already wrestling. Purple sparks were emitting from Meicrackmon, hitting his own partner, hitting the others. With growing horror he thought he began to realise what exactly Gennai’s plan had been and why he’d looked so happy when their partners had evolved…

“Taichi-san-“

“I know.”

Meicrackmon had left WarGreymon behind – unharmed, or so it seemed – and was clinging to Hououmon now, biting his neck, but the aggression almost didn’t matter compared to the purple sparks of infection passing from one Digimon to the next.

“Don’t be…please don’t be…” Taichi murmured, knowing full well that nothing he could say would stop WarGreymon from becoming infected again if he stayed too close to Meicrackmon during the fight.

Meicrackmon was jumping between the two sides of the gorge so quickly that it almost seemed like it was flying and their partners, despite actually being able to fly, had to struggle to keep up. Only Vikemon was stuck on the ground, firing attacks up towards their enemy.

He’ll be able to withstand the infection the longest, Taichi couldn’t help thinking, and he looked around his friends, hiding all around him from falling rocks and staring up at their partner with fervent worry. Had they realised Gennai’s intention as well? Did they know that the positive effects the reboot had had, the cure from the infection, would soon be gone, leaving only the losses?

With a loud boom, WarGreymon’s attack hit a porous bit of the cliff and the entire wall seemed to come down on them. Taichi grabbed Koushiro by the shoulders and dragged him to the ground with him – he’d been too transfixed by the fight to notice the falling debris.

“Is everyone alright?” Taichi shouted. The dust from the avalanche made him cough and he couldn’t see anything but purple lightning overhead. It felt like he had only resumed breathing when he heard all six of them shout back.

“Taichi!” Sora yelled. “We need to get somewhere safe!”

“There’s…” he had to clear his throat – the dust made it hard to talk, somehow, “There is no safe place near here!” he shouted back. When the dust settled, he saw that Yamato was huddled at the entrance of their cave together with Takeru and Hikari. Nishijima stood in front of Mimi and Sora,
trying to shield them, while Jou was near Vikemon – Taichi really hoped that he wouldn’t get infected while Jou was so close –

Another violent crack, and Taichi whipped his head upwards. Meicrackmon had slammed MetalGarurumon into one of the cliffsides, causing even more rocks to topple down and breaking some of the TV screens, projecting glass shards onto the ground. The others flinched, but Taichi kept staring upward, and then he saw it: purple streaks, not coming from Meicrackmon, but from MetalGarurumon. It was happening. Their partners were being infected. Again.

“METALGARURURMON!” Yamato had run out of the cave. He’d seen what had happened as well.

Meicrackmon left MetalGarurumon to itself, and he slid down the cliff, before regaining his strength. He let out an animalistic roar and then turned towards the Chosen Children.

“Withdraw!” Taichi tried to shout, but the battle noises were so loud that he didn’t know if anyone but Koushiro had actually heard him.

“Taichi-san! Our partners-“

“I know.” He put a hand on his friend’s shoulders and squeezed. Koushiro didn’t say a word, not even a theory as to why this was happening again when the reboot had been supposed to fix all that.

Above them, Meicrackmon was wrapped around Hououmon, causing them both to crash to the ground.

A blast from MetalGarurumon – wordless, like all the infected Digimon’s attacks – hit the ground directly in front of them, freezing almost everything before them to ice. Taichi and Koushiro only narrowly escaped being frozen on the spot by climbing up a small boulder. On the other side of the now icy patch, Sora was trying to reason with Hououmon, with not much success, of course. Taichi glanced upwards. Meicrackmon evaded any and all attacks in her direction, and targeted each of their partners with deadly precision. Soon, they would all be gone, their personalities erased by the corruption.

Taichi watched as Meicrackmon and Rosemon hit the ground and another cloud of dust rose up like an explosion, enveloping them in hot air and sand.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it took me a long, long time to finish this update, and I am only able to upload tonight because I decided to split the originally planned chapter into two! Still, I'm reasonably content with what's going on and I hope that you are, too!

Will Taichi and the others get out of this one? Feel free to speculate how, I'd love to hear if you've got any theories ;)
“Taichi-san! We need more shelter!” This time, it was Koushiro who had to drag Taichi backwards. Stunned, he saw an explosion hit the icy ground before them. He had been too focused on Meicrackmon to see that another of their partners had fallen victim to the infection and was attacking them instead of Mochizuki’s partner now.

It was WarGreymon.

“No…”

“Taichi-san, please come!”

Koushiro dragged him towards some of the rocks that had fallen down during the fight. They provided a sort of barrier now – and also an elevation from the ice as well as from the still sloshing black water a little further from where MetalGarurumon’s attack had hit. But of course, they provided no protection from above. And most of their Digimon on their Ultimate levels could fly.

They cowered behind a large boulder. Taichi, no longer focused on the fight, looked around them to see where their friends were – Nishijima and Mimi had succeeded in convincing Sora not to keep trying to talk to Hououmon, and they were hiding behind a pile of rubble a little to their right. Hikari and Takeru had dragged Yamato back into the cave and they were hiding there – Taichi hoped that maybe they would be a little safer there, but he couldn’t reach them now – he’d slip on the ice and be hit by an attack before he got there. And Jou…

Jou was still standing with Vikemon.

“Crap.” Taichi jumped up on their boulder. “Stay here, Kou!” He skidded over the ice a little, then found a more or less steady path of rocks to get to Jou. He grabbed him firmly by the shoulders. “Are you insane?!?”

“Oh! Taichi! I need to support Vikemon~“

“No, you need to hide with the rest of us.”

“Vikemon will protect me.”
“Trust me, he will not.” Just now, purple sparks were shooting off from the Digimon’s fists. He only just managed to get Jou to crouch behind the boulder with him and Koushiro before the morning stars from Vikemon’s back hit it, causing some cracks to spread through the rock.

“What-“ Jou shook his head. “I don’t understand, I-“

“They’re getting infected, Jou. Meicrackmon is infecting them.”

Jou just stared at him, and then at Vikemon. Taichi knew exactly how he felt, but he didn’t know what to say to comfort him. There seemed to be no comfort left. To their right, a large Digimon, reminding him vaguely of a lion, was attacking Nishijima, Sora and Mimi now.

“That is LoaderLiomon, evolution of Bearmon.” Koushiro said after a glance at his laptop, but his voice sounded shaky, not as composed and serious as it did usually.

Taichi didn’t say anything. He felt cold, not just because of the waves of icy air wafting over from some of the attacks. He knelt behind the same boulder with Jou and Koushiro, and his knees and feet were immersed in the rest of the murky water, which hadn’t yet been turned to ice. It was just as cold and felt oddly dense and thick, and Taichi wondered if it had to do with the effects of MetalGarurumon’s attack.

There was a roar in a much too familiar voice directly above him. Taichi looked up only to see WarGreymon had already reared its giant metal claw high up over his head to assemble the necessary energy for Gaia Force. That was it. He had no idea how to get out of this one. None at all. In a minute or so, Koushiro, Jou and he would all be reduced to ashes.

Suddenly a bright pink blob flittered through his vision.

“What-?”

WarGreymon’s attack went off, but he must have been distracted by the pink thing as well, because it missed. Still, Taichi could smell his singed hair and knew how close he’d come to being burned alive by his own partner.

Carefully, he raised his head a little to peek above the boulder that was sheltering the three of them. There it was again, the pink blob, a Digimon, that much Taichi could make out now, but judging by its size, it could have been no higher than child level. Yet it was moving fearlessly between their raging giants.

“What is that?!"

“Would you like me to run it through my Digimon analyser?”

“Yes!”

Koushiro opened up his laptop again while another explosion thundered across the sky. Taichi couldn’t see who this attack had been meant for, but so far, the others remained relatively unscathed beyond some bruises and scratches from the flying debris. But he didn’t know what would happen now that another Digimon, albeit a small one, had been added to the mix.


“Wormmon? Digimental of Kindness?! That’s supposed to be Ken’s-?”
But he couldn’t finish the sentence. Pucchiemon moved his arms as it was holding an invisible arrow, ready to fire, and then it directed an attack – “Heartner Beam!” – directly at WarGreymon.

“NO!” Taichi screamed in shock as his partner disintegrated into bright light. No, Ken’s partner wouldn’t… why would Ken’s partner kill his own? Sure, he knew WarGreymon was infected, but there had to be another way, there just had to be, and Ken wouldn’t just allow-

And then he realised it. WarGreymon hadn’t disintegrated at all. On the ground, just beneath where WarGreymon had been flying when it had been hit, lay Koromon.

Without a second thought, Taichi abandoned the shelter of the rock and rushed to his partner’s side, ignoring the other Ultimates still fighting. He’d almost forgotten that they were still there.

“Koromon!”

The little Digimon blinked sluggishly, and then, all tiredness gone, launched itself at Taichi’s face.

“Taichi! Taichi!”

Taichi both coughed and laughed at the familiar greeting, and when Koromon let go of his face, he hugged him tightly. “Koromon, are you ok? How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay, Taichi… what’s going on?”

Taichi had to duck and curl around Koromon when another attack shot past them.

“Why are we fighting? Who are we fighting?” Koromon fretted. “And why are we in the Digital World? Weren’t we in yours just a minute ago?”

Taichi raised his head a little to stare at his little partner. “In our… Koromon, do you remember me? Are you really yourself?!”

“But, Taichi, how could I be anyone else?” Koromon eyed Taichi as if he wasn’t quite sure if his partner was still sane, but then some sort of realisation seemed to set in. “Do you mean because of the reboot? But that didn’t happen! I remember everything!”

Taichi laughed and cried, and he hugged Koromon even more fiercely.

“Koromon… Koromon…!”

A fireball came down next to them, and Taichi, Koromon in his arms, jumped to the side. They weren’t safe yet, far from it. Above him, Pucchiemon was about to be hit by a Thorn Whip from Rosemon.

“Watch out!”

But he needn’t have worried. A blue lightning bolt redirected Rosemon’s whip from the small Digimon. “Blue Thunder!” The Digimon who’d helped Pucchiemon, black and blue and about the size of a horse, jumped onto the ice left over from before, leaving it cracked, and then it jumped up again, effectively protecting Pucchiemon from all attacks while it went about the task of hitting each and every one of their partners with its invisible arrows.

Two boys were sitting on its back. Taichi’s eyes were widening as recognition dawned on him. “Lighdramon…” he murmured before Koushiro even had a chance to start his analyser. And then, “Daisuke!” Of course. How could he have… how could he _ever_ have forgot about Daisuke?!
Daisuke of all people. His friend, his protégé, bearer of his crest... Taichi felt like his heart had been pierced by an arrow just as much as Koromon’s had.

“...Daisuke...” he whispered once more. The younger boy was sitting in front, holding tight onto Lighdramon’s spikes. Behind him was Ken – of course, it was just as always when the two were riding on Daisuke’s partner – pressed tightly against Daisuke and leaning his head firmly against Daisuke’s shoulders. Taichi couldn’t help wincing when he remembered that Lighdramon’s rapid movements couldn’t be very comfortable for Ken with his concussion.

“That’s... is that...our friend?”

Taichi nodded. Koushiro wasn’t the only one to stare up in wonder at the sudden apparition. Hikari had cried out, and both she and Takeru were gazing at wherever Lighdramon bounded in his quest to cover Pucchiemon.

Sora and Mimi, to his other side, were already holding Pyocomon and Tanemon in their arms, crying, and Pucchiemon was busy making sure that everyone else would soon be reunited with their partners.

Koushiro abandoned his laptop when Motimon fell to the ground where HerakleKabuterimon had been.

“Taichi, I still don’t understand what’s happening, what are Pucchiemon and Lighdramon doing?”

Taichi laughed at the confusion in Koromon’s voice, and he laughed again, because finally, he could see a way out, could see hope, could imagine how they’d get out of this on top. Daisuke, Ken, and their partner had shown up just in time.

“Taichi!” Taichi turned around to face Yamato, already with Tsunomon in his arms. “Our partners may be back to normal, but Meicrackmon is still around. What do we do?”

Taichi looked up where Pucchiemon and Meicrackmon were now alone, all the partners having returned to their in-training forms. Pucchiemon did the same bow and arrow motion and fired Heartner Beam towards the out-of-control partner Digimon, but it only made her pause – Meicrackmon didn’t immediately change forms like their partners had, and it made Taichi very worried. If they had to fight Meicrackmon again, then they would just be in the same situation as before, perhaps with Daisuke’s and Ken’s partners infected as well and no way to stop it from happening again.

At least, Gennai seemed less confident now. His face was distorted into a mask of rage.

“ATTACK!” he howled. “ATTACK YOU USELESS THING! REMEMBER WHAT I DID TO YOUR PARTNER!”

Meicrackmon looked towards him, purple energy wafting all around her. The Digimon looked like she was about to explode.

Behind him, Taichi heard a cracking noise, and more static. When he turned around, he was faced with a portal – no, a distortion like the one that had reunited them again when they’d been dispersed by Machinedramon’s attack. Behind it, a lavender-haired girl with cracked glasses was beckoning for them to come through. It was Miyako. Of course, Inoue Miyako.

Taichi watched as everyone passed through – he couldn’t prevent Koushiro to stop in order to pick up his laptop again. Urging him to hurry up would lead nowhere, anywhere.

“Go through! We’ll follow!” Ken shouted from Lighdramon’s back, and Taichi realised he was the
only one still left. With Koromon in his arms, he jumped through the distortion. Pucchiemon flew in after him, and Lighdramon, the two boys still secure on his back, jumped through with power.

They had ended up on a mountain with a castle on top. Taichi had been here before, but he didn’t have the time to reflect on that, not when he’d just seen who had kept the portal open. Next to it stood Mochizuki, legs trembling, arm stretched out, holding her digivice, which was glowing purple.

Taichi let out a deep breath. She was alive. Everyone was still alive. They had made it. And they were finally together again. A few feet away, he saw Daisuke helping Ken down from Lighdramon’s back. The poor kid looked even more ill than when Taichi had last seen him, and the movement amidst the battle couldn’t have been good for Ken. He wanted to go over to them, check if Ken was doing okay, hug Daisuke and apologise, but before he could make it to them, they were all distracted by some sort of commotion a few steps ahead, closer to the castle’s gate. He stepped forward.

Yamato was shouting at someone – not him for a change, but Himekawa Maki. How on Earth had she ended up with Daisuke, Ken, Meiko and the others? Sighing, he got ready to restrain Yamato. While he wasn’t particularly fond of the agent himself, it was probably a bad idea to give Yamato full range to have a go at her. He was surprised, though, that he wasn’t the first to stop Yamato.

Ken, with Daisuke’s help, had reached the two before Taichi and Koromon could, and was now standing between Yamato and Himekawa.

“Please stop, Yamato-senpai,” Ken said, polite as usual, but quite firm. Despite all his determination, however, Taichi saw how tightly he held onto Wormmon as if looking for comfort.

“What? No! Get out of the way, Ken-kun, I want to have a word with that-”

“No, Yamato-senpai. I won’t. You’re angry, and I understand that. But I won’t let you attack her.”

“She made us forget you! She knew you were missing, and she didn’t do a thing! She works with our enemies, don’t you know that??”

Ken merely nodded. “She did work with Gennai-san. I do know that. But I still don’t want you to attack her.”

Taichi had an idea what was going through Ken’s mind. He cleared his throat.

“Ken… I promise I’ll stop Yamato from attacking Himekawa –“ he ignored the glare that got him from his friend, “ – but you know you don’t have to forgive her for what she’s done, right? Just because you were forgiven, doesn’t mean that you just have to accept her after all that happened.”

Ken looked at him calmly and much too serious for someone so young. “With all due respect, Senpai, I disagree. But even if I didn’t think that I… I have to repay what was granted to me and give her a chance to redeem herself. Then I would still want to try and forgive her.”

“But why?” Takeru had spoken up – he and the others had assembled in a circle around Daisuke, Ken, Taichi, Yamato and Himekawa – even Nishijima stood with them, watching.

Ken smiled softly, if perhaps a little sadly. “It’d be the kind thing to do, wouldn’t it?”

Taichi sighed. “Alright… I won’t tell you what to do. But please don’t think… that we expect you to be her advocate or something, okay? You don’t owe her or us anything…” If anything, they owed him an apology, him and Daisuke, and Miyako, and- with a start, Taichi noticed the young
boy standing next to Miyako. Iori, yes, that was it. The youngest of them all. Iori saw him looking and bowed to him in greeting, but Taichi was still a little too dazed to return the bow.

“Taichi? Are you okay?” Koromon peeked up at him. He smiled. “Yeah, just thinking… Listen up everyone!” With that, he turned to everyone. “Let’s go inside. We’ll interrogate Himekawa as well as Nishijima there. You’ll allow us that, won’t you, Ken?”

The boy nodded briefly, and Taichi nodded back. “Alright then, come on, I think we can all do with a roof over our heads for a change.”

He let the others walk ahead, waiting for everyone to file in before moving himself. Suddenly, though, he found himself next to Daisuke. Immediately, he started smiling, glad to be reunited with his younger friend. “Yo Daisuke!” he greeted him, beaming. He wanted to tell him how happy he was to see him again, how relieved that he was okay, and how sorry for not having looked for him sooner, but he was cut short by the expression on Daisuke's face.

“You shouldn't badger Ken so much for wanting to forgive that woman, you know,” he said, eyes narrowed. “He's forgiven you, too, and I’m not so sure you deserve it anymore than she does!” His voice wasn't loud, but harsh and without even a hint of Daisuke's usual cheerfulness – no hint at all that he didn't mean every word of what he'd said.

“Daisuke...”

He noticed with a start that Daisuke was wearing the dark blue and purple regalia of the Digimon Kaiser – well, Gennai-san's new version of him, anyway. How had he not seen that before?

“Don’t - ! Just don't. But maybe keep in mind that I don't have the crest of kindness. Senpai.” The way he said it, with a low hiss, made it sound more like an insult than like an honorific. And just like that, he turned around on the spot sharply and started walking towards the castle, leaving even Ken behind. Only Veemon glanced back at them, frowning, but followed his partner nonetheless.

Troubled, Taichi stared after them and then glanced over to Ken, who stood fixed on the spot, shoulders hunched and tense. Wormmon in his arms looked just as anxious.

Koromon had stopped hopping up and down next to him and was looking up at him with a worried expression that he didn't often see on his partner's vice. He shot him a weak smile, but could offer neither explanation nor comfort. Instead, he turned to Ken.

“...Hey, Ken... can I...ask you something?”

Ken flinched a little, but then nodded.

“Is Daisuke alright?”

He didn't get an immediate answer. Ken looked up at Taichi, then back to where Daisuke had already disappeared into the castle, then back to Taichi again. He drew his shoulders in a little more as if trying to hide.

“He...” Ken lowered his eyes. “He's...I think he's just angry...” he finally mumured.

“Angry...?”

Ken looked up again. “We've just been through a lot, Taichi-senpai!” Ken's voice had cracked while he spoke, the slight tremble all too audible and the wet glimmer in his eyes all too obvious.
Taichi sighed. “You're right. I'm sorry...” He put an arm around Ken's shoulders and drew him closer. “Let's go inside, yeah?”

