For Love of Pharaoh and King
by Lightningpelt

Summary

Yugi Mutou enjoys wearing decorative chains—for both their aesthetic appeal and their irony, considering his recent transition from slave to Betrothed of Pharaoh Atem.

Ryou Bakura, meanwhile, serves both his Pharaoh and exiled Thief King. But neither the Thief King nor his servant counted on the involvement of the Royal Husband-to-be in their plans.

Part One of the Those Who Rule Egypt series. Can be read separately.

Notes

So, um... I've fallen headfirst into this fandom and somehow ended up with 20,000+ words of guys my hand slipped send help. I mean, c'mon. Class difference is one of my favorite things to write, so I had to contribute to the Pharaoh/Slave Puzzleshipping trope. And Bakura happens to be my favorite boy, so when he wandered into this story I had to just go with it. And there's actually a shocking lack of Gemshipping to be found in the fandom, so I thought,
"What a fine opportunity!" I really wasn't planning to post it, but then somehow managed to finish it, so...

**Some Important notes about the story!**

- The first chapter is told mostly in flashback, but that isn't indicative of the whole story.
- Rating is "M" because there's some fade-to-black moments, as well as some flowery language to describe you-know-exactly-what. But private bits are never expressly mentioned (I think the closest I get is describing what's happening with "hips").
- **WARNINGS** for mentions of past abuse, very brief mention of dub-con in a flashback, talk of contemplated suicide, lots of wine, and the aforementioned fade-to-blacks.
- I may wind up hand-waving some things, here, but feel free to give me suggestions or let me know if I've gotten something wrong! I've just been working so darn hard on my original fiction lately that I'm taking a really laid back approach to this, so please keep that in mind and don't rain on my parade~
- Though grammatically questionable, in certain instances, I choose to capitalize "Pharaoh" to better contrast with "Thief King."
- Duel Monsters/Shadow Games are thing, with some major deviations from the canon. This is an AU in other ways, as well, including but not limited to some changed backstories. The Millennium Items also aren't really things.

And I'm done rambling! (I think, whoops) I hope you enjoy the story~
"Pharaoh, it's alright..." The small boy glanced up; met the entrancing eyes of Egypt's ruler.

A handsome young man stood behind the boy, his dexterous fingers preening through the other's spiky hair. He crouched down, eyes fixed on the image of the two of them reflected in an ornate mirror made of polished, reflective bronze.

"You will look your best, my partner. No one will dare to question you then, not aloud."

Yugi Mutou fidgeted, comfortable with the Pharaoh's touch but bewildered by his own reflection. How had his slender neck come to be adorned by weighty gold? A ring of bruises seemed far more expected. The chains on his wrists were exclusively decorative, now, not functional shackles. He seemed to glow with restored health; his body still bore scars, but they were less obvious beneath thick golden robes than threadbare sackcloth.

Even more perplexing than his own appearance, however, was the man crouching beside him, holding up alternating sets of earrings beside Yugi's head, trying to decide which he favored.

The Pharaoh Atem had many servants and slaves—and Yugi Mutou should have been one of the later. He supposed he still was, technically, despite Atem's fervent denials of it. Yugi had reservations regarding the legitimacy of his initial capture and sale, so perhaps the whole thing was somewhat null and void, but, regardless, he wasn't living as a slave now. Atem certainly didn't treat him as one.

Indeed, Pharaoh Atem treated him as partner and consort.

The Pharaoh eventually decided to link the two sets of earrings together, leaving one jewel to dangle ostentatiously from the other. He clipped the ornaments into place, pausing to caress the ridge of one of Yugi's ears.

"Really, Pharaoh, this is too much..." Yugi objected softly, only for the other to shake his head vigorously.

"Never too much. Not for you."

Never too much—it was one of Atem's favorite phrases, where Yugi was concerned. Whether the topic was the absurdly soft, high-canopied bed, the wardrobe filled with silks and satins, or the abundance of nutritious, decadent food, Atem usually answered Yugi's objections in that way: "Never too much."

Servants had dressed and made up the Pharaoh, but the Pharaoh himself made a point of dressing and making up his small slave.

Everyone knew that Atem was a young ruler, but his exact age changed depending on who one spoke to. Yugi now knew the number with primary-source certainty: nineteen. *Nineteen...* he often reflected, shocked and awed by the fact. Though far smaller, physically, than Atem, Yugi himself was eighteen. Atem showed his age in rare moments of vulnerability, and Yugi sometimes wondered how many other living people had seen the more emotional sides of the Pharaoh.
"By Ra, curse them!"

Atem's fist cracked the stone, and Yugi flinched—instinctively, though he knew the anger wasn't directed at him. He lay, feeling slightly abandoned, on his back in the Pharaoh's bed; watched as Atem glowered at the crumbling patch on the wall.

"Pharaoh?"

"Curse them!" the Pharaoh repeated, though he didn't move to strike again; his shoulders were so tense they seemed carved from stone, and Yugi could see tightly drawn muscles outlined on Atem's bare back, quivering beneath the flawless bronze of his skin.

"They're long-healed, Pharaoh. It's alright. I don't feel them anymore."

Yugi was unsure if Atem had truly failed to notice the scars before, or if it was only his first time reacting to them. Atem had a habit of pushing himself right to the threshold of snapping, where control of his emotions was concerned. Unless that threshold was reached, he could be completely inscrutable.

"I'll find them..." Atem snarled, though his tone remained deceptively soft. "I would burn them as offerings, but no god I know would accept such shit."

Yugi wriggled out of the bed; went to his Pharaoh, and wrapped his arms around Atem's waist from behind. He felt the Pharaoh trembling.

"Come back to bed. Don't think about the before. It makes me think about the before, then."

Atem cringed. "Sorry." He let Yugi pull him back to the bed, then allowed himself to be pushed down. Yugi slithered up on top of him, and touched the Pharaoh's cheek when Atem turned away to the side.

"Don't be sorry for anything. Please. Not you, Pharaoh."

Atem responded to his touch; looked up and met Yugi's calm gaze with tumultuous brown eyes. Though the rest of his face remained impassive, his eyes spoke of anger and fear and sadness and love. Yugi leaned down and pressed their foreheads together, feeling Atem let out a shuddering, pent-up breath.

"Don't be sorry, Pharaoh. We're together now. That's all that matters to me."

Atem kissed Yugi's forehead before placing a golden crest there—it matched the one that adorned Atem's own head. Yugi reached out to tangle his fingers in the front of Atem's robes, chuckling faintly.

"This is ridiculous, Pharaoh. I'm nervous."

"I can feel it. But I'm here, and no one will hurt you. No one will question you. No one will ever dare to touch you again. You are mine."

Yugi smiled; closed his eyes. "Yes..." He lifted his head, and Atem touched their noses together.

_It was the duty of the Pharaoh to inspect the newest batch of slaves purchased for use at the palace—not one of Atem's favorite duties, but one that must be taken seriously regardless._

_Young Yugi Mutou stood amongst the other slaves, swaying slightly on weary legs. He was relieved_
to have ended up in the palace—he had heard, through the bewilderingly effective network of information that slaves shared, that the palace was not a bad place to be a slave. And, while he resisted that identity with every scrap of strength left to him, he currently existed as such.

He had been in bad places to be a slave—very bad places to be a slave. He was happy of the slightest hope for the slightest respite from such torments.

The Pharaoh entered among a small entourage of castle-folk, and Yugi felt an unexpected jolt that travel up his spine. He had seen Pharaoh Atem from a distance, but couldn't imagine why the young ruler's presence would make him react so. His exhaustion-deadened nerves came alive; his eyes, widening, focused in on Pharaoh Atem and refused to close or move.

And then the Pharaoh met his gaze.

Pharaoh Atem, maintaining eye contact with the tiny slave boy, leaned over to one of his attendants, who nodded rapidly several times. A few moments later, when Yugi imagined his heart was about to successfully shatter through his ribs, the attendant came over to him. Pharaoh Atem averted his eyes, at last.

"Please come with me," the attendant said, and Yugi mumbled something agreeable; his breath seemed to have left him along with the Pharaoh's eyes. "The Pharaoh wishes to receive you personally."

A murmur of speculations sprang up among the slaves—the majority of which had a dubious lean to it. But Yugi couldn't summon up the proper amount of apprehension. On the contrary, he felt a tremendous sense of relief, as if he had reached the end of some great journey. When he tried to move forward, he stumbled; though his heart was beating out a victorious rhythm in his chest, his legs were still hopelessly worn.

The attendant lent him his arm, and Yugi accepted the support.

Pharaoh Atem stayed a meter or so ahead as they walked through the hallways of the palace, and Yugi forced his legs to keep moving as he followed the Pharaoh. Atem's figure was painfully familiar to him—something he had seen, too many times to count, in dreams. But that seemed unlikely, so he dismissed the sense of recognition as fatigue-induced hallucination and trudged on.

At a motion from the Pharaoh, the attendants peeled away. Yugi staggered for a moment, as he lost the support of the servant's arm, then struggled to follow the Pharaoh through a doorway.

As soon as he entered, Yugi realized where he was. At the same time, he thought the conclusion was quite improbable, if not impossible. The chamber was lushly decorated in shades of gold and red, and the canopy bed alone, in its center, was larger than Yugi's childhood room had been.

The Pharaoh closed the door behind him, and Yugi felt a supportive hand in the small of his back. He leaned reflexively back into it, for fear of falling.

"What is your name?"

The Pharaoh's voice was deep and rich, and Yugi felt himself weaken, mysteriously, further. He looked up at the man—handsome, young, and very human when seen up close—and said, "Yugi... Mutou..." as he struggled to draw breath into his collapsed lungs.

Atem nodded; fidgeted, and then gave his lip a small nibble. Yugi wondered if he had seen that right—for could the almighty Pharaoh really be showing such a genuine sign of uncertainty?—but his thoughts scattered when he was swept up off his feet. He gave a breathless little squeak and clung
"Come, Yugi. I'll get you cleaned up." Atem's voice was lower, this time. Yugi looked up at him quizzically, searching for some clue in the man's beautiful, bronzed face. But the Pharaoh's expression gave nothing away, even as he swept toward the bathing room off one side of his chamber.

The water in the bath was hot—not uncomfortably so, but right on the verge of being so. Atem set Yugi on the edge of the stone tub, then began to slowly disrobe. Yugi shivered violently, but found himself unable to look away from the Pharaoh's intimately familiar, godlike form.

"Is this alright?" Atem asked, though his voice was slightly less than steady. He spread his arms. "I would not ask you to expose yourself so vulnerably if I was not willing to do the same."

Yugi inclined his head slightly, struggling to understand. "It's fine."

Atem nodded, then undressed the small slave and lifted him into the bath. The warm water felt heavenly to Yugi, and he shuddered; tried to remember the last time he had truly been warm, since winter had begun. A small cloud of rusty red and brown materialized around him as Atem lowered them both to sit on the bath's stone steps.

Atem began to wash Yugi, methodically and tenderly, with a cloth that felt too soft to belong in the mortal world.

"Why are you doing this, Pharaoh?" Yugi asked the question in a small voice, with tears coursing down his cheeks.

Atem's hands didn't falter as he gently cleaned out a bloodied divot in Yugi's bony back. "I've seen you. In dreams."

Yugi shuddered slightly. "... Me?"

"You. I'm certain."

Yugi closed his eyes, trying to make his own strange, nightly visions come into focus. Atem's scent was familiar and comforting.

"I did not know you would appear before me as a slave," the Pharaoh continued.

"I wasn't born a slave."

"A commoner?"

"Mmhm." Yugi leaned back slightly, feeling Atem's fingers work up a lather in his filthy hair. He kept his eyes closed. "My grandpa deals in games."

"Games?"

"Mmhm. Wonderful games."

Atem was silent for a moment, working his way across Yugi's body. "Lean back," he commanded, after a time, and Yugi allowed himself to be dipped back into the water. Atem rinsed the soap from his hair.

"I have met you before, Pharaoh."
Atem's hands stilled, but Yugi wasn't concerned. He allowed himself to drift in the feeling of the Pharaoh's strong hands supporting him; of the warm water he floated in.

The Pharaoh said, "I'll keep you beside me, if you'll let me."

"According to your own law, Pharaoh, I'm your property." Yugi said it with a slight smile, eyes still shut.

"I would free you, if you wish," Atem said, his words a bit jumbled with haste. "In fact, I free you now. As of this moment, by decree of the Pharaoh Atem, you are free, Yugi Mutou."

Yugi's smile widened. "We're in an odd position for you to say that."

Though he couldn't see it, Yugi could tell that he had made the young Pharaoh blush, and got a thrilling pleasure from that. He felt the touch of a nose against his, moments later, and opened his eyes as he realized that Pharaoh Atem had just kissed him.

"I'll make you mine, if you'll allow it." Atem's eyes burned with a virile, masculine type of passion, though the touch of his hands remained light; unobtrusive and gentle. Yugi shifted his body, curling in on himself and so sinking into the water to rest between Atem's knees.

"I'm certainly in no condition to make the trip home."

"You aren't," Atem said, a note of concern appearing in his voice. His hands skimmed along the smaller boy's abused body, and when he spoke again it was with the wrath of gods underlying his words. "I am so sorry for what you've gone through."

"Then why do your laws allow things like this to happen?"

"They don't. Slavery is a societal construct that benefits the kingdom, certainly, but human beings, slaves or otherwise, should be treated with respect. That is my belief."

Yugi shrugged. "Fair. Though, for what it's worth, I was more or less abducted."

For the first time, Atem's grip tightened. "You were...?"

"I won a game. I bet my life on it, you see, against the debts on my grandfather's shop, and I won. But the man who lost to me was angry, and I'm rather bad at physical fighting. He did keep to our terms, strictly speaking, by not killing me."

Atem was silent. Then: "I will not let you suffer any longer."

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

"I'll have them fetch you something to eat, and then you'll rest," Atem said, lifting Yugi from the bath and beginning to briskly dry him with a towel as soft as clouds. "My healers will tend to you when you wake."

Yugi nodded, finding his trust in the Pharaoh to be both inexplicable and absolute. He let himself be dressed in a thin robe, tied loosely at the waist. Atem's eyes didn't meet his, though Yugi's gaze remained fixed on the mysterious Pharaoh. To distract himself, he glanced over his shoulder at the water, stained reddish brown from the blood and dirt that had been washed from his skin. He looked down at his arm, slightly flushed from the heat.

"How do you keep the water warm?"
"My magicians give me such little luxuries," Atem replied. "I don't ask, but they do things like this, anyway. The water cycles automatically, too, so it'll be clean again within the hour."

"So it's enchanted?"

Atem nodded. "Commoners don't realize how much magic flows through this palace, day in and day out. And most of it doesn't go to things like heating my bath."

"What does it go to, then?"

"Games."

Yugi's eyes widened. "Games?"

Again Atem nodded, his gaze distant and thoughtful. "Perhaps that is why the gods have given you to me, and at this precise time... Yugi, Magician of Games..."

That first night in Atem's care, Yugi had wondered if he might actually be dead. The Pharaoh's dwelling was like the stories he had heard of the afterlife, and the Pharaoh himself like a kindly god. But in many other, less noticeable ways, Atem was strikingly mortal. He nibbled on his lip when he was searching for words, and honest surprise made his eyes bug in a comical manner. He was tentative whenever he touched the small slave boy, as if trying not to spook a timid animal. More than anything, his gaze glowed with fragile, youthful hope when he looked at Yugi Mutou, and it made the other determined to live up to the version of himself had visited Atem's dreams.

The Pharaoh's bed was huge and soft and unnaturally warm; Yugi had wondered if—and since confirmed, yes—it was enchanted like the bath. The first night Yugi spent there, the Pharaoh hadn't slept in his own bed. Work, he had said—he had work to attend to, and hadn't planned to sleep that night, regardless. Yugi had slept like the dead, gratefully. In the morning, he had eaten a fine breakfast, and then the healers had seen to him, as Atem had said they would. When they gave their report, Yugi had seen the Pharaoh's face twist with anger for the first time.

"Is this alright?" Atem asked, in reference to the food that several servants had brought for a midday meal. The Pharaoh had been in and out of his chamber throughout the morning, constantly checking on the slave boy there.

"It's more than enough," Yugi replied, a bit amused by the fussing.

"Never enough..." Atem muttered.

"This is a week's worth of food, back at home." Atem looked sharply over, his face surprisingly stricken, and Yugi held up his hands quickly. "A joke! A joke!" He took a bite to demonstrate his satisfaction with the offerings, though he nearly choked on how good it really did taste.

Atem's expression eased, and he looked away. "Never enough..." he repeated, and Yugi shook his head.

"Thank you, Pharaoh."

"Thank you, for allowing this," Atem said, then placed his face in his hands. Yugi watched him for a moment, bewildered, but the Pharaoh didn't look back up.

"I've dreamt of you too, Pharaoh."

Atem's head snapped up, and Yugi caught the tears in the corners of his eyes before he could blink.
them away. "You have...?"

Yugi nodded. "I wasn't as sure at first, because it seemed pretty impossible, but I know now. I feel like I've known you my entire life."

