The Newly Revised Book of the Dead

by Nenya85

Summary

A fairy tale that begins the moment the manga ends and takes Kaiba, Mokuba and Yugi on a quest to find Yami. Of course, as a very wise and Holy Elf points out, seeking and finding are two very different things.
Once upon a time

In the book, 'Dune,' there's a saying of the Bene Gesserit: "Beginnings are such delicate times." I think that's true for stories as well as people, so I'd love to know what you think of this beginning.

SUMMARY: A story that begins the moment the manga ends and takes Kaiba, Mokuba and Yugi on a quest. Of course, as a wise and holy elf points out, seeking and finding are two very different things. Spoilers for the end of the series. Eventual Yami/Kaiba (or Kaiba/Yami.)

SPOILERS: Since this story starts the moment the manga ends, it is a spoiler for the end of the series.

MANGA NOTE: This story is based on the manga version of the Ancient Egypt arc. There are significant differences between the Ancient Egyptian arc in the manga and the anime. The main one is that Kaiba does not appear at all in the Ancient Egypt arc of the manga. He arrives at the very end, just as Yami goes through the door to the after-life. I will outline other differences as they become relevant.

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Yugioh. I do admire Kazuki Takahashi for his skill in creating such vibrant characters and for his generosity in allowing the rest of us to borrow them for a few adventures of our own.

CHAPTER 1: ONCE UPON A TIME...

You are entering a fairy tale. It has dragons and dark magicians and a spirit who made his home in a puzzle: what else could it be? Not a modern fairy tale, for all that it starts in present day Egypt; for all its up-to-the-minute slightly slashed facade. For nowadays, wolves are vegetarians, and ogres, merely misunderstood. But, as the ancient map-makers warned, when you go beyond the borders of the world: here there be dragons.

(Some of them might even be on your side.)

I would say that it is my fairy tale, but it's not. I'm simply the one telling it. Because legalistic disclaimers aside, who can a fairy tale (or any other story for that matter) belong to, except to the characters living it?

You can say that this story starts with an ending, but what are endings for, except to make new beginnings of? And this one begins, as all fairy tales do, with the proper words: Once upon a time...

Once upon a time, Seto Kaiba was late.

He arrived just as the ceremonial duel was ending. Yami was in the fight of his life – with someone else. Kaiba could live with that. Beneath the temper and the craziness, Kaiba was a fair man. He knew Yugi had earned this duel with his 'other self'.

Then Yami lost. Kaiba could live with that as well. Yami had lost before.

It was the sequel Kaiba couldn't accept... almost couldn't believe. Instead of living with his defeat,
instead of taking his shiny new body and marching into his future... Yami chose to die. He strode through a door that led not to the present or future; with barely a glance back at his partner-turned-victor (much less one for his long-time rival.) Yami marched through a door which closed behind him and sank beneath the sand... but not before Kaiba's sharp eyes had caught the light gleaming from its borders, as if it was stuck slightly ajar... as if it was buried but not quite sealed... like a question waiting for an answer, or a promise waiting for fulfillment.

Kaiba could have accepted anything from Yami but his death. Although he was nowhere near ready to admit it: it was one loss too many.

I said this wasn't my story, and I told the truth. And so, it is time to let the characters speak for themselves...

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

"That damn fucking coward," I muttered over and over, as I strode towards the rejects huddled by the now-buried door. The loser-roster seemed complete. Even Isis was there.

"Hey, look who turned up, like a vulture." The bonkotsu's voice interrupted my thoughts, unprofitable as they were. It seemed like every time I could hear blood pounding in my ears, feel it throbbing in the pulse at my neck... every time I could taste the anger building in my throat... every time I was desperately holding on the fraying edges of my rage... the mutt was there, just waiting to light a match.

Usually it was his relentless mediocrity that irritated me, the way he settled for being third-rate. Didn't he know his deficiencies were supposed to eat away at him? He had needed Yugi to save his sister's sight – and that was okay with him. I thrust aside the thought that I had needed Yugi to save not just Mokuba's sight, but his life. And that was when my anger flamed into a white-hot rage.

Yami... I knew the name they all called him, although I had never used it, preferring to call him the other Yugi, preferring to remind him how insubstantial he was... Yami had made me believe in all his stupid, useless ideas about friendship and caring and letting go of my demons... he had made me believe that my life had possibilities, not just promises... and then the fucker had killed himself.

I turned to Jounouchi, waiting like a bug ready to be splattered.

"All that friendship bullshit was just an act, wasn't it?" I snarled. "He was never real to you, was he? He was this spirit whose job it was to bail out your sorry ass. And now that your ass is safe you don't give a shit if he lives or dies, is that it?"

"Fuck you, Kaiba," he said, but for once there was no heat in his words, and I knew I wouldn't be able to bait him. I looked for a new victim. My next words were calmer, but no less vicious. "What about you, friendship girl? Weren't you the one who told me that the most precious card you hold is your life? Weren't you the one who taunted me that I was trying to throw it away? What would you call this?"

She was staring at me in shock, as stunned as I by the fact that my anger was on behalf of someone besides me and Mokuba.

Or maybe she was just surprised I had remembered anything she said.

Of course I did. My memory had been trained just as efficiently as all my other reflexes. I remembered everything... no matter how trivial. Even though she had been wrong. I hadn't been trying to throw my life away that day, at Duelist's Kingdom. I had been trying to trade it for
Mokuba's. There was a difference.

And that thought brought me full circle, to the kid I'd always ignored while waiting for his other self to appear. He was looking at me… those wrong-colored eyes swimming with useless tears.

"I freed him," Yugi whispered.

"Freed him from what?" I shot back. "From living? Some favor that was. Is that your idea of being a friend? I'm glad I don't have any then. I have to give you credit, Yugi – you sure had me fooled, with that caring act of yours. After all this time, did he really mean so little to you? I thought he was your 'other me'? Could you really give up a piece of yourself so easily?"

Mokuba tugged on my sleeve; pulled me a little to the side. I went reluctantly. If it was important enough for Mokuba to feel he had to interrupt me, and private enough for him not to want to say in front of the people he considered his 'friends,' I almost certainly didn't want to hear it.

"It's hard for Yugi, too… being the one left, the one who's supposed to go on with his life, being the one who's important enough for someone to give up everything for him…” his voice trailed off awkwardly. I didn't reply, because I didn't want to think about what Mokuba was saying or why. But it kept me from attacking Yugi again.

"What was he supposed to do, asshole?" the bonkotsu yelled, the anger back in his voice. "How in hell was he supposed to stop Yami?"

"I had no right to stop him," Yugi said quietly.

"No. But you had an obligation to be sure he was doing it for the right reasons." I said. "Are you so sure this is what he wanted? Yami told me at Alcatraz that after a loss you feel sad, but then the road of your future continues. Was that a lie? Or did he just not know how to live without a mission to fulfill, without you to protect, without a world to save? Could he really be that big a fraud?"

Yami could of course, but I didn't want to believe it.

"I thought I was sure…” Yugi said, and I could see him replaying every conversation they had ever had in his head.

"He wanted to discover his memories. He felt so incomplete… not even knowing his name…”

I snarled. It was an ambition I had never understood or respected, having spent so many years trying to destroy my own past. And names are over-rated, anyway. The birth name I had discarded and forgotten was much less trouble than the one that had become my trademark.