Ken was hiding something. He was worried about Daisuke, Taichi could tell that much, but he didn't know what it was that Ken wanted to keep for himself. Was it important? Likely, but did he have the right to pressure Ken about it? No... not after all that had happened. He decided to let it be for the moment, hoping that maybe Ken would tell him on his own later on.

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Mimi still had enough memory of ShogunGekomon's castle to be able to lead them to a hall, where they could all sit on the floor around a long table, as if to a banquet. Taichi wished that it really was a banquet, now that the adrenaline from the battle and their escape had lost its effects – by the looks of it, at least Koromon and Veemon agreed with him fullheartedly. He'd caught Koromon nibbling on the tatami mats and grabbed his partner to put him on the table with a stern look.

“Sorry, sorry,” Koromon said cheerfully, without the faintest trace of guilt in his voice. Veemon rather looked as if he wished he'd thought of eating the mats first.

“I don't have anything left...” Sora, who'd noticed Koromon's hungry shenanigans, said apologetically, but she needn't have worried. Miyako placed a handful of yellow fruit on the table. “Your partners should all eat – we might need them to evolve soon enough,” she said matter-of-factly. She was sitting together with Iori, Ken and Daisuke – apart from the others, not much, but enough for it to be noticeable.

Tachi closed his eyes. If any of them had hoped for a tearful reunion, they had been disappointed. Ken had left his side as soon as they'd entered the castle, joining Miyako, Iori, Daisuke and their partners in their separate little huddle. Takeru and Hikari had tried to talk to them, tried to apologise – he was pretty sure he'd seen both of them bow to their friends – but the four of them had mostly tried to avoid addressing the very obvious rift between the two groups. Except Daisuke, who had been very vocal in his disapproval of Taichi and his choices.

What a mess.

“Ahh, if only all the Gekomon were here, they would serve us an amazing dinner!!” Mimi exclaimed wistfully, and Tanemon agreed with a sigh – even though it was still nibbling on a yellow bit of fruit.

“Even if the Gekomon were present, their memories would likely still be affected by the reboot,” Koushiro replied. “They would have no reason to receive us with hospitality, seeing as they have no knowledge of your previous acquaintance. Though I wonder how long it will take for Server to be repopulated – and by which means the Digimon will move from File Island to their various habitats.”

“According to our research, the Gekomon will most likely migrate in great swarms, swimming across the ocean while being protected by the group, much like frogs’ migration in our world, albeit at a much greater scale. Landbound Digimon will hitch a ride with those able to fly or swim.”

Koushiro listened to Himekawa with great interest, and Taichi could see that he'd love to hear all about Himekawa's research. Himekawa was not their friend, though, nor their ally – they couldn't just treat her like nothing had happened, no matter what Ken said.

“Oi, we have a few questions for you before you and Koushiro start your own university on the spot, okay?”
“Yes, Taichi’s right - “ He'd never thought he'd hear Yamato say it, “ - tell us what you know about Gennai. What are his plans? What's going on?”

“And how did Mochizuki open the gate that brought us here?”

“Ah! What a good question, Taichi-san!” Koushiro looked almost impressed, and Taichi wasn't altogether sure if he should be flattered or insulted.

“Meiko-chan was able to open a distortion deliberately because her digivice is connected with Meicoomon's destructive power. It's not exactly a gate, it's more like a rip through the fabric of reality – we shouldn't even try opening anymore, it's destabilising the Digital World too much.”

Himekawa's seemingly permanent frown deepened. “I suspect that this is why we could do it so easily – it works towards Gennai-san's plans, as far as I can tell destabilising everything seems to be his priority.”

“Why? He used to protect the Digital World. What happened to him?”

Himekawa shook her head. “I don't know... At first, I didn't think anything was wrong. I thought he was just trying to help me.”

Taichi thought that the woman had never sounded this open and vulnerable before, but considering her normally forceful personality, her tone of voice carried more than a hint of defeat with it. Yet she seemed determined not to let it show too much. She closed her eyes for a mere second, took a deep breath and then looked straight into Taichi's eyes.

“All of you will have to pass me their digivices, I-"

But she was interrupted by loud and vocal protest.

“Give you – do you think we're stupid?!” Yamato had risen from the ground in such a quick and fluid motion that Taichi thought for a second that he should be the athlete. “You think we're gonna give you our digivices so that you can tamper with them, make us defenceless, what?!”

Takeru was holding his brother's sleeve, urging him to sit down again, but he didn't look any more eager at the prospect of giving his digivice to the agent than Yamato. Patamon on his hat exchanged a glance with Gabumon.

Even Sora – Sora! - shook her head and shot Himekawa a suspicious glance. “I don't think that's a very good idea, either,” she said, a little louder than usual.

“Stop it...” Ken's voice sounded tired and a little too quiet to be properly heard amid all the shouting, but Taichi noticed him nonetheless. The boy had his hand pressed to his temple, taking slow, deliberate breaths.

“Shut up, everyone!” Taichi shouted, only to regret it a moment later when Ken winced at the noise. But it couldn't be helped, and so he only pointed to his younger friend. “Ken's got something to say.”

Ken gave him a slow nod, then looked up to face everyone, even if he seemed a little unfocused. “She fixed our digivices too – Gennai-san used them to manipulate us. Well. You, mostly...” He paused, closed his eyes, then spoke up again. “Your memories... you know...that's why you couldn't remember.” Ken looked at Miyako, and she continued as if they had practiced the quick take-over.

“There's an easy way to at least make an educated guess if Himekawa is telling truth or not If she
isn't lying to us, then you should all still be experiencing the mind control from your digivices. Do you?"

Uncomfortable glances all around. Taichi just nodded. Yeah, it made sense. The constant struggle to remember Ken when he wasn't immediately present. He may have hit his head once or twice playing soccer, but he was reasonably certain that his brain was still functional enough to remember a friend for more than five minutes. They'd already known that they were being manipulated, and now they knew how. A cold block of ice seemed to have formed deep within his stomach. To think that his digivice had been able to do that to him... He'd had it with him near constantly since he was eleven – and all this time he could have been a mindless puppet of anyone clever enough to access it?

Despite his gut telling him it was true, he still looked at Koushiro for confirmation.

“That would explain the gaps in our cognitive function...,” Kou slowly stated. “If you do not mind, though, Himekawa-san, I would at least ask that you let me witness every action you perform on our digivices – both for research purposes and for safety.”

“Yeah. I'm game if Koushiro has an eye on her.” Taichi's decision had been quick. He took his digivice off of his belt and slid it across the table towards Himekawa. Himekawa didn't grab it, just looked and waited. Slowly, the others were making their decisions, too. Mimi was the first to take her digivice and carefully place it on the table. Sora followed suit, then Jou. Takeru and Yamato put theirs down together. Hikari, to his surprise, was the last to give in. She turned her pink digivice in her hands once or twice, before stretching out her hand, but she didn't let go right away. With a wary glance at Himekawa and one last look for reassurance in Taichi's direction, she placed it on the table, her hand remaining on it for a moment before she drew back.

Himekawa looked at him, and Taichi nodded back. Koushiro and Tentomon moved to the other side of the table to sit beside the agent, switching places with Nishijima and Bearmon. Himekawa promptly got to work, Koushiro watching with interest and therefore completely lost to everything else around him, as usual.

Taichi used the break in their little council to have a closer look at their formerly lost friends. They all looked weary and tired. Rips and tears in their clothes – except Daisuke's weird new outfit – and far too many bloodstains here and there. Miyako's glasses were cracked, probably beyond repair, but she'd kept them on – going without them would have been worse, Taichi suspected. Hawkmon was hovering above Miyako's head protectively, quietly talking with the girl. Iori held Armadimon close to his chest, head resting on his partner's armature. His hair was tousled and slick with oil, though Taichi remembered now that he usually wore it very carefully combed into a bowl haircut. There were dark rings under his red-rimmed eyes and the twelve-year-old looked as if a permanent frown had been etched into his face. Ken was as pale as before but his cheeks were a little redder than the rest of his face now, and he had moved backwards a little to lean against Daisuke while both Veemon and Wormmon were snuggled up to Ken's lap. Daisuke, despite arguably looking the healthiest, worried him the most. He only seemed to have traces of his former smile left for Ken and their partners, and perhaps also for Iori and Miyako, but everyone else only got a fairly blank stare, at best.

Ken had opened his eyes again and was looking back at Taichi. He gave him a friendly grin, but Ken only manage to raise his lips into the ghost of a smile. It was only then that Taichi noticed his own goggles – his former goggles, to be precise – dangling from Ken's neck. They looked a right mess, broken, lenses shattered, bloodstained. Taichi couldn't quite comprehend it. How could anyone wearing those on his head when they got so mangled still be able to sit up, talking, moving as Daisuke did – or Ken, if he had already worn them when they'd been attacked. Taichi had no
idea when his old goggles had apparently changed owners, but he didn't think that it was something he just forgot. Not that he had a problem with it – he’d given them to Daisuke as a present and Daisuke could do with them whatever he wanted, but it was still strange to see them on Ken.

“Ouf!” Koromon had jumped onto his stomach – he'd hopped across the table on his ears.

“Kou-hiro shays 'sh hinished.”

“Scuse me?”

Koromon opened his mouth wider and Taichi's digivice fell onto his lap.

“Koushiro says it's finished.”

“Thanks.” Bemused, Taichi wiped Koromon's spit off of the device and put it back on his belt. One by one, every one of his friends got their digivices back, but if Taichi had thought that they would get back to their little council immediately – maybe talk about what they could do next – he'd been wrong. Most of them had got up from the floor, standing around in small groups around the room, happily chatting with their partners – and Taichi understood. He grabbed Koromon and put him under his arm, grinning. He was glad to have his buddy back properly. The connection had never changed, but he hadn't realised before how precious shared memories could be...

Koushiro was the only one not entirely focused on his partner. When Himekawa was done with the last digivice, he jumped up immediately and ran around the table in pursuit of something. Knowledge, probably. He'd have rushed right past Taichi if he hadn't grabbed him by the shirt, with Tentomon hurriedly buzzing behind.

“Well, what did she do? What's been going on with our stuff?” Taichi wanted to know.

“Oh, Taichi, it's most fascinating! The digivices emit certain wavelengths, that much we already knew – it's how they enabled evolution after all - “

Did they know that? Well, Taichi supposed they had to if Koushiro said so.

“But Gennai-san was able to tap into that wavelength, change it ever so slightly so as to not interrupt functionality, but still be able to influence our very minds! Isn't that absolutely prodigious?”

“I'd have used 'scary', but okay. What does it mean, though? Why'd he do it? And we're completely safe now, yeah? She didn't do any funny things with our digivices?”

“No, no, everything seemed to be in order. It means we are much closer connected to our digivices and thereby to our partners than I ever hoped – speculated, I mean.”

“Koushiro-han, I've always known that we are forever connected, with or without your calculations.”

Koushiro beamed at his partner. Was Taichi imagining things or did Koushiro seem much more excited about these new findings than he had been before Himekawa had 'tampered with' their digivices?

“Anyway, I should like to speak to Mochizuki-san and examine her digivice. I cannot believe that I have not already done so. What a grave oversight! Well, I will have to rectify this. If you'll excuse me, Taichi...”
“For sure!” Taichi said, grinning. He hadn't exactly got the answers from Koushiro that he'd hoped for – when he'd asked what it meant for them, he'd rather talked about what they could do now, maybe whether the wavelength change or whatever would have any future effects on them, not about some theoretical considerations concerning their connection with their partners, but who was he to stop scientific fervour? It was good to see Koushiro like this, anyway...

“Looks like someone's happy.” Sora, Pyocomon perched on her shoulder, had joined him, smiling.

“Yeah, I have a feeling that Mochizuki won't be, though, when he's bombarding her with a million questions.”

Sora laughed. “Maybe not, but I daresay she'll live.”

“Probably!”

They both giggled, and for the first time since they'd come to the Digital World, Taichi felt like maybe things were going to turn out fine. Then he caught a glimpse of Takeru and Hikari watching the other four young Chosen from a distance, nervously, unsure of themselves, and he grew more serious again.

“They're not exactly happy, are they?” Sora had followed his gaze, losing her smile as well.

“No... I'm worried about them... all of us, really. How will we...how will we move on from this?” He sighed, only slightly comforted by Koromon nudging his ribs. “I forgot Daisuke! How could I forget Daisuke of all people?”

“I know... I forgot about Miyako, too, after all...” Sora let her shoulders drop for a second, only to straighten them again when she noticed that she'd made her partner lose balance. “I'm sorry, Pyocomon..”

“Not at all, Sora, I know you're feeling sad...”

Sora ruffled Pyocomon's leaves fondly. “We'll be okay... somehow.”

“You think?” Taichi looked in Daisuke's direction again. “I don't think Daisuke's going to forgive me so easily.”

“Daisuke? But Daisuke's the most easy-going, the most compassionate-”

Taichi shook his head. “Not this time. There's... I think he's really been hurt, this time. I don't think this'll just go away...”

Sora touched his arm and gave it a slight squeeze. “We'll work to earn their forgiveness. We just... we have to take care of them now, as best as we can...”

“You're gonna mother them now, aren't you?” Sora punched his shoulder, and he laughed.

“Alright, alright, I didn't say a thing!”

He'd have quabbled with her a little more if Koushiro hadn't come back at this moment, though he looked deep in thought.

“So, Kou, anything interesting about Mochizuki's digivice?”

He looked up, seemingly startled. “Oh, Taichi-san. Yes, 'interesting' does not entirely do it justice. It is as I suspected – Meicoomon's infection is detectable even through her partner's digivice. I
assume that the discolouration – from regular light blue to black – has occurred due to the corruption as well. It's just…” He paused and bit his lips. “The data I was able to access by connecting the digivice to my laptop was corrupted by trinary code, but it was not entirely foreign, either. In fact, it reminded me off…”

“Off what?”

Koushiro glanced uneasily towards the table where Miyako, Iori, Daisuke and Ken were still huddled together. “It reminds me of the data I gleaned from Ken-kun's Dark Rings...There was only a relatively small similarity, but it was pronounced enough for it not to be negligeable.”

“Okay... so what does that mean? You don't think Ken's-”

“Oh, I do not want to suggest that he is in anyway implicated in this,” Koushiro said straight away. “But I do think that there is a connection. Perhaps between the Dark Spore and the infection. After all, he mentioned that Gennai-san took a scan and we have all witnessed him taking the shape of the Kaiser.”

Taichi nodded slowly. That made sense, but Ken didn't seem to know why Gennai had targeted him specifically, either, so he couldn't quite see how Koushiro's conclusions would help them.

“Taichi-san, there is something that I would need to do to confirm the connection beyond a doubt.”

“Well, what is it?”

“I would like to analyse the seed embedded in Ken's neck. The data should give me important insights into the potential connection between Mochizuki's digivice, Meicoomon by extension, and Ken-kun's affliction.”

“He's not gonna be thrilled.”

“I know. But I see no other way. A quick scan should be enough for me to upload everything onto my laptop where I could properly analyse it...”

“Ask him, that's all you can do. It's not like I can order him to say yes...”

“Ah, yes. Of course not.” Koushiro nodded, glancing nervously towards Ken. “I will ask him, then. Though I would appreciate it if you could support my request, perhaps by stressing its importance...”

“Sure...” He didn't feel quite comfortable with that – it seemed too much like they were going to pressure Ken, and he didn't think the boy deserved that after all he'd been through. Especially since Taichi was sure they didn't even know half of it...

He watched as Koushiro approached the younger group, but it didn't take long before he had to step in.

“No way!” Daisuke had got up and stood in front of Ken and their Digimon. “You're not going to do anything to Ken, do you hear me?! You won't touch him!”

“But Daisuke-kun, it is merely a scan, it will not hurt-”

“I don't care; he doesn't want it!”

Ken seemed to have shrunk. His shoulders were drawn in and he had thrown his arms around
Wormmon and Veemon both, pressing them against his chest. His eyes were looking nowhere.

“It is of utmost importance, please, Daisuke-kun-”

“Is it really necessary, Koushiro-han?” Tentomon asked uncertainly, looking back and forth between his partner and the shivering boy at the centre of the row.

“It is!” Koushiro insisted, seemingly unaware of Ken's distress, though Taichi knew that Koushiro wasn't so callous. If he kept insisting on the scan, then it was only because he convinced that they couldn't continue otherwise.

“Guys, calm down...” Taichi raised his hands and tried to step between the two, but Daisuke only glared at him.

“Don't tell me what to do!”

“...it's okay...”

Taichi turned around, but it took the others a few moments to realise Ken had spoken. He'd been nearly inaudible, and he wouldn't look up from the ground.

“...he can do it...” Slowly, Ken raised his head. He was white like a sheet, eyes wide open. His lips trembled as he spoke. “It's really important, isn't it, Koushiro-senpai?”

Koushiro nodded, but he didn't seem so sure anymore.

“No, don't do it, Ken,” Daisuke nearly shouted. “You don't owe them anything.”

Ken had balled his hands into fists, but they still shook. “I want to, Daisuke, it's okay, really, it is. Just... it's going to be okay if you stay by my side, okay? That's... that's all I ask...” That stopped Daisuke in his tracks, and he nodded morosely.

“Thank you, Ken-kun. I appreciate your cooperation. I understand that the thought of another scan makes you uncomfortable, but I assure you that there is no reason why it should hurt. I understand that the scan Gennai-san subjected you to was painful, but I suspect that he made some changes to his equipment in order to produce this effect...” Koushiro looked ill at ease at the thought of someone – Gennai of all people! - going to such lengths just to torture a teenager, and Taichi felt queasy himself..

Ken looked unconvinced, but he nodded nonetheless. It was enough for Koushiro to start setting up his equipment. His laptop was out already, of course, but he pulled another...thing out of his pocket, then went over to the two agents, asking for something, or so it seemed.

“It's gonna be fine, Ken-kun,” Taichi said and smiled. “Koushiro says it's not gonna hurt, and he knows what he's talking about.”

Ken only gave him a weak smile, but didn't look any happier. Sighing, Taichi ruffled Ken's hair slightly, careful not to disturb his injury. “Don't worry, yeah?”

“...yeah...” Ken lowered his head, resting it between Wormmon's antennae.

Koushiro was back before long, hooking something up to his laptop with the cable thingy he had pulled out of his pocket earlier.

“That's a phone.”
“Hm? Oh, yes, Taichi-san, I borrowed Nishijima-sensei's phone. I noticed in class that he had a very advanced model so I asked if I could have it.”

“Yeah, okay, but why a phone?”

“Oh, I will use it to focus my Digimon analyser and thereby collect data from Ken's neck.”

“You can do that with a phone?!”

Koushiro nodded, and the corners of his mouth lifted a little. “You can with the right software and hardware additions,” he said simply, then turned towards Ken and Daisuke. “If you would be so kind to get into a comfortable position in which I can reach your neck without obstruction...”

Ken nodded and moved about until he sat so close to Daisuke that he was almost on the other boy's lap. He leant his head forward until his hair fell forward and exposed the red and inflamed spot on his neck.

He could see Koushiro swallow – a little nervously after all – and then he began.