Atem came forward suddenly; embraced the other, his arms powerful and protective. His wiry strength was commanding, and Yugi drew a sharp breath as fire gathered deep in his belly.

Atem drew back, though his hands remained on Yugi's shoulders. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," Yugi cut him off gently, then moved forward; hugged the Pharaoh, who relaxed gradually into the embrace. "Hold me. Please. It feels nice."

Atem nodded into the crook of Yugi's neck, then kissed the top of his head. "I'll never let go, if that's what you desire."

Yugi tightened his grip. "That would be fine, Pharaoh."

... ... ...

"Pharaoh?"

Night had fallen again, and Atem looked up from a grand desk in the corner of the room. Yugi sat on the very edge of the Pharaoh's bed, his feet dangling a considerable way off the ground. Beneath the black makeup around Atem's eyes, Yugi could decipher shadows of fatigue.

"Yes? Do you need something?"

Yugi shook his head. "Are you going to sleep, tonight?"

Atem's eyes widened, and his hand jerked; knocked over the inkwell on his desk, and he muttered, "Bast!" as he scrambled to rescue sheets of papyrus from the spreading black puddle.

Yugi smiled at the display—yes, the Pharaoh had an awkward side to him. He wondered how many other people had seen this private part of the Pharaoh's personality; it was endearing, almost cute.

"Don't worry about that," Atem said, after he had averted the inky crisis on his desk.

"I can sleep somewhere else—a chair, or even the floor. I don't mind."

"No." Atem's voice was firm. "You will sleep in the bed."

"Do you think you can't, then?"

Atem stiffened, and Yugi knew he'd hit upon the truth. The small boy shook his head slightly.

"I don't mind. I trust you, Pharaoh."

Atem stood abruptly; straightened his robes and began to stride toward the door. "I'm going out for some air."

"I didn't dream about you last night, Pharaoh. I was lonely, last night."

Atem stopped; stood still, like a gilded statue in the doorway. "I... did not dream of you, either."

"Come to bed, Pharaoh."
Atem spun; bashed his shin into a small table in his haste and hissed, curling in on himself. Yugi tried not to laugh.

"See? You're half-asleep already."

Atem chuckled grimly. "Ra help me..." he breathed, straightening. He met Yugi's gaze, his eyes warm. "Alright. I'll come to bed."

"We don't have to do this, Pharaoh."

Atem shook his head; touched his nose briefly to Yugi's. "I want to do this."

"I don't mind being kept secret. Not when I'm your secret."

Atem shook his head. "As long as you remain secret, I'll be expected to entertain potential suitors. And I refuse to be unfaithful to you in such a way."

"But this will put you in an uncomfortable position, won't it? Won't I?"

Again Atem shook his head. "You will never be an inconvenience to me."

Yugi frowned slightly. Most of the people in the palace knew of his existence, of course, and many had at least guessed at the nature of their relationship, but most of the Pharaoh's common subjects assumed he was nothing more than a concubine—it wouldn't be unusual for a pharaoh to take on a slave in such a way. But now, at this celebratory banquet, Atem intended to reveal Yugi, officially, as his betrothed.

"Pharaoh, it might be better for you to keep me—"

"You are vital to me." Atem's voice left no room for argument. "I will have everyone know it. Besides," he added, softening, "your family can join us, then, here in the palace."

That was the argument that Atem had used, in the first place, to convince Yugi that the revelation was a good idea. While Yugi had established and maintained written contact with his mother and grandfather, with Atem's help, he missed them dearly. Once he was officially betrothed to the Pharaoh, it would only be natural for them to come and live at the palace.

If he thought that Atem was only using the argument as a means to an end, Yugi might have been angry. But the Pharaoh, Yugi believed, honestly wished to bring the Mutou family into his own royal fold. Besides that, Yugi's grandfather would be of great use where the matters of royal games were concerned.

"Yugi, I believe you are my salvation."

Atem whispered it against the back of Yugi's neck one night, and the small boy shivered with the feeling of his breath. In the beginning, Atem had kept careful and generous distance between them in the huge bed—there was certainly enough space for the two to sleep side by side without ever touching. It had been Yugi who had shimmied over, edging closer night by night, and eventually managed to snuggle up against the Pharaoh's lean body. While Atem had initially resisted this arrangement, remaining perfectly still or even nudging Yugi away from him, he had eventually adopted a protective embrace as his favored response to the advances. They lay spooned together beneath the warm blankets, now, Atem observing the newfound softness of Yugi's skin. His bones still dug into the Pharaoh's own flesh, sharp reminders, but his skin no longer felt like over-dried papyrus; his hair was soft and smelled of expensive perfume. He had been in the possession of the Pharaoh for just about a week.
"Hmm...?" Yugi, half-asleep, turned his head a bit. Atem shifted to oblige the movement.

"You play games, yes? I have great need of those skills."

"I know..." Yugi replied, and Atem stiffened.

"You know?"

"The dreams..." Yugi mumbled, his voice slurried with sleep. "Sometimes... I play for you..."

Atem nodded, though Yugi couldn't see it. "That's... yes. I know."

"I know. We're having the same dreams, Pharaoh. Haven't you figured that out, yet?"

"I haven't had one since I met you."

"I know that, too. Neither have I. We don't need them anymore. Shouldn't that be obvious?"

Atem sighed. Yugi usually had some modicum of respect for his pride, even when he blatantly got the better of his Pharaoh, but it seemed sleep had stripped him of that filter.

"Will you play a game with me, tomorrow?" Atem asked.

"About time you asked."

Atem chuckled, this time, and nuzzled into the back of Yugi's neck. He felt vertebrae, hard against the tip of his nose.

"Curse it, Atem, would you just..."

Atem stiffened and drew back slightly—it was the first time, if his memory was reliable, that Yugi had called him by name. And the slave sounded irritated.

"What? Do you need something? Was that too much?"

"Atem, we've been having the same dreams." Yugi flipped over, quickly enough to make Atem fully withdraw from the embrace. But Yugi followed him across the bed, small hands knotting in the front of Atem's robes. "I haven't had a single dream, since. And I miss you."

His lips—still chapped, like his skin had been, and thin—met Atem's. Though surprised, the Pharaoh responded with practiced certainty. The contact—mouth to mouth, chest to chest, hips scarcely brushing one another—was familiar. Atem wrapped his arms confidently around Yugi, lavishing attention on the smaller boy's mouth.

"Same dreams..." Yugi whispered, when they paused to breathe. "Same dreams, Pharaoh... and I miss them. I miss you."

Atem, his throat disconcertingly dry, nodded. "Same dreams... Yes. And I miss you, Yugi."

Though it was the first time they had touched one another in such a way, they both felt like they had consummated their bond many times before. For the duration of the night, they explored one another's bodies in proper; reveled in their physical joining at last.

"I love you, Yugi Mutou..." Atem breathed, lavishing attention on the other's mouth and then promptly having to redo the paint on his lips. "Have faith. Everything will go as planned."
"I trust you, Pharaoh... always..." Yugi breathed, leaning after Atem as he withdrew, searching for another kiss. But Atem pushed him gently back.

"We should be going. It wouldn't do to be late."

"We'd be able to make quite an entrance, if we were."

Atem chuckled. "A pharaoh can make whatever type of entrance he fancies. He doesn't have to resort to things like intentional tardiness."

"What if my clothes were askew, Pharaoh? And my hair messy, and my makeup smudged? What type of entrance would that make?"

Yugi laughed at the way Atem's face flushed, and the Pharaoh tripped over the trailing bedspread as he tried to walk briskly toward the door. "You're an evil spirit, Yugi Mutou," he muttered, running a hand through his hair, "sent here to ruin me."

Again Yugi chuckled, then rose; embraced the Pharaoh from behind. "Sorry. I'll behave, I promise."

"By Ra, please behave..." Atem breathed, and Yugi gave him a playful shove.

"Let's get going. You don't want to be late, do you?"

"Curse it... Ra be with us both..." Atem fixed his golden skirts crossly, and then strode to the door. A small cluster of servants, already aware of the announcement that was to be made, close in protectively around their Pharaoh and his Betrothed.

"Yugi... Yugi, can you hear me...?"

They met in the same violet-tinted scape as their shared dreams, yet this time at will. Yugi waved Atem over excitedly.

"It worked!"

The Pharaoh nodded, glancing about nervously. "Are you sure? You're willing to do this thing?"

Yugi nodded, beaming. "I'm honored to serve my Pharaoh!"

"Don't say it that way..." Atem muttered, but his tension eased when Yugi picked up his hand and kissed it's back.

"Anything for you, Atem. This is what I can do—this is what I love, and this is what I'm good at. I'm the best player of games in the kingdom. Just watch me."

Atem nodded, though his brow was still creased with worry. "Alright. Be careful."

Yugi nodded; stretched up on his toes. Atem obliged him with a peck on the lips, and then the two parted.

Yugi Mutou gasped as he found himself in the body of Pharaoh Atem, staring across a fire-lit stage. A shadowy dragon monster floated above his opponent, menacing, and he swallowed. But he forced his heart rate to slow; tried not to let Atem's outward confidence falter.

He looked down at the papyrus cards in his hand, and he smiled.

Atem, meanwhile, came to with a start in the body of Yugi Mutou. The magicians sitting on either
side of him moved to help him when he slumped to the ground, breathing hard.

"Why..." he gasped out, then winced. "Why is it so hard to stand...?!" His legs—Yugi Mutou's legs—were trembling.

"Please don't worry, Pharaoh," one of the magicians said. "This will be over as soon as the game ends. We'll get you back into your own body shortly. Until then, please try to relax."

"No..." Atem wheezed, struggling to get his borrowed body upright and failing. "Yug..."

"The Mutou child is doing fine," the other magician said. "He's manifested in your body, by now."

A distant explosion echoed up through the palace—the sounds of a monster battle. Again Atem tried to stand, and this time succeeded. He had to brace his legs wide to manage it, and looked down in confusion as himself.

Yugi Mutou's body always felt frail when he held it, but that was nothing compared to what he was feeling inside that small, abused body.

"Yugi..."

Before Atem could verbalize anything further, he felt a violent jolt and his vision went black. When he blinked, his opened his eyes to the arena of the game once again. His gaze found his opponent, lying prostrate on the other side of the field, and his own monster, the Dark Magician, flying victorious above him. His advisers and priests behind him were shouting their praise and approval.

With a swish of robes, Pharaoh Atem spun; ignored them all and dashed up towards his chamber on his own, powerful legs. He felt the strength in his own muscles, conscious of it like never before. In less time than should have been possible, he skidded into his chamber, finding Yugi Mutou standing straight between two magicians.

"We did it!" the small boy exclaimed, spreading his arms.

Atem's own legs, powerful as they were, weakened; he dropped to his knees, and then wrapped Yugi in an embrace when other came to him.

"You are so strong..." the Pharaoh breathed, into Yugi's plush hair. "You have such courage, my precious partner..."

"You should eat and rest, Pharaoh," said one of the magicians. "This business of Mind Shuffling can be deeply fatiguing."

Atem nodded faintly, then stood; picked up Yugi as he did so, much to the smaller boy's surprise.

"Pharaoh?"

"You don't need to..." Atem breathed, pleased that his well-conditioned body could support them both, for the time being. "I'll carry you. You needn't even walk, not if you don't want to, ever again."

Yugi chuckled breathily. "Pharaoh, that's a silly thing to say..."

"I'm serious," Atem insisted, making his way to the bed. The magicians, taking their cue, backed out with hasty words of respect. Atem sat, Yugi on his lap, and wrapped the blankets up around both of them. There they sat, in comfortable silence and intimacy, until servants arrived with trays of food.

"Splendid duel, Pharaoh," said one, glowing.
"The whole palace is talking about it," another said. "Brilliantly played. We'd expect no less from you, of course, but still stunning."

"Thank you..." Atem muttered, then waved them off politely. "I'll take rest, now. Please, make sure we aren't disturbed."

Yugi watched, peering out from the confines of Pharaoh's arms and blankets, as the servants obeyed. Then he glanced up at Atem.

"It worked!" he exclaimed, pleased. "They can't challenge your rule, now! And the next time you need me to—"

"Hush," Atem murmured, his voice slightly strained. Yugi found a piece of food, a meat pie of some sort, pressed to his lips. He accepted it obligingly.

Neither of them spoke for some time, then, cuddling together on the huge bed and sharing what the servants had brought. In Yugi's case, he allowed himself to be fed more of the tasty morsels than he would have felt comfortable indulging in of his own volition. He waited patiently for an explanation, and eventually Atem answered his unspoken questions.

"Your body... it's frail."

"It's been through a lot," Yugi answered, and was about to say more when a slice of fruit was slipped between his lips. He chewed obligingly, and Atem spoke again as he did.

"It hurt me, when I tried to stand. You're in pain, every time you stand?"

Yugi swallowed. "It's gotten a lot better."

Atem's stricken expression didn't ease. "I want you to recover. That's the very least I can do."

"I'm getting better, Pharaoh," Yugi said patiently, though he allowed himself to be fed another morsel.

"You have to eat to get better. And rest. You have to rest, Yugi, and eat... I'll have my healers see if they can mix up some herbs, and you shouldn't leave bed, tomorrow. The Mind Shuffle can drain you of strength, and you haven't got much to begin with. I didn't realize, Yugi, so you've got to—"

"Atem," Yugi cut in gently, pressing his lips to Atem's. In the resulting silence, he said, "I'm going to be fine. I'm not going to get back to full strength overnight, but I'll get there, honest. And the Mind Shuffle isn't bad at all, not for us. We've been doing it our sleep for years, so I think we'll be okay, honestly."

Atem lowered his head slightly. "Sorry..." he breathed, and Yugi shook his head.

"Mm-mm. Thanks for worrying over me."

"I'll never stop doing that, Yugi."

Most of the highest-ranking officials in the land—and some from neighboring kingdoms—had gathered for the banquet, and all of them looked up as Pharaoh Atem made his entrance. Just as quickly, however, all eyes fell on the small boy standing beside the Pharaoh.

The boy was noticeably shorter than Atem, though their tri-colored hair was styled in similar ways. The boy was made up as splendidly as the Pharaoh himself, if not more so. He wore black and gold
robes that trailed on the ground, and his neck was adored with precious metals and jewels. On his head sat the Pharaoh's crest, and around his arms hung chains—not slaves' shackles, but purely decorative mockeries thereof. He padded along beside the Pharaoh as Atem made his way to the head of the table, his back straight and his head held high.

It was a moment before people dared to start to whisper, but, once they began, speculation sprang to quick and powerful life.

Pharaoh Atem halted with a swish of his own flaxen and white silks, a heavy gold pendant bumping against his bare chest. The boy, too, remained standing beside him.

"Your attention, please, everyone." Atem's voice commanded the attention of everyone present, and the gossip fell immediately silent. The Pharaoh placed a hand on the strange boy's shoulder. "Thank you for accepting my invitation, tonight. It's my honor to play host for you all."

There was a polite, obligatory acknowledgement. The young Pharaoh paused for a moment before clearing his throat; continuing.

"I'd like to properly introduce someone very important to me." He nodded toward the boy, who bowed at the cue. "This boy, Yugi Mutou, is my betrothed. Please, spread this news across the lands. He is mine, and I his. We will be married, with proper ceremony, come the spring. Going forward, please afford him every respect you would me."

Throughout the banquet, the Pharaoh didn't make any of the small talk he was expected, by polite society, to make. He had eyes only for the small boy sitting beside him. He fed Yugi choice bits of food off his own plate; at some point that no one quite caught, Yugi ended up on his lap. It was these things, as much as Pharaoh Atem's words and sharp gaze, that sent a message as clear as crystal to those in attendance.

... ... ...

"I think they liked you."

Yugi scoffed, pushing a shock of sweaty hair out of his face. "They liked me so much that we've got six challengers to face this week!"

Atem grinned. "Nothing we can't handle, my partner."

Yugi shook his head, leaning down over Atem's naked form and kissing him. The Pharaoh returned his affection, although his movement was somewhat restricted by his betrothed's seat across his hips.

"Nothing we can't handle," Yugi agreed grudgingly, after a moment, and allowed Atem to reverse their positions.

"I think the palace folk are all glad it's out in the open," Atem said, nuzzling into Yugi's neck. "They'd figured it out, anyway, even the ones who weren't supposed to know."

"Everyone in the palace worships you," Yugi replied dryly.

"And everyone in the palace adores you," Atem replied, nibbling along Yugi's collar bone and momentarily rendering him unable to retort. "As they should." Yugi scrambled up, and the two tussled for positioning in the over-large bed. When they came to rest, however, it didn't matter who had won, only that their bodies were tangled together in a most delightful way.
Thank you so much for reading!! Kudos and comments really make my life worth living, so I’d love it if you’d leave some~ See you very soon in the next chapter! ;w;

(Prepare a way, for the King of Thieves is about to make his entrance...)

Chapter End Notes
The Servant

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys so much for your support for the first chapter, and welcome to chapter two! This is where plot starts to happen~ Though big chunk of flashback happens again, too, fair warning... Chapter 1 was actually supposed to just be a oneshot, until Ryou popped his pretty little head into the story.

