

Teeth

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Summary

Set just after episode 4: When Green's reaction to that Slow-Mo Black/Red hug is Less Than Thrilled, what's a King to do?

There's one moment of absolute terror, where his stomach drops into his toes as he lays with his bloodied face in the dirt, and then black takes the shot.

The world seems to move in slow motion as Souji watches their rescued King fall into Ian's arms, and he's certain the happy relief on his own face must mirror their smiles. In such a quick time, these friends have come to matter to him a great deal... especially their fearless leader.

Still, that feeling, that *tightness* in his chest, doesn't leave him the entire battle. Every slash he makes is a little stronger than necessary and his teeth are grit so hard, his jaw is sure to ache tonight. *Everyone's safe...so why do I still feel so tense?*

It's only after it's all over, when Ian grins at the group, popping his imaginary gun as the sparkling rain of riches falls around them, that Souji realizes what he feels is... *jealousy*. *Over...* Souji searches himself, plays back his memories... *a hug?*

As King leads the group back to Spirit Base to charge their batteries, Souji's stewing causes him miss the concerned look their leader sends in his direction.

He might not know all of them that well yet, but Daigo's always had a talent for reading people, and he's been particularly attuned to Souji's subtle moods since their first meeting. Watching as Souji retreats to a corner of the base to fuss with his sword, clearly stalling his departure, King keeps one eye on him as he loads his batteries to charge. As happy as he is to finally have his team come together, to see Ian move forward to really join them... the uncomfortable silence from their green does not go unnoticed. Nothing Souji ever does goes unnoticed by Daigo, and even when Ian comes to stand by the batteries and talk with him, he continues to observe.

Souji gives Ami the most polite farewell he can muster when she comes to prod at him, but his eyes follow her as she leaves, stopping to throw her arms around King for an enormous hug first, which he happily returns. He continues to watch as King then hugs Nossan goodbye for the day, laughing at probably another ridiculous pun... and then wonders if he can do the same thing. Simply... walk up... bid farewell... *hug him - Like I should have the other day, instead of hesitating and letting Ami...* - and end this awkwardly jealous feeling.

But Ian is still standing there conversing with King instead of taking off on one of his usual dates, and Souji turns away sharply, packing his sword up and slinging it over his shoulder in edgy annoyance. *This is stupid*. It hadn't bothered him before, so why should it bother him now? He doesn't need a hug. He doesn't need anything. But he also doesn't want to have to watch King with any of the others, especially Ian, not after thinking that the friendship he'd been forming with their leader was...

“We're going upstairs for a snack, Souji – you should join us!” Daigo's hand on Souji's shoulder startles the other boy out of his internal rant, and he smiles when those eyes come up to meet his, but Souji doesn't smile back. “Are you busy now?”

“I, ah...” Souji glances over King's shoulder to where Ian is waiting with the hint of a knowing smirk, and bristles a little.

Sensing the hesitation, Daigo presses him again, his grin widening as he knocks one shoulder against Souji's in a friendly manner. He can tell that something is bothering his friend, but he doesn't know how to get him to talk. The whirl of unspoken feelings behind those serious eyes sets Daigo's heart aflutter in return, though, and the words roll off his tongue before he's quite thought them through, instinct always first. “Come on – I'll buy you a cream soda!”

Souji flushes brightly at the suggestion, averting his eyes away and then back. “I'm sorry,” he finally blows their leader off, unable to face spending any more time having to look him in the eye while these muddled feelings remain just under the surface. “I'm already late for dinner... my father...” He can't even bring himself to finish the excuse, feeling like an ass as he watches the disappointment flicker in King's eyes, his cheerful expression faltering, and he brushes past him awkwardly, ignoring Ian on his way out.

Daigo can't help but let his eyes follow Souji's back as he strides across the room, disappearing through the portal in a flash of light, and wonder what he's done wrong. Of all of his new team members, he feels that Souji probably has the most in common with him, and he can't understand why the other is pushing him away so forcefully all of the sudden. It... hurts, and leaves him feeling very unsettled.

“You can go after him if you like,” Ian suggests after watching the tense exchange with a look of bemusement. *The boy is such a stubborn hothead, and our king is perhaps too dense, it seems.* “I won't hold it against you.”

Daigo finds that for once, he's a little unsure of his own feelings and he shakes his head sharply. “Don't worry about it,” he offers Ian a smile and points towards the portal. “I'll think on it better with a full stomach.”

Nossan ends up joining them for dinner with his sister and Rika in tow, and afterwards, Daigo parts ways with his friends, waving them off in opposite directions. Wandering through the city streets in the dark, hands jammed in his pockets, he finds his mind keeps drifting back to Souji's awkward departure and the empty hole it's left in his chest.

School is unbearably longer than usual the next day as Souji continues to lament his botched actions the previous evening. King had left him with the perfect opportunity to take what he wanted, or even to simply ask for it... and he'd completely chickened out like an idiot... *and* managed to hurt his feelings.