It was painful to watch. Ken had already been tense before Koushiro had even started with his scan, but the moment he connected the device to Ken’s neck, the boy let out an involuntary gasp – whether from shock or from pain, Taichi couldn’t really tell. Ken had quickly lost all colour and his breathing had soon become too rapid. Daisuke had soon given up what little distance there still was between them and put his arms around Ken in a strong embrace. He held him tightly, but that did nothing stop Ken’s violent shaking.

Taichi couldn’t look away. Ken ground his teeth together in an effort not to cry, but it was clear that, no matter how slowly or how carefully Koushiro proceeded, Ken was in pain. Whatever Koushiro had said before, there was nothing harmless about this procedure, nothing to suggest that they weren't torturing Ken as much as Gennai-san had before. It didn't take long for Ken to start whimpering. Taichi watched as Ken clung to Daisuke with clenched fingers, and Daisuke spoke to him – quietly, with comforting, gentle whispers, but the expression on his face was full of righteous anger. He glared at Taichi with venom when he caught him looking.

Finally, it was over. Ken all but collapsed into Daisuke’s arms, drenched in sweat and barely conscious. Daisuke cradled him carefully while Wormmon nudged his partner's arm and Veemon peered anxiously over Daisuke’s shoulder at their exhausted friend.

Taichi had his sister give him a bottle of water from the remaining bag of supplies and wanted to offer it to Ken, but Daisuke snatched it from his hands without a word. Daisuke's eyes told him clearly that he wasn't welcome here.

Ken, however, didn’t even look at him; he seemed pretty out of it. Miyako and Iori had rushed to his side as soon as Koushiro had stopped the scan, bending worriedly over their friend. Taichi winced when he saw the feverish red of Ken’s face, even redder than before, the dark rings under his eyes, the fact that his eyes were only half open and glassy, the way he hung limply in Daisuke’s arms… He was surer than ever that they needed to get the kid into a hospital, quick.

Even Koromon seemed thoroughly unsettled by what they had just witnessed. “Is Ken very ill, Taichi...?” he whispered, but Taichi only shrugged helplessly.

He felt heavy as he turned towards Koushiro, who looked just as unsettled as he felt, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. Koushiro's face was grim and pale.

“I hope that was worth it, mate, I really do.”
Koushiro nodded, slightly ashen-faced. He cleared his throat. “I… I believe so.” His eyes darted back and forth between Ken and his laptop. “We will have to allow some time for the data to be processed, but then we should have a clearer idea as to how the corruption affecting the Digital World and Ken’s Dark Spore might be connected.”

Taichi didn’t particularly like how Koushiro’s previous certainty had suddenly transformed into a ‘might’. The scan hadn’t exactly helped bridge the gap between the two groups of Chosen – though they weren’t even just two anymore, but Taichi didn’t yet know how to factor in the two adults – but if it turned that all that pain had been for nothing… well, Daisuke already looked about ready to murder him, and Taichi didn’t think he’d enjoy finding out how the younger leader would react if he thought Ken had just been tortured for no reason…

He sighed and sat down next to Koushiro, waiting for whatever news he’d have for him.

Chapter End Notes

Finally! Old gang and new gang are reunited - and I hope the reunion was epic enough to meet everyone's expectations!
Chapter 13 The Most Unkindest Cut of All

When Ken came to again, the first sensation he became aware of was that of being enveloped by a mild heat. It wasn’t the burning, exhausting feeling of fever that still simmered in his body. Instead, the warmth made him feel comfortable and protected, and at first, he was loath to open his eyes, but then he had to blink, and he realised that his eyes had actually been half open for a while – he’d just been too...absent to see much. His cheek was resting on a flattened collar, and his nose touched the tanned skin of someone’s neck. Reddish-brown hair tickled his nostrils.

Ken was wide awake within seconds. “D-daisuke...?”

Brown eyes turned toward him, and the fabric underneath his cheek shifted. “Hey, you okay? You sort of blacked out when Izumi was done with his shit.”

Awkwardly, Ken struggled to sit up. A different kind of heat that had nothing to do with either the fever or Daisuke’s warming embrace burned on his cheeks.

On second thoughts, perhaps Daisuke’s hug had quite a lot to do with the red tinge on his face. Ken quickly looked away from his best friend.

“Hey, hey, don’t move too much, come on. Maybe you should lie back down again, okay?”

“’s fine...,” he murmured, embarrassed. Slowly, he became aware of the rest of his surroundings, not just Daisuke. Immediately in front of him, he realised with a start, was Jou.

“Hello, Ken-kun. May I...?” Without waiting for a response, the older boy put a hand to Ken’s forehead, and he flinched because it was so cold. Jou frowned. “You are running a fever, but I suspect you had that before the scan?” He nodded before Ken could say a word – but the look on his face had probably been telling enough. “Thought so... now, let me just check your pulse...”

“Ahh, is he properly awake?” Taichi was looking over Jou’s shoulder to get a glimpse of him. He didn’t seem to want to come any closer, which struck Ken as fairly strange. Jou had his fingers over his wrist now, and Ken did his best not to flinch and draw his hand away. His skin felt oddly thin as if every touch could break it and even the slightest pressure might cause discomfort.

“...I am...” he croaked, still trying to remember what had happened before he blacked out. At his knee he felt the gentle tug of little pincers and he looked down to see Wormmon peering anxiously...
back at him. Jou had let go of his wrist, so he carefully stretched out his arms to pick up his partner and draw him onto his lap.

“Ken-chan...! Are you alright?!” Wormmon sounded almost frantic with worry, and Ken felt a pang of guilt. He wrapped his arms around his partner a little tighter.

“I am, I'm sorry if I scared you...” he murmured softly, hugging the little caterpillar close to his chest. Wormmon clung to his shirt fiercely as if he didn't intend to ever let go again – Ken didn't mind at all; he ran his fingers over Wormmon's head and antennae with care, trying to comfort his friend even though he was still dazed and confused himself.

Slowly, he became aware of the others around him. Daisuke still knelt by his side, ready to catch him should he need to lean back, but in front of him were Miyako, Iori and their partners. The look on Iori's face scared him. The younger boy was pale and his eyes were wide open as if something had frightened him. Miyako wasn't much better; she quickly wiped her eyes beneath her glasses when she caught him looking.

“...how are you feeling?” Iori asked in a shaky voice. “That...that scan looked like it hurt a lot...?”

Before Ken could answer, Daisuke let out a bitter snort. “Yeah, that's pretty much what it sounded like, too. 'Not gonna hurt', eh?” He shot a glance towards Koushiro, who, Ken had only just noticed, sat a little apart from everyone else, staring at his screen with a frown. “Either Izumi's not as smart as he wants everyone to think, or he was lying!” Daisuke's words had become louder as he spoke, clearly meant to be heard by Koushiro. Ken was glad that he seemed too focused on his work to notice.

“Daisuke...”

“What, it's true!”

Taichi had been looking back and forth between the two while they were talking and Ken was relieved when their beginning argument was interrupted by Veemon, who threw himself against Ken's stomach, asking to be hugged, too. Ken complied readily, but he kept watching Taichi who clearly had neither failed to hear Daisuke's criticism nor the sharpness of his voice. Concern was plain on his features. Still, he didn't comment on it, instead clearing his throat and looking back at Ken.

“Well, apparently, it's still gonna take a while for Koushiro to make sense of his scans. You've got some time to recover before we talk about...well...things.”

Jou bent forward again. “I'd like to have another look at your head wound if you don't mind. I didn't get a chance to do that since you saved us.”

Ken blushed a little at Jou's choice of words, but he couldn't help hear Daisuke mutter, “Dam right we did”, which did nothing to alleviate his worries. He gave Jou a small nod, but winced nonetheless when the older boy undid the bandages around his forehead. He didn't dare mention the bandages wrapped around his middle where Jou had secured Hikari's wet neckerchief to his burns. It had long since dried and Ken dreaded the thought of having to remove it from the sore skin even though he knew it had to be done at some point.

“Why did you redo them? They look, well, they look a little shoddier than when I did them. Sorry.”

“Ah, it...it started bleeding again, so we had to... we washed them in a river first, but I don't think it helped much...”
Jou made a low humming sound of agreement; if he noticed that Ken was hiding part of the story, he didn't comment on it, just started cleaning the wound again with his little flask of medicinal alcohol. Ken tried not to react much even though it hurt, especially because Daisuke would shoot angry glances at Jou every time Ken as much as winced. He tried to concentrate on his surroundings instead. Takeru and Hikari were sitting together at the low table. They looked happy enough with their partners fully restored to them, but they kept glancing uneasily at Miyako and Iori. The four of them hadn’t spoken to each other, at least not before Ken had lost consciousness, and it didn’t look like Miyako and Iori had left his side to talk to the other two in the meantime...

“You’re going to have to see a doctor, and soon, Ken-kun,” Jou said while bandaging his head once more.

Ken only hummed in response.

“You might need stitches, actually... and it might leave a scar...”

Ken didn’t want to think about that and didn’t know what to answer, so he simply went back to observing the room. Koushiro was sitting alone with Tentomon, still working – he wondered what kind of results the scan would yield. Though he wouldn’t admit it in front of Daisuke, not now, he didn’t quite like the idea of having gone through all that for nothing.

He couldn’t see Mimi, Sora or Yamato nor the male agent anywhere, but the girl they had saved from Gennai-san’s headquarters – Meiko, was that her name? – and Himekawa-san sat together huddled in a corner. He could guess why Himekawa-san would choose to keep herself apart – none of the others seemed too comfortable in her presence after what she had done – but why Meiko would prefer the company of the agent as opposed to that of the others was not quite as clear. She looked sad, Ken thought and remembered suddenly that Meicrackmon, the infected Digimon they had briefly faced with Pucchiemon and Lighdramon, had been her partner. Pucchiemon’s Heartner Beam had had almost no effect on the Digimon...

“There, it’s done for now...” Ken looked back up at Jou, who seemed somewhat sceptical about his own handiwork.

“Thank you...” he murmured absentmindedly, then turned towards Taichi. “Is she okay...?”

“Who? Mochizuki?” Taichi shrugged. “More or less, I guess. I think she feels guilty because Meicrackmon’s her partner, y’know...”

“Right...”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything for her partner, Ken-chan...” Wormmon’s antennae were drooping and his blue eyes were already suspiciously watery – because he feared he had disappointed his partner...? The thought made Ken shiver, and he tried to hold Wormmon closer to himself, leaning forward to press their foreheads together.

“No! You did great, Wormmon, don’t worry...!” He wanted to say more – after all, it was his fault that Wormmon was so easily distraught, wasn’t it? – but he didn’t get the chance because Yamato, Mimi, Sora and the male agent entered together with their partners, all carrying vast amounts of vegetables and fruit, creating a lot of noise with their entrance. It even made Koushiro look up from his laptop.

“We brought food!” Mimi announced in that loud voice of hers that made Ken instinctively shrink back a little, even though he knew she certainly meant no harm. Miyako and Iori flinched, too, though – apparently, none of them could deal with loud, sudden noises all too well at the moment.
Only Daisuke remained motionless except for the angry frown that never seemed to leave his face for long now.

“I do feel guilty,” Sora said while she put the supplies on the table. “The palace had fully stocked vegetable gardens and orchards, but we’ve pretty much raided them. What will the Gekomon think when they return...?”

“They might grow back before they do,” the agent stated, clearly not too worried about the Gekomon and instead grinning at Bearmon by his side over the collected spoils.

“I suggest we keep the fruit for later – those will last for a bit. And I'm going to look for the kitchen and fry those vegetables,” Yamato suggested, already packing up all the vegetables before anyone had the chance to reply. “When I come back, we should talk – I hope Koushiro has some answers by then.”

They sat and waited. Ken's neck was still throbbing in a dull pain, and he felt dizzy and tired. He'd have leaned against Daisuke for support again, but he'd become acutely aware of how badly he must stink. His clothes reeked of blood and sweat – they still felt clammy and uncomfortable. So he remained sitting with Daisuke, Miyako and Iori huddled around him, and Takeru and Hikari looking in their direction more often than not.

They didn't talk.

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They were back to sitting on the floor around the low table. Daisuke had had to support him to get there even though it wasn't exactly far. He felt weak and embarassed, but he knew full well that he didn't have another choice. He could hardly stand on his own, let alone walk, and the pain in his side and in his neck didn't make anything easier.

Still, they had made it to the table and were sitting down now, with a little bowl of fried vegetables in front of each of them. It should have made a welcome change from the fruit that the four of them had been carrying around as provisions, but Ken had almost no appetite. He glanced nervously at Koushiro, waiting for him to speak and reveal what he had discovered from the scan.

But he could feel Miyako's and Iori's worried glances, too, - not to mention Wormmon's almost reproachful stare – so he tried to bring himself to eat at least a few bites. Most of the others seemed to have less of a problem with their appetites, but the mood was far from cheerful either – certainly unlike any of the other meals he had shared with the Chosen Children. There was an awkward, uncomfortable tension in the room, and Ken was almost sure that it wasn't his mind playing tricks on him. Everyone was eager to learn what Koushiro had found out, he was sure, but they – Taichi and the others – were also looking at him and Miyako and Iori and Daisuke again and again without saying much except a few awkward attempts at conversation.

Hikari had made a few starts to talk to Miyako, and Miyako had leant forward, willing to listen at least, but Hikari had faltered before they had really talked about anything. Takeru and Iori were simply staring at each other in silence.

Daisuke only glared.

Ken put his hand on Daisuke's knee under the table, and his friend turned to him. His expression immediately softened.

“You should eat more. If you leave it like that, Chibimon's gonna devour it in seconds.”
"Am not!"

"Uh-huh, you ate half of mine and you had your own portion."

Ken saw an opportunity. "Oh, if you only ate half, you should have some of mine...!" He pushed the bowl in Daisuke's direction.

"Ah, no, I'm not that hungry. You eat, you're gonna need your strength, eh?"

Ken frowned. Of course, Daisuke was right in that he should eat, but when had Daisuke ever been not hungry?

He still wondered if he should argue when Koushiro cleared his throat.

"In the last few hours, I went through every single piece of data that I have managed to assemble since the current crisis began. I cannot confidently say that I have a complete overview of our situation yet, but what I have gleaned should be enough to form several working hypotheses as to possible origins of the infection..."

He looked directly at Ken.

"It is as I suspected. The data from the spore in Ken's neck seems to correspond to that embedded in Meicoomon's core data as well – while I could not access Meicoomon directly, the data left in Mochizuki-san's digivice was sufficient to ascertain a similarity. Furthermore, recurring trinary patterns that are common to infected Digimon and distortions alike can also be found in both the spore and Mochizuki-san's digivice. I can only conclude that the infections and the spore have the same origin."

Ken felt a deep cold creep up to his chest, wrapping icy tendrils around his heart. The same origin...that meant...that meant...

"Wait, I thought Meicoomon was the origin of the infections?" Taichi sounded confused.

"Meicoomon had nothing to do with that spore thingy, right?"

"That is correct. But the infection within Meicoomon likely came from the same source. After all, even if Meicoomon is the 'patient zero' of infected Digimon, it is unlikely that such an infection would occur spontaneously with no external reason."

Nishijima-san, who'd sat slightly apart with Himekawa-san and Mochizuki-san, leant forward.

"Hang on, at the agency, we thought that it was a shard of Apocalymon's data that had been embedded into Meicoomon for some reason. Are you saying that there's a shard of that Digimon in Ichijouji-kun as well?"

"No. I am saying that your assumption is incorrect."

Both agents seemed slightly taken aback at their research being challenged by a high school student, but Koushiro continued apparently without noticing.

"It is understandable as the data is in some ways reminiscent of Apocalymon, most likely due to similar degrees of corruption, but it is different enough to at least warrant the presupposition that there is another entity involved."

Ken felt sick.

"This entity has left its traces within both Meicoomon and Ken-kun. And I believe that the traces –
for simplicity's sake, we might refer to both of them as 'spores' or 'seeds' – are at least partly sentient when activated.”

He was going to be sick.

“I must apologise for the pain my scan put you through, Ken-kun. I can honestly say that I did not expect such a reaction, but I do believe that I have found the reason why the scan affected you so badly. The spore must have interpreted the scan as a threat and the pain can be seen as some kind of immune reaction – clearly, it was designed to make Ken refrain from investigating the spore or from trying to rid himself of it.”

He just about managed to turn away from the table enough not to hit it before he threw up. The spore... a semi-sentient seed within himself... a left-over from that... that...thing... corrupted, corrupting... He'd never wanted it. He could only half remember how he got in the first place. He wanted it to go.

“Stop that.”

Confused, he looked up. Why had Daisuke taken hold of his hand suddenly, what- He only belatedly realised that his fingernails were bloody. He'd begun scratching at his neck without even noticing.

“Don't do that, please. Don't hurt yourself,” Daisuke said urgently. “Remember, it's only data anyway. You could never get it out like that...”

Everyone was looking at him as if they were frightened. He couldn't blame them.

Daisuke helped him turn back to the table – he'd wanted to clean up his mess first, but Daisuke wouldn't let him, telling him not to be silly. Daisuke had his arm wrapped firmly around Ken's shoulders, anchoring him to reality, at least a little bit.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he noticed Taichi and Koushiro exchange glances he couldn't interpret anymore.

Iori had placed a hand firmly on his arm, and he was grateful for it. If not for Miyako, Hawkmon, Iori, Armadimon, Daisuke and Chibimon at his sides, and Wormmon in his lap, he'd have felt like he was swimming in a vast ocean, nothing to hold him back, to protect him.

“Uhm... Ken-kun, I was hoping that you might remember under which circumstances you...acquired the spore? This would undoubtedly help with identifying the entity responsible for all this...”

Remember, remember, why didn't he... why couldn't he remember?

“I... I can try...” he murmured, though Wormmon didn't look pleased. “Wormmon remembers more than I do, I think. I- We had just defeated...it. Paildramon... had devolved.”

“What – Paildramon?!” Daisuke hissed in surprise, but Taichi quickly shushed him.

Ken closed his eyes, conjuring up the image from that dream he'd had three years ago.

“There's spores flying all around in the air. Spores and sand. We're in a desert, that's where we were fighting it. I think the spores are all its data, it's like when a Digimon is killed and you can see bright data fragments float away, only...more...tangible. They're everywhere. One...one was going
for Ryo. I pushed him to the side.”

He opened his eyes again. That was how it happened in the dream anyway. The spore aiming at his companion, and he had acted without thinking. And then there had been the pain and days of fever and struggle. And after he'd recovered, there hadn't been any more visits to the Digital World, not until he came back to conquer it. The disappearance of a boy had put an end to that. That and a speeding car.

Koushiro nodded. “More than one spore in the air, that makes sense. It might even explain how Meicoomon achieved the spore – it's possible that Meicoomon was simply close by when the spores were flying around and she was hit by accident. Is there anything else you can remember, Ken-kun? A name perhaps?”

Daisuke hit the table with a clenched fist. “Enough! Can't you see he's upset? Don’t you have ANY human emotions, Izumi?!”

He wanted Daisuke to stop, he would hurt their friend with those words, but he didn't know how to express that anymore. Instead, he concentrated on his memories. He felt as if all his muscles had contracted; everything felt tense and his chest was abnormally tight. A needle seemed to bore into his neck the more he tried to think of a name, but he was persistent, he had to, it hurt so much. He dug his fingernails into his palms, drawing blood once more. He shivered all over.