I have lots of feelings about the Thief King, okay? Advanced apologies about the name confusion that I really hope doesn't happen...

Gonna just add a WARNING for extremely brief mention of past dub(?)-con, in the context of a flashback. Just in case~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lord Yugi!”

Yugi turned; smiled, and held up his hands. “I-I’m not ‘Lord Yugi,’” he said, and the young servant boy smiled brightly.

“I know. You always say that. But now it’s official, you know!”

Ryou Bakura had been one of the first of the palace staff to know the true nature of Yugi and Atem’s relationship. He and Yugi had a familiar, relaxed report with one another, and Yugi often requested Ryou keep him company when Atem was off attending to the duties of a pharaoh. Now was such a time, and, at Yugi’s motion, Ryou sat beside him on the pharaoh’s bed.

“Have some?” Yugi asked, holding out a plate of fruit and sweet breads. Ryou nodded gratefully.

“Thank you!”

Atem took great pride in caring for those in the palace, from slaves and servants on up in rank, and Yugi knew they all had good food to eat and warm places to sleep. It was one of the many things Yugi loved about his Pharaoh. But Ryou seemed eternally famished, regardless, and never turned down the food Yugi always made sure to offer him. Yugi knew that a good half or more of what Ryou took ended up in the limitless pockets of his robes, anyway, though Yugi pretended not to notice. The hoarding behavior was undoubtedly a holdover from some period of severe starvation in Ryou’s past, and Yugi only hoped the food didn’t end up rotting in some masterfully hidden stash somewhere in the palace floorboards. He couldn’t imagine that Ryou managed to eat it all, not with how scrawny the servant boy was.

“Pharaoh Atem has a duel tonight, doesn’t he?” Ryou asked conversationally, through a mouthful of sweet-bread.

“He does.” Yugi nibbled at a slice of melon; shivered in anticipation of the game scheduled for that evening.

“Who is it?”
“A disgruntled general,” Yugi replied. “I don’t recall his name.”

“Aah… Pharaoh Atem is still undefeated, isn’t that right?”

Yugi nodded, feeling pride swell in his chest. “That’s right!”

“He had a close call, just about the time you got here,” Ryou said. “But since then, people say he duels like an entirely new person!”

Yugi swallowed, the melon getting stuck halfway down his throat. “Aah… really? I hope I get to see him duel, sometime…”

“Unlikely,” Ryou said, his quick fingers making a few pastries disappear into his robe. “Duels are top-secret. But Pharaoh Atem breaks a lot of conventions already, where you’re concerned,” he added brightly, “so who knows? You should ask him. I’ve never seen him say no to you.” He chuckled.

Yugi softened. “True. But I wouldn’t want to put him in a troublesome position, much less over a whim.”

“You’re so thoughtful…” Ryou murmured, availing himself of more food. “You’ll make the best ruler, beside Pharaoh Atem.”

“I-I don’t think I’ll be much of a ruler…” Yugi said, smiling nervously. “That’s what Pharaoh is good at.”

“You have your own value,” Ryou said, with a somewhat pained smile. “You must. Why else would Pharaoh Atem place such importance on you? Love is one thing, but the way he behaves around you… it’s like he regards you as a valuable ally in some war he fights every day.”

Yugi shivered slightly. Ryou Bakura had an uncanny sense of intuition, although he never seemed to fully grasp what he himself was saying. If he ever realized how sharp he really was, he could become quite a force to be reckoned with.

“Or maybe it is just love…” Ryou sighed wistfully. “What is it like, Yugi? To have someone love you that much?”

“You’ll find out, someday,” Yugi said, with certainty. “You’re the sweetest person in the whole palace—in all of Egypt. Someone out there is going to be really lucky to love you the way Atem loves me.”

Ryou gave him a shaky smile. “Do you think?”

“I know it.” Yugi reached forward; clasped Ryou’s hands, and felt the stickiness of his fingers. You dear, sweet little thief… but you’re safe here. You don’t need to steal anything.

Ryou’s smile wavered, and he gave a nervous chuckle. “You’re a great friend, Lord Yugi. Thank you.”

“Of course. I’m not ‘Lord Yugi,’ though…”

Winter was deepening by the day, and Ryou Bakura pulled his robes tighter around himself. It was all too easy, at night, to sneak past the royal guard, provided one knew their way around the palace
grounds. The room he’d been provided with was warm, but he left it willingly and braved the cold desert winds. The thick castle clothing still kept the worst of the chill out, far better than the rags he had worn on many such nights in the past.

Trudging across the uneven sea of sand, Ryou struggled to keep his footing in the near-blackness. He closed his eyes against a gust of sand-laden wind that stung his face; forged onward toward the rocky outcropping that stood off the palace’s eastern flank, some two and a half miles out into the open desert. He couldn’t see it, through the night, but he knew it was there.

The cold and dust made it hard to breathe.

Ryou’s foot caught on an obstacle unseen in the dark, and he felt himself begin to fall. He stifled his own cry, lest he alert the palace-folk, and braced himself.

Calloused hands caught him before he hit the ground, and he gasped quietly as he was bundled up and held against a broad chest.

“Ryou, you fool…!” came a gravelly voice from deep within that chest. “What are you doing out here?!”

“I had to… see you…” Ryou breathed, then squeaked as he was bodily lifted. He remained silent as powerful legs carried him over the traitorous sand dunes, and then the wind fell suddenly silent as the two fugitives dove into the rocky outpost. Ryou tried to cling to the other as he was set down, then cringed in on himself when the larger man pulled away.

A moment later, a lantern flared to life. The little flame bathed the sheltered cavern in flickering light, revealing the desert rogue who had taken Ryou into his arms. He was tall and broad-shouldered, his muscles defined but made wiry with hardship. A crosshatching of scars decorated his right cheek, and his eyes burned with feral ferocity beneath a mop of pale hair.

“What are you doing out here, Ryou? We didn’t have any meeting planned tonight.”

Ryou took off his outermost shawl, shaking it as free of sand as he could manage and spreading it out on the floor. Then he scrambled inside his robes, producing handfuls of palace food and piling them on the floor. Yugi’s fruit and sweetbreads, from that morning, were among them.

The desert rogue crouched down with a sigh, reaching out and picking up a smushed bread roll. Ryou continued, for several minutes, to fetch slices of meat and torn-up loaves and chunks of dried fish from countless pockets.

“You don’t have to come out here… just to….” But the man’s hand was shaking, as he looked at the baked good he held, and then he crammed it, whole, into his mouth. Ryou sat back and watched, satisfied, as the other ate, bolting the food like a famished animal.

The man was known only as the Thief King, as far as most were concerned. He was a legend. Ryou knew him, however, as Bakura. When Ryou had needed to pick a surname for himself, when he had entered the service of the Pharaoh, and he couldn’t remember his own, because he had forgotten it long ago, he had chosen to call himself Ryou Bakura. He hadn’t told the other man of this decision, knowing how zealously the Thief King protected his secret name.

The way that Yugi loved Atem, Ryou loved the man called Thief King Bakura.

Bakura plowed through most of the food without pausing to speak, then sat back with a satisfied grunt and fixed Ryou with a mild glare. Ryou only smiled docilely back.
“You don’t have to come out here just to bring me food.”

“I’d risk my life a thousand times over if it meant you didn’t have to fall asleep hungry.”

“Damn it, Ryou…” Bakura knotted one hand in his hair; shook his head. “What happens to me if you get caught? What happens to me if you die?”

“I won’t get caught. They trust me.”

“And they should. You haven’t given them any reason not to.”

“I’ve gotten very close to Yugi Mutou, the Pharaoh’s betrothed.”

“That’s good. That’s great. So don’t mess it up now!”

“I won’t. I swear it, Bakura. I won’t let you down.”

Bakura scowled, but couldn’t maintain the expression. He picked up one of the remaining pieces of bread and nibbled on it, a wry little grin curling his lips. “This is the best damn meal I’ve had in days. Since the last time you brought me goodies, actually. Hard to do better than palace food, even for a king of thieves.”

Ryou’s chest swelled with satisfaction, but sadness and longing made his heart ache. “I wish you could be there, with me…”

“Soon, Ryou. You’re going to help me make sure that happens, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Soon. We’ll unseat the Pharaoh together, Ryou, and then…”

“You’ll be able to live in the palace, with me.”

“I’ll take that Atem’s place. I’ll be the pharaoh, and the king of all thieves. And I’ll keep you close beside me, brave little Ryou. Always.”

“That’s all I hope for in this world.”

Mind Shuffle!

Yugi sucked in a breath as he opened Atem’s eyes; took in the cards in his hand, the battlefield, and the disgruntled general on it’s other side. His own grandfather—one of Atem’s official advisers, now —stood off to one side, oblivious to the Mind Shuffle, wringing his weathered hands. It brought Yugi great satisfaction that his family was now well taken care of, under Atem’s protection and living in the palace.

I won’t let you down, Pharaoh.

“I summon Dark Magician! Come forth, my servant!”

Yugi breathed deeply as his own life-force was drawn out to lend power to the monster. Though the general was no novice at gaming, Yugi unraveled each of his strategies in quick succession and saw his monsters destroyed just as efficiently. In the end, the man fell to his knees; guards moved to take him away as priests and magicians swarmed Yugi to congratulate Pharaoh Atem.
Sometimes, the Mind Shuffle activated again immediately; other times, Yugi made it all the way back to the chamber he shared with the Pharaoh before the two of them switched back. When it became obvious that this was to be a longer instance, Yugi graciously excused himself and turned towards the staircase.

His eyes caught a glimpse of white; he stiffened, wondering if anyone else had spotted the spy. From the lack of reaction, he guessed not. *Duels like this are heavily-guarded secrets... if someone catches him...* Moving quickly, Yugi—as Pharaoh Atem—pursued the pale shadow on fleet, silent feet.

“Bakura!”

Ryou Bakura froze when his name was called out; the supposed Pharaoh had caught up with him just as he exited the staircase. Before he could panic, though, he felt the Pharaoh’s hand casually on his shoulder.

“Walk with me, Bakura. Don’t attract attention.”

Ryou obeyed, and Yugi breathed a silent sigh of relief. They walked quickly, side by side, out into a courtyard; Yugi greeted any palace folk they passed with a causal authority, and no one questioned them. Yugi felt Atem’s mind brush his, inquisitive, but shut it out; it wouldn’t do to have Atem witness his friend’s transgression. He could come up with an excuse for his unresponsiveness later.

When they reached a secluded part of the courtyard’s garden, Yugi stopped; Ryou’s breathing was a bit ragged. “Why were you watching me duel?” he asked, knowing that time was likely short.

Ryou stiffened; bit his lip. “I…”

“You could be punished severely.” Trying not to lose sight of his borrowed identity, Yugi wondered how Atem would actually react to discovering the wayward servant in his spying. “You can’t do things like that. Even I might not be able to stop you from facing harsh consequences.” *Atem likely could, but I don’t know if he would... and I don’t have any official say in anything, Ryou...*

Ryou’s expression cleared slightly, though confusion rose to replace his distress. “I wanted... Yugi wants to see you duel!” he blurted out, finally. “But he doesn’t want to inconvenience you by asking, so I thought I’d watch, and I’d be able to tell him about it! Pharaoh, my lord...!”

Yugi felt himself soften, and wondered if the expression suited Atem’s face. “A noble desire. Still, please don’t do such things again.”

Ryou bent his head low. “I won’t, Pharaoh. I swear it.”

“Good.” With an awkward pat of his friend’s shoulder, Yugi straightened; he could feel Atem pushing more insistently at the edges of his consciousness, and could scarcely manage to call a cursory farewell to Ryou as he hurried back towards the chamber he shared with the Pharaoh. He was halfway up the final flight of steps when the magicians’ power overwhelmed him, and quite suddenly he found himself back in his own body. He gasped; collapsed, unable to stay standing in the wake of the Shuffle.

Moments later, Atem himself burst into the room, looking as frantic as Yugi thought he’d ever seen him. He felt an instant stab of guilt as Atem rushed to him; grasped his shoulders tightly.

“Are you alright? What happened, Yugi?”

Yugi nodded, clinging tightly to the Pharaoh and feeling Atem tremble beneath him. “I’m sorry. I’m fine. I’m so sorry.”
“What happened?” Atem repeated, holding Yugi out slightly so that eye contact was possible. Yugi looked down.

“R-Ryou caught me in the halls. He wanted to talk about the game. I-I had a hard time breaking away, and I didn’t want us to switch back mid-conversation. You wouldn’t have known where to pick up, and he might have noticed something. S-So I resisted the Shuffle until I could get away from him.” Yugi figured that the closer he could get to the truth, the better. Now Atem would at least know, if Ryou referenced a conversation of any sort, that they had supposedly spoken after the duel. There was less of a chance too, then, that Yugi would contradict his own story later one.

Atem seemed to believe it, and his shoulders sagged with relief. “Good. I mean… good thinking. But please, you scared me half to death.”

“I’m sorry,” Yugi said, miserably and honestly. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s alright…” Atem breathed, and then held Yugi close once again. The magicians had long ago left them to their privacy. “Yugi, I love you so much…”

“I love you too, Pharaoh.”

They reveled in the feel and scent of one another, for a long moment, and then Atem drew back. “Little Ryou Bakura is interested in dueling?” he asked, with discernible curiosity. Yugi, though uncomfortable with the subject, nodded.

“I-It seemed that way…”

“I wonder if he’d be any good at it…” Atem mused. “He’s a bright boy. Don’t think he quite realizes that he’s bright, but still…”

Yugi chuckled. “That’s a good way of putting it.” He paused, then added, “He’s a good friend.”

“I’m glad of him, for that reason.” Atem kissed the top of Yugi's head.

... ... ...

Ryou Bakura sat in his room, alone, shivering despite the warmth of the palace.

He longed to feel Thief King Bakura’s arms around him. He needed those arms around him. He needed that strength and conviction to borrow.

Pharaoh Atem was a kind and capable ruler—that day’s interaction had only proved it further. And Yugi… Ryou shuddered at the thought of what he was going to do to Yugi Mutou. Perhaps the Thief King would allow Yugi to live. Ryou hoped he would at least consider it. Perhaps if Yugi could be convinced to beg for his life, Bakura would consider it.

But Yugi would never disavow Atem. Ryou buried his face in his hands, wondering how he could be so conflicted. “I love…” he breathed, then tried again. “My love…”

Would Yugi ever experience this type of uncertainty, where Atem was concerned? Or Atem, where Yugi was concerned? No—neither of them would, Ryou was certain.

“My love for him… is every bit as strong as yours. It’s stronger… I’ll show you… I’ll prove it…”

Thief King Bakura had once been a great leader of criminals, but those days were of the past. The only one he had left, now, was Ryou—no real criminal to begin with. *I’m... all he has left...*
Bakura… my poor Thief King…

Atem had been responsible. Under his rule, crime had dropped to neigh unheard of levels. Widespread and unprecedented prosperity made crime all but *unnecessary*, under Atem’s rule. But people like Bakura only knew how to live as criminals. Thief King, to Bakura, was more than a title—it was his identity.

“I’ll protect that identity. I’ll protect *him*… with my own life, if necessary,” Ryou Bakura whispered, tightening his grip on the plush blankets he slept under each night. He despised the physical comfort, knowing that the Thief King was sleeping on stone and gravel. The bedding he had smuggled out of the palace couldn’t possibly be as comfortable as this bed. The pillows he had taken to Bakura had to be filthy by now, didn’t they? It couldn’t possibly be enough to keep out the cold. Was the Thief King shivering? “Soon… soon you’ll be here with me, in the palace… and then…”

*Ryou’s feet faltered; caught and tangled in themselves, and he pitched forward. He lacked the strength, even, to catch himself on his hands; hit the ground, face-first.*

I’m going to die. *He accepted reality for what it was. He did not rage or fight.*

Mother… I’m coming.

“My, my, what do we have here?”

A foot nudged Ryou’s ribs; he had neither strength nor desire to respond. The foot rolled him onto his side, and his eyes shifted upward. He saw, unwillingly, the face of a man leering down at him: a golden-brown face with a pale crosshatching of scars across the right cheek. The man’s eyes gleamed, haughtily, in the dawn light.

“Ooh, you were probably a pretty thing, at some point,” the man said, crouching down. “If you were in a little better condition, you might’ve been worth the trouble of selling off.”

The man was handsome, despite the cruel way his lips curled. Ryou blinked, wondering why this stranger was the person who would be with him as he died. He felt his pockets invaded by probing fingers, and faintly registered that this man was looking for anything that might be of value.

If I had any money, I wouldn’t be starving to death… *he thought, with a glimmer of amusement. His breath growing labored with the effort, he struggled to get his hand inside of his threadbare robes; the thief paused in his search, watching Ryou curiously.*

“You can still move, ay? What are you going for, a knife?”

*Ryou didn’t bother replying, fumbling with the hidden pocket where he kept his treasure. He held out a closed fist, and the thief stared at him in apparent befuddlement.*

“What?”