"It was Atemu… his name I mean. But… as much as he wanted to learn about his past, he was excited about the future, too. It's why he cheered for you against Isis," Yugi said, suddenly remembering my presence, again. "He was proud of you – the way you always were ready to face the future all the time."

I stared. It was hard to imagine being a topic of conversation in the Mutou household – at least in a good way.

"You didn't see Yami," Yugi went on, arguing more with himself than me. "He was so confident going through that doorway… but he always looked like that… even when he was wrong. Yami used to call me his wisdom… maybe he was waiting for a sign from me to slow down and think…”

I could hear the doubt starting to spread through his system like a virus.
"You getting your kicks, playing with Yugi's head, you bastard?" Jonouchi yelled. "Why would Yami go and throw his life away, if it wasn't what he wanted?"

I clamped my mouth shut. I could write a book on that particular subject. Mokuba probably agreed, because he looked at Yugi and said, "It's okay, Yugi. It wasn't your fault. I mean that body we saw was probably just a loaner for the duel right? And you guys couldn't go back to the way things were before, all stuck together. I mean you deserve a life of your own right? And the best way to thank him for sacrificing himself, is to live it to the fullest."

But Mokuba's words had the opposite effect.

"I don't know if the body was a loaner or not. And I don't know if we can bargain with fate. We didn't even try. But I know that Yami wasn't a quitter, that it would take more than one loss to make him give up. And I know that I can't rest until I'm sure this was the right decision... and that I was right to let him go." The tears were gone. Yugi lifted his chin. His determined stance should have made him look ridiculous. Instead it reminded me that I owed him for Mokuba's life and my own. "If you can open that doorway, I'm going through it," he said.

"You can't, Yugi," Anzu said quietly. "The door closed. We all saw it."

"It is a sign that this part of your lives is over," Isis warned.

"Then why didn't it close all the way?" I asked, pointing to the sliver of light still fighting its way free from the buried door, fighting its way to shine through the sand at our feet. "Are you going to pretend you don't see that beam of light when it's right there at your feet?"

Isis pressed her lips together. She refused to look at the ground. "I see nothing but the will of the gods."

"Are we back to that bullshit again?" I demanded.

"Maybe your brains really did get fried by the heat. It's just a trick of the light. It can't be real, no matter what it looks like. There's nothing here but a shitload of sand," the mutt burst out.

"I don't see anything. Is there really something there? Do you see it, Yugi?" Anzu asked.

Yugi nodded, his eyes fixed on the spot in front of him.

"Hey man," said the pointy-haired kid, "We all want to see something there. But wishing won't make it so. Tell your brother, Mokuba – you don't see anything either, do you?"

He was probably hoping Mokuba would influence me. But he didn't know my brother. Mokuba looked him straight in the eye, and said, "I don't need to look to know it's there."

"If the gods wished the door opened, they would not have buried it," Isis repeated.

I smirked at her. "Well then isn't it lucky the gods made someone smart enough to invent the forklift? If there's one thing Egypt has, it's plenty of equipment for moving sand without damaging the delicate archeological artifacts buried underneath. Nothing stays buried forever. Not even fucking pharaohs."

Thanks to Bnomiko for agreeing to beta the story. I'm betting you didn't know listening to me whine was part of the job description...
Thanks to Kagemihari, for reminding me when I asked her whether it was unbearably tacky of me to tack on my own ending: 'What are endings for, except to make new beginnings of?'

AUTHOR'S NOTE: One thing I've always loved about Yugioh is the fantasy element that runs through it. On the surface, Domino might look like a city in Japan, perhaps (unlike grandmother's big eyes) the better to fool us with, but it's a place where card games can cause you to lose your mind or help you regain your soul. On the surface it might seem like an ordinary small city in an ordinary country in an ordinary world… but that was before someone sprinkled some fairy dust in the air.
In the book, 'Dune,' there's a saying of the Bene Gesserit: "Beginnings are such delicate times." I think that's true for stories as well as people, so I'd love to know what you think of this beginning.

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CHAPTER 2: TRADING COWS FOR BEANS

Destiny is an elusive thing… its workings difficult to pin down – even in fairy tales. Take a certain famous (if nameless) prince, approaching a forest of thorns exactly 100 years after the princess within had pricked her equally celebrated finger, and (with exquisite compliance to fate), fallen into a preordained slumber. As the brambles part to speed the prince to his appointed kiss, can anything more clearly reveal the workings of fate?

But what if the prince had decided that the prize was not worth the risk? Or, in keeping with this slightly slashed fairy tale, had discovered that one of his knights was more to his liking? Would another (equally nameless) prince have appeared to take his place? For who would bother to tell the tale of a princess who does nothing but sleep?

And what was the prince searching for anyway? Was he impelled by lust or love to find his perfect, if perfectly somnolent bride? Or was the true lure the challenge of crossing the impenetrable thicket itself? If he had known that he was doomed to succeed in his quest, would he even have made the attempt? Did he fulfill his destiny only because he arrived at the appointed place and time determined to defeat his fate?

ISIS' NARRATIVE

I looked at the excavation team that Seto Kaiba had managed to assemble with annoying ease and rapidity. He had already spoken to the team leader. In between monitoring their progress, Seto was busy assembling the gear he had decided he and his comrades would need: sleeping bags, backpacks, food, water, sunblock, and god knows what else. Seto smiled every time he checked an item off on some electronic gadget. It looked like a palm pilot but was much sleeker. Given the ostentatious KC on the lid, it was probably custom-designed. Like his past self, Kaiba was adept at using his advantages in pursuit of his aims. I just wished that once, in either lifetime, he'd stop for a moment to consider whether what he was doing with such single-minded intensity was right.

Even when he had been a High Priest, Seto had always had a natural blasphemy. He never listened, not now, not then. In the past life that Seto refused to acknowledge, he had risked his life for his prince time and again (usually against the pharaoh's wishes, if not his explicit orders) without ever once conceding that the pharaoh was wiser than he. Even as Seto gave his loyalty to the pharaoh, he made it clear it was his to give where he would. It was a trait that made even his obvious devotion suspect. If he was aware that the nature of his allegiance was a matter of debate among us back then, he gave no sign – and it certainly didn't bother him.
In this modern time, Seto was even less inclined to obedience. The only person who had ever managed to influence him, besides the boy at his side, was now gone.

As long as Seto stayed in this world, his recalcitrance didn't matter. But now he was proposing to invade the realm of the spirits.

"You are an ass to meddle in what is beyond our understanding," I told him. "You should accept that it is folly to set yourself against the will of the gods. Even the pharaoh has embraced his destiny,"

"Fate is just another opponent to be defeated," Seto answered, angry enough to be honest with me. "If I had tamely accepted my destiny, Mokuba would have grown up in a state-run orphanage."

"Are you so sure that fighting was the wiser option? It is only by the grace of the gods you deny, that Mokuba did not become a killer by the age of 11. You have only to look into his eyes to see the price he has paid for your battle."

"Nothing in life is free. Look to your own family, Isis, before you start in on mine. Whose brother is the murderer – yours or mine? At least Mokuba doesn't have a mutilated back and a psychotic alter-ego. That's where your blind obedience to destiny landed you. I thought you realized that when I beat you."