“...Milleniumon...” he breathed out. Wormmon shuddered in his lap and he knew he was right.

“Yes, that's the baddie we fought together, Ken! I remember that now,” Chibimon blurted out, but Ken could hardly pay attention, he felt so drained: He allowed Daisuke to hug him close – he wouldn't even have been able to sit upright anymore if it wasn't for his best friend's presence.

Ken closed his eyes. For a while, the only thing he could hear was frantic typing. Then some rustling and the clanging of bowls being stacked. He opened his eyes again. Yamato, Taichi and Jou were clearing the table. Miyako had joined Koushiro at his laptop and opened her own – the distance and conflict between the younger and the older Chosen momentarily forgotten while they were trying to make sense of the new information.

Iori was still sitting next to Daisuke and Ken, looking up at Ken nervously when he thought he wouldn't notice.

Ken's eyes fell on his hands resting beside Wormmon on his lap, bloody as they were. He was such a wreck; no wonder it made Iori nervous. Perhaps it was really only Daisuke who could somewhat cope with him, understand him, no matter how bad things got... especially, now, now that they were equal. Ken fought the itch to attack his own neck again.

Suddenly, a low rumbling sound could be heard and felt, gaining in intensity. And then the ground shook. Mimi cried out, Jou dropped a stack of bowls. The ground moved up and down and sideways. Ken's first impulse was to look for a table to take cover under like he had learnt at school, but of course the low table in front of him would provide no such protection. Technically, they should have sought refuge under a doorway, but Ken was too weak to move and everyone else had their own ways of reacting to the earthquake.

Taichi had run to Hikari immediately, holding her and Tailmon and Agumon close. Hawkmon, Pyomon, Tentomon and Patamon had taken flight to escape the vicious trembling of the ground and every other partner clutched their humans firmly. Sora had wrapped an arm around Mochizuki-san, while the agents were standing up ready to act but unable to do anything against the very world buckling up beneath them. Ken only managed to extend a hand towards Iori and hold onto
him protectively while he felt Daisuke's arms around him hold on ever tighter. With his free hand, he clutched Wormmon and Veemon both to his chest.

When the ground stopped moving, Ken only slowly let go of Iori, and all the others who'd grabbed a hold of partners, close friends or furniture proceeded with similar caution, but no further tremors seemed to be coming. Everyone seemed dazed, but more or less okay – at the very least, no one seemed visibly injured even if Ken felt a little bit dizzy. But then when hadn't he in the last few days?

But then he noticed it. Right through the middle of the room ran a crack, harmless, not too deep, not too unusual for the aftermath of an earthquake, but it filled Ken with a deep, unexplainable dread.

“Oh no, the Gekomon will have to get their nice floor fixed...” Palmon said, shaking her head in commiseration.

“I hope nothing else broke in the castle...” Mimi added, “it'd be such a shame.”

Koushiro knelt down beside her, investigating the crack. “I hope the architecture is still structurally sound. While traditional palaces like ShogunGekomon's are built with earthquake-rich geography in mind, the fact that a crack like this has formed so quickly is worrying...” he said to no one in particular, addressing the whole room rather than an individual.

Maybe that was it, Ken thought, maybe looking at the crack made him so uneasy because he feared the building might crumble.

“Should we leave then?” Taichi asked.

“It might be wise, I'm not sure...” Koushiro answered, quietly drawing his index finger along the crack.

“I don't know... with the infection spreading again and while the weather of the Digital World is so often hostile to us, wouldn't it be better to have a roof over our heads? Not to mention some of us desperately need rest...” Jou sounded worried.

Ken didn't feel safe inside, but he wouldn't feel safe outside, either, so he didn't bother weighing in on the older Chosen's conversation. Daisuke, however, clearly had other plans.

“...they think they can just decide for us, as if they have the faintest idea what's even going on...” he muttered, then spoke up. “Shouldn't everybody have a voice in this?” He directed it mostly at Taichi.

“Uhm, sure... so what are your thoughts on it, Daisuke?”

“Stay and rest,” he spat, though Ken didn't know if Daisuke genuinely thought that was the best option or whether he was merely going against what Taichi had seemed to favour.

“Leaving might be best.” Ken turned around toward Nishijima-san. “Himekawa may have disabled whatever mind control Gennai-san was able to exact on you, but that doesn't mean we can't still be tracked by our digivices.”

Himekawa-san nodded. “It might be best if we kept moving as much as possible. Who knows what Gennai will do next. Especially if he's really working with Milleniumon...”

Though the adults had been far from forceful, neither Taichi nor Daisuke looked overly pleased at
their interruption all of a sudden – but Daisuke seemed angry whereas Taichi merely frowned in slight irritation.

“Look,” Sora had stepped between both leaders – or were there three now who would claim that title? “Why don’t we solve this by a show of hands?”

Taichi nodded and was about to say something when Daisuke stepped forward.

“So, who’s in favour of staying here and resting?” he spat out before Taichi even had a chance to open his mouth.

“Provided that it is safe here...” Sora tried to amend, but Daisuke already had his hand up in the air. Miyako and Iori followed shortly after, and so Ken reluctantly raised his hand, too. Hawkmon and Armadimon followed suit, and Wormmon tried to, but when he couldn’t raise his pods high enough, Veemon raised two hands. Other than that, only Mimi, Jou and their partners also voted for staying.

Taichi smiled. He must have known he’d won, but Ken wished he wouldn’t show it so openly.

“And who’s in favour of leaving?”

Everyone else raised their hands, including the two adults, though they both hesitated as if unsure if they even had the right to vote.

“Fine,” Daisuke muttered, and Ken could see Taichi’s smile vanish. Slowly, everyone packed up their belongings – everyone but Ken, Miyako, Daisuke and Iori, who had almost nothing left except their D-3s and their partners.

It took a long time for them all to leave the castle, unsurprisingly; they were fifteen humans now and almost as many Digimon.

When Ken stepped outside, he flinched back. Hail was raining down and though the hailstones weren’t big, their incessant patter on the ground seemed to bore into his head like a drill. It felt like they were under attack again even though he knew they weren’t.

“Guess it’s not such a good idea to leave the castle after all!” Daisuke exclaimed, grinning. He was about to turn back when part of the castle roof collapsed behind them – whether from the onslaught of the hail or as an after effect of the earthquake, Ken didn’t know.

“Alright, let’s find shelter elsewhere!” Taichi shouted and led the way. They all started running, and Ken tried to keep up as best as he could, but the pain in his leg and the throbbing in his side and neck slowed him down. Even Wormmon would have been quicker without him, but he’d picked him up anyway if only to shield him from the hail with his body.

By the time they’d made it down the mountain and reached the safety of a dense wood clinging to the sharp rock face, Ken was completely out of breath and close to collapsing again. No one seemed to have noticed, not even Daisuke, who was busy arguing with Taichi about something or other. He leaned against a tree, closing his eyes...

“Ken-san?”

Still gasping for breath, he looked up. Hawkmon was hovering close to his head. It was he who had spoken, but Miyako stood right in front of him, too, looking just as concerned. Next to her was Iori, Armadimon clutched tightly to his chest.
“Are you okay, Ken?” he asked.

Ken merely nodded, still not quite able to reply.

“That’s why we were in favour of staying and resting, you know...” Miyako said softly, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Really, they should have thought about that, too, the others. Would have liked to see them run after that scan...”

“It’s fine...” he whispered, finally able to speak. “I’m going to be okay...” Wormmon wriggled in his arms and gazed at him worriedly, so he forced a smile.

“...but...I need to talk to you...” He focused on Wormmon instead of on his other friends. “...Daisuke... he’s not okay, is he?” Cautiously, he raised his head to look at Miyako and Iori after all.

“No... he’s not,” Miyako agreed quietly. “Do you think it has to do...with the spore?”

Ken nodded. “...it must be...the scan...the...the Kaiser program...”

Miyako grimaced. “Probably... I mean I’m not particularly fond of the others right now, either, but-“

“But you don’t look half as much like you’re already plotting their murder,” Ken stated almost dryly.

“Yeah.” Miyako turned her head to look at Daisuke, who was standing alone now, looking grim.

“Should we tell the others?” Iori asked, following Miyako’s and Ken’s gaze.

Ken shook his head. “No... not yet... the others... I’m not sure if they’d understand...” Almost pleadingly, he looked at his friends but he needn’t have worried.

“Let’s keep it for ourselves for the time being...” Miyako agreed, and Iori looked like he might have said something more, but the others had finally noticed that Ken, Miyako, Iori and their partners had separated themselves from the others.

Taichi approached.

“Are you guys okay?”

All six of them just nodded, though Ken couldn’t help feeling that the lie must have been obvious even in their silence. Taichi seemed to accept it – either that or he didn’t want to bother arguing.

“Well...if you’re sure... The hail has stopped so we thought we should go on now. Try to find a more comfortable shelter before nightfall.”

Ken didn’t say anything but he must have looked less than pleased, because Taichi’s expression changed to a worried frown.

“If you’re okay to go on, that is... Look, I know we ran too fast right now, but we needed to get everyone out of the hail... I can carry you again if you want, Ken, it’s no problem...”

He smiled weakly. “It’s okay, Taichi-senpai... as long as we don’t have to run...”

Taichi looked uneasy, unsure, but he’d clearly run out of things to say. Instead, he patted Ken’s shoulder a couple of times and smiled at him – and Ken smiled back. For all that had happened, he
knew, after all, that neither Taichi nor any of the others had deliberately refused them help. It didn’t take away the sting of abandonment, of course, but at least he knew that the blame lay elsewhere.

Taichi cleared his throat. “Alright, everyone! Get going!”

With as much noise as fifteen humans and thirteen Digimon necessarily made, they left the shadow of the trees.

The hail had stopped, and now that they were progressing slowly again, Ken had time to observe the world around him. It looked like the Digital World he knew and yet different from it. He didn’t feel safe, didn’t feel safe at all, but he couldn’t tell if it was him that had changed or the world itself. Though he had overheard Taichi and Koushiro talk about the Digital World being hostile to them, so he supposed that maybe the hailstorm had been attack after all...

What worried him more, though, were the slight tremors he could still feel under his feet. As far as he could tell, they had nothing to do with the streaks of purple that opened up portals to their world now and then, which let through newly infected Digimon – though those were worrying enough. He was pretty sure, he’d seen Odaiba, but also Tamachi once, and he couldn’t help but worry about his parents. Were they worrying about him, too? Or had they forgotten him just like all the others? Or worse, were they still angry?

He was wrenched from his thoughts when he tripped over one of the cracks probably left in the ground by the earthquake. Ken had still been carrying Wormmon, and he just about managed to turn to the side while falling. The impact pushed the air out of his lungs, and he let out a brief whimper of pain. Again, he was only relieved that it wasn’t his burned side, or else he’d have passed out.

“Ken, are you okay?”

“Ken!”

“Ken, what happened?”

Multiple voices came closer, their owners bending over him. The first to be at his side was Daisuke. His brown eyes were full of concern and worry – so much like the normal, wonderful Daisuke that he knew that he was almost tempted to believe that the spore had only been a bad dream. But he knew he wasn’t so lucky.

“Ken? Can you get up?” Daisuke held out a hand, and Ken took it, allowing his best friend to help him up.

Startled, he realised that nearly everyone had circled around him, worry apparent on every face.

“Is it your leg?” Jou asked, concerned. “If you don’t want Taichi to carry you, we can fashion a sort of stretcher...”

“I’ll help!” Takeru immediately offered, but Daisuke almost sneered at him for that.

“It’s not that, it’s...” Ken gestured at the ground. “I tripped over a crack, that’s all...” Only it wasn’t. These cracks – they’d unnerved him since the first moment he’d realised they were there. They were, for all intents and purposes, normal cracks cause by an earthquake. Nothing he hadn’t seen before, really. And yet... they were all running in the same direction, and it seemed to Ken as if they were all in a straight line. It shouldn’t have been possible, but it was. And they filled him with unease whenever he looked at them, like he’d seen them before and it hadn’t ended well. But
as usual when it would have been so crucial to remember, his memory failed him.

At least, now that they had been made aware of them, everyone seemed to keep an eye out for the cracks as they walked on.

It was good that they did, too, because it meant that none of them was standing on one of the cracks when it happened.

The first thing he noticed was the tremors underfoot increasing in intensity. Then a low growl seemed to emanate from the ground. And then the earthquake hit. It was like nothing he had ever experienced. Sora screamed when a rock pillar was ejected from the ground right in front of her and made her topple over. The cracks they had all been watching grew and grew, and the earth shook so violently that Ken thought it would break apart. And then it did.

The cracks joined together, forming a long fissure first, then a ditch and then a deep abyss. Ken had been standing much too close to a crack, and the ground collapsed beneath his feet. He would have lost his balance and fallen into the depths if Daisuke hadn’t grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him back. But there was no time to rest. The ground beneath them kept moving, starting to slope. With alarm, Ken noticed that the ground they had been treading – more or less level before – turned into a cliff itself as if their side of the planet was falling over.

They fell. Ken could hear himself screaming again, could hear the others scream. And then, something shifted again, and the ground became level once more. Only, Ken thought, it couldn’t have been the ground that shifted this time since the tremors had stopped. Gravity must have realigned itself to the new position of the Digital World as it now existed. How he knew that, he couldn’t quite say, but he had the distinct feeling that he had lived through this before.

When all the movement had stopped, he lay in a thicket, arms and face scratched and bruised from the fall. He let out a soft sob, but then a hand reached for his.

“It’s okay, Ken...” He turned his head. Daisuke was lying next to him, a bloody scratch running right across his cheek and a nasty bruise forming on his jaw, but he was still grinning – or trying to. “I’m here, I won’t let this world hurt you again...!”

It’s not this world, he wanted to say, but another thought made him jolt upright. “Wormmon!” He’d lost his grip on his partner mid-fall, and he couldn’t see him now. Ken could feel his throat tighten, his breath accelerate... Frantically, he scrambled to get up and look for Wormmon, only half noticing Daisuke following suit and calling out for Veemon. There! Behind a small rock...Wormmon lay curled up like... like he had before...back then...three years ago... The view turned blurry suddenly, but he still stumbled in Wormmon’s direction.

“Wormmon!”

“...Ken-chan...?” Wormmon’s voice was weak and much too quiet. He knelt by his side and gently picked his partner up from the ground.

“Are you okay? Wormmon, are you okay?”

“Yes, Ken-chan...” He nuzzled his mandibles into Ken’s shirt, and Ken could feel the tension leave his partner’s body. It frightened him.

“Wormmon? Wormmon!” Wormmon opened his blue eyes and looked back up at him, pressing his body more firmly into Ken’s chest.

“It’s okay, Ken-chan, it really is, I just need a little rest. And maybe food.”
A hysterical giggle escaped his throat, and he wrapped his arms tighter around Wormmon. Relieved, he noticed that he could feel the caterpillar’s weight distinctly – he wasn’t so light as he had been just before he’d dissolved three years ago.

“I’ll get you all the food you want, I promise,” he whispered, leaning his forehead against Wormmon’s carapace between the antennae.

“We’re alright, too, in case you wondered.”

Ken raised his eyes. Daisuke was standing in front of him, hands on Veemon’s shoulders. They both looked battered, but basically alright. Ken briefly wondered if there was some sort of reproach in Daisuke’s words, but the grin on his friend’s face made him dismiss the thought.

Daisuke held out a hand to him and helped him to his feet. He quickly rubbed his free arm over his eyes.

“What d’you think we should do next?”

Ken bit his lip. “Try and go back to the...chasm, I suppose. It’s probably what the others will do, too.”

No one else had landed quite where they had ended up – the thicket was empty of both Digimon and humans. It was crucial that they’d find their friends again quickly. They were stronger together, no matter how many conflicts were brewing between them...

“We could Jogress and travel on Imperialdramon! We’ll find Miyako and Iori in no time,” Daisuke suggested, quickly adding “- and the others, too,” when he noticed Ken’s expression.

“...no, I think we should go to the crack and wait there...” Ken didn’t feel comfortable with the idea of a Jogress right now, he didn’t know why. Usually, he loved feeling the connection he had with Daisuke in action, but all his instincts were screaming at him not to Jogress.

“Wormmon needs rest and food, and so does Veemon,” he said, even though it wasn’t his real reason for refusing the joint evolution.

“Guess you’re right...” Daisuke said, though he didn’t sound entirely convinced. “Come on, let’s get going, then...”

Daisuke grabbed his hand again and dragged him onwards. As always, Ken felt a little guilty about the touch he craved so much. After all, Daisuke didn’t know about Ken’s true feelings for him. Still, he didn’t let go of his hand.

When they reached the rift again, Ken noticed two things: Taichi, Koushiro, Agumon and Tentomon were sitting quite close to the edge of it, and the other side of the crack, the other half of the Digital World, was now so far away from them that he could barely make it out amidst a fog of dispersed data and purple distortions.

Taichi’s face lit up when he saw them approaching. “Guys! I’m so glad to see you!” They came closer, and Ken sat down next to the two older boys while Daisuke remained standing. Wormmon in his lap already looked much better, happy to be carried and coddled by Ken.

“Have you seen any of the others?” Taichi wanted to know.

“No, sorry to disappoint you. Just us.”
“That’s not how I meant that, Daisuke...”

Daisuke only rolled his eyes, and Ken uncomfortably shrugged when Taichi looked at him with a question in his eyes. They didn’t stay alone for long, though, so they were able to ignore the tension, at least for the moment.

The new girl made her way to the crack first, hair dishevelled and glasses cracked – much like Miyako’s, who reached them shortly after Mochizuki, riding on Aquilamon’s back. Takeru and Patamon came next, dripping water.

“We fell into a brook,” Takeru said, but at least the two of them were otherwise unscathed.

They waited near the chasm until dusk. Ken peered over the edge once, out of morbid curiosity. The inner workings of the Digital World had become apparent – it seemed to consist of a mixture of physical circuit boards and free floating streams of data. Far, far below them, he could see something glow in a bright, blinding light. It had to be the data core, Ken thought, but when he looked closer, he thought he could see movement, movement accompanied by purple streaks. He quickly drew back.

“You okay?”

Takeru had joined him at the edge, one hand extended in Ken’s direction – as if ready to grab him should he fall.

“Y-yeah...”

“You shouldn’t be so close to the cliff, you know...” Takeru sounded worried, much to Ken’s surprise. He’d only wanted to get a closer look, and his balance wasn’t so bad that Takeru needn’t have feared he might fall...

He moved away from the edge anyway, and he and Takeru walked the few steps back to where the others were sitting. Taichi knelt behind Koushiro, who was still working on his laptop, but they both looked up when Takeru and Ken joined them. Miyako was sitting with the girl they’d saved from Gennai’s headquarters, getting to know her maybe.

Daisuke was sitting alone with only Veemon and Wormmon as immediate company. Ken left Takeru’s side and sat down on the ground next to the three of them. Wormmon promptly climbed onto his lap and he trailed his fingers over his carapace.

“You’re feeling better now, aren’t you?” he whispered softly, and Wormmon nodded. Ken smiled.

“Guys, listen up!” Taichi had got up and was standing behind Koushiro now. “Koushiro thinks it’s likely that the others might have ended up on the other side of the chasm.”