“Take it…” Ryou rasped, his throat dry and coated with sand. He held his hand out more insistently, arm trembling with the strain of staying up. *The thief put his hand beneath Ryou’s fist; Ryou opened his hand, then allowed his arm to fall with a soft thud.*

*The thief stared in amazement at the object left in his palm. “This is…”*  

Ryou closed his eyes; breathed out in a soft sigh. “It isn’t… worth much…”

“Worth a bit of bread and beer, surely,” the thief observed. “Why haven’t you sold it?”
Ryou didn’t reply. He could feel himself starting to lose consciousness, and suddenly didn’t appreciate this thief’s intrusion. He just wanted to sleep.

“Hey!” The thief nudged Ryou roughly in the shoulder, and the boy grudgingly opened his eyes again. The thief stared down at him in fixated scrutiny, seeming almost irritated. He displayed the ring in his hand, a golden band with a few spiked baubles hanging off it. “What is this thing? And why give it to me?”

“You’re… the one who’s here…” Ryou replied, though it was growing harder to speak. “I’m dying, and you’re the one who showed up, here, at this moment in time. And that… it’s my treasure. It’s the only thing… that I want to outlive me. Take it… keep it, or sell it… but it’ll still exist, out there. It’ll see places I never… lived to see…”

The thief’s eyes narrowed shrewdly, and he gave a harsh chuckle. “I’ve seen a lot of people die, kid, but this is a new one. You sure you don’t want to beg me for help? Appeal to my humanity? Promise me something of real value? Or sob about the unfairness of it all?”

Ryou only sighed; closed his eyes. “Let me… sleep.”

For a moment, the world was perfectly silent, and Ryou thought the thief had left. He sighed again—his breathing, now, was more a series of half-hearted sighs than actual inhalation and exhalation. Death was almost upon him, he could tell, and he called out to it in welcome. Perhaps… a bit of my soul will stay… in that ring… perhaps…

“You want to die, kid?”

The thief—he was still here. Ryou figured, after a moment’s consideration, that he didn’t mind. The thief’s voice was pleasant; deep and rich, and full of strength.

“Hey. Hey, kid!”

“No…” Ryou answered, when the thief persisted, “not really. But that’s about to happen, anyhow…”

Again the thief was silent. Then, “And you don’t resent me? For showing up moments before you die and rifling through your damn pockets?”

“Why would I…?” Ryou murmured, although he thought his voice was growing too faint to be properly understood. “Not like I… have any use… of anything that might… be in my pockets… not at this point…”

“Tell me your name.”

Ryou opened one of his eyes—one was all he could manage. His vision was blurred, but there was the thief’s handsome face, staring down at him with a far less mocking expression than he had first worn. It was like a god’s golden, shining countenance.

“It’s… Ryou.”

“Ryou. Give me one reason why you shouldn’t die today.”

There was only one reason Ryou could think of. “Because… you’re very… handsome. I’d like to look at you… for a bit longer…”

The thief grinned wryly. “If anyone else had handed me that shitty line, I wouldn’t believe a word of
And Ryou’s eye closed again, though the man’s face remained with him until he lost consciousness moments later.

… … …

When Ryou woke again, he didn’t know where he was; he didn’t know what to expect.

But when heard the man’s voice, he was overwhelmed by the sense that everything was alright.

“Hey, the kid woke up.” The thief sat a few feet away from him, cramming a piece of roast meat into his mouth. Ryou had long ago stopped feeling the agonizing pangs, but some instinctual need mimicked a hunger response in the pit of his wasted stomach. “Didn’t think you would, there, for a while.”

Ryou didn’t try to move or respond, only accepted the fact that he was temporarily still alive. He seemed to be wrapped in a blanket, propped somewhat upright on a bed. The thief approached him, and Ryou noticed that his ring hung on a chain around the man’s neck, bumping against his bare, well-defined chest. It wasn’t just his face, Ryou realized—his body, too, was godlike.

“Got some water into you, while you were out, but that was about it.” The thief ripped another mouthful off his chunk of meat, and spoke as he chewed open-mouthed. “Don’t think that’ll be enough to bring you back from the brink, though. Think you can eat a little something?”

Again, Ryou didn’t respond. He doubted he would have the strength to chew, let alone—

Ryou’s eyes flew wide as the thief leaned in, pressing greasy lips to Ryou’s own. Ryou felt half-chewed food pushed into his mouth by an insistent tongue, and a hand gently massaged his throat until he swallowed reflexively. Coughing feebly, he stared with wild eyes as the thief drew slightly back. The man gazed down at him with a satisfied smirk, licking his lips.

“I’ll do all the hard work, see? All you have to do is keep on living. Sound doable?”

And it did, so Ryou nodded.

… … …

“So, what’s your sad story, Ryou?”

Ryou didn’t know how long he had been in the possession of the thief whose name he still didn’t know, but he had begun to regain some modicum of strength. He could eat on his own, now, although the thief still often fed him by hand or mouth as a matter of course. Ryou didn’t mind.

“Nothing special. I’m alone. That’s enough of a sad story for anyone, I think.”

“Parents?”

“Dead.”

“What a cliché. Friends?”

“Never had much luck with those.”

“Hired allies?”
“No money to hire them.”

The thief laughed, a full-throated guffaw that warmed Ryou’s bones. “Fair enough.” He toyed with Ryou’s ring, as he seemed to be in the habit of doing. “And now? What’re you living for?”

“I’ve told you that. You’re very pleasant to look at.”

“Then come back and haunt me when you do die!” the thief invited, flinging his arms wide. “You’re not terrible company, yourself.”

“I think I may be in love with you.”

“Even better,” the thief purred, whumping down into a plush chair across from where Ryou lay on the bed; propping his feet up on a small, gilded table. Ryou had deduced, through casual observation, that the thief was keeping him in some sort of private hideout somewhere in the city. He had gathered, from the thief’s behavior and verbal clues, that he was a part of—likely the leader of—a group of thieves, but Ryou had never seen one of his cohorts. He wondered if they knew the thief was keeping him here, and decided it was just as likely that this room was some sort of private stash.

The thought of being kept in such a way pleased him.

“And what’s the deal with this thing?” the thief asked, holding out the ring around his neck. “Memento of a dear mother? Or some type of family crest? Maybe something a cute girl gave to you, in the days of your boyhood?”

“No. I just like it. A lot.” Ryou tried to find the words, and settled on, “I felt drawn to it, at a bazaar. So I stole it.”

The thief laughed boisterously, leaning back and slapping his leg. “Brilliant! You’re great, kid!”

“Please call me Ryou, if it pleases you.”

“Ryou, then,” the thief crooned, and Ryou felt a thrill at the sound of his name in that sultry voice. The thief radiated masculine appeal, and Ryou often wondered if he knew exactly how powerfully attractive he was. Though the thief behaved as if he had some idea of it, Ryou doubted he could know the full intensity of the aura he gave off. “I could kill you tomorrow, dear Ryou. It all depends on my whim, sweet little Ryou.”

“I don’t mind that at all.”

The thief chuckled—a lower sound, and somehow more dramatic than his loud, full-bodied laughs. “What a strange little creature you are, Ryou.”

“May I have something to call you?” Ryou ventured. “I understand if you don’t want to give me your name, but right now I don’t have anything to call you, except ‘the thief’ and ‘my reason for living.’”

Again, the thief chuckled. “Can’t have that, now… though you can call me your ‘reason for living’ any time. It’s quite flattering. I’m not a thief, though, not just a thief, so you may call me… the Thief King.”

The thought of being kept in such a way pleased him.

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The Thief King’s hideout did seem like the dwelling of a royal personage. As Ryou began to
maintain consciousness for longer periods of time, he had ample time to look around, during the Thief King’s many absences. The walls were covered in expensive tapestries and art—Ryou assumed they were only trophies, as the Thief King had never expressed any special interest in them. He did seem fond of gems and jewels, though, and sometimes showed them excitedly to Ryou. He would talk about cuts and clarity, and critique the settings of certain stones. Occasionally, he would inform Ryou that he had had one reset, after he’d stolen it. Such things filled glittering chests strewn about the room, and vases and baubles crowded decorative tables. The bedding, too, was of luxurious quality, as were the clothes that the Thief King dressed in—and those that he dressed Ryou in.

I’m like one of these treasures. Ryou smiled whenever the thought occurred to him. I am one of these gems, that he’s reset. The Thief King has stolen me, body and heart and soul. I’m so glad.

Ryou indulged in thinking that the Thief King was pleased by his recovery. The Thief King sometimes indicated that he intended to take Ryou out of the room with him, when the boy had recovered enough strength. Ryou wouldn’t have minded being kept there for the rest of eternity.

“We’ve got a new pharaoh as of today, Ryou.” The Thief King’s words were light, but Ryou knew him well enough to sense the apprehension buried in his tone. He hadn’t kept specific track of time, but he had been in the possession of the Thief King for nearly a year, at that time. “He’s supposed to be pretty no-nonsense, where my trade is concerned.”

“No one can touch you,” Ryou said, with certainty. The Thief King gave him a wry grin.

“See now? This is why I keep you around, sweet Ryou. Anyone else said that to me, I’d assume they were out to kill me. I’d have them killed within an hour. But you? No ulterior motives. Not only do I know you’re a rotten liar, but I think you genuinely believe it.”

Ryou smiled. “I do. The P haraoh could be Ra himself and he wouldn’t be able to chain you.”

“You’ve never even seen me in action.”

“I don’t need to. I know what you’re capable of.”

The Thief King chuckled, then stood. Yes—he was nervous. Ryou could see it in the tension held in his powerful shoulders. Ryou rose, as well, and went to him; placed his hands on those gorgeous shoulders and, when the Thief King didn’t move away, began to massage them.

“I may be untouchable, but what about those below me? If even one of my higher-ups is captured, it could lead them straight to me. It’s been a long time since I’ve had to be this careful, Ryou.”

“You’ll be fine,” Ryou said, kneading at the steel rods that seemed constricted around the Thief King’s spine. He focused on the task at hand with everything he had, trying to afford his love some amount of relief. “You are the King of Thieves. Even the Pharaoh has no power capable of unseating you.”

The Thief King chuckled, though there was a hollow ring to it. “I may have to kill him, if some of my intelligence turns out to be right. He may be capable of getting to even me.”

“Then you’ll kill him, and then it’ll be over.”

“And if I can’t?”

Ryou shivered. It was the first time he’d heard the Thief King express self-doubt, and it deeply unsettled him. He wasn’t worried over any truth the words might contain, though—it pained him, instead, that the Thief King would be plagued by such groundless, blasphemous thoughts.
“You can do anything. You are a god, at least as far as I’m concerned.”

“You’re in love with me. Your opinion doesn’t count.” But there was a warmth beneath the dismissive words, and Ryou smiled. The Thief King rolled his shoulders, a signal for Ryou to step back, and then the Thief King turned so that they were face to face. “You’ll stand beside me, Ryou, no matter what.” It wasn’t a question, but a command, and Ryou’s heart leaped with gladness at it.

“Yes, Thief King. Of course. Until my death.”

The Thief King leaned in close, and Ryou tasted his breath as their faces drew close. “And stop it with this ‘Thief King’ shit. If I lose that title, then what’ll you call me?”

“You will always be the Thief King.”

“Don’t call me that, anymore. Call me Bakura. That’s the name that I entrust to you, sweet Ryou—my real name, something no one else living knows, as far as I’m aware.

Ryou couldn’t manage to get breath into his lungs to reply, so he only nodded resolutely.

Thief King Bakura smirked—there was a weakness, hidden deep within the expression, borne for Ryou only. And then Bakura kissed Ryou, far more seriously than he had in the past. He was gentle—so gentle that it brought tears to Ryou’s eyes, even as those powerful arms swept in around him and held him tenderly. He returned the kiss with every scrap of passion he had to his own name, trying to convey the love he expressed with every breath in that precious moment of physical contact.

It didn’t matter if Thief King Bakura was sincere in his affections or not—Ryou wouldn’t have cared. But he also knew Bakura, in name and in soul, better than anyone else alive, and he knew the thief wasn’t lying to him. He knew the kiss was honest and pure, and he loved the Thief King even more for it.

Over the next year’s time, Bakura’s premonitions came to pass. The underground crime markets began to collapse, and the Thief King lost most of the thieves working under him to either punishment or reformation. A week past the one-year anniversary of Atem’s ascension to the throne of Egypt, he and the remainder of his group were driven officially into hiding. At that time, Bakura was forced to reveal Ryou’s existence to his thief comrades, something he had resisted like death itself since he had first taken Ryou in. Subsequently, Ryou played servant to them all—the safest position for him in the group, Bakura had judged.

Unfortunately, a few of the thieves took this as implicit permission to use Ryou as in-house whore, as well. Ryou didn’t particularly mind, not if such things kept him safe and saved the Thief King trouble, and so made no effort to stop it from happening. That came to an abrupt end when the Thief King found the marks left on Ryou’s body. That same night, he slayed one of his remaining underlings for the crime of damaging his precious property—indeed, for daring to touch the servant boy in such a way.

While things were already in uncontrolled downward spiral, at that point, the incident may have triggered the final end of the group. Two of the thieves plotted to trade their King to the Pharaoh in return for their own amnesty; it was Ryou, with tiny body and sharp ears perfect for spying, who discovered the plot and alerted Thief King Bakura.

When Bakura executed the two perpetrators, those few remaining under his service fled. Only Ryou remained.
When Pharaoh Atem had been in power for two years, the only place left to Thief King Bakura was the open desert. Ryou had been willing—pleaded to be allowed, in fact—to go with him. But Bakura held firm.

“You, Ryou, you’re going to be my salvation…” Bakura’s fingers felt bonier than they once had as he cupped Ryou’s face in his hands; Ryou would know, with how much he loved the feel of those hands on his body. “You’re going to save me. But that won’t happen if they run you out, too. You’re going to find work in the palace. Do whatever you have to, to manage it. Get as close to the Pharaoh as you can. Gain their trust. We won’t be able to see each other for a while, though, not without risking tipping them off.”

“When?” Ryou asked softly, leaning into Bakura’s touch. The Thief King kissed his forehead.

“Soon. Before you know it, my gem.”

“I want to come with you.”

“You have to infiltrate the enemy for me, Ryou. I can’t do it myself. I can’t defeat Atem alone. I need your help, for that. Besides, it would break my spirit to see you starve.”

Ryou nodded, despite the tears coursing down his face. “For you, I’d gladly starve.”

“I don’t need you to starve,” Bakura said, growing insistent. “I need you to survive. Atem has too soft a heart—that’ll be what kills him. You’ll infiltrate the palace, as a commoner seeking only to serve his Pharaoh. You’ll infiltrate the palace and, when you’re certain you have their trust, no matter how long that takes, you’ll wait one month more to be sure, and then you’ll come out and find me, in the desert. I’ll show you where I’ll be hiding. Then we’ll bring the Pharaoh to his knees, together.”

The separation from Thief King Bakura almost killed Ryou. For four months he worked in the palace, making a place for himself and gaining the trust of those who lived there. That part had been easy; he was non-threatening and childlike in demeanor, and many of the palace folk took it upon themselves to look after him. It was strange—the only people he’d ever had show such concern for him were his mother and his Thief King. Pharaoh Atem himself was a frequent presence in the palace halls, and somehow seemed to know each of his staff, young Ryou Bakura included, by name. Ryou could understand why he was considered such a charismatic and capable ruler.

Despite the comforts of the palace, both physical and social, he remained in agony. For a fifth month he waited, as per Thief King Bakura’s instructions, and then, one night, tore off into the open desert. As he ran, sand snatching traitorously at his feet, he was certain he would never return to the palace; once reunited with his beloved, he was sure he would lack the strength to leave once again.

Then he reached the rocky outpost where Thief King Bakura had made his hideout. He dug down into the sand; searched, frantically, for the entrance, and wriggled inside when he found it. Firelight flickered ahead of him, and he felt his heart soar. He called out, half to relieve the pressure in his chest and half to avoid being mistaken for a hostile, “Bakura!”

A raspy voice answered him, one he hardly recognized. “Ryou?”

As Ryou stumbled down the stony tunnel into a hollow beneath the desert, he was crushed almost immediately to a broad, bony chest. The stench of human decay almost made him gag, but beneath it was that scent he so adored, and had so missed: Thief King Bakura’s scent. He breathed deeply; clutched at the man he loved.
“My gods, Ryou, you actually came back.”

Ryou stiffened; drew back in surprise, and looked up at the Thief King’s haggard face. “Every single day I’ve thought about you! Every single day I wanted to see you, damn the plan! But I waited, Bakura, and it worked. I live in the palace, now, and I see Pharaoh Atem in the flesh almost every day. Everything is in place! Whatever your plan is, I’m ready to carry it out! And I won’t let you down, I swear it.”

Thief King Bakura crumpled slowly, first to his knees and then to sit back heavily on his heels, his hands clasped around Ryou’s. Ryou stared, bewildered, as Bakura kissed his hands over and over again.

“What did I ever do to deserve you? I don’t deserve you… I don’t deserve you…”

Ryou knelt with him; lowered his head and rubbed it against Bakura’s. The other man’s hair was matted. “Anything you need me to do, I’ll do it. Oh Bakura, I’m so happy to see you…”

“Alright… Fine, Ryou…” Bakura breathed, then sucked in a deep breath. Ryou looked down; reached out and touched the ring that still hung against the Thief King’s chest. “Gods, why would you come back…?”