"Maybe you were destined to win."

"Then you just keep telling yourself that I'm destined to walk through that door and find Yami – because that's just what I'm going to do."

MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE

My brother supervised the dig with his usual efficiency. I wasn't surprised to see the door standing once more. Everyone could see now that he was right as usual… it had been left ajar this whole time. We grabbed our gear and headed towards it. As Nisama approached it, walking just as calmly as if he was going to his office, it opened. I saw the same blinding light that I had seen from a distance. My brother crossed the threshold without breaking his stride – with me, Yugi, and the rest of the gang (except Isis) running behind him, trying to keep up.

As soon as Nisama, Yugi and me were through though, it closed behind us, cutting us off from Yugi's friends. There was no doubt – it was shut tight this time.

"Well, that was ridiculously easy," my brother snorted.

He was right. It was a bit of an anti-climax. The door hadn't even clanged ominously. It was still there, incongruously large as life in the desert landscape… just like the doors in Noa's world – which was not a comforting comparison.

Nisama grunted in satisfaction, probably at the absence of Yugi's friends. He took in the bleak landscape and muttered, "Some paradise this is."

Nisama toyed with something in his briefcase, before removing his back-up cards. He put them in his pack. Even here, his pack made me smile. For one thing, it was the only item that fit in with the setting. Nisama had been a CGI consultant on Peter Jackson's live action version of 'The Hobbit.' The plot had bored him silly, and he'd been offended by the idea that a dragon could be tricked so easily – but everyone agreed – his dragon and fire imagery stole the show. In addition to his handsome fee, he'd come home loaded with stuff, and a lightweight leather pack to put it all in. He'd taken for using it for overnight trips.
Nisama checked his pack one more time. He stood up and slung it on his back, the strap across his chest. Then Nisama set the nearly-empty briefcase carefully against the door. He checked the compass on his watch and scanned the horizon, noting the spot of green in the distance.

"What are you doing?" Yugi asked curiously.

There's a tracking device in the briefcase. I'm trying to fix our position so we can find our way back. That door is too small to be seen from far away."

"Or we could just use that as a landmark," Yugi said, pointing to the enormous obelisk next to the door.

Nisama glared at it. "Considering it wasn't there a minute ago, we'd be fools to depend on its continued presence."

"Unless it was created in answer to our wishes," Yugi said.

"You can rely on wishing if you want. But if you're going to wish for something, it might as well be something practical, like water."

I had wandered a little ahead. I turned to look at them, and when I turned back, I saw a larger patch of green, much closer. I yelled and pointed. Nisama and Yugi caught up to me easily, and we raced ahead. It was an oasis all right. And someone had left empty skin pouches, obviously meant to store water.

My brother looked, if anything, even more pissed off than ever.

"This is absurd. It's like finding items in a video game," he said furiously. "Am I supposed to believe that heaven is a second-rate video arcade? It's enough to turn anyone into a non-believer."

"A video game… or a fairy tale," Yugi said.

"A fairy-tale?" Nisama sneered. I think he had forgotten that we had just walked through a mystical door into an alternative world.

"Where do you think the story-lines in video games came from?" Yugi asked. "Besides, what are the chances of both wishes coming true like this?"

"Higher than you might think," my brother retorted. "Take a Duel Monster's tournament for example. The chance that any of the other duelists will have the same birthday as you is very small. But of all the duelists assembled, the odds that two of them will share a birthday are very good indeed. So the chance that these two particular coincidences would happen quickly is small. But the chance that somewhere, this type of event would occur, is well within normal parameters."

"Well, just in case this is a fairy tale, and someone is arranging your coincidences – we probably have only one more wish coming – so let's not waste it."

"Why three wishes? Why not four or five… or an unlimited number?" my brother asked.

I don't know. It's one of the rules," Yugi answered.

My brother probably had plenty to say to that observation, but luckily someone else had arrived on the scene.

"You are wise in recognizing the nature of this world, although you are not limited to an artificial
number of desires. It is simply that here, as with anywhere else, not all your wishes may be granted."

I must have blinked. We weren't in the desert anymore, but in a forest. The air had grown cooler,
with a hint of moisture in it. It didn't look anything like Egypt. But it did look like the proper setting
for the Holy Elf.

She was standing before us.

My brother snorted. "Skin that deep a blue definitely looks better on a card than in real, or not-so-real
life."

Yugi stared at Nisama. "Dark blue skin..." he mumbled. He looked at Nisama puzzled, before
adding, "You see the Holy Elf's Blessing..."

Of course.

Yugi had the Holy Elf in his deck. I'd seen her often enough, the slender body, the downcast eyes,
the long blonde hair – the perfect Tolkien Elf... if you could ignore the tinge of pale blue in her skin.
My brother's version, the one on the Trap Card, with her intent glare and backlit face was slightly
more sinister. Yugi switched his gaze from my brother to the Holy Elf. He squinted as if he could
change her into Nisama's demon by narrowing his eyes.

"No," the Holy Elf answered gently. "Even with your gifts you can not truly see the world through
another's eyes."

"Please," Yugi said. "Where are my friends? Are they all right?"

"They are here with you," she answered.

Yugi was polite enough to ignore my brother's snort.

"I mean the others, the ones we left on the other side of the door," he explained.

She looked puzzled. "I can only see those who are bound to the cards – wherever they reside. I sense
one other – the keeper of the Flaming Swordsman and the Red Eyes Black Dragon. He is where he
should be."

"Why isn't he here?" Yugi asked.

"He is your anchor. You are like a triangle with four points."

"A triangle has three points," my brother contradicted.

She smiled. "One is unseen. Just as with the base of a pyramid – it rests on four points, but only three
can be seen at any time. So it is with you. Atemu and Yugi stand at the apex of the triangle. You are
on Atemu's side, and Jounouchi stands by Yugi. One half in sunlight and the other in shadow.
Jounouchi must remain on the other side, to anchor the triangle in the sunlit world."

"Let's hope the mutt doesn't get hungry and wander off in search of food."

"There's no one I'd rather trust," Yugi said at the same time, his relief visible.

"He is worthy of your trust," the Holy Elf agreed. "Anyone not willfully blind can see that."

"Where is my Battle Ox when I need him?" my brother muttered. His fingers twitched as if he was
reaching for a card, before he restrained himself. I was glad. Blue or not, she was pretty. I'd really
rather that my brother didn't decapitate her again.

"But you need not worry about his leaving," the Holy Elf continued. "Time flows differently in our worlds. What is an eternity here, is a blink of an eye in the world outside, and visa versa."

I guess that made as much sense as anything else. And since she seemed to be handing out answers, I had a question of my own.

"If only people who are part of your triangle could get through the door, how come I'm here?" I asked.

"When Seto rebuilt his heart, he chose to make you its keystone. It was rash, but not fool-hardy."

"Did you come here just to babble on with a bunch of foolish riddles?" Nisama snarled.

"I am afraid that the answer is yes… I have indeed come here to give you a riddle. Of the many things you will find here, you may bring back only one. And only by giving something of yourselves. But there are many kinds of offerings."

"We're only looking for one thing," my brother argued.

"Seeking and finding are two different things. You do not know what you will discover along the way."

"If you've got something to say, just spit it out," Nisama snapped.

"I did."