Koushiro nodded. “If they were here, they would have reached us by now. I also cannot detect their digivices anywhere close by – ours still show up. Either they are too far away regardless on which hemisphere they are at present, or they are all on the other side and our digivices cannot reach theirs over the chasm.”

They all looked across, but with the evening’s half-light meant that they could see even less far than before.

“I think I saw Sora hold on to Hikari. They fell to the other side, just before the world broke apart,” Takeru said quietly. Taichi’s sigh of relief was audible, and Ken noted that his shoulders visibly dropped, like his fear for his sister had kept his body in permanent tension.
“That’s good to know! Let’s just assume that the others all made it safe to the other side as well...”

“I hope Iori’s okay...”

Ken’s shoulders dropped. They hadn’t openly said it, but the absence of their youngest friend had been weighing on their minds – at least he knew that Miyako, Daisuke and he had been thinking of Iori. He still wasn’t sure how Taichi, Koushiro and Takeru were thinking. Though he knew now that their apparent callousness had been due to manipulation and he didn’t resent them for it – or didn’t want to, anyway – a certain unease, a certain mistrust remained.

He didn’t know Mochizuki enough to judge her yet, but he liked that she’d instinctively put a hand on Miyako’s arm, even though she had withdrawn it almost immediately after.

“I’m sure he is,” Taichi said firmly. “He’ll be safe with the others, don’t worry, Miyako.”

“Shouldn’t we try to find him?!” Daisuke spoke up. “Ken and I can Jogress. On Imperialdramon, even crossing over the chasm wouldn’t be a problem.”

Ken held Wormmon closer to him. He still felt oddly reluctant at the idea of a Jogress so he was relieved about Koushiro’s immediate reply.

“That is a good idea, Daisuke-kun. But it’s almost dark now. I suggest that we find a place to spend the night and follow through with the plan in the morning.”

Daisuke muttered something, but at least it sounded vaguely like agreement.

“Alright then!” Taichi told them to get ready to move a bit ‘inland’ as he phrased it. Ken guessed that Taichi didn’t feel comfortable that close to the chasm, either, though he couldn’t have seen the movement and the purple streaks.

“What’s up with the dusk anyway – shouldn’t it have been night hours ago?” Miyako wondered out loud as they were walking away from the split.

“Ah – I think I can explain that.” Both Ken and Miyako turned to Mochizuki in surprise. She hadn’t really spoken much, even when they’d first got her out of her cell in Gennai’s base. “Hime-chan – I mean, Himekawa-san, she said that opening the portals we travelled through might destabilise the Digital World even more...the time, the space... so it’s possible we travelled backwards in time as well as through space.”

Miyako raised an eyebrow. “Well, that would sure explain it. Do you think that’s what made the Digital World fall apart, too? Us using the portals to travel?”

Mochizuki seemed incredibly alarmed at the thought. “I...I didn’t mean to cause this! It just seemed like we had no other option...”

Ken raised a hand – whether to wave the thought away with it or put it on her arm in comfort he wasn’t quite sure, but it didn’t matter anyway. Miyako beat him to it.

“Don’t worry, you’re right, we couldn’t have got away from Gennai and Meicra- I mean...well, from your partner quick enough. I’m sorry,” she added when Hawkmon, flying next to her the entire time, tapped her shoulder in slight disapproval.

Mochizuki smiled weakly, but her voice trembled. “It’s fine, really...”

Miyako didn’t look convinced. “I spoke without thinking, I’m sorry. I do that too often. Bit like
Daisuke.”

“Very funny.”

Ken chuckled slightly. It was almost like before it all had happened. Like they were just bantering on a trip to the Digital World, to see their partners, nothing more. But it was night now, and the sky above them was filled with purple lightning and distortions opening up to their world, letting monsters through. Darkness closing in on them.

Koushiro had slowed down a bit to join the four of them. It was apparent that he had listened on their conversation whereas Taichi and Takeru kept walking ahead.

“If it is any comfort to you, Mochizuki-san, I do not think the portals caused the split. I am not even sure if Meicoomon is the primary source for the infection as we first thought. Not just because of the connection between the infection and Ken’s dark spore – presumably originating in Milleniumon, not Meicoomon, of course. But it’s also the fact we have seen so many infected Digimon cross over to our world – it seems illogical to assume that Meicoomon has encountered all of them. No,” he shook his head, “I think it’s possible that the infection lies much deeper, within the Digital World itself. And that is what made it split apart.”

Ken shuddered and thought of the purple streaks deep within the core.

“We’ll stay here!” Taichi’s voice echoed through the night, causing them all to come to a halt. It was about time – Wormmon was already asleep in Ken’s arms, and Ken himself was deadly tired.

They’d set up camp. Miyako, Ken, Daisuke and their partners stayed together – they didn’t have any blankets, anyway, and nothing else to set up.

Taichi snatched Koushiro’s laptop away from him, much to his alarm, but handed it to Tentomon right away. “Sleep now, Koushiro, not work.”

“I agree, Koushiro-han! I’m going to keep that for now!”

Taichi let out a snort of laughter – and Ken couldn’t help thinking, again, that he wasn’t taking their predicament as seriously as he should. Of course, he’d had other experiences than Ken. Hadn’t lived through that attack. But whose fault was that?

Taichi walked over to them as if he’d sensed Ken’s thoughts. “Here, you can take my sleeping back – you can unfold it and use it as a blanket for the three of you. I’m sorry that I don’t have anything else.”

“No,” Ken said, and Miyako followed his example. Daisuke remained silent, and Taichi’s expression faltered.

“Well... sleep well, okay?”

They just nodded again, and then tried to settle down. Taichi, Koushiro, Takeru and Mochizuki had chosen sleeping places very close to the spot where Miyako, Ken and Daisuke huddled down together, but there was still a gap – no close company, no comfort. Ken didn’t know what to feel about it.

Miyako clutched Hawkmon like a stuffed toy, and maybe it was that, which made her fall asleep soon enough. Wormmon and Veemon lay curled up together between Daisuke and Ken – Wormmon had already been sleeping when they stopped and Veemon had been tired enough to fall asleep as soon as he laid down next to Ken’s partner.
Ken, however, was restless. And Daisuke was worse. He could hear and feel him twisting and turning, not finding a moment’s rest.

Ken lay flat on his back, staring up at the sky, where purple lightning still ripped tears into the fabric of reality, opening portals, letting in the danger – or out. The two worlds seemed to have become a jumbled mess in Ken’s head already. He spent what felt like hours watching parts of Earth light up on the night sky. Flymon circling around Tokyo Tower. A Monzaemon rampaging through a big city. Tyrannomon roaring near some Mayan pyramids. He wondered if Rosa was okay...

Suddenly, there was movement to his right, the blanket shifted and he could see Daisuke’s shape stand up and walk away from the camp a little bit. Ken sat up himself, careful not to move too suddenly and wake up Miyako or the Digimon.

Daisuke had sat down again, a couple of feet away from them, staring into nothingness. Silently, Ken got up. He walked amidst their sleeping friends – Agumon sprawled over Taichi’s stomach, snoring quietly, Patamon lying on Takeru’s hair like a weirdly-shaped hat.

He stepped over Koushiro and Tentomon – lying, as promised, flat on top of Koushiro’s laptop. Just as silently as he had walked, he sat down next to Daisuke. His best friend looked at him briefly but didn’t yet say anything.

“Can’t sleep?”

“No...did I wake you up?”

Ken shook his head. “I can’t sleep, either.”

They sat together in silence while above them the distortions grew bigger, taking longer and longer to fade away again. Ken leaned to his side until their arms touched. Daisuke’s hand touched his, and then, without a word, he took Ken’s hand and held it. Neither of them moved anymore than this for a while.

“Ken...?”

“Yeah?”

He turned to look at Daisuke and found his friend’s face much closer than he’d expected. For a moment, the two boys seemed to stare into each other’s eyes, and Ken almost, almost felt like something important was being said without any words to put it in.

“You need to know-“

But Ken didn’t get to hear what he needed to know. The feeling of crushing Darkness came first and then Gennai-san’s awful laughter penetrated the night.

“Did you think you had got rid of me so easily, Chosen Children?” he cackled. “Oh no no no, I brought some friends for you to play with...” He was riding on top of an Airdramon – Ken didn’t know if he intended to taunt him with his choice transport, but the Airdramon was not what he had been referring to.

No.
Piemon and Pinochimon hovered in the air beside him.

There were shouts and screams from the camp, and then a glowing light. First WarGreymon, then HolyAngemon, then HeracleKabuterimon rose from it. Aquilamon followed shortly after, and Wormmon and Veemon ran to their partners, too, ready to evolve.


“No, they’re real,” he yelled back – simultaneously with Takeru. They had felt the Darkness before they had seen where it had come from.

“Come on, Ken, Jogress – NOW!”

He still didn’t think it was right. But Imperialdramon was their greatest asset. How could they not use him? With considerable hesitation, he pulled out his D-3. Wormmon evolved to Stingmon in an instant. That was right. And then XVeemon and Stingmon merged.

WRONG WRONG WRONG WRONG WRONG

First Paildramon, then Imperialdramon appeared – should they have been able to do that? Did Qinglongmon even still exist?

He didn’t know, but he knew right away that there was something wrong with Imperialdramon. The colours were all off. And he didn’t speak, he roared.

Ferociously, their partner Digimon began to attack the two Dark Masters. He fired his positron laser with a force he shouldn’t have been able to wield. Numb with fear, Ken watched as Imperialdramon tore into Piemon and Pinochimon with surprising brutality, disintegrating them within seconds.

None of the other partners had even got close enough to fight.

“YOSH! Well done, Imperialdramon!” Daisuke shouted, apparently as delighted as with any other victory.

Taichi had run up to them, and he just stared in horror at the place where Piemon and Pinochimon had just been and where Imperialdramon now hovered. Miyako, Meiko, Takeru and Koushiro ran up to them as well, all pale with fright. Only Gennai-san laughed and laughed.

“That’s...well... good...?” Taichi said, doubt heavy in his voice. “...Imperialdramon can devolve now, right?”

As if to answer, Imperialdramon let out a mighty roar, and it made Ken shudder.

“Devolve? Why should we?” Daisuke turned around to face Taichi, eyes cold with disdain.

“Well... the fight’s over and...” He gestured towards Gennai-san, who was already disappearing into the night with his Airdramon, still laughing.

“Oh, I don’t think so.”

“Daisuke, we don’t need Imperialdramon right now-“

“Ken and I need him. Ken and I don’t need YOU!”

“Come on, Daisuke, be reasonable...”
Imperialdramon fired another shot of his laser into the night, making all of them jump.

“...Daisuke, I think Imperialdramon’s unstable, it could be dangerous – let him devolve NOW."

If we still can, Ken thought, all his misgivings proven right.

“I don’t see why I should do what YOU are saying, Taichi!” Daisuke spat, face twisted in disgust. “Why should we listen to you when you very nearly let us walk to our deaths?! Why should we care what happens to ANY OF YOU?!”

Ken only stared at Daisuke. How could he not have realised how bad it already was?

“Ken? Come on, let’s go. We don’t need them. They certainly don’t need us – they forgot all about us.” Daisuke offered his hand to him and he sounded as sincere and genuine as always. “With Imperialdramon, we’ll be invincible. We can conquer this world so it cannot hurt either of us ever again!”

And Ken was tempted. Visions played at the forefront of his mind, the two of them, clothed in extravagant regalia, ruling over the entire Digital World – both worlds even. Two emperors united in a harmonious double reign – harmonious for them at least. Ken had no doubt that Daisuke would not hurt him. The spore had affected him badly, but never once did Ken think that he was in any danger from him. And so he was tempted.

But of course he knew that he only really considered it because of the reactivated spore in his own neck playing its tricks on him, whispering to the unconscious parts of his minds, telling him that he deserved the power and the glory – even more so because he could share with Daisuke.

He lifted his hand, almost ready to take Daisuke’s, but then he paused. This isn’t right.

“...n-no.”

Daisuke seemed puzzled. “What? Why not? We deserve this!” His voice had risen towards the end of it all as if he was already aware of the futility of his almost desperate plea.

Ken slowly shook his head. “Daisuke, no.”

The hurt in Daisuke’s eyes looked so real and so heartbreaking that Ken almost felt it physically – it was like he had been stabbed and it felt like betrayal. How could he let his best friend down like this? How could he bear not being by his side? Yet he knew that saying yes would have been a much greater betrayal. He owed it to Daisuke. He had to free him from the dark spore, somehow, not join him, as hard as it was and as badly as he felt right now.

“I won’t join you.”

Hurt turned to hatred. “Fine!” Daisuke snapped and Ken shuddered – he’d never been addressed this viciously by his best friend before, not even in jest. “Suit yourself, Ichijouji.” And with that, he spun around – the emperor’s cloak flowing dramatically behind him – and bid Imperialdramon descend, allowing him to climb onto his head. He shot Ken a last dark look of disdain, and then their Digimon partner rose into the air and the two of them flew into the night.

Chapter End Notes
I have been looking forward to sharing this chapter for SUCH a long time! Finally, it's done! I hope you all enjoy it as much as I did!
What do you think of my chapter title? I put a bit of thought into it and I think it really fits ;-)
For her, everything had started two weeks earlier than for everybody else.

At first, it had been a perfectly normal day. At 21 years old, Motomiya Jun still lived with her parents and commuted to university every day. That day had been no different. She’d got up, got ready and presentable – and then banged on Daisuke’s door to wake the little idiot up. Obviously, she’d acted out of sisterly affection and duty. Who knew how long he’d sleep if no one gave his door a few kicks and punches every morning.

She remembered every single second of that morning’s conversation in astonishing detail. The angry groaning from inside, his offended expression when he’d finally opened the door only to shout at her. There’d been nothing unusual about it at all. After a couple of minutes of bickering, he grumbled something – probably not very flattering – and went back into his room to get dressed. He’d eaten her breakfast egg and she’d punched him in the shoulder for it. And then he’d gone back into his room again, green uniform jacket already on, and dropped backwards on the bed to play with his stupid soccer ball.

“’m not late, there’s still some time,” he’d told her in that lovingly unfriendly tone of voice that he seemed to reserve for her and her alone.

“Suit yourself, nerd.”

And then she’d gone to uni.

When she’d come back home, he wasn’t there yet. That, in itself, wasn’t so unusual. He could have been out with his friends or, more likely, had made his way out to Tamachi to visit Ken-kun. Only then, his school had called – he hadn’t been seen all day. Fair enough. It certainly wasn’t the first time that the little idiot had skipped school. But school was over, and he had to be somewhere. Her parents had been working late that day, and so it had been her responsibility to find him and get him out of trouble, if necessary. Her first idea was to call the Ichijoujis, of course. And that was when his disappearance first began to trouble her. She’d called and Ken’s mother had immediately picked up the phone.

“Is Ken with Daisuke-kun?” had been Ichijouji-san’s first question. As it turned out, Daisuke was not the only one who hadn’t been at school that day. But unlike her brother, conscientious Ichijouji Ken was certainly not one to simply play truant.

The Ichijoujis were frantic, of course, and Jun could hardly blame them. After all, they had already lost one son and Ken had vanished once before… Her own parents were a little more relaxed. Daisuke hadn’t been at school, yes, but he’d hardly been missing more than a few hours – he’d be back soon, probably bragging about what a wonderful day he’d had at the arcade together with his best friend before getting grounded for a week… Only he hadn’t come that night, and neither had Ken.

The next day, Hida-san, little Iori-kun’s mother, and Miyako-chan’s parents had called. Had they
perhaps forgotten a planned sleepover, a joint trip somewhere…? Their voices had resonated with desperate hope, but Jun could tell that they didn’t really think that their worries would be over so soon. There was no way that any of those kids – except maybe Daisuke – would have organised an overnight stay on a school night…

So they were missing. Daisuke, Ken, Miyako and Iori. Strange. Jun had never expected to be the sister of a missing child. She’d never thought that one day she’d go to a police station to say: ‘My brother hasn’t come home last night.’ She’d never thought she’d miss him quite so much.

The police proved to be unhelpful. ‘You can’t file a missing persons report when the person in question hasn’t been gone for more than 24 hours,’ they’d said, and when Jun had protested that the last time she’d seen her brother was yesterday morning, they’d told her that he’d been seen by friends later than that.

Which friends?

She never got an answer.

And so a day turned into two, and two days turned into a week. And still the police was unhelpful, insisting that teenagers just ran away sometimes, and they’d be back before long.

But it had been over a week now, and Jun was done waiting for the police to do their bloody job. She’d have to find them herself, and she knew where to start. In fact, she was surprised she hadn’t thought of it before. Perhaps she’d been too trusting towards the police, or too busy keeping the Ichijoujis company – she’d spent most of her week trying to prevent Ken’s mother from falling apart at the seams, after all…

But the waiting was over now, and she didn’t have to go far in order to accomplish her first sensible action in over a week. She left the apartment and rushed to the Ishida flat, banging on the door ferociously. As she stood there waiting, she had to wonder why Yamato-kun hadn’t come by on his own… He was friends with Daisuke, too, and even if the older Chosen Children and the younger weren’t that close anymore – though she’d no reason to assume that since she’d got the impression from Daisuke that they still met regularly – Yamato-kun’s brother was in Daisuke’s class. Surely, their teacher had explained to them that one of their classmates was missing, and surely Takeru-kun had to be worried?

Her thoughts were cut short when the door sprang open, and she was face to face with Yamato-kun. Only he didn’t react at all the way she would have expected. Contrary to popular opinion, she wasn’t entirely unaware that the younger boy was still somewhat uncomfortable in her presence (though she certainly had been blissfully oblivious to that three years ago). Now, however, he only looked at her with a rather blank stare.

“Yes? How can I help you?”

It was so unreal that she genuinely forgot what she’d been about to say for a couple of seconds.

“Uhh, my brother. He’s missing—”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, Motomiya-san,” his face showed genuine concern but nothing hear the level of anxiety she’d have expected from a friend. “You live on the next floor, right? Are you here to distribute leaflets?”

She had no idea how to respond.

“Uh well, no, I was just wondering whether you have any idea—” what happened, whether it had
something to do with the Digital World, whether he was aware of what was going on and trying to do something against it.

“Where he might be? No, sorry. I don’t think I’ve seen him for a while, either…” Yamato-kun looked sort of disoriented, but thoughtful… like he’d only just remembered something he’d forgotten. “...I’ll ask my little brother… Takeru – he goes to your brother’s school,” he frowned, “I think so, anyway….” He grumbled something and sighed – Jun knew him well enough by now to be able to tell that he was thinking about his own brother now, the little dork with the stupid hats, and that he thought he knew what she was going through, but would never say so.

“Sorry that I can’t be of more help,” he said, and with a bow, excused himself. And closed the apartment door.

Jun remained where she was. What had just happened?! She’d had to have been dreaming… Puzzled, she made her way up to her own apartment again. What was Yamato-kun’s deal, pretending he didn’t know them very well, talking to her like they were just regular neighbours…

Soon after, the ‘attacks’ started. At first, it seemed to be almost random hacking – phones malfunctioning, internet access points seemingly vanishing, digital time tables becoming useless – but it quickly turned more threatening… Traffic lights became unreliable, air traffic control systems stopped working. Soon, the news were talking about cyber terrorism, but Jun knew better. There was some trouble in the Digital World, no doubt about it, and her brother and his friends had gone to fix it. But why the secrecy? Why the pretence not to know her? What could the Chosen Children possibly hope to gain from keeping their families in the dark?