“I love you… so much…”

“Aah … why else…?”

Chapter End Notes

Please do let me know what you guys thought! ;w; Comments and kudos make my day~ Aiming to have Ch. 3 up on Thursday~
The King

Chapter Notes

Welcome to chapter three~ Let's play a Shadow Game, shall we?

Thank you for your continued readership! :'D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Yugi…”

Yugi slowed; turned, and waved to Ryou Bakura. “Ryou! How are you?”

Ryou caught up with him. “Fine.” He paused; lowered his voice and said, “I saw Pharaoh Atem duel, yesterday.”

Yugi’s eyes widened sharply. “R-Really?”

“Mm-hm. And it’s true—he’s like a different person, when he duels! He destroyed his opponent so effortlessly…” Ryou sighed. “He’s so strong, Yugi. You’re lucky to be betrothed to someone like him.”

Yugi nodded. “I am… of course, you’re right. I just wish he’d let me do more for him…”

Ryou looked unexpectedly perturbed, then smiled slightly. “I’m sure you do plenty. You really shouldn’t… I mean…”

Yugi tilted his head. “Is something wrong, Ryou?”

Ryou shook his head slowly. “No… No, nothing wrong, Lord Yugi.”

“I’m not ‘Lord Yugi…””

“… Good.”

As Ryou turned and trudged off, Yugi had a fleeting thought to call after him. But Ryou seemed strangely distant, and Yugi decided it would be better to let him work out whatever it was by himself. He watched as Ryou drifted away down the hallway, wondering what types of hell the young boy had seen. Maybe someday… you’ll trust me enough to tell me… Ryou, my friend…”

“Yugi?”

Yugi raised his head, feeling Atem’s familiar presence brush his mind. The more they Mind Shuffled, it seemed, the closer they came to true telepathic connection. “Pharaoh!”

“Not out-loud, my partner…”

“Sorry!” Yugi tried out the silent communication, and felt a warm glow of approval from Atem’s consciousness. He closed his eyes; caught a glimpse of the Pharaoh’s warm eyes behind his own. “What is it?”
“Come back to our room. Immediately.”

“Is something wrong?”

“I hope not.”

With one last glance in the direction Ryou had vanished, Yugi hurried back toward the room he shared with Pharaoh Atem. The hallway just outside their door was clogged with gifts—congratulations on their official engagement. Though many higher-ups and political figures had reacted unfavorably, the common-folk seemed genuinely delighted by the betrothal. Yugi wondered if the man who had sold him as a slave had figured the whole thing out, yet, and smiled at the thought.

Atem sat at his desk, legs crossed and fingers tapping at the desktop. When he saw Yugi, his expression eased a bit, and he uncrossed his legs.

“Yugi.” He motioned to his lap, and the smaller boy went obediently to him.

“What’s happened?” It had to be something serious, for Atem to be acting in such a way. Yugi felt his stomach tighten.

“There’s been… an incident.” It wasn’t like Atem to be evasive, and Yugi pressed himself closer to the Pharaoh.

“Atem, what happened?”

“A few of my statues were… toppled.”

Yugi’s mouth fell open. “In response to me?”

Atem shook his head. “We don’t think so. There really hasn’t been any open decent regarding you, or our betrothal. If anything, the duels we’ve fought over the past couple of days have put that issue to rest. But these statues…”

There was more, and Yugi gave Atem’s mind a gentle nudge with his own. He got, catching the Pharaoh slightly off-guard, a glimpse of the statues in question, and gasped.

“You shouldn’t have to see things like that…” Atem muttered, closing his eyes and his mind. But Yugi could still see the disemboweled bodies splayed across the tumbled statues.

“Who were they? Do we know?”

“A few ex-thieves.” Atem said, resigned. “They helped my forces, early on, in eliminating some especially stubborn holdouts in the crime underworld, almost three years ago.”

“And someone killed them? Now?”

Atem nodded.

“Do you… have any idea who’s behind it?”

Atem nodded, but didn’t speak. Yugi waited patiently until he did.

“I assumed he was dead. An oversight.”

“Who?”
“The Thief King.”

Yugi shuddered, something in Atem’s tone disturbing him deeply. “Don’t worry, Pharaoh. There are so many people who will stand beside you, fight for y—”

“No,” Atem cut him off, his voice low and serious. Yugi fell instinctively silent. “That’s how I tried to deal with him last time. I thought I could smoke him out… pressure him, until he showed himself, rather than striking directly at him. I thought that, when he didn’t appear… he had simply crawled off to die. I didn’t let it worry me. But now this is happening. No, this time, I’ll face him, and finish him, myself.”

“In a duel?”

“Most likely.”

“Then you won’t be alone,” Yugi said, relieved. “I’ll be with you.”

Atem bit his lip lightly; didn’t speak again, and the two held one another in much-needed, comforting silence, their minds as intertwined as their bodies.

… … …

Bakura was laughing. Ryou had missed his laugh dearly.

“He really seemed spooked?” the Thief King asked, and cackled again delightedly. “It must seem to him like I’ve risen from the dead! And I have—it feels like I have come back to life, and it’s all thanks to you, my loyal, courageous little Ryou!”

Ryou lowered his head, his skin burning with the praise. Even in winter, Bakura radiated heat like the sun.

“Ryou…” Bakura purred again, opening his arms. “Come here. Of all the treasures I’ve ever held in my hands, you’re the most valuable, my gem.”

Ryou edged obligingly closer, and allowed himself to be bundled into the Thief King’s lap. Bakura laughed again, and Ryou closed his eyes in something resembling bliss.

“We’ll hang Atem’s head from the palace balcony, for all to see! We’ll string his entrails around the palace gates—three yards of entrails in a human belly, did you know that, Ryou?” He prodded Ryou’s stomach with a teasing finger. “Three yards of ribbon to decorate our palace with!”

Ryou only nodded, reveling in the feeling of his beloved’s arms around him. He could borrow Bakura’s convictions; leach it like heat from the larger man’s body. He could forget, then, Atem’s kind eyes and Yugi’s bright smile. He could forget his friend and his Pharaoh, for the one he loved was holding him close. Soon Bakura would be with him in the palace; soon, Bakura wouldn’t have to want for things like food and bedding. Bakura would be a proper King once more, and Ryou would sit happily at his feet.

“I love you, Bakura…”

“And I you, my gem…”

… … …

The palace seemed strangely empty, to Yugi Mutou. Atem had sent the majority of his personal
guard into civilian areas to hunt for the Thief King. Though the Pharaoh seemed wholly convinced that his palace was secure, even in their absence, Yugi couldn’t help but feel anxious.

Atem… Pharaoh… are you sure your emotions aren’t clouding your judgement?

In the dead of night, Yugi stood on the palace’s inner balcony, looking out over the private garden that Atem took such pride in. Under Atem’s rule, Egypt was a better place—that seemed an irrefutable fact. But what about those… who thrived in the old system? What about someone… who would call themselves the King of Thieves…? Yugi took a sip of the wine he held; imagined what it would be like to watch Atem’s power crumble away, in the face of some greater authority, and wondered if the King of Thieves and those close to him had felt such despair.

The sound of footsteps startled Yugi, and he jumped; relaxed, a moment later, when he turned to see Ryou Bakura step out onto the balcony. The servant had a very light step; he often—unintentionally, he claimed—snuck up on people, and Yugi thought he must have scuffed his feet intentionally, just then.

“Ah. Ryou. Couldn’t sleep?”

The young servant shook his head. “No. I’ve never been a very solid sleeper, to be honest.”

Yugi smiled. “Neither have I. I get excited or nervous, for whatever reason, and my mind won’t shut off. Then I get all jittery, and then there’s no hope of falling asleep.” He chuckled, and then turned back to the garden. “If you don’t want to be alone, you could stay out here with me. I could use the company.”

Ryou made a soft, consenting sound.

“There’re snacks and wine on the table,” Yugi added. “It’s never easy to sleep when you’re hungry, and wine is a good antidote for sleeplessness, in moderation.”

“Words of wisdom…” Ryou murmured, and poured himself a glass of the fruity red wine. He didn’t avail himself of the food.

“If it wasn’t for Atem, I don’t know where I’d be,” Yugi murmured, swirling the drink he held. “I would be hungry, I know that for sure. Even owners who don’t outright abuse their slaves tend to skimp on food—cost of upkeep, you know?”

“Mm…”

“And now I’m betrothed to the Pharaoh!” A radiant smile came to Yugi’s face, and he gazed up at the star-speckled sky. “How did this happen? Fate?” Then he turned toward Ryou, still smiling. “You should be my personal attendant! We’d be equals, as far as I’m concerned, and then we’d be able to stay close to each other. I can ask Pharaoh about the protocols for that.”

Ryou drank his wine aggressively; coughed slightly. “You’re too kind, Lord Yugi…” He looked down into the empty cup; fetched himself another glass.

“Don’t make yourself sick,” Yugi said gently, and Ryou chuckled.

“I might surprise you.”

Yet again, Yugi wondered about Ryou’s unknown past, and took his chance. “Where did you come from, Ryou?”
“Around,” Ryou answered, his tone almost playful. Yugi often thought that Ryou Bakura had to know what an enigma he was, amongst the palace-folk, and this seemed to be confirmation that he got at least a bit of amusement out of it.

“Okay, but where?” Yugi asked, in a tone to match. “You don’t have to tell me, if you don’t want to, but I’d like to know. I want to understand you, better.”

Ryou seemed to consider this, then smiled. “Fine. Ask me something specific, then—none of these vague, ‘Where do you come from?’ type questions. I’ll see if I can answer them, then.”

Yugi searched for a question, for a moment, then motioned to the glass Ryou held—almost empty, again. “When did you taste wine for the first time?”

From the way his expression brightened, Ryou approved of the question. “Nice choice.” He took a sip, then said, “It was good wine—strong, well-aged, with a full body. I had never had anything stronger than beer, and was a bit nervous, you see, but he insisted. He took a drink and then kissed me, lips closed. But when I opened my mouth, just a reflex, his tongue snuck past my guard, and that wine flooded in after it. That was my first taste. It was hot—warmed me from the inside out, like only he could. He laughed when I nearly choked, and then cleaned up what had spilled from our mouths with a red-stained tongue.”

Yugi’s cheeks flushed as Ryou spoke; of all the stories he had thought the small servant boy might tell, that wasn’t one of them. Ryou’s eyes glimmered with amusement at Yugi’s reaction.

“After that, we would split a bottle between us, most nights. He had expensive tastes, and liked to indulge in the trappings of wealth, so I learned a lot about good-quality wine. Atem has good taste,” he added, “if a bit boring. He’d do well to try some imports, even just for special occasions. Even foreign whites can be a nice change of pace, once in a while. Go on—ask another.”

Yugi swallowed, trying to moisten his dry throat as Ryou finished off his glass of wine; moved to refill it. “O-Okay… then who is ‘he’?”

Ryou clicked his tongue. “Won’t be answering that one, for sure. Try again.”

Yugi shrugged, having somewhat expected that. “Where are your parents?”

“I don’t know about my father,” Ryou said. “Mom said he was some sort of jewelry merchant. I never met him. And my mom, she’s gone.”

Yugi nodded slowly. “I’m… sorry.”

“It’s okay. The world was too harsh for someone like her, anyway. And if there’s an afterlife, she earned her place there, for sure.”

“Do you believe in the afterlife, then?”

Ryou shook his head slowly, staring into his wine. “Maybe? I don’t know. I don’t think there’s anything after death that you can’t make yours while you’re alive, and I don’t know if the concept of ‘afterlife’ is all that appealing to me, anyway, even if it is so-called ‘eternal bliss.’ I don’t really think something like that can exist.”

“Have you ever come close to dying?” Yugi asked, and Ryou laughed faintly.

“Yes. Very close. If it wasn’t for him, I would’ve died, then. But he was there. He picked me up out of the dust, and held me tenderly.”
Yugi processed this; waited to see if Ryou would expand upon it and, when he didn’t, asked, “When did you first start stealing food?”

“ Noticed that little habit, did you?” Ryou answered question with question, and then said, “About when I started working at the palace, actually. I never had the nerve to do it before, even when I was starving on the streets.”

“Why *did* you start working at the palace?”

Ryou sighed; leaned out over the moonlit garden and sipped his wine. “I had nowhere else to go. This… the palace, Pharaoh Atem… they were my last hope, the only thing left to me. Pharaoh Atem has a softness for those in desperate states,” he added. “That was my salvation, as much as anything. If he hadn’t taken me on, as staff, I don’t know what would have happened.”

When it was clear Ryou had said all he was going to, on that subject, Yugi asked, “Are you happy, here?”

“If I spent the rest of my life in the palace, it’d be a good life.”

“Same…” Yugi murmured, then said, “Have you ever been in love, Ryou?”

“Oh, yes.”

“With ‘him?’”

“Yes.”

Yugi closed his eyes, all but tasting the honied devotion that dripped from Ryou’s words. “Are you still in love with him, then?”

“Oh yes…” Ryou sighed; looked into his wineglass and smiled. “Yes. I’m sure I’ll be in love with him until the day I die. I’m sure I’ll love him even after I’m dead, whether the afterlife exists or not.”

“That’s wonderful…” Yugi sighed, and Ryou looked over at him in surprise. “To be that in love is a wonderful thing, Ryou.”

Ryou softened. “You’re a good friend, Yugi.” He offered his glass, and Yugi tapped his against it.

“Thank you. For being my friend, like this.”

“Of course!” Yugi tried to ignore the sense of finality hanging about the conversation. He could feel Atem’s mind, a sleepy, questioning presence, looking for his in the darkness; the Pharaoh had likely woken to find himself alone in the bed they shared. Yugi brushed him gently away. “I’ll be your friend for as long as you’ll let me.”

Ryou gave him a wry little smile. “You’re sweet. Maybe that’s what Atem sees in you…” Ryou looked up at the sky, then finished off his wine. When he went to refill it, the bottle ran dry. “Oops… sorry. Did you want this?”

“It’s okay. One glass just about does it, for me. Atem might wonder what happened tonight, though, when he finds it empty.”

Ryou laughed, holding up his glass in a mock toast. “Let him wonder, I say.”

Yugi smiled back, and they stood together for a while longer, watching the stars scroll across the navy sky. By silent consensus, at some unknown hour, they bid each other a good night and sought
refuge from the cold. When Yugi crawled up into bed, he was immediately caught up in the Pharaoh’s lean, powerful arms.

“You smell like the balcony,” Atem mumbled, into Yugi’s hair. “The balcony and wine.”

“I couldn’t get to sleep. I didn’t want to wake you.”

Atem muttered something that wasn’t quite angry, holding him tighter. The Pharaoh was a rather deep sleeper; even then, he didn’t seem fully conscious, and quickly slipped back into slumber. Yugi lay awake, letting himself be held and thinking about Ryou Bakura.

Why did it seem… like he was saying goodbye…?

It had been a long time since Ryou had indulged in so much wine. He didn’t want to sleep alone, with his belly full of fire.

The desert was freezing, but he trudged determinedly through the sand toward Thief King Bakura’s outpost. The stars leered down at him, seeming much colder than when he had gazed up at them with Yugi on the terrace.

“Bakura…!” Slithering into the little cave, Ryou squinted into the darkness. The Thief King was likely asleep, the lantern extinguished for the night. Ryou stumbled, dropping down and crawling through the entry tunnel. “Bakura!”

“Hhn? Ehh… Ryou…?” came the sleepy murmur, and Ryou’s heart leaped.

“It’s me, Thief King!” he said, then slipped; tumbled into the open with a squeak. There was a shuffling in the darkness, and then the lantern flared to life.

Bakura’s eyes, hazy with sleep, widened. “What are you doing out here?” he asked, crawling to meet Ryou on hands and knees. Ryou laughed breathily, pulling a pilfered bottle of wine out of his robes.

“Drink with me. Like we used to.”

Bakura sighed. “It’s too early for celebration like this, my gem.”

“I don’t care.”

“You’re already drunk, aren’t you?”

“Pfft. It takes more than a few glasses of wine to get me drunk, Thief King. You should know that.”

“I do know you, Ryou, and you’re definitely drunk.”

“On the Pharaoh’s cheep wine? Never!”

Bakura lost the fight to keep an indulgent smile off his face. “Ryou, you aren’t going to be able to get yourself home, at this rate.”

“Home-home-home is with you…” Ryou said, scrambling over and climbing onto Bakura’s lap. The Thief King allowed it. Ryou leaned up and kissed him sloppily, and Bakura reciprocated.

“Home in the palace, you dumb whelp…” Bakura murmured. “How many suspicions do you think
it would raise if you didn’t come back tonight?”

“Don’t care, don’t care…” Ryou mumbled, nuzzling into Bakura’s chest. “I want to be with you…” Bakura sighed, kissing the top of Ryou’s head. Ryou twisted to meet his lips, pressing up until Bakura was forced to pitch backwards to keep from being knocked over. They hit the ground, the Thief King’s full-bodied laughter filling the small space and echoing off the walls.