"Not in a way anyone could understand."

"The answer would become meaningless in the telling. You must find your own answer."

"Are we back to that destiny bullshit again? Are you trying to convince me that we were fated to meet or something?"

"No, although I am in your deck, and would have come when you called. But as it happens, I am here simply because I had a message for you, if you passed this way. The choice of direction however, was yours."

She turned to Yugi and bowed in farewell. "You have kept me in your deck; given me a home and a family. For that I thank you. And you, Seto Kaiba, I am the only card you have ever allowed to increase your life points… the only card that expresses your determination not to win, but to live. I am honored."

There was a shimmer, like sunlight hitting dust, and then she was gone.

"At least she left the water. And the forest. I was getting pretty sick of the desert," my brother observed.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

We were probably better off in the woods. There was a greater chance of catching dinner for one thing. I considered the food situation. Once I realized we were going to be setting off into what could only be called the unknown, I had arranged for food, water, and other necessities. We should have enough to last us a couple of days, especially with the extra water skins.
I checked the compass. We had seen some green, possibly a settlement to the North. Lacking any other information, it probably made sense to continue in that direction. And it made even more sense to put some distance between us and that door before stopping.

Luckily no one was in a talkative mood. We walked in silence until it was time to stop for dinner. Yugi and Mokuba chatted through the meal.

"Look at this place. It really is like being in a fairy-tale," Yugi said. He took one look at my face, and added hesitantly, "You've read fairy tales, haven't you?"

I could tell from the way his voice trailed off that he expected the answer to be 'no.'

I grunted. Actually, the answer was 'no', but since Yugi obviously would have considered that a short-coming, I wasn't going to admit it.

"Are we back to that again? I knew it would be too much to expect you to have a helpful comment," I said, in a tone that made the others decide it was time for bed.

Except for Mokuba, of course.

I stared into the softly burning fire, careful to throw twigs on to keep the flames alive. I had read to Mokuba, of course… still did on occasion. He liked to fall asleep to the sound of my voice. But the closest I had ever come to telling him a fairy tale was describing the attributes of the different duel monsters, knowledge that was more relevant at the moment, than any conventional story could be.

I didn't remember any fairy tales anyway… not really. My mother must have told me some, but she had been sick her entire pregnancy; she had usually been asleep before me. My father had been too busy for bedtime chats, and possibly too caught up in his own life to be able to pretend there was going to be a happily ever after. (I did know the formula, although I believed in it as little as my father must have.)

They had read fairy tales at the orphanage, of course – but most nights, either I had chosen to lie in bed planning our escape instead – or I was being punished yet again, for fighting. Although why anyone considered getting an hour of peace and quiet and the room to myself to be a punishment was beyond me.

I had heard bits and pieces of the ridiculous stories that the staff read in their falsely cheerful voices, mainly because no one was going to tell me what I could or couldn't do… until the snatches I overheard convinced me that whatever they were droning on about was unlikely to have any practical application.

And needless to say, Gozaburo had never wasted time on fairy tales.

But Mokuba obviously saw the need to remedy this deficiency in my education, because he sat down next to me, and said with an impish grin, "Once upon a time…"

I growled. He laughed at that and said, "Okay, just listen… there was this boy named Jack who lived with his mother. They had this cow, and they sold the milk to get money for food. One day the cow stopped giving milk, so the mother told Jack to take the cow to the market and sell it."

Great, I thought. She was trying to palm off this worthless cow off on one of her unsuspecting neighbors. Sounded like my kind of story. I knew better than to say so out loud, however.

"On the way to the market Jack met this little man, and traded the cow for six beans."
I could only imagine Gozaburo's reaction if I'd ever done anything half so stupid.

Mokuba took one look at my face and said, hastily, "They were magic beans. Anyway, when he got home…"

"His mother killed him and that's the end of the story?" I said before I could stop myself.

"Of course not," he grinned. "She was his mother. You don't kill people you love just because…"

His voice trailed off awkwardly. I don't know what he saw in my carefully neutral face, but suddenly he was in my lap hugging me. I leaned my head on his; breathed in his warm, faintly mammalian scent.

"I'm sorry, Nisama," he said.

I swear, sometimes Mokuba made even less sense than this ridiculous story. I had almost killed him that time – so why was he apologizing to me as if he was the one at fault?

"Don't," I said. It was one of the many subjects we never talked about… and I wasn't going to start now.

"Why don't you finish your story?" I suggested instead.

"His mother threw the beans out the window," he said in a subdued voice, before focusing on his story once more. "And in the morning a giant beanstalk sprang up. Jack climbed all the way up to the top where there was a giant's castle."

What on earth would a castle be doing on top of a beanstalk? I hoped this story had a point.

"The giant liked to eat boys, so Jack hid. And when the giant was asleep, he stole a bag of gold. Jack went back two more times, but on the third time, the giant woke up, and chased him. Jack scrambled down the beanstalk, shouting for his mother to bring his axe. He cut down the beanstalk, and the giant splattered on the ground."

Well, that part I could relate to. I wondered if the giant had looked like Gozaburo. But Mokuba was looking at me expectantly… like he was waiting for me to say something.

"How did they clean up the giant?" I asked awkwardly.

That's when I remembered that fairy tales are supposed to have morals – and Mokuba must be waiting for me to find one in this mess.

"Well," I said slowly, "Jack sneaks into this giant's house, takes his stuff, and then kills the giant when he tries to recover his stolen property."

If this is what fairy tales were like, I'm surprised Gozaburo hadn't told me any. Of course his lessons were usually delivered much more directly.

"But he was a giant," Mokuba explained, staring at me intently. "Giants are always bad. It's a rule. Fairy tales have their own laws."

"And the sooner we figure out what the rules are the better," I agreed. "Because in any battle, you need to learn the lay of the land. But what matters most is being smart and fast… and having a family member ready to hand you an axe when you need one." I stroked his hair. "Got it. You're one hell of a story-teller, Mokuba. Come on, it's time for you to get some sleep. Yami couldn't have been too far ahead of us. We'll probably find him tomorrow."
Mokuba might have been done telling stories, but he left me with a puzzle to mull over.

"Yami's not the one I'm hoping you'll find," he said as he went to lie back down next to Yugi.

Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter… and for reminding me to put in all the things I left out.
Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's a poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

**MANGA NOTE:** Not only does Kaiba not appear at all in the entire AE arc in the manga, but the entire back-story about Kisara's childhood friendship with the High Priest, and Seto saving her from bandits, doesn't happen either. Kisara appears for the first time, as an adult, in the village, just after the Blue Eyes White Dragon is seen in the desert. There is no childhood history between Kisara and Seto, and Kisara's origins are unknown.

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**CHAPTER 3: IF WISHES WERE FISHES…**

Fairy tales seem the most traditional of venues, suitable for lulling children to sleep. But they are tricky creatures beneath their demure facade, devoted to upending the status quo – or else why would such a disproportionate number of pigherders end up marrying princesses? So it seems appropriate that that archetypal orphan, Seto Kaiba, should find himself stalking through a fairy tale. And that he should be distinctly ungrateful for the privilege.