Jun decided that she would go directly to their leader – their older leader, that is, Yagami-kun. Perhaps he would be more helpful than Yamato had been.

So she went over to the Yagami residence and rang the door bell. Hikari answered, and the first thing she noticed that she looked unconcerned. Irritatingly happy even, considering that she should be just as worried about Daisuke as Jun was. Or, come to think of it, in the Digital World with him. Wasn’t she part of his team?

“Yes?”

“Is your brother home? I need to speak to him.”

“Oh no, I’m afraid he’s gone to a soccer match.” She smiled. “I need to get going now, I’ve got to be somewhere – but it’s so nice to meet you! I didn’t know he had a girlfriend.”

Jun just stared because she regained her composure. She’d known this girl since she was tiny! “Look, I don’t know what you’re playing at, but I want to know where Daisuke is!”

Hikari’s startled, almost frightened face told her that she’d yelled perhaps a little too loudly, but her brother was missing, in danger, she bloody well could yell as she pleased. She did notice the look of genuine confusion that lay plainly on the girl’s face, but she was too angry to care or draw any conclusions.

“Never mind. I don’t care what exactly it is you’re up to, I just wanna know that Daisuke is safe. Gonna ask your brother myself if you insist on playing dumb.” And with that she stormed off in such a hurry that she completely forgot to ask where the stupid match even was.

She was about to go in the direction of the school Yagami and his friends attended, hoping that that was where the match was taking place, when she heard a weird buzzing noise overhead. Jun
looked up but there was nothing to see – except a couple of feet ahead, there was a sort of disturbance in the air, an electric flicker, as if she was watching the Odaiba sky on a TV screen.

*Weird…*

She walked on; soon she’d be at the school. But suddenly, there was the buzzing noise again, this time accompanied by shrieks and screams. She looked up just in time to see a giant red…bug…flying overhead. *No, not a bug. A Digimon!*

Only seconds later, a boy cycled past.

“Yagami-kun!”

He turned his head, briefly, but didn’t slow down. Jun didn’t think anything of it – clearly she’d been right, there was some trouble in the Digital World – or out of it, rather – and he was dealing with it. But she wouldn’t let him off without finally getting answers, either, so she ran after him, as fast as she could. Following him, following the destruction the red Digimon had started to inflict on buildings and bridges – she had to crouch on the ground when it crushed into a bridge, causing the structure to collapse. Around her, people were screaming in fear and fleeing in a panic, but as soon as she could she stood up again to follow him – only to bump into a man in a suit.

“Motomiya-san, would you please follow me?”

Jun stared at him. He looked like he was straight out of one of those American alien movies Daisuke liked to watch – Men in Black or something like that? Exactly like that, including the sunglasses. What a cliché.

“No, thanks, I’d rather not.” She’d worry that she’d lose Yagami’s track, but she had the feeling that the screams would guide her way just fine.

“I have to insist.”

The man grabbed her arm and wouldn’t let go even as she struggled. No one noticed that she was being kidnapped but, she guessed, a giant bug in the sky was a little distracting for the few people who still remained in the area.

He pulled her into a black, official-looking car – he wasn’t exactly unkind or brutal, but forceful nonetheless. Jun had no choice but to sit down and wait where he would take her.

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As it turned out, he took her to a completely mundane-looking office building. Long hallways with tiny offices to the left and right, grey floors, grey ceilings. Nothing remarkable. She was being led to a slightly larger room, which housed several computers and a substantial wooden desk at the front of it. Behind it stood an older, grey-haired man in a suit, flanked by a young, professional-looking woman and a young man in a suit. But she had no time to focus on them right away – she wasn’t the only one who had been brought here. Her own parents stood next to a broad window, looking uncomfortable and out-of-place in their present surroundings. A little apart from them, the old Hida-san sat on a chair, his daughter-in-law standing behind him – her serious, concerned face reminded her so much of Daisuke’s youngest friend that it almost hurt and she had to blink once or twice to see clearly. In the middle of the room, Miyako-kun’s family sat huddled together – Momoe gave her a small smile, but it wavered quickly. No wonder, Jun herself didn’t feel much like smiling these days, but nodded in the direction of her friend.

In the front, the Ichijoujis stood facing the next, visibly agitated and arguing with the grey-haired
man. Jun shot her abductor, who stood at the door – guarding them – a vicious glance, then turned her attention to what was going on between Ken’s parents and the three people on the other side of the desk.

“We want to know where our son is!” His mother sounded angrier than Jun had ever heard her before but there was a quivering note to her voice, too.

“Ichijouji-san, calm down,” the man said soothingly, holding his hands up in a placating gesture. “As we have said, we are doing all you can to locate your children. In the meantime, there is really no need for you to worry-“

“No need for us to worry?!” Ken’s father all but shouted – she’d never expected him to speak that way to a person of authority, he seemed way too obedient – and Jun had no doubt that this man was high up, though she had no idea what his function was.

“Our son is missing! And his friends, too – the police refuse to act, we’re kidnapped in the middle of the day by your underlings, and you expect us not to worry?!”

“These ‘underlings’, as you select to call them, are government officials, working for my department. And they were merely tasked with bringing you here so we could have a reasonable conversation, Ichijouji-san… If you could please calm down and allow us to explain. Now that we are all here…” He made a very slight bow in Jun’s direction as a way of greeting. Jun didn’t move.

“…very well. Himekawa-san?”

The young woman nodded and turned towards the assembled families. “Please. Why don’t you all sit down first…” Jun knew that this had to be mostly directed towards the Ichijoujis, still standing close to the officials, the very image of outrage, but the suggestion makes Jun’s knees almost buckle. Sit down…they ask relatives to sit down when they have bad news to share, don’t they…?

She dropped to a seat next to Momoe and grasped blindly for her friend’s hand. She barely noticed Ichijouji-san collapsing onto a chair next to her husband.

“Thank you,” the young woman said in a voice that sounded as professional as her outfit made her look – not at all suited for a bearer of bad news, Jun thought, as the woman started the computer in front of her as well as a projector.

What appeared on the screen was a map of some sort – Jun had never been there herself but she’d have bet everything she had that it was the Digital World.

“Your children and siblings were needed in the Digital World due to some kind of emergency – we are still working on finding out what exactly is going on. But I am sure you are all aware of the responsibilities the children have.”

Ken’s mother promptly rose from her chair again. “They’ve been missing for two weeks!”

The woman shook her head. “Not missing. They are currently in-action, and we are monitoring their well-being.”

Jun felt Momoe squeeze her hand.

“In-action? You make them sound like soldiers! My Iori is only twelve...!” Iori-kun’s usual calm, soft-spoken mother had stood up net to Ichijouji-san and was watching the suited people with a guarded eye.
The woman didn't seem much perturbed. “As I said, they have certain responsibilities towards the Digital World. Rest assured that they are as safe as they can be...” She was calm, friendly – not overly emotional, but seemingly sincere.

Jun didn't buy it.

The young man spoke up. “…while we...monitor the situation, we must ask you not to contact the other Chosen Children. They, uh, they are dealing with the situation on their own and shouldn't be burdened any further...”

“Wait, wait, wait – they don't know what's going on with my brother and his dorks, then? But you do? How's that happened?”

This stinks.

“They, uh-”

“They know what they need to know,” the woman interrupted her less confident colleague. “We are supervising their current operation, so there is no need for you to get involved.”

“I think we already are involved!” Momoe's mother had jumped up with that temper that was common to the female members of their family. “Our children are missing!”

“Please, Inoue-san. There's no need to get agitated. Everything is taken care of.” The woman – Jun had decided that she didn't like her one bit – gestured towards the young man by her side. “Nishijima-san will hand out forms for you to sign...”

The man came forward and Jun snatched the papers he held out for her out of his hands, but she didn't even get a chance to read them properly before her own mum spoke up.

“We hereby confirm that we will not continue contacting the police’ – why shouldn't we? Our son is missing, isn't that what the police are for?”

Jun could tell that the woman eyed her mother with disdain, even though she remained polite. “We know where your children are, roughly. The police cannot reach them there, so it would be a waste of their time to keep contacting them about this issue. We will keep you updated as soon as we have new information.”

“What, so you will be our only point of contact?” Jun just had to ask.

“Precisely.”

Had she imagined it, or was there a distinct coldness that had crept into the lady's voice? “How convenient,” Jun muttered, though she ultimately had no choice but to sign the papers. Quickly and with no actual answers, the families were being herded out of the office with the government's (or whoever they were really working for) expectation that they would just shut up now.

When they were left standing outside of the building, Jun noticed that she and Momoe were still holding hands. She paused, surprised, but then she squeezed her friend's hand. “We'll get them back, I promise. They're annoying dorks, but they're our annoying dorks, and I won't let that lady tell us what we can and can't do to find them!”

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They waited for a week before acting again. Jun only heard about the battle at the harbor and the
destruction of the ferris wheel from vague news reports and exaggerated rumours. A giant black monster had been attacked by eight other monsters, and then a massive white knight – must have been Yamato-kun's and Yagami-kun's – what was it called? - Jogress evolution... She saw the fight between the giant cactus – Tachikawa's partner? - and the actually monstrous looking green thing on the television, watched as Tachikawa's partner spun around and the helicopter crashed.

She didn't contact Yamato again, even though he was living in the same apartment block. Nor did she try and visit any of the other so-called Chosen Children since she had the feeling that she was being watched. But when she heard that there was going to be a school festival at the school they almost all went to, she thought that was her chance. Surely noone would notice her there, and among the crowd, whoever was monitoring her would be hard-pressed to notice when she approached any of her brother's so-called friends.

Unfortunately, the first familiar faces she saw were those of the professional lady and her less professional friend – though he wasn't wearing a suit anymore. Instead, he wore a t-shirt, a white lab coat, and perhaps the ugliest shoes Jun had ever seen. He seemed distinctly less threatening than his colleague, but she still didn’t want to go talk to her brother’s friends while he was watching. She shouldn’t have waited.

Just when she thought her moment had come – the oldest one with the cute older brothers, Jou – had gone to the bike stands...Hikari turned up.

Jun cursed – the younger girl had already proved unwilling – unable? – to help. Still...she had to try.

“Hikari-!” But the girl didn’t listen, didn’t even look. She and Jou were running back to the festival, and Jun followed, feeling more and more like she was some unimportant background actor, constantly pushed to the sidelines, almost willfully ignored. She could only run after him and hope to catch a glimpse of her brother, wherever he might be.

Voices. Screaming, but also a weird digital buzzing. And then she saw it, the black hole, or so it seemed, right in the middle of the school yard, and, within it-

“What the heck!” It was her brother’s partner, no, her brother’s and Ken’s partner. She recognised the giant dragon, had seen it often enough, only something seemed off about it. And why was it fighting with the others’ partner digimon?!

All around her, students were flying, but she stayed put, watching the whole thing unfold from behind the corner of a building – not that any of the kids paid any attention to her, glued as their eyes were to the black hole, and when that closed, to a computer screen. She had to get a look to, surely they’d let her watch, too, as soon as they fucking remembered who she was-!

Jun sprinted forward – and bumped into a guy in a black suit.

“Sorry, miss, you are not allowed to approach-"

“I am, trust me, I know what’s-“

“You are not allowed to approach the Chosen Children, Motomiya-san.”

Ah. One of them.

Defeated, Jun had to let herself get escorted of the school grounds. Now she wouldn’t know how that battle had ended. And she hadn’t learnt anything new, hadn’t achieved anything besides adding another question to the growing pile.
Were her brother and his friends fighting Yagami’s team?

There is a blackout in Odaiba and a mysterious message. Spirals of clouds in the sky. Freak lightning. Panic ensues but nothing much happens for another week. Then... the rifts start appearing. The Digimon are coming through. The digital networks all around the world are failing.

The world is ending. She knows it. And yet, while everyone else is fleeing, hiding, screaming, she stares up at the other world that has appeared in the night sky, hoping for a last glimpse of Daisuke.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this update certainly took me ages!!! And that despite the fact that it was 'just' an interlude to prepare for next chapters approaching 'apocalypse'...
I hope you enjoyed it anyway even if you still have to wait a little longer for the main action to continue!
Imperialdramon’s giant form was still visible on the horizon on the other side of the rift when his vision blurred. Still he kept staring at them until they disappeared, long after Daisuke on Imperialdramon’s head had gone from being a tiny speck to being not visible at all. Ken’s throat was so tight that he could hardly breathe. He let out a strangled gasp, half-way between a scream and a sob, and then he felt his legs buckling under him.

Ken had to struggle for breath now, much like it had been in that red desert. For a moment, a blind fear gripped him as he could not explain the sudden weight on his chest and it frightened him. He fell forward and gripped the grass in front of him while he clutched his chest with his other hand. Teardrops fell on the ground before him but he hardly noticed. His fingers slid towards the throat where something was still strangling him. Or maybe it wasn’t. He couldn’t feel a thing, was only vaguely aware that something seemed to make it harder to breathe for him.

The world seemed far away; he could hardly hear the steps approaching, and when the hand touched his shoulder, he flinched.

“Ken...” Miyako knelt down beside him. “Are you okay...?” He could only hear her as if through water. He didn’t know what it was that had removed him from the world around him all of a sudden, but he welcomed it. Harder to feel guilt when his mind, his perceptions were so clouded.

“I’m- Fine, he wanted to say, needed it to be true so badly, but it wasn’t and he couldn’t. He shook his head. Tears were trickling down his cheeks but he couldn’t bring himself to wipe them off, too busy clutching his chest – what was wrong with him, what – apart from the obvious... but it felt so real...

Miyako wrapped her arms around him and he leant into her embrace. It made him feel less distant, less alone, but it also meant that the guilt hung in his stomach like a weight. He had betrayed Daisuke. Perhaps it had been the right thing, yes, but that didn’t mean... that didn’t mean it couldn’t be wrong, too... He could hear his breath come out in bits, like tiny sobs, but it almost seemed to him like it was a different person crying.

Ken hid his face in what little was left of the jacket covering Miyako’s shoulders. She squeezed him, holding him close. “...sorry...” he whispered, sounding even more muffled now.

“...what for...?” Miyako asked, from far away.

He didn’t answer, burying his face further into her shoulder so he wouldn’t have to face her. Already her clothes were wet from his tears.

She noticed, of course. “...what, because you’re crying?”

He didn’t need to answer that.
“…that’s rubbish! You don’t seriously think-“

She didn’t get to finish the sentence. Other footsteps had joined them, and Ken felt like he had to withdraw from her, even though he certainly didn’t like the thought of having to face the others just yet, pathetic as he was with his tear-filled eyes.

Taichi was the closest to them, staring at Ken with a serious expression that frightened him. He must be angry...

Ken didn't look up, didn't dare to until he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“...you're not still going to pretend nothing's wrong with Daisuke...?” Taichi sounded calm, understanding even. He didn't seem to blame him for the lie. He slowly raised his head. The older boy was still serious, but there was no anger in his face, nothing that would have justified Ken's fright. Of course not, Ken thought, and then: They should be afraid of you. He wanted to ignore that voice so badly that he didn't even mind having to answer Taichi’s question.

He shook his head – not a good idea, on a second thought; his concussion seemed to have got worse, if that was possible, and there was an incessant droning noise as well as a leaden heaviness in his head now. “...no, he...it's my fault, not his...” The confession of guilt came so easily, like it was part of Ken now – and he felt it deeply. Without him, none of this would have happened... Wasn't his spore at the centre of all of this? Miyako was shaking her head, but he ignored her.

“G-gennai put it inside Daisuke when he...manipulated him to attack us...” They hadn't told the others any of this; there hadn't been time enough. Or trust.

“And it's made him...what?” Taichi wanted to know. “...more angry? ...aggressive? More-” He stopped, and Ken was grateful that he didn't finish what he was surely about to say: more like the Kaiser.

He nodded. “He's been irritated and easily annoyed... and...violent...” He shuddered at the memory of the infected Airdramon dying while Daisuke cheered. He closed his eyes, “I’m sorry...” He could feel Miyako’s arm around his shoulders, squeezing. What would Taichi say now? Was he angry at him for lying...? Would he shout, would he realise that it was all his fault, would he leave him behind... Maybe I should have gone with Daisuke.

“We should move,” a flat voice said.

“Move? It’s in the middle of the night, we should sleep!”

“Yes, Taichi-san, I agree on principle, but I would not like to stay in this precise spot. Imperialdramon’s attacks were short and brutal, but they would have been seen from far away. It might have drawn attention to us, and besides, we are not very far away from the, uh, the rift yet...”

Ken opened his eyes again. Taichi was running his fingers through his hair, looking back and forth between Koushiro and the direction in which the rift lay. He seemed reluctant, Ken thought. Maybe he didn’t want to move away too far because he knew that his sister was on the other side... Would Osamu have been like this...? No, he couldn’t think about Niisan now, he didn’t even know why the thought had come up – he truly had enough other worries as it was...

“…Alright...” Taichi said slowly. “Let’s move camp.”

It was best, of course. Koushiro was right. Taichi was right. Ken looked to the side where the split that ran through the world beckoned. Ken closed his eyes. What was he thinking? It wasn’t beckoning, it was frightening, made him feel sick. It was infested...
“Ken?”

He looked up. Taichi was holding out his hand expectantly. Takeru was looking at him again, worried, just as before, when Ken had looked down into the chasm. He didn’t understand it and he was too tired to think about it. Ken sighed and took Taichi’s hand but when he tried to get up, he felt a stinging sensation in his chest and everything went white. When he could see again, he was lying on his back on the ground, eyes wide open, gasping for breath. Above him, there was a ring of heads, all wearing expressions of various degrees of concern, even the girl he hardly knew, Mochizuki.

“Ken, what’s wrong? Is it your head?” Taichi wanted to know, but Ken shook his head no and gripped his chest. His eyes grew even wider; he was scared. What was wrong with him? His heart was racing and he was trembling, there was something so, so wrong. His breathing was too fast, he knew it, he recognised by now when he was starting to hyperventilate but wasn’t that appropriate when he might well be dying? He could feel tears form in the corners of his eyes.

“Ken, it’s okay, calm down…!” Taichi was saying, but he didn’t sound calm at all himself. Miyako nudged him to the side to lean over him. She took his hand – even she looked worried, but she was trying to hide it. “Ken? Can you hear me?”

He tried to nod. “My… my heart…” he whispered. It beat too fast, too irregular, for every beat that there should be he heard two. Two… Oh. Oh no.

“…out of sync…” He could tell from Miyako’s face that she understood right away, though no one else did, not even Takeru or Taichi who at least had experienced a Jogress connection themselves.

“Oh shit…” He heard her say, and the others turned to her, frantically, worried – for him, he realised, but he couldn’t reassure them now. He had to get his breathing under control and had to get used to this irritating, disorienting feeling of two hearts beating in his chest, which were no longer in harmony.

At least, I’m not dying.