It's stupid, really – King is touchy and seems to hug everyone constantly anyway... so this is such a stupid *stupid* thing to be obsessing over.

But maybe that's part of the problem... even if he can bring himself to take advantage of King's tendency for casual touch, deep down, the jealous feeling in his stomach lets Souji know it would mean more than that to him - to hug their leader. It wouldn't be a casual touch. The grateful way he feels towards King for helping him to make amends with his father, put

his life in order... it digs deeper into him than the way he feels about the rest of the team, deeper than Souji can admit to, and he won't be a liar. He'd rather just... keep his distance instead.

...Which would be far easier if there wasn't a familiar face waiting at the gates when school dismisses that afternoon.

“K-king,” Souji stammers, coming to an abrupt halt as students stream around them on both sides, gaping in surprise at him. “What are you doing here?”

“I really wanted to see you,” Daigo responds sincerely, smiling warmly at Souji and paying no attention to the amount of strange looks the pair are receiving. “I didn't know if you would come to Tiger Boy today and I didn't want to wait.”

“Oh,” Souji says, still struck rather dumb by the moment, and so he doesn't resist when King grabs his elbow and steers him out of the crowd and down the street. *King wanted to see me?*

Daigo automatically heads them in the direction of Tiger Boy, glad that Souji seems surprised but not angry to see him. “Yesterday it seemed like something was bothering you?” he asks cheerfully, folding his arms behind his head and tilting his face upwards to enjoy the afternoon sunshine. He already feels better just being by Souji's side instead of stuck in his wandering worrying all night.

There's a long awkward moment of silence as Souji continues trying to catch up to the idea that *King* came to *school* just to *see* him. “Everything's... fine...” he says slowly, finally falling into step beside him.

“It seemed like maybe you wanted to talk about something?” Daigo tries again persistently, his eyes flickering over to Souji's face, finding that he's hoping for a smile he knows isn't there. *What can I do to put it back there?* When all he receives is more of Souji's stony silence, he can't help but begin to fill the space himself, hoping to loosen the other's mood. “At the very least, I promised you a cream soda yesterday! And if you're not busy, we can always test more batteries or spar together or...”

“King?” Souji finally stops abruptly, turning and waiting until the other boy stops to meet his eyes. Despite how touched he is by their leader's determination to buy him a soda, he's not going to be an idiot and lose this second chance. If they head straight to Tiger Boy, he's bound to have to deal with the rest of the team again as well. “Do you mind if we stop somewhere else first?”

“Anywhere Souji wants!” Daigo responds with a grin, clapping one hand down on Souji's shoulder. “Lead the way!”

The bamboo forest that is home to Souji's dinosaur partner is an ethereal green, with patches of light and shadow playing tag as they walk along the mossy path, side by side. “I usually visit Zakutor on the way to the cafe,” Souji explains softly as they get close to the right place. “I didn't get a chance to yesterday...so I didn't want to miss today...”

“Aaaah... that's both lucky and kind,” Daigo praises him, impressed with the bond Souji's already developed with his dinosaur. Despite his love for Gabutyr, King knows he and his dinosaur are still just beginning to understand each other's hearts. “I'm sure it means a lot to Zakutor that you care enough to spend your time here with him. I think all the dinosaurs can feel our sincerity... and wouldn't choose people to be their partners recklessly at all...which is why we should all work together to get along...”

Souji listens to King's continued ramble about dinosaur and team bonds as he greets Zakutor, petting the dinosaur as best he can manage for their difference in size, pleased when King follows suit and adds greetings from Gabutyr. He's never taken anyone to this place before, despite Ami following him here that one day, but it feels far more comfortable to have King here than he might have guessed...

“...and sometime, we should go visit Gabutyr on his island!” King enthuses, throwing both arms up into the air in excitement, his voice echoing in the quiet surroundings.

“I'd like that...” Turning and walking a few steps away, Souji sets his sword down to lean against a tree, not quite able to look at his leader's exuberant face just yet. “I'm sorry for yesterday.”

“Sorry... for what exactly...?” Daigo prods him, but curiously, not in anger, taking a few steps towards him until they stand no more than arm's length apart.

“For... turning you down...” Souji answers, even though he knows it's more than that. He really hadn't meant to hurt King's feelings and he certainly doesn't want to do so again.

Sensing the hesitation in every word, Daigo worries his bottom lip between his teeth before taking another step forward. “Souji...” he starts, letting one hand come to rest on the younger boy's shoulder. “I'm not upset about that.” Daigo doesn't like to waste time with misunderstandings, so even if his manner is often blunt, he finds that honesty is really the best way to the heart of any matter. “Come on, what's really bothering you?”

The hand on Souji's shoulder actually helps to calm his raging torrent of feelings, and he thinks for a long moment about why he asked King to come out here alone with him. “You... say we have a lot in common...” he intones lightly, a statement of fact wrapped around a question.