*Kaiba might not appreciate the cosmic help in rearranging his affairs (no more than would Yami), but when have human beings ever desired the things done in their best interests?*

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**YUGI'S NARRATIVE**

I awoke to the smell of grilled fish. It made my mouth water. I got up and saw Kaiba peering at something cooking on a makeshift grill. As Mokuba sat up and rubbed his eyes, Kaiba gave it a final poke and announced, "Breakfast."

It *was* a fish.

"Where did you find a fish that big in the middle of a forest?" I asked, puzzled.

Kaiba smirked. It was an expression that Yami had always puzzled me by finding attractive.

"The Holy Elf said that if we called Duel Monsters, they'd come." He pointed to a Duel Monsters card on the floor besides the grill – the Flying Fish.

"You cooked a duel monster?" I asked, as if I needed more evidence than the scorch marks on the large fish in front of me.

"Why not?" He shrugged. "If I'd sacrificed him to call up a more powerful monster, he'd be just as firmly in the graveyard, and Mokuba wouldn't have breakfast. Besides, this way I learned something. They really do come when you call."

Kaiba must have noticed the stunned expression on my face, because he said, "Flying Fish was a reasonable choice. It's too early in the day for Marshmelon, and besides, we need the protein. You're not a vegetarian, are you? I can call up the Hungry Tomato next."

Whether he was serious or joking was impossible to tell, but I started laughing and couldn't stop. I
was worried about Yami. I felt guilty. But somehow, the fact that Seto Kaiba had caught and cooked a fish in the middle of a forest made me feel better about the whole enterprise.

"It could have been worse," Mokuba shrugged philosophically as he reached for his share of breakfast. We're lucky he didn't try to feed us the Wicked Worm Beast or Bubonic Vermin."

After breakfast we packed up and headed out, putting our faith in Kaiba's compass to lead us to the settlement that he had predicted would be to the North. Kaiba had been silent since breakfast. He was walking a little ahead now, scanning the forest as he went, studying it as if it was his latest opponent and he was determined to overlook no sign that might help him win.

Mokuba was circling Kaiba like a noisy satellite – running ahead, then darting to the right or left before looping back to his brother's side, never getting too far out of reach. Mokuba looked relaxed, even happy. For once, his brother wasn't the one we were going to rescue. I could hear his voice, although I wasn't quite near enough to make out what he was saying.

The Kaiba brothers weren't trying to exclude me. They just did. They were a team, and they didn't need anyone else. For the first time since Jounouchi and I had become friends, I was the one on the fringes. I was warmed by the thought of Jounouchi on the other side of the door, anchoring us to our world, but I wished he was here. Or Anzu, since this had turned out to be a walk in the woods.

Despite the Holy Elf's words, and as hard as I had tried, Kaiba was an ally, not a friend. Of all the people I'd met, he was the one I knew the least. Our brief exchange over breakfast had probably been the longest we'd talked. I was aware of all his conversations with Yami, of course, but little as I knew Kaiba, I knew him well enough to prefer not to try to imagine his reaction if I showed that much of an awareness of his feelings or past.

But, I thought, looking at his grim face, there was something even deeper than friendship connecting us, now. Kaiba missed Yami as much as I did. We were both in mourning.

If nothing else we could talk about cards and game strategies, I decided as I caught up with him.

"The Holy Elf was right," I said.

Kaiba looked at me.

"She's the only card you have that extends your life points."

"That's not why I keep her in my deck," he said curtly. I wasn't sure if he was angry, or if this was just his regular tone when someone said anything bordering on a personal remark.

"Why, then?" I asked.

"She buys me time. I don't care about the life points. I never did. They're just a means to an end. But I came so close to throwing everything away. I never want to fail again at the last minute... just when I should have won. I never want to risk losing anything crucial to me again – just because I couldn't hang on a little bit longer."

We had all assumed that the had put the Holy Elf's Blessing in his deck for Duelist's Kingdom. I now realized it had been, as was so much else, a reaction to Death-T. I was stunned, as much by the passion and suppressed fury in his voice, as by his words. Kaiba wasn't talking to me, of course, but to Yami. I wished Yami was here. He might have known what to say next.

Not that it mattered. Abruptly the scenery shifted. In front of us was the Shadow Realm's graveyard... the same swirling purple mists, the tombstones, the faint wailing in the wind. Then we
saw the monsters – Necros Soldiers. I recognized them. Kaiba whipped a pair of long knives out of his pack, and said tersely, "Make sure Mokuba stays in the forest."

"You can't fight them!" I protested.

"Why not?"

"They're Duel Monsters!"

"So what? Do they look friendly to you?" he yelled, and then they were on him.

I caught up with Mokuba at the edge of the forest. "Your brother wants you to stay here," I said.

Mokuba grimaced, but nodded and stayed where he was.

"Where did he get those knives?" I asked.

"Dual Kodachi," Mokuba corrected automatically. "Nineteenth century. Folded steel. Made by Munetsugu. Ninety-five percent iron, 2.5 percent carbon for hardness and blade strength, 1.5 percent copper, trace silicon for flexibility, trace manganese for tensile strength. Each blade was folded and beaten nine times creating over 3,000 layers." Mokuba rattled off the stats as if I was considering buying the things. "They were my birthday present to him," Mokuba added, his eyes never leaving his brother.

It was like watching a whirlwind, the double Kodachi flashing like sunlight glinting, Kaiba himself sometimes all but invisible inside this moving, swirling mass; but always fighting free. He looked like a character in one of those old samurai movies that Jounouchi and I liked to watch with Ji-chan on Saturday nights. Except this was real. I had to keep telling myself that – because it sure as hell didn't look real.

Kaiba slashed his arms in a crosswise motion, writing an 'X' with his blades. As they sliced across the monster's chest, the first Necros Soldier shattered, as if we were still in Domino and this was just another duel. "Goku Juuji." Mokuba said, and I realized he was naming the move.

Kaiba turned to face his next opponent. I heard a sound ring out above the roar of the melee. It was Kaiba's laugh. He was using the Kodachi as a shield, blocking an attack with his left hand, then using the sword in his right to thrust the first blade home. Another Necros Soldier shattered. Another laugh.

"Onmyou Kousa," Mokuba said.

Kaiba was moving so fast now that the swirl of his blades was providing all the defense he needed. I wondered if he was this fast in real life, or if something in this strange place had picked up on the ferocity of his attack, the intensity of his will, to give him the equivalent of a power boost. Maybe Kaiba was right, and this was just as much a video game as a fairy tale.

Kaiba switched his grip on the Kodachi in his left hand. He held it backwards as he began a spinning attack, becoming a blur of arms and legs and blades. His trench coat flared in the vortex created by the speed of his attack, as if he carried his own whirlwind. He landed six strikes in swift succession, shattering another Necros Soldier. Kaiba threw back his head and laughed. He was in his element here, in a way he had never been in Domino. I'd never seen him look so alive, so elated, except when he dueled. Even as the Necros Soldiers attacked again, even though he was outnumbered, Kaiba looked like nothing could contain him, much less defeat him. I wondered if it was this quality that had attracted Yami's attention – or if it was the knowledge that, despite all appearances, Kaiba was human… he could be hurt.
Mokuba stood at my side, muscles twitching as if in protest at staying on the sidelines… but he followed his brother's command. "Kainten Kenbu Rokuren," he said, as if all he could do for Kaiba was name his attacks.