“…do you want to try and sit up?” Takeru had turned away from Miyako already and was kneeling beside him now.

“…y-yeah…” It was not as if something was physically wrong with him and he’d get a heart attack if he tried. He simply had do try and get used to the feeling of two heart beats in his chest, beating one after the other… Ken tried to breathe as slowly and regularly as he could while Takeru helped him to a sitting position. A few steps away, Miyako was still explaining to the others what was going on. Ken’s shoulders dropped. He was being a burden again...

“…you ok?” Takeru himself was rather pale and his brow so furrowed, his eyes so wide, that Ken would have asked whether he was ok, but figured that he probably looked even worse. “...yeah sure…”

Not like he really cares..., that voice whispered, the one inside his head that he hated so much and that sounded exactly like him. He tried to smile reassuringly, but judging from the change in Takeru’s expression it looked more like it could fit on one of those Oni masks, frightful, demonic – maybe it was the Kaiser returning after all. No, no, that couldn’t be it, not while he was still Jogressed with Daisuke... then again... wasn’t he the Kaiser now...? How easy it would have been to join him...

“Ken? You still with us?”
Taichi’s voice took him out of his convoluted thoughts. “...sorry...” he muttered.

“We’re gonna stay here for the rest of tonight. Gonna keep watches in case someone got attracted by the fighting...”

“I can take the first watch,” Takeru offered with a strange sort of eagerness on his face that Ken belatedly figured out to be an urgent need to just do something, anything.

“I’ll make fire!” Agumon offered, blasting out his Baby Flame before anyone even had the time to answer. Hawkmon gave an indignant squawk and rose in the air, his back feathers slightly singed. The smell of it made Ken shudder – suddenly, he could see Daisuke, in front of him, hair singed from one of Alphamon’s attacks – he closed his eyes until the image was gone. Taichi was laughing.

“Not like that, buddy, we gotta make a pile of wood with some stones around it first – we want a campfire, not an inferno...”

Agumon looked a little sheepish, but soon cheered up when Taichi patted his head and joked around with the others about Agumon’s over-eagerness, making even the new girl chuckle. Ken could tell now that their laughter wasn’t all that genuine, but it still sounded grating to his ears.

He felt the grass flatten and weight come down next to him. He turned around and saw Miyako sitting there, knees drawn up to their chest. “Seems weird, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah...” They didn’t have to say what they meant; it was obvious that they couldn’t relate to that lightness anymore, not even when it was dampened by what had happened after the earthquake. He looked at her, glasses cracked – again, after the reboot somehow fixed them; he still couldn’t really get his head around what the reboot had even been… – sleeves so torn that her bare arms showed up to her shoulders. His gaze flickered towards his upper thigh where part of the light blue cloth was wrapped tightly around the wound he’d got from one of Alphamon’s blasters. It still hurt when he touched it and he wondered what it looked like under the layers of cloth...

“So how are you doin’ with that heart beat now? Must be hella weird...”

He let out a short laugh. “You could say that. It’s...disturbing... It used to be so synchronised that it just made me feel stronger, connected. But now...”

She slid her hand over his and squeezed. “It’ll be okay...we’ll get through to Daisuke, I know we will...”

Ken merely hummed, neither in confirmation nor disagreement. He truly hoped so but the irregular beat in his chest, fast and almost painful made it hard to be hopeful.

“Come on, let’s get some sleep. The others will wake us if they want us to take over a watch...”

She softly called out to Hawkmon who came flying over to them and prepared to roost. Miyako tugged on his arm and made him lie down next to her, close to her. Comforted. As safe as they could be now. “...we’ll be fine for the night,” she said.

He hummed again. The night sky above them was dark, except for the stars sparkling here or there. Only the occasional bolts of purple lightning reminded him that things were far from right. Ken looked away and moved closer to Miyako, wrapping an arm around her waist, thankful for his friend’s presence.

She wrapped an arm around him, too, drawing him closer. He could feel her breath on his face
becoming slower, more regular. She was dozing off. Ken wasn’t. He closed his eyes, but that did nothing to stop thoughts circling round and round and round.


Ken must have dozed off because when he opened his eyes again, the sky had turned a dull grey colour, the first light of morning spreading around them.

He felt like shit.

His head was heavy and the light, however dim, hurt in his eyes. His skin felt as if it was stretched too tightly over his bones and he was drenched in sweat. There was also a slight weight on his stomach. He glanced down and saw that it was Miyako’s arm. She was sprawled on her stomach next to him, one arm draped around his middle, the other on Hawkmon’s back. She was snoring softly. He smiled weakly while he gently lifted her arm and put it down on the ground. He slowly staggered to his feet.

Most of the others were still sleeping except for Koushiro, who sat on the outskirts of their little camp, Tentomon circling overhead. Presumably, they were the last watch. Nobody had woken up Miyako or him.

He walked among his sleeping friends; it made him feel oddly ghostlike. Agumon and Taichi were huddled together in an ungainly heap, snoring loudly. Takeru slept curled into a ball with Patamon flopped over his head. All his friends with their partners… He hoped Imperialdramon was okay and that this awful, awful Jogress wouldn’t hurt him in the long run. It couldn’t be good for him, not the way it felt, so wrong, wrong, wrong, second heartbeat pounding against his ribs out of place, out of rhythm…

As he stumbled along, he came past the new girl, Meiko. She, too, was curled into a ball, partnerless like him. He wondered if she felt as lonely as he did. Perhaps they should talk, perhaps they would find that they had things in common… He knew, vaguely, that the infection that had started this all had to do with her partner, somehow, but he didn’t blame her. She couldn’t have known, certainly couldn’t have known that he and his friends were trapped, not like the others… No. Ken closed his eyes. That kind of thinking didn’t help anyone, the only thing it achieved was make that thing in his neck become stronger…

He opened his eyes again, then narrowed them, looking closely at what he’d just discovered. Meiko’s digivice… it looked… odd, but oddly familiar, too. It wasn’t normal, not as it should be, he felt that more than he knew. Carefully, he bent down to have a closer look…

The shriek that followed made him stagger backwards, and then, because he wasn’t at all stable on his feet, fall onto his back. Meiko was sitting upright, screaming.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…!” he stammered, he hadn’t meant any harm, he’d only wanted to take a look, why was she so frightened, everyone was standing around them now, humans and Digimon alike.

“Everyone calm down…!” Taichi said, trying to sound calm, but noticeably stressed. “What’s going on?”

“The boy, the boy, he stole Meicoomon-!”
His shoulders dropped. So that was why he’d scared her so much. She’d confused him with… with the Kaiser. He shuddered. Why couldn’t he leave that part of himself behind, once and for all?

“He’s not that person, you just got confused, Meiko-chan…,” Takeru was explaining, “… remember, that’s Ken, our friend…”

She relaxed right away, looking sheepish and embarrassed now, but it didn’t comfort Ken one bit.

“I’m so sorry…” she whispered, “…you just look exactly like him. Of course I know you’re not, please forgive me…”

He looked away.

A few hours later, they had just finished breakfast – mostly fruit that had fallen from nearby trees during the earthquake – and were discussing where they would go next. Of course, for Ken, the question was moot. It was abundantly clear what they had to do – bring Daisuke to his senses, find the others, go back home, in that precise order. The rest of them had other ideas, however.

Taichi was budgering Koushiro about trying to open a gate to the real world again, just as he had just before Ken had run off. His eyes narrowed as they did back then. “Trying to get rid of me again, aren’t you, Taichi-senpai…” he muttered under his breath. He wouldn’t run away this time but he certainly wouldn’t hide somewhere while the Digital World was in danger. While Daisuke-

“Shit!”

He turned around. Miyako was bent over her D-Terminal, hacking at it with such fury that he was worried she might break it. Hawkmon evidently felt the same way because he was flying next to her head, speaking to her in that voice of authority and reason that was his, trying to get her to calm down.

Ken felt around in his pocket for his own D-Terminal and digivice – he’d almost forgot that they got it back from Gennai’s base.

“What’s wrong with it?” he asked her.

“It’s not working, that’s what’s wrong. I keep trying to get in contact with Iori, but no, nothing. No messages getting through. I tried amping up the signal, but-“ She shook her head in frustration.

“Could be the disturbances, you know…” He pointed to the purple lightning bolts, less visible in the morning light, but still unmistakeable there. “Or that we’re so close to the chasm…”

She swore again. “I just want to be sure that Iori is okay!”

“…me too…”

“Miyako! Ken! Come over for a sec!” Taichi was waving to them, wanting them to come closer to where he stood with Koushiro and his stupid laptop. With a final curse, Miyako shut her D-Terminal and got up.

“Alright, alright,” she muttered, “you’d think he could wait for a few minutes, it took him long
enough to come…”

Ken wasn’t sure what he should feel – he hated to think of his friends as fighting, would have loved to return to how it was before… but he knew that neither of them could. Besides, he thought, glancing forward to where Taichi was still talking incessantly to Koushiro, he deserved at least some anger if he still thought it was a good idea to send Ken home.

They walked over and watched as Koushiro was frantically typing into his laptop. Ken could see right away that he was trying to open a gate, just as he’d thought.

“I’m not going home,” he said right away, and was answered by deep sigh from Taichi.

“Come on, be reasonable, Ken, you’re in no condition to go on with any of this…!”

He glared at Taichi, then turned to Miyako, hoping for support. She was frowning. “You do look like shit, Ken…”

Ken frowned right back, but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t trust himself to – he’d say something angry that he didn’t really mean, and he didn’t want to upset Miyako now; she was the only one who really understood him here.

“It’s not use, Taichi-san…”

“What?”

Koushiro was shaking his head. “I can’t open a gate. Maybe it’s the disturbance of the chasm or maybe it’s the infection as a whole, but there’s no coming through…”

Ken could feel a smile form on his face, even if it didn’t reach his eyes. Taichi turned back towards him and the look he gave him wasn’t exactly friendly, or at least, that’s how it seemed to Ken.

“That’s not a good thing, so stop smirking like you’ve won!” Taichi told him, but Ken couldn’t help it.

“I have, though, haven’t I?”

The smile that broadened on his face now felt like someone else’s smile, but he didn’t care. “I’m not leaving, Taichi-senpai, you can’t make me,” he laughed a little, “You literally can’t.” He could feel the others’ eyes on him, he could practically heard them thinking, he’s regressing, he’s under the influence of the spore. Perhaps he’ll join Daisuke after all. Maybe he should have done so in the first place.

Miyako gave his arm a squeeze but she wasn’t looking at him, she was looking at Taichi. “So what now, great leader? We can’t spend the whole day here, can we?”

Koushiro shook his head before Taichi even had a chance to answer. “No, we should not. I do not think that this place is at all safe.” He gestured around them, the woods with the mountain and the castle to the side, the open plain next to it. “The castle will attract attention if the fighting last night did not already do so, and with the current increase of infection throughout the Digital World, we should probably assume that every approaching Digimon is a potential danger.” He paused, his eyes flickering to Tentomon and back to the screen. “We should also keep watch on our partners…the infection is at 65%, at least on this continent, and it could very well affect them as well. And since we don’t have Pucchiemon available any more…”
Everybody nodded, Ken included. He may be cross at the others, bitter even, but he didn’t want to see their Digimon attacking them again. He didn’t want to see that happen to Hawkmon and Miyako especially.

Taichi cleared his throat. “Right. We pack up and leave then. Any suggestions for directions?”

“We should try and cross the chasm, find the others,” Takeru said, much to Meiko’s dismay, it seemed.

“Th-that could be dangerous…! There’s something vile in that chasm… and what if your Digimon get infected flying over it?”

Taichi replied with such speed and certainness that Ken suspected the older boy had hoped that somebody would suggest a crossing. “But if the infection here is already that high, then they’re in as much danger here as they’d be over there,” he didn’t stop when Koushiro looked up and tried to say something, “And we can look for the smallest crossing possible and attempt it there. After all, I think we’d be in a much better position to defend ourselves if we’re together.”

Ken snorted, and he thought that Miyako was doing the same. Taichi looked at them uneasily. “…Anyway. We should at least try and see if we can make it.”

“Taichi-san… it is possible that the others have had the same thought and crossed over to us…”

Miyako nodded. “Koushiro’s right. I’ve tried contacting them,” she waved her D-Terminal around, “but it’s no use. Either the signal’s too weak or something’s blocking it.” She grinned, though it seemed sad to Ken. “Or maybe they’ve forgot about us now, you never know…”

Ken found it almost amusing how everyone – except Meiko, who probably still didn’t quite know who they were and why they’d never been mentioned before – looked awkwardly to the side, trying not to acknowledge Miyako’s small taunt.

Apparently, it was Takeru’s turn now to give his opinion. “I think we should try it. We have enough Digimon who can fly among the six of us to get us over – and the others have less flying Digimon than we have, so it’s likely they haven’t made it over here yet. Angemon can carry me, Aquilamon could carry Miyako and Meiko—“

“Ken’s with me,” Miyako said before Ken even had a chance to protest. He only felt a little sorry for Mochizuki who again wasn’t really the one their disappointment was targeted at.

“…right then. Miyako and Ken ride on Aquilamon, Koushiro on Kabuterimon, and WarGreymon will carry Taichi and Meiko.”

Meiko blushed at that, but, Ken thought, didn’t seem to mind it very much. Taichi was almost enthusiastic. “See? We can go over easily like that. And then we can find the others, make sure that—“

“-our siblings are okay.”

“…well yeah, them too.”

At least, Takeru was honest about it. Ken had already suspected that Taichi was only so eager to follow a rather risky plan as opposed to exploring the area around them first because he wanted to be where Hikari was. He didn’t blame him, of course. It just left a bitter taste in his mouth that nobody had been worrying about him in that way, when he was missing. He didn’t mind that Taichi was – naturally – more worried about his own sister than about Ken, but he’d just wished
that the others had been just a little bit concerned. He knew they hadn’t remembered them, that it hadn’t been their fault that they didn’t, but still, he wished.

“Then it’s decided,” Taichi said after an awkward pause. “Let’s walk up and down the chasm to see if we can spot a place where it’s narrower, yeah?”

Ken and Meiko stood watching as the others’ partners erupted into blinding lights and emerged in their Adult or Ultimate Forms. He was almost made dizzy by how fast this plan was being put into action, but, then, they didn’t really have a reason to linger here for much longer. They had found a place where they could see a little more of the opposite side of the world – Ken could make out trees and perhaps even a river that was flowing down into the chasm, its course interrupted by the cataclysmic separation of the world – and decided to attempt the crossing there.

He climbed up behind Miyako and clung to her while Aquilamon took off. The movement upwards still made him feel nauseous, but he tried to ignore these feelings as best as he could – there were plenty of other little aches and pains to distract him anyway.

When they were in the air, he couldn’t see much of the others anymore – he could hear the whoosh of Angemon’s wings, could see an orange glow that must have been WarGreymon and up, up above, there was a whirr that could have been Kabuterimon’s insect wings, but that was it. The air above the abyss was glimmering in a purple haze, and for a moment, Ken wanted to tell Miyako to hold back, not to risk Aquilamon being infected. But he knew they had to try anyway – Daisuke was there, and Iori too. They had to be reunited.

Ken leant against Miyako’s back, trying not to move his head at all if he could avoid it. They didn’t speak. He could hear the two heartbeats in his chest much more clearly now, one after the other. And he could hear Miyako’s, too, quicker than it should be.

Aquilamon’s wings went up and down in strong, confident strokes, bringing them across as fast as the Digimon could manage.

Below them, the darkness of the core of the Digital World was alive with movement. Ken shuddered. It seemed like there were vines pulsating around the centre, crushing whatever was there. “…Yggdrasil…” Ken murmured, not even sure what he was saying. From the vines, there seemed to be flowers blossoming, but he might have been imagining it. The centre of each of them seemed bulbous, with thin, spindly fingers stretching out from them, a red tinge running along them like veins. He held on tighter, feeling dizzy all of a sudden, but then Miyako tensed, only briefly, but he knew her well enough to notice.

“Miyako?” He loosened his grip. “…was that too tight…?”

“Huh? Oh. Oh no…” she answered without turning around. Her voice didn’t sound quite alright, but he couldn’t really make sense of it. “Keep holding on to me, I don’t wanna have to dive down there if you fall off…”

Ken shuddered at the mere thought of it and let his head rest against her shoulder, eyes closed, careful not to look down again, trying not to think of hurtling down to the spindly arms stretching out towards him, trying to ignore the vague pull he felt.
He breathed a sigh of relief when Aquilamon landed on the other side. Once he’d slid down from Miyako’s partner’s back, he’d had to pause for a moment, retching. Aquilamon’s up and down had already not been good for him, but somehow, standing on firm ground was even worse. Next to him, he heard a loud thud and saw some pebbles shaken loose from the ground, but it wasn’t another earthquake – it was WarGreymon landing with all the impact his enormous mass required before gently setting down Taichi and Mochizuki. A bit further ahead, Angemon landed on his feet, setting Takeru down and then devolving into an exhausted looking Patamon. On Ken’s right, Kabuterimon touched down, grass and earth flying about beneath him from the helicopter-like whirl of his wings.

They had all made it.

Now they had to find the others.

************************

They had decided to spend most of the day walking to cover as much terrain as possible – they didn’t have a fixed direction anyway since not even Koushiro could locate the other digivices anymore. Their digimon had all devolved to Child level to reserve their strength because, as Koushiro kept reminding them, every Digimon could potentially be infected again and thus an enemy.

The only Digimon they actually encountered, however, were Child level Digimon at the most, and many were smaller. Even though some of them did behave erratically, wildly, they didn’t represent any physical danger to the Chosen children – the greatest danger they posed was that of infection to their partners. It made the others uneasy and twitchy so that most of their hike were spent in anxious silence. Ken couldn’t blame them… He couldn’t stop himself from thinking about Wormmon, either. Was he infected because of the trinary code that seemed to spread throughout the world at such an extraordinary speed that even mere days after the reboot – whatever it had been – it had permeated most of it already? Or was it because of the spore, which now resided in both his and Daisuke’s neck?

At the very least, the weather patterns seemed to have stabilised. It didn’t rain and so the walk was pleasant enough. Only Ken struggled because his leg hurt more the longer he walked and sometimes his vision doubled. The landscape looked like it almost had – tropical plants, bright colours, and the occasional vending machine.

By late afternoon, they had reached a small hill on top of which stood a lonely tree. The leaves rustled in the wind, and if they didn’t all look weary and if Ken didn’t feel so miserable and if Miyako’s clothes weren’t torn, then they might as well have been on a pleasant walk, a camping trip to the Digital World.

Taichi, ever the leader, reached the tree first, and he stood still, silent. Staring. One after the other, the children caught up to him and stared in horror at what lay before them. Beyond the hill, the earth scorched, the trees flattened to ground. It seemed so at odds with the warm glow of the sinking sun – surely it should be raining, Ken couldn’t help but think, but the scene was dreary enough. There was smoke rising here and there, and the smell in the air made Ken’s stomach turn. He preferred not to think about what it might be.

Mochizuki had raised her hands up to her mouth. “Do…do you think that was Meicoomon…?”

“No,” said Ken. “…that was…that was Imperialdramon.” He knew it was Positron Laser even though the attack had never been this strong. It looked like a nuclear blast had hit the area. Noone disagreed with him. What was Daisuke doing…?
It was a while before any of them spoke again.