“Come here, you…” Bakura growled, his hands sinking into the backs of Ryou’s thighs. Ryou squeaked delightedly, pulling Bakura’s robes open and then paying the same attention to his pants. “Hold—hold it…!” Bakura, still laughing, pushed himself upright; his clothes slipped in all directions, and he kept Ryou on his lap as he reached for the wine. “Let me have a drink, first… maybe a lil’ celebration is in order.”

Ryou laughed, and took a swig from the bottle when Bakura offered it. The Thief King regarded the bottle, apparently impressed.

“The Pharaoh’s cheep wine, you say? This is some damned good stuff.”

“Not compared to what you used to bring me,” Ryou purred, wrapping his legs more firmly around Bakura’s waist. “Not compared to the stolen spoils of the Thief King.”

“Ha!” Bakura laughed, then drank deeply. “Well, it’s good, anyway. Warm…”

They kissed again, both with wine-stained lips, and then fell back once more. Bakura was mindful of keeping himself on the bottom of whatever positions they took, however, lest Ryou’s soft skin be pierced by the sharp-edged gravel they rolled across.

Ryou Bakura was found, curled up and bundled in blankets, on the balcony the next morning. Atem raised an eyebrow towards Yugi, who could only shrug.

“You stayed up drinking with little Ryou?”

Yugi shrugged again; smiled, and then moved to wake his friend. Ryou muttered drowsily at the disturbance, curling tighter in on himself.

“Ryou. Ryou, it’s time to wake up.”

“Feels like… death…” Ryou groaned, then blinked bloodshot eyes up at Yugi. “Aah… sorry, Yugi…”

“It’s okay,” Yugi replied, and then helped Ryou stumbled to his feet. Ryou’s eyes widened when he spotted Atem standing several feet away. “It’s okay,” Yugi said again.

“Ah, I’m so sorry, Pharaoh…” Ryou murmured, and Atem shrugged.

“It happens. I’ll have my healers mix you something to help your head.” And then the Pharaoh swished off, leaving Yugi and Ryou to make their way inside.

“How humiliating…” Ryou muttered, and Yugi smiled sympathetically.

“Even if you used to drink half a bottle of wine every night, it’s been a while since you’ve done it, right?”
Ryou shook his head slightly. “Longer than I thought, I guess…”

“Come on,” Yugi urged, pulling his friend along. “Take breakfast with us.”

Ryou tried to object, but was pulled along into the Pharaoh’s chamber despite his half-formed protests. Atem waited, seated primly at the dining table in his room, a glass of herbal-smelling sludge in front of him. When Yugi guided Ryou to sit down, he pushed it over with graceful fingers.

“Drink. It’ll help.”

Ryou muttered thanks, then downed the concoction uncomplainingly. Atem gave an impressed little grimace. A servant came in, then, with platters of food, and set them down before excusing himself.

Ryou stared down at his empty plate, then jumped as Yugi began to dish him some of the breakfast. Atem tucked into his own meal, saying, “Food will help you feel better,” without looking up.

“I-I can go…” Ryou began, looking uncertainly over at Yugi.

His friend beamed back at him. “We may as well get used to one another’s company. Pharaoh?”

Atem kept his gaze fixed on his hot cakes. “I’m not sure I’m willing to entrust your keeping to someone who drinks himself to sleep on the balcony. You could have frozen to death, a week later into the season,” he added, gesturing vaguely to Ryou with his knife.

“Don’t tease, Pharaoh,” Yugi said. “Besides, I don’t need a ‘keeper.’”

“Granted,” Atem said, “but if you’re going to be getting drunk, I’d prefer it be with me, honestly.”

Yugi laughed, and Ryou glanced between the other two in confusion. Ryou tried to speak, but Atem cut him off with a command of, “Eat your breakfast,” that made him jump and obediently take a bite of roasted meat. It tasted so unexpectedly good that he had to swipe at his mouth to hide a drizzle of drool.

“Coffee?” Yugi offered, only to have Atem practically knock the serving pot out of his hand.

“Drink water,” he ordered Ryou, nudging the pitcher across the table. “You’re probably as dehydrated as Set’s open desert.”

Ryou could only nod, though his hand shook as he poured himself a glass of the crystalline liquid and drank deeply. How the Pharaoh could have such clean water at his disposal bewildered Ryou; even at the height of his power, Bakura had spoken bitterly of the difficulty of getting unpolluted water.

Yugi smiled encouragingly at him. “Feeling any better? Not nauseous, are you?”

“Do not throw up inside,” Atem ordered, and Ryou shook his head adamantly.

“N-No, my lords, no nausea… I’m fine. The herbs, Pharaoh Atem, they helped… thank you…”

For a long moment no one spoke; Yugi hummed quietly, some cheerful, wordless tune.

“It’s fairly customary for a pharaoh’s spouse to have a personal entourage, separate from the main palace staff,” Atem said, without lead-in, as he dissected a piece of honey-soaked date-bread into bite-sized pieces with dexterous fingers. Ryou dropped the bread he was holding. “Yugi brought the subject up with me, this morning. According to standard proceedings, who this entourage is comprised of is entirely up to him. I know you’ve been a good friend to him, in the palace. I
appreciate you, for that reason. And, barring this morning, you’ve always shown yourself to be responsible and capable, where your duties are concerned.” Atem took a leisurely bite of his breakfast; made a point of taking his time as he chewed and swallowed, even taking the time to mumble, “Yugi, remind me to compliment the cooks on these sweetbreads,” before saying, “I see no reason to object if my Yugi wishes to choose you for such an appointment.”

“Isn’t that great news?” Yugi asked Ryou, excitement lending his voice an almost bubbly quality.

Ryou could only nod; mumble, “Great news…” as he stared unseeingly down at his plate.

Yugi reached across the table, grasping Ryou’s hand gently; Ryou looked sharply up at him, eyes widening. “So please… I don’t know what last night was all about, but it sounded an awful lot like you were saying goodbye. Don’t leave. Please.”

“If anything’s troubling you, I’ll do everything in my power to remedy it,” Pharaoh Atem added, dropping his show of preoccupation with his breakfast. “You’re precious to me, Bakura, as is everyone in this palace. And especially you, as a close friend of my Yugi, have my ear at any hour, and all of my resources at your disposal, if you have need of them.”

Ryou lowered his head; tried to scrape together some semblance of composure, but couldn’t entirely conceal the agony precipitated by internal conflict. Luckily for him, the Pharaoh and his betrothed perceived it only as surprise and bewilderment.

“I’ll leave you two, for now,” Atem said, standing—taking his plate with him. “I have a meeting, this morning, to do with this business of killings and statues being toppled. Bakura, I’ll look forward to hearing your agreement.”

Yugi rose briefly to give Atem a farewell kiss—a sweet, slow affair with chastely closed lips—and then returned to where Ryou sat. As soon as the Pharaoh had left, Yugi smiled and said, “Sorry about that. He likes to make people squirm. His sense of humor is a little perverse, sometimes. But he did mean what he said, there at the end.”

“Why are you doing this…?” Ryou asked softly, keeping his head down.

“Because you’re my friend,” was Yugi’s reply, and he squeezed Ryou’s hand. “You aren’t alone. It doesn’t matter what you’re going through. We’re here for you.”

Ryou began to shake; wanted to cry, but somehow couldn’t. Yugi didn’t question it, only rubbed his hand and then, at some point, rose and hugged him.

“You’re okay, Ryou. You’re okay, and you’re going to be okay, for as long as you let Pharaoh and I have a say in it. I promise.”

… … …

Yugi Mutou had grown very fond of decorative chains, as jewelry. He appreciated the irony, and liked the aesthetic look of them, on top of it.

Atem’s eyes roamed hungrily across Yugi’s body as Yugi layered those chains on, observing himself in front of an ornate mirror. The young Betrothed of the Pharaoh had chosen a revealing black silk to wear wrapped around his waist—that was the only cloth incorporated into his outfit, unless one counted the straps of his sandals. The rest consisted of those heavy chains, a dark gray variation of his usual gold, draped across his shoulders and wrapped around his arms. One massive cuff encircled his neck, attached—with plenty of slack—to smaller ones on his wrists. All three of the cuffs were hollow, to ease the weight of them.
“Do you think it’s too much?”

“Oh, Ra yes…” Atem breathed. “Too much for me to *stand.* I might not last through the banquet.”

Yugi glanced over his shoulder; obligingly hiked the black scrap of fabric up higher on his hips. Atem sat up markedly straighter—an impressive feat, considering his already impeccable posture.

“You’re going to be the death of me, Yugi Mutou.”

“I haven’t got my makeup on yet, Pharaoh. I’d rather you pounce on me now than after I go through all the trouble of painting my face.”

Atem rose, looking as though he might oblige, when a knock came. The Pharaoh froze, even as Yugi rattled the chains invitingly with no regard for whoever was at the door. He stopped when Ryou Bakura called in, “Pharaoh? Lord Yugi?”

“Come in, Bakura,” Atem called, sitting back down and crossing his legs. Ryou’s eyes widened when he saw Yugi, who waved and pulled the black silks back down over his thighs.

Ryou coughed slightly, then said, “The last of the generals just arrived, Pharaoh.”

“Oh, Ryou, would you come over here and help with my eyes?” Yugi asked, motioning. Atem watched with sharp eyes as the servant, though visibly hesitant, obeyed. “I can never get the left one to look quite right, when I try to do them myself.”

Yugi sat down, and Ryou knelt before him; took the makeup pallet.

“Are you ready to say yes, Ryou?” Yugi asked, holding perfectly still beneath the brush. Ryou’s hand remained steady.

“Can we talk about this after the banquet, Lord Yugi?”

“I’m not ‘Lord Yugi…’”

“When we’re in public, that’s how I should refer to you. If I take this position, I mean.”

Yugi softened. “In public is one thing. But it doesn’t matter when it’s just you and I and Pharaoh.”

“I couldn’t call Pharaoh Atem by only his name,” Ryou replied, “even now. It hardly makes sense for me to call you anything but ‘Lord Yugi.’”

“For Ra’s sake, Bakura, you can call me ‘Atem,’ if it puts you more at ease,” the Pharaoh growled, and Ryou glanced up.

“Then why call me ‘Bakura?’ Why not ‘Ryou?’”

“Formality?” Atem asked, with a shrug. “Convention? Would you rather I call you ‘Ryou?’ I’m an accommodating person, Ryou, despite what the rumors say.”

Ryou didn’t reply, and Yugi fidgeted with the mysterious sense of tension crackling through the room.

“Please hold still, Lord Yugi.”

Realizing he had moved, Yugi closed his eyes again; felt the gentle touch of the makeup brush on his lids. He didn’t try to correct his friend, as far as titles were concerned, again.
The banquet was mostly an exercise in keeping up appearances; some nobles had made a joke about Pharaoh Atem canceling a private supper, due to the statue incidents, and so Pharaoh Atem had been all-but-required to throw an elaborate banquet in response. With most of the palace guard still away, the risk was obvious, but Atem insisted it was manageable. It would take a wealth of inside information to pull off any sort of meaningful attack on the palace, far more than could be provided by a bribed official or two. Furthermore, the Thief King—if it even was the Thief King behind the statues and murders, a theory which Atem seemed now inclined to resist—couldn’t possibly have the resources to gather the types of information and equipment he would need.

So Yugi Mutou, dressed to attract attention, and Pharaoh Atem, draped with the finest jewels he owned, made their appearance in the banquet hall. With their wedding growing closer, as winter progressed and spring approached, their betrothal hung like heavy innocence in the air.

Yugi insisted that his friend, Ryou Bakura, sit beside him at the table—arguably not a suitable seat for a servant, but Yugi was Yugi; the Pharaoh’s Betrothed could break convention at his own discretion.

The first half of the meal went as it should—three courses of food and plenty of wine, plus a fair amount of political and social banter. Yugi was fast learning to hold his own in such conversations, though Ryou, for the most part, kept his silence. At certain moments, Yugi reached over and grasped his friend’s hand; squeezed it, softly and encouragingly.

Around the time when trays of roast pig were being brought around by a fleet of servants, a shrieking noise could be heard from outside the palace walls. Though an odd sound, it didn't arouse undo concern; Atem discreetly sent two guards to investigate, and the meal continued.

Several minutes later, however, the palace windows began to dance with an unnatural kind of light—violet and dark. Atem stood, and the conversation at the table ground to an uncertain halt.

“Shadow Fire…?” Atem breathed, just as an upper window shattered. Immediately Atem dove for Yugi, even as most of the officials at the table scattered like bugs in bright light. The palace-folk closed ranks around their Pharaoh without hesitation.

“Gather the magicians! They’ll be able to deal with the fire!” Atem ordered, and several servants hurried off. “The rest of you, downward! The basement will be the safest place!”

“Pharaoh, what are you—?” one young maid began, and Pharaoh Atem cut her off with a stern look.

“I’m headed upward. From the roof, I’ll be able to assess the threat. That’s where I’ll rendezvous with the magicians, and we’ll put a stop to this. But the upper levels will be at greater risk for collapse, so you must all go to the duel ring, below. It’s the most fortified place in the palace.”

“Pharaoh, I’ll—” Yugi said, but Atem rounded on him.

“Stay with the others, Yugi. I won’t have you endangered.”

“Pharaoh—” Yugi began again, but Atem crouched down; kissed him sweetly, then drew slightly back.

“If you need me, reach out,” he breathed, against Yugi’s mouth. One of his hands stroked the shackle around Yugi’s neck. “And trust the cards, if it comes to that.” He rose.

“But—!” Yugi tried, only to have his hand grabbed by Ryou Bakura.

“Come on, Yugi. Your life is the priority.”
Atem softened. “This is your first task, Ryou Bakura, as keeper of my Yugi. Perform it well.”

Ryou nodded resolutely, and Yugi was swept along by the huddle of people before he could further object. He cried out; felt Atem’s mind brush his own as the Pharaoh raced up the palace steps.

“We will not be separated, my partner. But I will not see your life needlessly endangered.”

“Atem…!” Yugi called out, but heeded the pull of Ryou’s hand around his. They had begun their decent into the basement, as Atem approached the roof. “What if it is him? The Thief King?”

“Then I’ll face him, as I should have those years ago. And I will defeat him.”

“Atem—”

The stairs beneath Yugi’s feet—or perhaps those beneath Atem’s—gave an uncertain lurch, and they both cried out mentally and aloud. Ryou shrieked as Yugi stumbled, a wave of dizziness washing over him.

“Yugi? Yugi!”

Yugi caught a glimpse—through Atem’s eyes, he was certain—of a purple-tinged sky above the castle roof. There was a man—bronze skinned, with pale hair and malevolent eyes and lurid scar on his cheek. Atem gasped in pain, and Yugi with him, their hearts beating in perfect synchrony across the mental link, and the world went momentarily violet.

Yugi could still feel Ryou’s hands on him, trying to drag him along, and grasped helplessly for his friend to hang onto. “Ryou!…” He fell, despite his best efforts; blacked out, and then opened his eyes to blinding purple light.

“What is this?! What happened?!“ Ryou was screaming, and Yugi blinked desperately to clear his vision. He was still clutching at Ryou’s pale blue dress-robes, but had fallen to his knees. The world had a strange, dim, violet property about it, and was a bit distorted, too, as if seen through a warped pane of stained glass. Yugi felt Ryou’s panic, visceral, as if it were his own, and realized with a start that he had been reaching out to his friend not only physically, but mentally.

“Ryou…”

Ryou looked down at him, eyes wild. “Y-You…” He seemed to struggle for words, his narrow chest heaving. “Y-You, you and Atem, you’re…” His face twisted strangely, something between a sob and a scream leaving him with no more volume than a whisper. He fell to his knees. “And you dragged me along with you…”

They were still in the stairway, but the other palace-folk had vanished. It was oddly quiet, devoid of any sounds save for those created by the two boys. Yugi stared around in confusion.

“Where are we, Ryou…?”

Ryou struggled to his feet; stooped down and grabbed both of Yugi’s hands, coaxing him up, as well.

“Oh gods…” Ryou was shaking—hard. His eyes flashed from place to place, and he mumbled, “What now? What am I suppose to do now…?”

“Ryou, it’s okay,” Yugi said, despite his own confusion. The air had a suffocating quality about it, and he focused, for a moment, on breathing. “We’ll… find Atem. He’ll know what to do.”
Ryou blinked. “Atem. Right… Atem and…” he breathed, and then tightened his grip on Yugi’s hands. “Come on…” he urged, his voice still shaky as he started back up the stairs. “Come on, I know… a way…”

Yugi nodded, following his friend. They each gripped both of one another’s hands tightly, as if that hold would keep them both grounded in a sense of physical reality. Yugi reached out for Atem’s mind desperately, and found only a void all around him.

Along the staircase, the two boys reached a carving of the Change of Heart spell. Ryou disentangled one hand from Yugi’s, then reached up to the heart and pressed it into the wall. The stone maiden shifted to one side, opening a hidden passageway. Ryou pulled Yugi inside, and then took a deep, steadying breath. His composure seemed to be returning.