My only experience with fighting was getting beat up, but that didn't mean that I couldn't or wasn't going to help. I might not have had Kaiba's skill, or his way of looking at everything as a battle, but I had something else... faith in the cards. Kaiba had used his deck to call up breakfast. Now it was my turn.

I pulled out a card, though as hard as I could about how much we needed him; about how much I wanted him... and there he was. He took in the situation at a glance and headed off to the melee, frosty blue eyes flashing, long purple robes flying. He used his staff, just as I'd seen him use it in countless duels, unearthly green flames flying, destroying the monsters, shattering them as if they were Kaiba's holograms.

Soon the area was clear. The graveyard had vanished with the last of our enemies. We were in a field with reeds and tall grasses and palm trees. Kaiba had been too absorbed in his own life or death struggle to notice that an ally had joined him. He looked around now, as surprised at the abrupt change in scenery as by the sudden lack of foes.

Kaiba looked at the Black Magician, then at me. He saluted before bending to clean his weapons. "You're right," he said. "This monster I will not fight."

He straightened, turned, and bowed his head slightly to the Black Magician in acknowledgement. As if in answer, the Black Magician smiled and swung his staff quickly, smacking Kaiba on the side of his head. Kaiba dropped like a stone.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked, open-mouthed with shock.

"We've been rivals for 3,000 years, and I've waited all this time to catch him off guard." The Black Magician smirked. "It was irresistible."

"You did that for a joke?" Mokuba screamed, leaping at the Black Magician, his fists flying. The Black Magician held the smaller boy off with ease.

"You are unexpected," he told the angry boy. "You must have been Seto's reward for faithful service. Calm yourself. You must have realized your rules do not apply here. And I did not strike to injure. He will awaken in a moment, perfectly fine... if a trifle angry. And that is too common an occurrence to fret us."

He was right. Kaiba was coming to even as we spoke. The Black Magician's expression changed. Automatically I looked at Kaiba to see what had caused the guilt that flashed across the Black Magician's face. My eyes widened in surprise. I'd seen Kaiba angry more often than not – I'd never seen him look hurt.

"There is no memory of Seto inside of you, for all that you are a perfect copy," the Black Magician said.

"I seem to spend a lot of my time telling people that."

"You did not react to me as Maahado, your comrade and rival. You did not even react to me as the Black Magician I became after my death. You responded to me as a card – as our pharaoh's card," he laughed sadly. "And you did not believe than anything of the pharaoh's would harm you. I am sorry."
"For what?"

"For realizing the extent of your trust only by betraying it." He knelt before Kaiba, offering his staff. "If you wish to take revenge, it is your right."

"And you think that offering to let me get in a swing at you will make us even? Believe me, if and when I decide to pay you back, it won't be at your invitation."

"So be it." He smiled. "Perhaps there is more of my old ally and rival within you than I thought. He would have refused just as proudly."

"Where's Yami?" Kaiba asked, getting to the point immediately.

"Pharaoh, or if you must, Atemu," Maahado corrected.

"Yami," Kaiba replied just as firmly.

I bit back a smile. The whole time, up to the moment Yami had walked through that door, Kaiba had refused to call him anything at all, even when leaving messages for him with me. But I had to admit…I thought of him as Yami, too.

"Why are you here disturbing him? It is a difficult transition. He has much to let go of."

"And who are you to make that decision for him?" Kaiba challenged.

"The one who has always guarded him."

"Is he your pharaoh or your prisoner?" Kaiba retorted.

"Your arrival was unexpected, at least to me. The pharaoh has the right to be warned of your coming before meeting you."

And with that, the Black Magician disappeared.

"The son-of-a-bitch," Kaiba muttered.

Dinner was quiet. Kaiba spent the evening going through his deck over and over, staring at each card slowly in turn. He didn't speak or move, even when Mokuba and I got up and went to our sleeping bags on the other side of the fire.

I wasn't surprised that Kaiba was awake first, the next morning. I was just glad Mokuba was still asleep. I thought back over my conversation with the younger Kaiba the night before...

Kaiba had been watching the fire. Mokuba and I were lying down a little way off, just out of earshot. It was late.

"Yugi," Mokuba had said hesitantly, "Are you asleep yet? Can I ask you something... you know... about yesterday, and that door and all?"

"What?" I asked, fighting back a yawn.

"Well, I know why I went through, without looking back – because Nisama was ahead of me, and all I wanted to do was keep up. Besides with Nisama on this side, what would be the point of remaining? But it's different for you. I mean you have friends and a family – and they're all back there."
"And you want to know why I'm doing all this for one person when I have so much to lose?"

Mokuba nodded.

I shrugged. It wasn't one of their shrugs. Mine was a bit helpless. "I guess I did it because I think your brother may be right. He isn't right often, but when he is, it's a beaut. I keep remembering that time, against DOMA. Yami had set Mirror Force, but he was afraid to use it, afraid of hurting us. But your brother knew there are some things that just have to be faced. I don't think Yami ever knew what to do after a defeat. But your brother knows about being defeated. He knows all about getting back up and moving on. Yami always listened to me. All it would have taken was one word, and he would never have gone through that door. And all I did was wave good-bye."

"You weren't there for the whole thing," I told Mokuba, although my words were meant for Kaiba who was too far away to hear them. "After all we'd been through together, it seemed like a story-book ending. But how can death be happily ever after? Your brother doesn't believe in fairy tales. Look at him; he's striding through this world and he doesn't believe in any of it. He's fighting Duel Monsters for god's sake, and they're just one more obstacle standing between him and his goal. Maybe he's right. Maybe Yami and I gave in too easily. It took your brother showing up like that to make me question stuff. But now that I have, I need to know if Yami and I made the right moves in the most important game we ever played." I shook my head. "Or maybe it's just that friends shouldn't play for life and death."

"My brother wouldn't agree with you on that one. It's funny the way he got so mad at Yami for throwing his life away. Nisama's pretty blind sometimes. You think Yami will come back with us when we catch up to him? I mean he must want to live right?"

"I don't know, Mokuba. I guess it depends on why Yami went away in the first place."

Why did my conversations with the Kaiba brothers seem destined to come in pairs? There was something I needed to say to Kaiba, and I was just as glad Mokuba wasn't awake to hear it.

I walked over to Kaiba. He was still by the fire. He looked up at my approach, and surprised me by speaking first.

"You should see the look on your face. You finally won a duel on your own, and now you're regretting it."

"Yeah. But I'd do it again if it was what Yami needed me to do."

Kaiba snorted. "If you're so sure, then why are you here?"

"Because I'm not sure. And I need to be clear that this is Yami's decision, and that it wasn't made in ignorance. You had no right to lash out at us like that back there. Jounouchi and Anzu didn't deserve that. Do you really think we let him go because we didn't care? We were trying to do the right thing by Yami, even if it hurt. And if this is truly what Yami wants, I will support that 100 percent."

"Even if Yami's only doing it for you? What if he's decided that he owes it to you to give you back your life, even if it means his death? Will you accept that? Knowing that his walking through that door was just one more sacrifice in a life he's already given up on, when so much of it should be ahead of him?"

"Especially then," I answered.