“We do, you know...” Daigo confirms immediately, his hand squeezing Souji's shoulder, but he can tell from the tone that it's really a request for a longer explanation. “We're both... people who've been raised by someone... with a lot of passion for, dedication to something...” Well, that was one way to explain his father's all-consuming obsession with the dinosaurs, and he certainly couldn't *fault* him for it. He imagines Souji feels much the same. “My dad with dinosaurs... your dad with swordsmanship... they loved these things so much, they couldn't help but raise us surrounded in that love. So, maybe they think that... or even, maybe we feel like... like we should be their legacy, right?”

Yes...yes, that's a lot of how I feel, a lot that King understands about me... Souji's hands close into tight little fists at his side. He wants to feel like seeing King understand the others is a betrayal... but he's still right here at Souji's side too, understanding him better every day. It's

impossible to fault him... for simply being himself. *And maybe I wouldn't feel the way I do if he was different.*

“But you've got the secret figured out already, Souji...” And now King grins, for he's so fond of Souji already, so fond of the way they're kindred spirits. He's met a lot of people in his travels, but never someone he's felt could really understand his mindset. Throwing his arms out to grab at the air, he continues, “You've got to take that passion and just make it a part of your own journey! Isn't that... what we're both doing? *Chomping out our own unique paths?*”

He's ridiculous.

He's right.

Souji's hands loosen and he finally turns around, a slow shake of his head before he finally lifts his eyes to meet King's. “You have... such an unusual way of doing things.”

There's a tiny facet of worry hiding in Daigo's smile as it begins to turn decidedly pouty, and his voice is uncharacteristically soft as he asks. “But you get me, don't you, Souji?”

Souji can't help but crack the hint of a smile at King's expression, which causes him to brighten considerably. “I do...”

“But...?” King's eyebrows raise dramatically as he presses, but now that he's seen that hint of that smile, he's definitely not going to give up until he gets it in full. He can feel they've reached the heart of the problem, finally... “It's not enough that we understand each other...?”

There's a moment of quiet tension, and even though Souji is certain he already knows the answer, he can't help but bring himself to ask anyway. “I want to know that the friendship we have is....is...”

Oh... Oh! This... this is one I can answer. King grins, unable to help but tease, just a little, as he tries to fill in the blank. It's clear to him now that Souji feels the *kindred* between them just as much as he himself does, and all of the previous night's worry finally evaporates.

“Important?”

Souji's cheeks flush.

“Special?”

Then his ears.

“Forever?”

King knows he's close to the limit of Souji's patience, as the more he says, the further embarrassed Souji gets, and so he finally starts to laugh, loudly and happily. Throwing his arms open wide, he beckons him close in much the same way he had a few days previous. “Souji...”

Souji wants to be mad that King is teasing him so mercilessly, but that great big goofy grinning laugh... it finally unravels the last of his resolve. What he wants is right in front of

him and-and-

stop thinking

Souji is in King's arms almost instantly this time, a grin splitting his face as the other boy's arms close tight around his shoulders. *He's warm...* Souji's heart hammers as he lifts his own arms to encircle King's back, letting himself be pulled in close. It's just as he'd daydreamed it might be, and yet... he finds what he's most struck by is not how it feels to be *in* King's arms... but how it feels to have King in *his*.

“Souji is...” King whispers, holding the younger boy tight against him, feeling that he owes him a real response for such honesty. He can feel the rapid fire pace of Souji's heartbeat hammering against his own, so very in sync. *I'm happy.* “Souji and I...” he tries again, then turns his face, laughing softly into Souji's neck, because sometimes he's terrible, just terrible at actually explaining anything...

“K-King!” Souji gasps in surprise as he feels King's teeth chomp down hard on his neck, just under his ear, just above his collar. His hands clench into the fabric of their leader's vest as a line of heat shoots straight down his center.

“We're the only two with teeth,” King whisper-teases into his ear with another soft laugh. Letting him go, he takes one step back, a huge grin spreading across his face again as he hooks his hands into his vest pockets. “So don't forget!”

“I...I won't...?” Souji's cheeks are still pink as he lifts one hand to rub at his neck, wondering what he could possibly think of to say to such a statement, and then he decides he doesn't really care right now. He's too pleased.

Too pleased to even be aware of the ear-splitting grin he's wearing that perfectly matches Daigo's.

King's aware of it, though, and he continues to beam, throwing an arm around Souji's shoulders while declaring. “I'm starved!”

Souji only barely manages to contain his grin by the time King drags him to Tiger Boy, and just as he expects, the entire team is already assembled. Sliding into his usual place, he's surprised one further time today by their leader.

“Hey, Ami!” King calls, sinking down opposite of Souji and nudging his foot under the table. “Two cream sodas today on my tab!”

All eyes turn to stare at Souji but he only shrugs without explanation, kicking King back underneath the table before smiling at the group – causing a squeal of delight from Ami and even more suspicious looks from Ian and Nobu. “Thanks, King.”

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