Yugi’s whole body, conversely, was shaking; rattling the chains still draped around him. “How…? How did you know this was here?”

“I’m a thief,” was Ryou’s simple response; he began to walk, then picked up speed until he was at a steady trot. “Hidden passages are a vital part of my trade. Now come on—let’s find the Pharaoh.”

My… trade… Yugi took Ryou’s hand; allowed himself to be led along. But the confidence Ryou now radiated wasn’t his own; it didn’t belong to Ryou Bakura, but was borrowed from other source. Yugi flexed his fingers; tightened his grip on Ryou’s hand, and followed his friend.

The hidden hallway spiraled slowly upward, and Ryou led them on with a grim sense of determination. Again Yugi searched for Atem’s mind; again, found nothing. He tried to push down his mounting panic, focusing on the feeling of Ryou’s hand around his.

“Where are we, Ryou…?”

Ryou glanced over his shoulder, his eyes uncharacteristically sharp. “You don’t know?”

“No…? Should I?”

“You and Atem have been Mind Shuffling, right?”

Yugi nodded dumbly, past the point of being surprised.

“And you don’t know what the Shadow Realm is?”

Yugi shook his head.

Ryou gave an exasperated sigh. “Gods… so dangerous, what you’ve been doing! Even more so if you’ve been doing it unknowingly!”

“What does that have to do with this?” Yugi asked, struggling to keep up. He wondered why Ryou had such physical stamina, and decided there was probably a good reason he couldn’t even guess at.

“Every time you Mind Shuffle, you utilize the Shadow Realm. The Shadow Realm is what allows your two souls to come into direct contact.”

“Even if the magicians are aware of that, I’ve never known…” Yugi huffed. “What about you, Ryou…? How do you know… about the Shadow Realm…?”

“He told me.”

Yugi felt a shiver pass through him—a revelation he wasn’t quite ready to make; kept suppressed for
a few moments more. But Ryou began to slow as they neared the top of the passageway, and then stopped altogether, his legs—lean muscles conditioned by slogging through traitorous sand in the middle of pitch-black nights—set wide and braced as if for balance.

“Yugi, I…”

The shriek of a beast echoed down to them—a monster, surely, and Yugi pushed past Ryou without thinking. The violet light intensified for a moment, as he emerged from the tunnel, and he threw up his arms as a ward against the blinding wall of shadow. But as soon as he could manage, he forced his eyes open—just in time to see Pharaoh Atem blown backwards by the massive serpent’s attack.

“Atem!!”

The Pharaoh’s head snapped up; he was scuffed and battered, the same ornate robes he had worn at the banquet torn open over his chest. Yugi ran to him, headless of the Diabound Kernel swaying several meters away, and of the purple flames that seemed, impossibly, to hem in the palace roof, and of the man standing on the other side of the impromptu battlefield.

“Yugi…!” Atem reached up; touched Yugi’s face, oddly tender, given their setting. “Yugi, you should… shouldn’t be here…”

“Thief King!”

Ryou’s voice confirmed what Yugi had already known, and he looked up in time to see the man’s menace vanish, just for a moment, in the midst of confusion. Ryou didn’t run to him, but approached quickly with head lowered.

“Ryou! What is this? Why are you here?”

“Yugi Mutou and Atem share a mental link. They Mind Shuffle, my King.” Ryou went down on one knee, when he reached the man. “I’m not sure how, exactly, but Yugi dragged me with him when he was sucked into the Shadow Realm via his connection with Atem. I’m sorry, Thief King, I didn’t realize—”

“No matter.” The Thief King cut him off brusquely; looked back up, a wicked grin splitting his handsome face. “So you’re Yugi,” he purred, seeming to give Ryou no more consideration. But Yugi saw—registered, and noted—how he moved subtly in front of the smaller servant boy, shuffling only a few steps under guise of a hostile advance. “I’ve heard so much about you! Look, Pharaoh—your beloved has come to die with you! Which will perish first, I wonder?”

“You’re him…!” Yugi exclaimed, and Ryou’s head snapped up. The significance was missed by both the Pharaoh and the Thief King, who didn’t look away from one another.

“Yugi!”

Yugi’s heart leaped at the silent call of his name. “Pharaoh! I’m here!”

“I couldn’t feel your mind, before. But now that we’re in physical contact…” Yugi felt Atem’s relief like a literal wave of warm water, and he thought, perhaps inappropriately, of the huge bath they often shared. He felt himself smile.

“Pharaoh… I’m so glad…”

“I don’t know what this place is, but—”
“The Shadow Realm.”

“?”

“It’s called the Shadow Realm. That’s what Ryou said.”

“Ryou Bakura…” The feel of Atem’s mind darkened, but he didn’t ruminate on the name further. Yugi shivered.

“As long as we can talk. We can plan, then. We can fight back.”

“No, Yugi. Stay behind me.” Atem struggled to his feet, even as the Diabound Kernel shrieked.

“This whole place, this… Shadow Realm… is like a duel ring—monsters and spells and traps, they all manifest. It’s just lucky I always carry our deck.”

“But our deck, it’s missing—”

“Are you quite ready to continue, Pharaoh?” the Thief King called out, haughty and mocking. “Or would you like to surrender and be done with it?”

Atem staggered slightly, but kept his feet. “Come!” he shouted, holding up a card. “Do your worst! The stolen cards you carry cannot hurt me!”

The Thief King laughed—a warm, boisterous sound. “As a proud thief, I have every bit of faith in these stolen cards as you have in your own deck, Pharaoh! Go, Diabound!”

“Feral Imp, defend!” Though the monster materialized in time, Atem was still blown backwards by the force of the attack. Yugi lurched, catching Atem’s arm and helping the Pharaoh keep his feet.

“It’s over, Pharaoh!” the Thief King shouted, pointing. “How many cards do you have left to defend you? You will die here!”

“I believe a miracle will occur!” Atem called back, drawing another card and setting it, immediately, in defensive position. Yugi could see him shaking with fatigue. “I will fight, so long as there is breath in my body, waiting for that miracle!”

“The long exile of the Thief King is coming to an end!” the Thief King cried, and Ryou’s head tilted up in an adoring way; he still knelt on the ground, beside his King. “I summon Abaki, to attack! Destroy the defender!”

The fiendish monster shrieked; charged. This time, despite Yugi’s steadying grip on his arm, Atem went to his knees as the defending monster was obliterated. The Thief King’s laughter grew more laden with perverse joy, sounding, for a moment, like a manic child’s.

“Pharaoh?”

“Not yet… Yugi… not yet…”

“You won’t defeat me, not with monsters like those!” Atem shouted, though he was on his knees. “The Thief King has no more powerful servants than a snake and a little goblin?! You make a mockery of yourself!”

The Thief King laughed. “Is that so, Pharaoh? You intend to posture and cling to your false bravery to the end?” His grin stretched; twisted. “Very well! I’ll make you pay properly, then, for all the suffering you’ve caused! I call forth the greatest of all gods to crush your defiant spirit! Ritual Spell
Card: Contract with the Dark Master!" He whipped up the card. "I tribute Abaki and Diabound! Come forth, Dark Master Zorc, destroyer of worlds! Come forth as my servant to destroy the Pharaoh!"

The roof of the palace began to shake, far harder than the exhausted Pharaoh was trembling. The monsters on the Thief King’s side of the field vaporized, their energies contributing to a massive vortex forming above the King himself. Yugi hunkered closer to the stone, pulling at Atem to keep him anchored, as well.

“For every indignity, I will make you pay!” the Thief King continued, though he could scarcely make himself heard over the wailing winds. “Every sacrifice I will take back, ten-fold! Your rule is over, Pharaoh! Now is the time for a King!”

The mysterious monster, Zorc, was at last taking form. One massive foot met the roof, setting off an unnerving series of cracks across the stone. The monster’s head, just visible in the swirling indigo clouds, sported multiple horns capable of impaling any mere mortal who saw fit to challenge it.

“Now!” The Pharaoh tried to shout it, but the force of the gale battered his voice down to a whisper. Still, his last card responded to his will, and he managed to raise it high. The wind snatched it—glowing, as it came to life—and carried it high into the dark vortex. “Trap, activate: Dark Horn of Heaven!”

The density of the cloud-cover muffled the resulting explosion, but the shock-waves rocked the already abused palace. The half-formed monster gave a ghoulish scream as it began to disintegrate; Yugi and Atem, keeping their elbows linked, clasped hands over their ears and hunkered down against the roof, pressing their bodies close together.

When the world quieted, Yugi raised his head. He saw the Thief King staggering up, and Ryou scrambling from beneath him. Atem’s breath was coming in labored wheezes, but the Pharaoh managed to get to his feet. Yugi, legs shaking, stood beside him.

“What—?! The Thief King’s breath seemed to be in the same state as Atem’s. He struggled to speak, even as Ryou gripped one of his arms with both hands. “What…?! What… happened?!”

“The trap card Dark Horn of Heaven,” Atem said, his voice faint but steady, “stops a Special Summon and destroys the summoned monster. You could have slain me with normally summoned monsters, but I goaded you into trotting out your mightiest beast. That was your undoing.”

The Thief King gave forth with an enraged roar despite his breathless state, sounding for all the world like a cornered lion. Ryou tightened his grip on his arm.

“Pharaoh…” Yugi murmured, fetching a card from the hidden compartment in the shackle around his neck. Atem nodded; accepted it.

“Now, I summon Dark Magician!” Atem’s voice regained a bit of it’s missing grander as he raised the card. With a flash of light, the loyal servant of the pharaoh appeared, staff glowing with vengeful energies. “Thief King! Prepare yourself! And Ryou Bakura, I will smite you along with your depraved King!”

The Thief King’s eyes widened slightly, and Yugi saw the word, “Bakura?” phrased as a question on his lips. Ryou stood up a bit straighter.

“Pharaoh!” the servant called out, his voice somehow stronger than either the Pharaoh’s or the King’s. “I will stand up for my Thief King! I will defend him, in the place of the monsters you’ve
destroyed!"

“Ryou!” the Thief King commanded, even as Ryou took one step forward, then another. “Get back here!”

“No…” Ryou breathed. “You’ll find a way… I believe you can make miracles happen, too, Thief King…”

“Very well!” Atem pointed; squared his shoulders. “You’ll be first, then, Ryou Bakura! Dark Magician, attack!”

In a flash, the Thief King had gotten in front of and knocked Ryou back—the smaller boy gave a squeak as he hit the palace roof, and the whole thing gave an unstable lurch. Like that final straw, the impact was all it took for the cracked stone to separate entirely, sending first Ryou, then the Thief King, plummeting downwards. The Dark Magician’s attack missed by a considerable margin, and Atem grabbed Yugi as the two of them were pitched into free-fall, as well.

The last thing Yugi was aware of was Atem’s arms tightening around him, and then the impact came.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, if you’re enjoying the work! The finale will be posted soon~ Thank you for reading!
Guys, we have reached the conclusion.

... But have we really?

The answer is a resounding "No!"

If you haven't already noticed, this work is part of a series. I do intend to continue it (lots of bonus scenes, for one thing, as well as a telling of TKBakura's backstory (extensively altered, in this AU), and even a proper sequel in the works), so head on over to the "For Those who Rule Egypt" series page for more info!

With that, thank you so much for reading this little fic! I had so much fun writing it, and I do hope you enjoyed it as much as I did! I hope to see you in future installments of this AU and, without further ado, the finale~

“Bakura!”

The first thing Yugi heard was a voice calling out a name—Ryou’s voice, it seemed, calling out his own surname.

“Bakura! Bakura!”

No, not his own name—someone else’s name. Someone else was called “Bakura.”

Yugi forced his eyes open; struggled to inhale and immediately fell to a coughing jag as he choked on dust and debris. He struggled to push himself up, the pain more intense than even what he had experienced as a slave. Still, with the memory of overcoming such obstacles in the past, his mind triumphed over his badly bruised matter. He succeeded, at least, in getting to his elbows, then looked toward Ryou’s voice.

Ryou’s streaming eyes met his, huge and desperate. His hands were tangled in the tattered clothes of the Thief King, who lay unmoving among the rubble.

“Yugi…” Ryou moaned—begged. “He won’t wake up, Yugi…! What do I do, what do I do?!”

Yugi dragged himself forward, feeling one of his legs twist unnaturally beneath him. He wondered, objectively, if it was broken or only dislocated.

“Ryou…”

“He won’t wake up!” Ryou repeated, his hands knotting more insistently in the Thief King’s robes. “I can’t find his pulse, Yugi!”

Yugi felt a cold shiver run through him as he dragged himself over to where Ryou and the Thief King lay. When he was near enough, he reached, almost unthinkingly, to the shackle around his left wrist—to another hidden compartment, and another card.
“Trap: Miracle’s… Wake…” he whispered—his voice, otherwise, seemed to have gone missing.

Ryou’s breathing hitched, and he snatched the card. Then he paused; seemed to check the reaction, and held it back out. “What if Atem needs it…?”

Yugi shook his head. “I… I can feel Atem… nearby. He’s not… He has a pulse, still.”

Ryou drew a shuddering breath, then nodded. He stretched out toward Yugi; paused, hesitant, and Yugi closed the gap to embrace him. They held one another tightly for a moment, then Ryou drew back. He pressed the card to the unmoving chest of the Thief King and whispered, “Trap, activate: Miracle’s Wake.”

There was a soft glow—magenta, among the omnipresent violet of the Shadow Realm—and the card dissolved into Thief King Bakura’s chest. The man drew a deep, shuddering breath; his eyes snapped open, and a moment later he began to cough and wheeze and curse weakly.

“Bakura!” Ryou clung to his chest, even as Yugi scooted backwards. “Gods, Bakura, thank the gods!”

“Ryou…” the Thief King rasped, looping one arm weakly around the smaller man. He closed his eyes. “Ryou… no, not the gods… thank you, Ryou…”

Yugi felt himself smile, then looked up at the crunch of feet through the debris. “Pharaoh!”

Pharaoh Atem didn’t look at him. His clothes had been torn further, and he was bleeding somewhat severely from scrapes along his arms and exposed chest, but he seemed otherwise unharmed. “Just a moment, Yugi,” he said, striding toward the two thieves. Ryou lowered his body defensively over the Thief King’s; Bakura could only watch with tragic, resigned eyes.

“Well, Pharaoh, it comes to this…” the Thief King murmured, making some feeble attempt to brush Ryou away. “You’ve won, it seems. Do your worst. Just do be sure to kill me, this time, or I may be forced to do it myself.”

Atem nodded, drawing a dagger from a sheath hidden among the decorative belts slung across his hips. “One way or the other, this will end your suffering, you miserable—”

“Atem!”

The Pharaoh faltered; turned, and met Yugi’s imploring gaze. “Yugi?”

“Isn’t it enough, Atem?” Yugi asked, and Atem’s eyes widened.

“What are you saying, Yugi?”

“I’m saying it’s enough.”

“Do you honestly think they would show us the same mercy you’re suggesting I show them?” Atem asked, his thoughts dripping disgust and suspicion.

“I honestly think that I would do exactly the same thing for you that Ryou is doing for Bakura. And that you would do the same for me that Bakura is trying to do for Ryou.”

Atem drew physically back, looking stung. “Yugi—”

“If our positions were reversed, Atem. This would play out just the same. I’d bet my life on that.”
Atem scowled, then looked back at Ryou and Bakura. The Thief King had closed his eyes again, both his arms wrapped around the servant boy.

“What are you waiting for, Pharaoh?” Bakura rasped, unaware of the silent conversation. “Don’t tell me you’ve lost your nerve? You’ve killed me once before, haven’t you? Can’t do it with your own hands, this time?”

Atem’s grip on his dagger tightened, and Ryou lowered his eyes. “I didn’t kill you,” the Pharaoh spat. “Besides the fact that calling yourself the King of Thieves was your own choice, and the consequences should be yours to face, you’ve never felt the despair of true death. You always thought you could get to me, that your time would come again. You… seduced this boy, here,” with an angry gesture to Ryou, “into doing your bidding, to that end! You destroyed him in some sick attempt to resurrect yourself, and worse—you somehow presented that warped connection as love.”

When Ryou drew a breath, Bakura gave him a gentle squeeze to silence him. The Thief King chuckled weakly, eyes still closed, as Ryou looked questioningly at him.

“I told Ryou to go to the palace, to seek work there… yes. Why did I do that?”

“To lay the groundwork for your attack,” Atem said. “Your revenge.”

“I did it so he’d be safe!” Bakura’s voice rose, then immediately dropped again. He tightened his grip on Ryou, keeping his eyes shut. “I never thought in a thousand years he’d actually come back to get me.”

“You…?” Ryou whispered, and Bakura shook his head.

“Listen, Pharaoh. Those in my line of work don’t have many friends. You, you get all the adoration. You get the praise and the accolades. And if you can tell me with a straight face that I had a fair shot at the type of life you have, you’re an even better liar than I am. I’m not that deluded, and I have made my choices. So all I ended up with, in this whole shitty world, were some worthless jewels and this priceless kid right here. That’s it. When you took my jewels away, he was the only one who stuck with me. He was willing to destroy himself to stay with me. So I made up a story. I lied. I’m good at that. I said I had a plan, and that all I needed was for him to infiltrate the palace.”