Kaiba didn't answer. He didn't have to. The curl of his lip said everything. I looked down at the carefully tended fire, the bank of ashes, and wondered if Kaiba had woken up early, or if he had
simply never gone to sleep. Part of me wished there was another way to do this. After all, everything I knew about Kaiba, I’d learned from sharing a body with Yami. I’d been a sort of innocent bystander to Kaiba’s confidences, and I was pretty sure that Kaiba was unaware of how much he had revealed. If he hadn’t shown his contempt so openly, I might have backed down. But however silently, Kaiba had challenged me. So I said, "I don't know much about your life. But if you got to choose who it happened to – you or Mokuba – which one would you pick? If you had to do it all over again, knowing the price, who would you sacrifice?"

His eyes widened in shock, the way they did when Yami turned over the winning card in their duels. He pressed his lips together and looked down. As I stared at his downcast face, I realized for the first time, why Yami had always been, in my view, oddly protective of Kaiba. Seen like this he looked fragile.

He looked back into my eyes, his momentary weakness gone. He opened his mouth, and I realized that he didn't respect only Yami, but me as well, because he was going to answer my question.

"Me," he said finally.

"Could you live with any other decision?"

"No."

"Then don't ask Yami to."

"I won't," he said heavily, "But I still say he took the coward's way out."

I shook my head. "I was the one who let him down, not the other way around. I sealed his Monster Reborn. What could that have told him, except that I wanted him to die?"

"You played to win. Would you insult him by doing less?"

"I feel responsible," I said.

"I see," Kaiba replied, and the sneer was back in his voice.

"Do you remember that day at Pegasus's Tower?"

I nodded.

"I didn't know about your grandfather. And it wouldn't have changed my actions in the slightest."

I nodded again, curious now. Whenever Kaiba prefaced his remarks by reminding everyone of just how big a bastard he could be, whatever followed was usually interesting.

"Yami would have killed me that day. Those were the stakes. That was my truth – and Yami's as well. You had another truth – and you carried the day. But you can't spend the rest of your life holding back a winning hand because you're afraid of who'll get hurt in the fall-out. What is that but another form of cowardice?"

"I should have done something," I repeated stubbornly.

"What kind of man needs another to be his strait-jacket? The decisions I made – every last one of them that led to that day atop Pegasus's Tower – were mine. The consequences rightfully belonged on my head alone. Accord Yami the same respect. His decisions were his own. The blame belongs
to him; the consequences are his to live with – or not.” His words referred to Yami, but Kaiba was looking at Mokuba as he spoke.

“But what if it was my actions that forced Yami’s decisions?” I asked, pretending we were speaking only of Yami and me.

“That doesn’t matter. Yami would agree with me.”

“Yami probably would. But he’d be wrong,” Mokuba stated. His eyes were open and alert. It was probably wistful thinking to hope he’d just woken up. “Because Yami and Yugi are a team, Nisama. And that means they should share everything, not just the good stuff.”

Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing the chapter, and listening me drone on and on about the chemical composition of steel. I hope I managed to remember to paste in all your corrections this time!

Thanks to AmunRa: I'm sure it's not a coincidence that the amount of time Yugi gets in my stories has increased since we started talking.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: I learned quite a bit about steel and sword-making while writing this. The most interesting thing was that the higher the percentage of carbon in the steel, the harder the blade – however, the harder the blade, the more brittle it is, and the more likely it is to shatter. When you think about it, that's a pretty good metaphor for Kaiba, isn't it?

Rurouni Kenshin fans might have noticed that I couldn't resist giving Kaiba, Shinomori Aoshi's dual kodachi and signature moves. But I really think the two characters have a lot in common besides height and the same taste in coats.

When I first started drafting this, quite a while ago, I started asking everyone unwary enough to be chatting or emailing with me what duel monster they thought would be the most edible. Once people stopped saying "ewwww," or making eating dragon jokes, there seemed to be a general consensus that one of the fish ones would probably be the best choice – although Marshmelon got a few votes on the grounds that it probably tasted like cotton candy. I don't think even Kaiba would try to feed anyone the Wicked Worm Beast – but since this is the monster killing him in the nightmares he has after that first Shadow Game with Yami, I figured that the possibility that he might consider summoning it just to cook it would cross Mokuba's mind, at least.
Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's a poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

MANGA NOTE: Not only does Kaiba not appear at all in the entire AE arc in the manga, but the entire backstory about Kisara's childhood friendship with the High Priest, and Seto saving her from bandits, doesn't happen either. Kisara appears for the first time, as an adult, in the village, just after the Blue Eyes White Dragon is seen in the desert. There is no childhood history between Kisara and Seto, and Kisara's origins are unknown.

CHAPTER 4: FLYING OVER THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

For a girl famous for staying by the fireside, sweeping ashes, Cinderella has traveled the world. She has worn patched moccasins and a birch bark dress as an Iroquois maiden, gained a snake for a fairy godmother in Kenya, and was named for a peach blossom in China. She's been given animated mice for friends, a cell phone instead of a slipper, and cursed with the gift of obedience. How do we recognize this chameleon heroine through each incarnation? And yet we do, no matter how she changes with each retelling.

Although glass slippers and pumpkins were far outside his experience, Mahaado would have recognized Cinderella as a kindred spirit. How could he not? There is Mahaado, the man who lived and died 3,000 years ago. There is the Black Magician he became, still serving his pharaoh from beyond the grave, his soul carved into a stone tablet that survived into a new age. And finally, there is the card Pegasus drew, using that marker as a guide, capturing some of its spirit on paper. Do they all have the right to the name, 'Mahaado'? Or are they like an image scanned into a computer, changing slightly as need demands, diverging to a slightly greater degree with each new generation?

But Mahaado at least remained a man through all his transformations. For some, the journey was longer and stranger still, and possibly began, not after death, but before life...

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

Mokuba and I were getting breakfast ready, although after Yugi had called up the Black Magician the day before, my trick with the fish didn't look so special anymore. Of course I had the card that could trump anything in Yugi's deck (three of them, in fact). The only decision was whether to summon them...

Until Mokuba's quiet question drove every other concern from my mind.

"Nisama..." he began hesitantly, "If this is the after-life... do you think we'll find Mom here? It's okay if we don't. It's just that I never got to meet her."

I noticed he hadn't wasted time asking about our biological father. I guess Mokuba remembered enough about his early childhood to know how rarely our father had been home – or how little interest in us he had shown. Or maybe it was just that Mokuba had learned to be wary of father figures.
"I don't know, Mokuba," I answered. "I don't know what this place is, or how it works. Just don't ask that bastard of a Black Magician anything. I'll find another way to get your answers."

He nodded. We both knew it was a promise.

I suppose it was fitting that it was Mokuba who pushed me to do what I'd wanted to ever since I'd seen that the cards really could spring to life. It wasn't that I didn't want to see the demon that was so much a part of me. It was more that I'd been wary. I knew the reception I deserved. Now I wondered if my hesitation was adding insult to what had been a very real injury.

For once, when I thought of my Blue Eyes White Dragons, what came to mind was not their magnificence, but all the ugly things I'd done to ensure that I would hold them in my hands; as if my actions had somehow tainted even those mighty beasts. The only one of the four given a choice whether to serve me, had chosen death instead. And I had obliged. It was ironic. I had created a theme park of death, but the only thing I managed to kill at Death-T was the being that housed part of my soul.