“Do we…do we just go on…?” Miyako asked, still looking at the wasteland stretching before them. “…that’ll be less easy walking for sure.”

Taichi nodded. “We’re not going to try this now. Sun’s almost down. We camp here, wait for the first sunlight. Then we go on.” He didn’t say what he must have been thinking – what everyone was thinking: what if the others had been here when Daisuke attacked?

Huddling around a hastily assembled campfire, they spent a restless night, sleeping huddled against one another, all tensions forgotten for the moment. Ken had been leaning against Taichi’s shoulder, but sleep hadn’t come at all. When the others stirred, he felt as flattened and crushed as the trees beneath the hill, but they hardly had any other option except move on. They all looked as reluctant as he felt when they trudged down the barren hillside.

Charred branches lay everywhere and the ground was so uneven that everyone stumbled as much as he did. Ken wondered how many Digimon had disintegrated here – not many could withstand an attack like that, certainly not without shelter, and most of the shelter that had once been here had clearly been blown away. As if the morning wasn’t miserable enough already, it had begun to rain and the ground was muddy as they sloshed through it. Everything seemed to look exactly the same to Ken, just brown, desolate earth, no life, no movement. But then he thought he saw something, something white in the distance, near some burned trees that had somehow remained standing.

“Hey, what’s that over there?”

So Takeru had seen it, too. One after the other, the children tried to walk faster though the muddy terrain hardly lent itself to a brisk walk. Unsurprisingly, it was Taichi who overtook all of them, running side by side with Agumon.

*Unwise*, Ken kept thinking.

It could be enemies.

Taichi was well ahead of them already when he turned around and seemed to jump up and down with excitement. Ken could see that he was shouting something, but over the noise of the rain, he didn’t know what he was saying – his gesture was clear enough, though; he was beckoning them to come closer.

“I think Taichi has found something good!” Patamon, perched on Takeru’s hat, squeaked.

“…I bloody hope so,” Miyako muttered as she moved closer to Ken and slid her arm around his waist to help him keep up with the others.

Soon enough, though, they could see what it was that had cheered up Taichi at first glance. The white speck Ken had seen was Nishijima-sensei’s lab coat and he was standing up, waving at them. Next to him was Iori. Ken and Miyako exchanged a relieved look – he seemed alright even if he was clutching Armadimon rather tightly. Huddled on the ground sat someone else, and Ken recognised with a shock that it was Mimi. That wasn’t right, was it? Mimi sitting in the mud, that wasn’t like her at all. Jyou sat beside her, an arm wrapped around the girl. Something was wrong, something must have happened.

He started walking faster, trying to ignore the pain.

When they finally reached them, Miyako let out a frightened gasp, let go of Ken and rushed over to Iori, Ken following close behind. Iori wasn’t alright at all, he was covered in bruises and bloody grazes, and Armadimon looked worse for wear as well. They both hugged him and he clung to the
two of them like a little child, crying.

“What…what happened…?”

“We were attacked…” Gomamon said, crouching next to Jyou. He sounded hesitant, like he didn’t quite want to talk about it.

Ken let his gaze wonder from the Digimon to Mimi and was again taken aback by her state. Her clothes were dishevelled and muddy, her face tearstained. And then he realised – Iori, Jyou and even the teacher were all protectively close to their Digimon. Mimi…Mimi, however, was alone.

“Palmon…?” he asked quietly, anxiously.

Jyou looked up and shook his head. “…she died…” His voice sounded hollow, and when Taichi wanted to know what on earth had happened to them, they remained silent for far too long.

Ken noticed that Mochizuki was about to speak; she was wondering if it had been her partner, he could tell… but she didn’t get to ask her question.

“I-it was Daisuke…” Iori finally blurted out, sobbing.

A dreadful cold took hold of Ken. He’d known, of course, he’d known that the devastation around them had been Imperialdramon’s work, but this…? Attacking their friends, injuring Iori of all people… killing Palmon?

“…he’s not…he’s not himself…” he whispered weakly, but Mimi heard and glared at him.

“I don’t give a shit! He…he killed my partner!” She looked almost ready to attack Ken since he was here and Daisuke wasn’t so Miyako carefully stepped in front of him. He could hardly blame Mimi, though, it was his spore after all that had caused all this. If she had to be angry at one of them, it would better be him, not Daisuke. Daisuke had been pushed to what he was right now through no fault of his own…

Mimi wasn’t finished. “And who says he isn’t involved somehow? It was Imperialdramon after all!”

Ken knew, he knew that Mimi was just hurt, desperately looking for someone to blame, but her words hit him harder even that he had expected. He turned around, moved away from her a bit, didn’t look when Taichi and Mochizuki were trying to get her to calm down. He looked to the ground, studying the muddy earth, seeing ash scorch marks here and there and trying very hard not to picture Imperialdramon directing his Positron Laser at Lillymon.

He felt the impact of a small body around his middle and found that Iori had wrapped his arms around him, renewing their hug more fiercely – perhaps to comfort Ken, but Ken could also tell that his younger friend needed the contact as much as he did right now. Taichi, Takeru, Mochizuki and even Koushiro together with Jyou as well as their partners were huddled around Mimi trying to comfort her. The man, Nishijima, stood a little apart but watched the group with concern.

Miyako, Ken and Iori were pressed together in their own little huddle, separated from their former friends. Again. The rain was relentlessly falling on them, had been falling the entire time without any of them really taking notice.

And just as Ken was thinking about doing something, saying something, perhaps apologising to Mimi once more, no matter what little good it would do, the earth started to rumble. But it wasn’t another earthquake, it was footsteps. Little ripples in the puddles surrounding them. From the
horizon where the scorched earth gave way to a relatively untouched forest they could see them approaching. Triceramon, but not in the wild rage of the infected. They were marching in something approaching a military formation, and they were marching towards them.

Suddenly, a whoosh, a dark shaped whisked past Ken’s ears and he turned around, trying to catch a glimpse of what it had been. Then, another one. And another and another, until they were surrounded by the little flying things.

“Oh man,” Taichi said, standing up to see what was going on, “that reboot sure was thorough.”

Takeru’s fists were clenched and he was deadly pale; he didn’t react to Patamon’s attempts to talk to him.

“What are those?!” Ken asked – in horror, as more and more of the black gears came rushing past.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, it took me AGES to finish this chapter, but finally, it is done!!
Initially, this was going to be the last chapter (minus epilogue), but as is so often the case in writing, the story took me elsewhere.
I hope you enjoyed reading and as always I appreciate any comments you might wanna leave me! :)
Things were supposed to be getting better, not worse. That was what he believed, what he had to believe; that was what his entire crest was about – hope. But hope had become a little hard to maintain these days – especially now when the ground beneath him was shaking with the coordinated steps of an army of Triceramon. They weren’t infected like all the other rampaging Digimon, he knew that, but they were their enemies alright. And he knew perfectly well why that was.

Takeru balled his hands into fists, dug his fingernails into his palms. This couldn’t be. This couldn’t be happening.

Familiar whooshing sounds were whirling around in the air, in his thoughts – he had to squeeze his eyes shut, just for a moment, to clear his head.

He heard Ken yelp as one of the black gears came dangerously close to his head, but Takeru knew they’d aim at the Digimon, not the humans. His eyes widened – they were going for – he raised his hands, fists unfolded, and grabbed Patamon from his head to hug him close, his body curled around his little, defenseless partner.

“…Takeru…?” His partner’s muffled voice was barely audible.

“..you’re safe…” he muttered, “…you’re safe, I’ll keep you safe…”

He could hear himself breathe. It sounded like the breaking of the waves on the shore during a storm – rapid and violent.

“…Takeru…! You’re hurting me…!”

Startled he looked down at Patamon again, pouting and squished against his chest. He let go slightly, even though it made his insides freeze. A dull thumping sound reverberated in his ears – he had no idea what it was.

A hand clasped his shoulder. It was Taichi.

“Calm down, kiddo. You’re not going to have to face him alone, we’re all here.”

Clearly, Taichi had no idea. “He’s coming for me…!” And he was coming for him, Takeru decided. For him and Patamon, but this time he wouldn’t let him take his partner, not ever again…

Black Gears were whirring past his ears, towards the others and their Digimon.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw a familiar glow, and soon after, Aquilamon spread his mighty wings protectively in front of Miyako, Iori, Armadimon and Ken.

No, Takeru wanted to shout. You need to protect him now. But it was too late.

A black gear bored itself into Aquilamon’s chest.
Miyako screamed in shock, but Aquilamon was deadly still. And then he turned around to the three children he had tried protecting only minutes ago, and they barely escaped, just because Ken had seen it coming and had dragged the other three to the side with him.

“Let me go…!” Patamon struggled in his arms, so he tightened his grip.

“No, no…! You can’t fight!” He kept whispering it, trying to block out the sounds of the others fighting.

Taichi was yelling at Miyako to point her D3 at Aquilamon but it seemed to have no effect whatsoever.

“…see, Patamon, the Black Gear won’t come out, it must have become even stronger – there’s no way you’re going to fight…” he whispered almost feverishly, ignoring Patamon’s protest as long as he could.

The telltale light of digivolution made Takeru close his eyes for a moment and when he opened them again, Greymon and Kabuterimon were already trying to stop Aquilamon from attacking again.

Patamon was wriggling about, digging his little feet into Takeru’s arms to get away from him and fight. “I need to help, Takeru! You know who’s coming!” He caught Iori staring at him and his partner in confusion – he didn’t know who was coming, none of the new kids did, and he couldn’t even think clearly enough to be horrified that he’d thought ‘new kids’ – as if that brainwashing, the amnesia, still had an effect on him.

“No, no, I can’t let you…” He would suffocate if he let Patamon go – he couldn’t, couldn’t let him get hurt again… “Ow!”

Patamon had bit him. Lightly, much more lightly than he had done when he was infected, but the shock alone had its intended effect – Takeru loosened his grip and Patamon flew away from his arms. He stopped in mid-air, and turned around to stare down sternly at Takeru, flapping his wings almost angrily.

“We need to protect our friends, Takeru!”

To his left, Ken had pulled Miyako and Iori behind himself, trying to shield them from whatever attacks might get through Greymon’s and Kabuterimon’s defense. He was deathly pale and shaking. To his right, Jou had his arms around Mimi, who was crying loudly, while Ikkakumon was providing some protection to the both of them, even though his mobility was impeded through their surroundings’ lack in snow or water of any sort. He was pushing against one of the Triceramon trying to hurl itself at them. Loud, echoing clanging noises diverted his attention briefly, and he saw Ankylomon’s tail collide with the Triceramon’s horns, and was oddly reminded of some dinosaur documentaries he’d seen on TV, only that this fight looked much more realistic – and could end much more deadly.

He looked in front of him again, where Patamon was still hovering in the air, evidently ready to scold him again. Behind his partner, in the same direction the Triceramon had come from, a dark cloud seemed to be forming, ever quicker, the darkness stretching its cold fingers out at them, ready to devour the light… He could almost hear Devimon’s laughter already.

“Takeru, I need to be ready when he comes…!” Patamon had adopted an almost pleading tone now.
He knew his partner was right. If he couldn’t hold him back – and he had been entirely prepared to shield him with his own body against Devimon – then he couldn’t leave Patamon in his utterly defenseless child form, no matter how much he disliked the idea of the two digimon engaging in battle again.

“O-okay…” he relented, reluctantly. He raised his D3, which had never been so heavy, had never been that hard to lift into the air, and he felt the warm glow, and then he couldn’t help feeling awed as he always did when Angemon’s glorious form appeared before him.

“Thank you, Takeru,” the angel said, his voice suddenly much deeper, but full of Patamon’s love for Takeru. It felt like he was going to freeze. Takeru would not survive seeing Angemon disintegrate again.

Behind him, the clanging booms of the battle seemed to become louder, more frequent. Miyako stumbled against his back – she, Ken and Iori were retreating. Takeru whipped around and saw Ankylomon’s tail still clashing against the neck shields of the ever-encroaching Triceramon, but now Greymon had refocused on the army of brainwashed digimon as well, spewing Mega Flames into their direction. Above them, Aquilamon circled around their group, occasionally screeching at them, as if to keep them in check.

“They’re forming a circle…!” Ken yelled.

“They seem to be intent on keeping us confined to this exact spot,” Koushiro confirmed in a calmer voice, though still clearly tense with stress. Devimon wanted them to be right here, without any options for escape.

“Would someone tell us what’s going on?!” Miyako, speaking for all three kids, who had not encountered Devimon before, not really, anyway, though he suspected that Ken had at least some knowledge of the darkness that had spawned the gruesome Digimon.

There was no time to answer her. The shadows on the horizon had come closer. He could see the individual bats now, could observe how they flocked as they manifested into the form of their original enemy.

“What is that?” Ken and Iori spoke at the same time, both looking equally horrified.

“Don’t worry, I’m a match for him,” Angemon said kindly, trying to comfort rather than answer their question, before he turned, raising his golden staff to face Devimon.

He was here.

“Well, well, Angemon. It is time for us to meet at last.”

Devimon’s voice sent cold showers down Takeru’s spine, and the Digimon’s malicious grin made his breath hitch.

“I have waited a long time for this,” the virus type hissed, and Takeru couldn’t tell if Devimon even remembered their previous encounter on File Island or whether the reboot had wiped his memory, too.

“So have I,” Angemon replied with quiet dignity, countering his enemy’s stare with steely resolution. “But not here.” With a mighty stroke of his wings, he rose into the air, high above the heads of the children, beckoning for Devimon to follow.
Takeru knew exactly what his partner was doing. He was removing the fight from where it could easily endanger any of the Chosen Children herded into a tight little circle, Digimon occupied with the Triceramon, and two partners missing, one under Devimon’s control…

He stared into the sky above them with an intensity that frightened himself. His eyes had started hurting, but he wouldn’t, he couldn’t close them; he had to be watching, whatever happened. Angemon made a few attempts at stabbing Devimon – the Fallen Angel Digimon kept evading the attacks. He reached for Angemon with Death Claw. And Angemon had to retreat.

Takeru had his hands balled into fists, but it didn’t stop the shaking. He needed…he needed to help Angemon… or he needed to be helped, hugged…where was Yamato when he needed him?!

White and black colours danced in the skies, now to fast in their battle to be properly seen, and yet Takeru kept staring. Watching was all he could do. Again.

“TAKERU!” Taichi, yelling in agitation. “What are you waiting for?! Devimon won’t stand a chance against HolyAngemon!”

HolyAngemon. Of course. That might work…

He held up his D3. “Angemon-,” he tried to get his partner’s attention, “get ready to digivolve!” And Angemon turned and was distracted – but just for a moment, it would be worth it once HolyAngemon was there, but – nothing happened.

There was a metallic beep from his D3, and he looked down at the display.

INSUFFICIENT VIRTUE.

Takeru felt his insides turn to ice again, and his knees buckled. “No, no…” He was a failure. A no-good partner. He’d doomed Angemon to death – again! – because he couldn’t muster up enough hope for this to work when that was the only thing he was good for in the first place. Crest of Hope, what good was it, what good was he if he couldn’t even help Angemon evolve?!

Angemon had turned back from him again, now parrying Devimon’s attacks, losing – he was losing, Takeru knew it –

“Takeru.” Another voice, much quieter than Taichi’s.

He looked up – when had he knelt down? – into Iori’s young but unbearably serious face.

“…what…?”

“Have you forgot about us again, Takeru?”

“WH- n-no!”

“Then there’s no reason to lose hope, is there?”

“How did you –?”

Iori held out a hand to him and he grabbed it. The younger boy helped him stand up again. How had Iori known that it wasn’t fear or worry that had made him drop to the ground, but utter
hopelessness? Had he been so painfully obvious, could Iori have possibly heard the D3’s cold and metallic reprimand?

Did it matter?

“Iori, I’m so sorry –“

“Not now. We’ll talk later.” Iori squeezed his hand. There was pain etched on his face, a little anger even – he hadn’t been entirely forgiven yet and he could hardly blame him for it. But there was something else, too.

“…we’re partners, Takeru. Daisuke, Miyako, Ken and I – we were alone, but that doesn’t mean that you have to be.”

Takeru took in a shaky breath. Iori’s face had become a blurry blob, all of a sudden. “But…you…”

“We’re stronger together…” Takeru wiped a hand across his eyes just in time to see Iori’s small wry smile. “I hope you haven’t forgotten how to do it…”

Ankylomon and Greymon had clearly been conferring about battle plans, because Greymon glanced at Taichi – and he turned into MetalGreymon, taking over the Triceramon that Ankylomon had been fending. Nishijima-sensei and LoaderLiomon had taken over keeping Aquilamon at bay – Miyako was at their side, anxiously making sure that her partner wasn’t seriously hurt.

Ankylomon rushed towards Iori and Takeru as fast as he could without trampling any of the Chosen by accident.

Takeru drew another shuddering breath. “Right…right…” He returned Iori’s smile with a similarly weak smile of his own, then focused his attention upwards again.

“ANGEMON!”

This time, when his partner turned, Angemon knew immediately what his partner’s plan was, and he flew lower, followed by a cackling Devimon. “Giving up already, old friend?” he taunted, but it didn’t discourage Takeru anymore. They weren’t giving up.

He looked to Iori, and they both nodded simultaneously, holding each other’s hands tightly.

Warmth filled Takeru and started to melt that frozen block of ice that seemed to have settled in his stomach. He thought that maybe, had he tried it again, his D3 would no longer signal ‘insufficient virtue’, but it was better this way anyway. They were stronger together.

“Ankylomon…”

“Angemon…”

“…JogressShinka…”

“…Shakkoumon!”

Hearing the odd, slightly high-pitched double voice again made him feel comforted. “Yosh!” he heard Taichi cheer, and both Takeru and Iori threw their fists up in the air in celebration of their partner.

Meanwhile, Devimon had caught up, ready to attack, but instead of delivering a final blow to
Angemon as he had no doubt intended, he collided with the bright white chest of Shakkoumon. Nigimitama brought the fallen angel down, broken clay disks piercing his already tattered wings and clipping them to the ground.

Shakkoumon’s eye slits turned red, getting ready to deliver the final blow with Aramitama, the red lasers shooting from his eyes, bound to disintegrate Devimon. Takeru couldn’t help but feel elated.

Finally. This was it. He would get the revenge he had craved since he was eight years of age. Devimon at the mercy of his partner, about to be killed, no sacrifice of Angemon’s necessary.

He hardly noticed Iori’s worried glance before the light of Shakkoumon’s red hot attack blinded them for a moment.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this took a while again... and again I have left you with a cliffhanger - I’m sorry! But I just had to! Devimon made me do it! I hope you like the chapter and enjoyed the new narrator - though he's hardly more reliable than the previous one...

Many thanks to iggy for giving me permission to use the "INSUFFICIENT VIRTUE" idea from her story "Save Two"!

And before I forget: HAPPY HOLIDAYS, EVERYONE!

End Notes

Since Digimon Adventure tri isn't giving me answers, I decided to start making up my own... this is supposed to recover what happened to Ken, Daisuke, Miyako and Iori and explain why the other Chosen Children don't seem to care where their missing friends are...

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!