At last Bakura opened his eyes, as nothing more than slits. He continued: “I holed up and got ready to die. I didn’t think he could possibly love me, the way he said he did. I thought that, once he realized he could live comfortably in the palace, under your care, Pharaoh, he would forget about me. So I got ready to die. For five months I tried to scrape together the courage to just end it already, telling myself that he wouldn’t come back, that he shouldn’t come back, and that he’d be safe.

“But then he proved me wrong.” Bakura closed his eyes again; gripped Ryou, who had begun to cry quietly. “He came back to me, Pharaoh. And I thought maybe he could love me that much, after all, and if he loved me that damn much… then I could do anything. Even keep living. Even bring you down. Even be worthy of loving him back.”

For a beat, there was only silence and soft sounds of Ryou’s sobbing. Then Atem scoffed; curled his lip, and said, “Nice story. Did you think it all up on the spot, or have you rehearsed that speech?”

“Atem…” Yugi objected, and the Pharaoh rounded on him.

“You don’t believe all that, do you?” he demanded, and Yugi gave a small shrug.

“I think you do, too. I can feel your thoughts.”
Indignation made Atem’s face flush, and he turned back to where the Thief King lay. “I don’t. I don’t believe a word of it.”

“I’m a great liar, Pharaoh, but at least I never lie to myself,” Bakura said, with a slight curling of his lips.

Atem bristled, but didn’t move one way or the other. Instead he shifted, uncertain, from foot to foot; flicked his dagger back and forth. “I don’t believe you…” he muttered again, and then looked at Yugi.

“Atem… help me up, please? My leg is hurt.”

The Pharaoh’s scowl deepened, but he sheathed his dagger and obeyed. Yugi was fairly sure the injury was only a bad sprain or pull, since the limb could support some amount of weight without giving out. Ryou watched the pair of them carefully.

“… You hurt my Yugi. And you destroyed my palace,” Atem growled at last, and Bakura shook his head slightly.

“Your palace is fine, Pharaoh. What happens in the Shadow Realm pretty much stays in the Shadow Realm. That doesn’t go for us, of course—any damage done to us transfers over quite literally.”

Atem scowled, but only scooped Yugi up more totally into his arms. “Fine. Get us out of here. Then we’ll see how I feel about you.”

Bakura’s smile widened, although his eyes remained closed. “As my Pharaoh commands.”

The violet light swelled to encompass the four humans, then faded out until it vanished; around them, the palace halls appeared in their rightful colors, and unmarred by the collapse. Atem glanced around and, seeming satisfied, nodded. A moment later, a group of palace folk came pounding around the corner.

“Pharaoh!”

“Pharaoh Atem!”

“Lord Yugi!”

“It’s fine…” Atem called out, to soothe them. With a glance at Ryou and Bakura, he asked, “Have the Shadow Fires been dealt with?”

“They were put out some time ago, Pharaoh, but when you didn’t reappear…” One of the magicians came forward. “Pharaoh, we feared the worst. Are you and the Lord Yugi truly alright?”

“We’re scratched up,” Atem said, with a hint of exasperation. “But we’re fine.” Again he looked down at the two on the floor; Ryou was exchanging strange looks with the other servants, who knew him well. “Have these two taken down to the dungeon. Make sure they’re given medical care, but lock them up with every bolt and chain we have.”

Bakura chuckled, startling several servants who had approached. “The merciful Pharaoh… the legends don’t do his generosity justice.”

Atem pointedly ignored him, addressing one of the servants. “Have my healers meet me in my chamber. Yugi’s injured his leg.”
As the woman hurried off with a word of assent, Yugi gave Ryou an encouraging smile; Ryou repaid it with a more nervous one, and his grip on Bakura tightened.

Atem looked up at the ceiling, an exasperated sigh leaving him before he said, “Put the two of them in the same cell. They’ll be less likely to try anything, then.”

As the servants muttered understanding, Ryou’s smile eased. “Thank you, Pharaoh,” he said, and Atem’s lip curled.

“None of this is for your sake, so don’t thank me for anything.”

“Thank you, Pharaoh,” Bakura mimicked cattily.

Atem bristled. But he was in the presence of palace-folk, now, and kept his composure. He did, however, indulge in saying, “Put some extra chains on that one. Shackle him. I don’t want him able to move about more freely than a shuffle.”

The servants nodded willingly, then hurried off to do their Pharaoh’s bidding. Ryou and Bakura were taken away—Ryou on his own feet, and Bakura carried—while Atem made his dignified way up toward his chamber with Yugi in his arms.

“That was a nice touch, letting them share a cell,” Yugi said, stretching his neck up to nuzzle Atem’s cheek.

“I meant what I said,” Atem retorted. “They’re less likely to get up to anything if they’re together. I’m not foolish enough to try to keep them separate.”

“You did a very good thing, Pharaoh.” And Yugi kissed his cheek.

“Only because I can’t tolerate disappointing you,” was Atem’s frosty reply. “I’d just as soon have slit that Thief King’s filthy throat.”

“And Ryou, too?”

“Ryou…” Atem began agitatedly, and then seemed uncertain of what else to say.

“Don’t be so stubborn,” Yugi chided, kissing Atem’s cheek again. The Pharaoh didn’t soften, but he kept his peace until they arrived in his chamber. There the healers saw to both their wounds—to Atem’s lacerations and to Yugi’s badly torn hip. Atem was annoyed that they couldn’t take a bath—as it would wash off the salve slathered across his wounds—but managed to stop complaining by the time they were cuddled together in the warm, soft bed.

“… I love you, Yugi.”

“I know. I love you, too.”

“All I want is to protect you. If this turns out to be a mistake—”

“It’s not a mistake,” Yugi said gently, and kissed Atem on the lips.

The Pharaoh murmured some incoherent response, returning the affection. Then Atem was on top of Yugi, mumbling, “Is this okay?” while being very careful of Yugi’s injured leg.

“This is fine,” Yugi replied, wrapping his good leg around Atem’s waist. “This is perfect.”

“I love you.”
“I love you, too, Pharaoh.”

“Yugi!”

Yugi smiled as Ryou approached the bars; Yugi crouched down outside the cell, and Ryou mirrored him. Yugi glanced at the shadowy figure sitting near the back of the cell, on the bed, but didn’t focus on it and addressed Ryou directly. “How are you doing? Are your injuries healing well?”

“They are!” Ryou replied. “Thank you! And yours?”

“Good as new,” Yugi said, setting down the tray he carried and pushing it beneath the barred door. “I heard that Pharaoh ordered you guys kept on standard prisoner rations, but that’s just him pouting. I think it’s pretty ridiculous.”

“Yugi…” Ryou picked up the bottle of wine sitting beside the food, his cheerful smile turning tender. “This is… Thank you, Lord Yugi…”

“I can see why little Ryou’s so fond of you,” came a deeper voice, and Yugi looked up to see that the Thief King had materialized, soundlessly, just behind Ryou. Though imposing in physical appearance, his posture and attitude were relaxed. He stooped down when Ryou held up the bottle of wine. “An eastern import!” he exclaimed. “I’m impressed! The little Pharaoh’s getting more adventurous!”

Yugi noted the telling lack of chains on the Thief King’s person, despite Atem’s blustery orders when they had first arrived back from the Shadow Realm. Similarly, despite the supposedly austere rations, the bed looked unusually large and comfortable for a prison cell, and there was even a private bathing chamber off one side of the room. Prison cells were very rarely used for long-term holding, but this one had obviously been outfitted otherwise.

Ryou reached through the bars and grasped Yugi’s hands, drawing his attention. “Thank you, Yugi. You’re a great friend.”

“I hope he’ll agree to let you out, soon,” Yugi said, and jumped when Bakura laughed heartily. The Thief King reached through the bars; nudged Yugi in the shoulder with a fist, and Yugi was surprised by how light the touch was.

“You’re a little fool, eh?” Bakura laughed again—an unexpectedly warm sound. “Clearly Pharaoh isn’t going to let us out any time soon, and clearly he shouldn’t.” The Thief King flashed a toothy grin. “Just because we’re on neutral enough terms right now doesn’t mean it wouldn’t delight me to strip him of the title of ‘Pharaoh.’”

“But not kill him!” Yugi chirped, and Ryou sniggered.

Bakura blinked. “What?”

“You just said, ‘strip him of the title of Pharaoh,’ but didn’t say a word about killing him,” Yugi explained. “Or me, for that matter! That’s progress, see?”

The Thief King chuckled; shook his head, and sat more comfortably down. “If you want to see it like that, go right ahead. I’d break that Pharaoh’s graceful little neck first chance I got, with pleasure. But as far as killing you is concerned? It’s bad etiquette to kill someone who feeds you.” As if to demonstrate his point, Bakura picked up a slice of melon from the tray and took a bite, heedless of the juice that drizzled down his chin.
Ryou leaned over to wipe at his mouth with one sleeve. “Don’t be sloppy,” he chided, and the Thief King laughed.

“But it’s so much fun to get all dirty…”

Ryou blushed, but didn’t bite. “Table manners,” he chided. “It may be the dungeons, but you’re still in the palace. And we’re in the presence of Lord Yugi.”

“I’m still not ‘Lord Yugi,’” Yugi said patiently.

The Thief King grinned; asked, “That bothers you? To be called ‘Lord?’”

“I mean, Ryou is my friend,” Yugi tried to explain, and the Thief King chuckled.

“Ryou’s practically my husband and he still calls me ‘King’ all the time. And I love that about him.”

Ryou’s eyes lit with humor. “Practically your what? I’ve never gotten a proper proposal from you, Bakura.”

The Thief King’s eyebrows arched. “Really? How terribly neglectful of me…” With a flourish, he produced a lapis lazuli scarab ring, and Ryou gave a surprised gasp. “Marry me, Ryou?”

“Where in the gods did you get that?” Ryou demanded, even as Yugi looked down in astonishment at his hands. The lapis lazuli ring—selected somewhat carelessly from the jewelry box on his vanity, that morning—was indeed missing. Ryou looked over; caught Yugi staring at his hands, realized what had happened, and chided, “Give it back, Thief King.”

“That’s okay…” Yugi murmured, even as Bakura held it back out through the bars. “I have way too many to ever wear, anyhow…”

Bakura grinned, closing his hand around the jewelry again. “I’m not called the Thief King for no good reason, pharaoh-ling.”

“Please. You gave yourself that title,” Ryou said, but tolerated it when Bakura took his hand and slipped the ring onto his finger. “Kauket… so embarrassing…”

The Thief King laughed—something he seemed to do quite a lot, Yugi noted with appreciation. “I’m serious, though, Ryou. Let’s get properly married once the Pharaoh lets us loose, what’d you say?” And he kissed the back of Ryou’s hand.

“Yes…” Ryou breathed, and Yugi applauded dutifully as Bakura looked around for a suitable stone to break the neck of the wine bottle. When he found one, he hefted it experimentally in his palm, then cracked the ceramic with practiced precision.

“Have a drink with us?” the Thief King asked, offering the bottle. Yugi took a polite sip before passing it back through the bars.

“When is your wedding happening, Yugi?” Ryou asked.

“In spring,” Yugi replied. “Pharaoh is still trying to navigate a few foreign rulers who are supposed to attend, too, with their availability and travel-time. The whole thing is a little too political for my taste, but I suppose that’s the nature of marrying a pharaoh.”

“Eyy, why don’t you stab the bastard one night? Then you’ll be pharaoh yourself,” Bakura asked,
and Yugi couldn’t tell from his grin if he was serious or not. “I’d back you a hundred percent, and so’d little Ryou.”

“Don’t tease, Bakura…” Ryou murmured.

“I’m not teasing!” the Thief King exclaimed. “I’m as serious as I am in love with you!”

“Don’t tease…” Ryou repeated crossly.

Bakura picked up a sweet from the tray; held it beneath Ryou’s nose. “Sorry, love. Forgive me?”

Ryou regarded him for a moment longer, eyes narrowed, then opened his mouth obligingly. Bakura slipped the treat inside, then turned to Yugi while Ryou was momentarily gagged by the fluffy cream pastry.

“I owe you, really, for saving him. I’ve never seen much need to repay my own life debts, but I’ll suffer being in your debt for saving Ryou’s life. One unconditional favor, little pharaoh-ling; anything. Call it in any time.”

Yugi lowered his head slightly. “Thank you. I do realize what that’s worth.”

“He’s a smart one, Ryou!” Bakura said, nudging Ryou—who, still happily preoccupied with the cream-puff, only nodded. “Easier to take you seriously when you’re not all strung with chains,” he added to Yugi, who shrugged. “Does the Pharaoh like that type of thing?”

“I’m sure he does. And I’m quite fond of them, too. It makes other people squirm, which is fun.”

“I like you, kid,” Bakura said. “In another lifetime, we might’ve been good friends, you and I!”

“Why not this lifetime?” Yugi asked honestly, and the Thief King softened.

“We’ll just have to wait and see about this lifetime.”

… … …

“You smell like thief and you taste like wine,” Atem observed, pulling back from the kiss. Yugi’s arms wrapped around his neck kept him from going far, though.

“Tell me, Pharaoh, what does ‘thief’ smell like?”

“It’s that murky, dirty, untrustworthy smell shared by vagabonds. It abounds in places like taverns and dungeons,” Atem growled. “You need a bath.”

“I would much rather make the scent rub off on you, Pharaoh.”

Atem sucked in a breath as Yugi’s hips ground up into his, closing his eyes as he fought to keep his focus. “I don’t want you going down to the dungeon, Yugi.”

“Why pick now to try to scold me, Pharaoh? Your sense of timing is poor, at best.”

“Because you smell like thief, and I can’t get that cursed Thief King out of my mind because of it.”

“That doesn’t seem to be affecting your performance. Should I be jealous, if you’re only thinking about King Bakura right now?”

Atem nearly got out of bed at that, but Yugi clung to him. Atem couldn’t quite get free, and so let
himself be physically dragged back under the blankets. After wrestling him down, Yugi crawled up to lie on Atem’s bare back, effectively pinning him down.

“Ryou is still my friend, Pharaoh. Friends visit friends when they’re locked up in dungeons.”

“It isn’t Ryou I’m worried about…” Atem muttered, his voice muffled by the mattress.

“Worried that that dashing Thief King will seduce me, then? I’m for you only, my Pharaoh, forever.”

Atem sat up at that; Yugi looped his arms around the Pharaoh’s neck, so that Atem was virtually choked when he straightened fully. Together, in a somewhat disorganized heap, they both flopped backwards on the bed.

“Can’t you be serious for two minutes, Yugi? This is serious. I’m being serious.”

“Hard to be serious when we’re both naked, Pharaoh.”

“Yugi…”

“We did a good thing, so stop pouting about it.”

“And where did your scarab ring get to, exactly?”

“Bakura swiped it. Gave it to Ryou.”

“See?”

“He offered to give it back, though.”

“After he stole it!”

“He is the Thief King, Pharaoh.”

“And since when is it acceptable for a King and a Pharaoh to exist, simultaneously, in the same kingdom? How is that reconcilable in any way?”

“It’s not like ‘Thief King’ is an official political title,” Yugi said reasonably. “Bakura made it up himself.”

“One of us is going to kill the other, eventually. This just isn’t sustainable.”

“Stop being so melodramatic.” Yugi climbed atop the Pharaoh; stared somewhat plaintively down, when Atem avoided his gaze. “You’re above this sort of squabbling, aren’t you?”

“Try me,” the Pharaoh huffed.

“I’m more important than all this petty argument, aren’t I?”

That got Atem to glance up, at least. “You’re the most important thing in the world, to me.”

“Then forget about the Thief King and Ryou and politics and the whole cursed kingdom and just pay attention to me, for a while,” Yugi appealed, and then kissed his Pharaoh. He gave the kiss every scrap of concentration and passion he could muster, and when he drew back Atem’s face was somewhat blank.
“You are making it very hard to pay attention to anything else, that’s for sure…”

Yugi grinned. “Good.” And he kissed the Pharaoh again.

Atem wrapped his arms obligingly around Yugi’s narrow shoulders as their impatient hips met and locked together. It was impossible, then, for either of them to think of anything besides the warm glow that swelled between their two bodies, growing to envelope them before pitching them both, violently and tenderly, into something resembling true ecstasy.

When Atem and Yugi lay, side by side and hopelessly short of breath, Atem managed to say, “If it made you happy, Yugi, I’d lie down in the mud and call myself a stinking thief. I’d give up my throne a thousand times.”

“That’s going a bit far,” Yugi said, with a faint chuckle. “I rather like the perks of your throne, Pharaoh.”

“Then every perk of my throne is yours to enjoy. And I’ll suffer the filthy thieves in my basement. Without a word of complaint, too.”

“That’s just the afterglow talking, and we both know it.”

“Then let’s be quiet and enjoy it while it lasts, shall we?” Atem asked, pulling Yugi close and holding him. And Yugi did as the Pharaoh commanded, snuggling into Atem’s chest with only a contented sigh.

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