Now it was time to answer for my crime (I've certainly never been called to any earthly account for anything I've done.) But if my dragon was going to (once again) judge me and find me lacking, he would have no opportunity to brand me a coward as well.

It felt like I should have to sacrifice something to pay for the privilege of calling him to me, but I'd learned from yesterday's battle that that wasn't necessary. My need would have to speak for itself. I pulled out the card that has always come so naturally into my hand. I should have been picturing him in my mind or focusing on summoning him... but against everything I'd ever believed in, I was pleading.

He came anyway. He was impossibly tall, unimaginably beautiful, immensely powerful... my pride and soul indeed.

"You have had a long road, and a hard one. I am glad that it has led you here, to this meeting."

The voice was soft... and unmistakably female.

"How?" I asked, confused.

"The cards are but a refraction, not a true mirror. Pegasus was more skilled than he knew. Pegasus may have borrowed my heart for those cards, but he created them in the image of the man who would one day own them. And your heart is undeniably male."

Her words reminded me of the great wrong I had done her.

"And I ripped one of them up. I'm so sorry," I said.

Her rumble surprised me. It didn't sound angry.

"Ahhh, little one... I am not the one you owe your first apology to."

Nobody, even when I had been shorter than Yugi, had ever called me 'little one'. And dragon or not, she was spouting the same incomprehensible gibberish as all the other inhabitants of this place. But I wasn't mad. First, compared to her, I was little. And second, when she spoke in riddles, I didn't feel impatient or angry for not getting them right away. Instead I felt her confidence that even if it took a while, I'd figure it out. The only one who'd ever made me feel like that before was Yami.

I reached out a hand to touch her; to prove to myself she wouldn't just vanish, as Yami had.
"The world looks very different from dragon-back," she offered.

I looked at Mokuba. He grinned and ran forward, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"I always knew," he said, although I had no idea what he was referring to. But as I returned his hug I remembered: the closest I'd ever come to making up fairy tales had been the nights when I'd lain in bed beside him describing what it'd be like to fly together on my Blue Eyes White Dragon.

"Ready to find out what it's like for real?" I asked.

"Do you have to ask?" He grinned, then stopped and nodded his head slightly in Yugi's direction. I'd forgotten he was there. Again. But now that I'd been reminded, I couldn't pretend he didn't exist.

"There's room for three," I said awkwardly.

'That was well done,' a voice said in my head. It sounded like my voice, but it was strange to hear approval, instead of a litany of my failures.

Yugi smiled. "I'll take a rain check. The first flight is for you and Mokuba."

"I can't leave you alone here. It's too dangerous," I said. Little as Yami deserved it, I knew he would expect me to protect Yugi.

"I'm not defenseless. And you're not the only one who can call up Duel Monsters," he said with a touch of Yami's arrogance. I wondered if it was new, or if I'd simply never noticed before. I nodded. Yugi had a point, although my dragon could beat the shit out of anything in his deck in a one-to-one match-up. I heard an echoing laughter.

'Especially that insufferable Black Magician.'

If I was hearing voices, at least this seemed to be an agreeable one.

I put Mokuba up on my dragon and climbed on behind him. It was time to fly.

"What should I call you?" I asked, as we rose into the air.

"My name is Kisara," she answered.

Then we were airborne. The wind was blowing my hair back. When I stretched my arms out to either side, I could feel the wind rush past me. I was home, as I have never been on the ground.

"Does this match your dreams?" Kisara asked.

"It's better," I answered. "To be free of everything. To feel myself racing towards the future… to feel the past rush by me and disappear, as inconsequential as the wind…"

"You have a dragon's heart. In some ways it is a poor fit for the human shell that houses it. I was a girl once. It did not work."

I nodded. In many ways I agreed with her. If I could shed my flawed and weak human skin… here in this place where so many unfathomable things seemed possible… Then I felt Mokuba lean back, settle against me, his head nestled on my chest… reminding me that there would always be some things to ground me to earth.

Reminding me of my latest promise.
"Kisara… is our mother here… mine and Mokuba's, I mean?"

"This world will not answer all desires, any more than the one you have left." Her laugh, gentle as it was, rumbled across the open sky, "Did you mistake this world for paradise?"

"No, and I don't believe in paradise anyway. I was just checking."

"Do you wish for her?"

"Mokuba never met her. It's natural he'd be curious."

"And you?"

I shrugged. "I never think about it. There's no point."

"I'm sorry."

My throat tightened a little, but I ground the words out, as calmly as ever. No one had asked about my biological parents in years, but I still remembered the routine.

"Don't be. It's okay. It was years ago, anyway."

"You didn't ask me how I like being up here," Mokuba said, as if he was going to reclaim our earlier mood by force of will. "Is this the fastest you can go?"

It wasn't.

As Kisara took Mokuba up on his dare, I learned what speed looked and felt and sounded like. I had to narrow my eyes to see through the wind. The earth was a green blur beneath us. Kisara's wings thundered in my ears. I threw my head back and laughed above the noise.

"Is there something in particular you wish to see?" she asked, when she had slowed the pace enough for us to hear her. "Or rather, someone?"

"Can you take us to Yami?" It was Mokuba who asked that, not I.

She nodded.

"Then it's time to go back and get Yugi," I said. "He deserves to be a part of this."

YUGI'S NARRATIVE

I looked at the green fields with their slender palm trees. For the first time since I had assembled the puzzle, I was alone with my own thoughts. It was an odd feeling, but a peaceful one. I had time to think.

Had Yami really chosen to die because he had never had anything in his life but his mission, and had seen that end? If he really saw nothing to live for, was I wrong to want him back? Was it selfish to want not only my own life, but Yami as well? Or was it just that I still wasn't used to thinking of myself as a single person? And Yami hadn't given himself a chance to get to know himself again, to think about his own feelings and wants and needs. He'd turned his back on his life, before he'd had a chance to live it. I chuckled, wondering if living was a skill that could be learned, like dancing and Duel Monsters.

My mind jumped to the Black Magician… Maahado. He might have been Yami's soul card, but I had always thought of him as a friend. It would be nice, I thought suddenly, to have a friend to enjoy
The afternoon with.

"I didn't mean to call you," I said in confusion as Maahado appeared at my side. "Did you come in answer to my wishes?"

"Or my own. I sensed your desire for company, and shared it." He looked around. "Seto Kaiba left you alone, here?"

I pointed at the key-chain sized dragon in the sky.

"Kaiba would have taken me, but he called the Blue Eyes White Dragon for the first time. It was only fair to let him go by himself... well, just him and Mokuba."

"That was generous of you not to intrude on their reunion," Mahaado said. He laughed suddenly. "Wait until he meets her human form. I wonder which he will find more unsettling?"

I laughed too. I had forgotten that Kaiba hadn't been with us in Yami's Memory World. He had never met Kisara as a girl... a really cute girl. I was pretty sure he'd prefer the dragon.

"I'm not sure Kisara will change to her human form," Maahado continued thoughtfully. "She rarely does. I think perhaps, she is not a girl with the soul of a dragon, but a dragon, who for a time, assumed the shape of a girl."

I nodded. It was, I sensed the opposite with him, that the Black Magician was a thin covering over the man who had been Maahado.

"Do you remember the stuff that happens when you're a card?" I asked.

"Vaguely, as if it had happened long ago to someone else."

"When this is over, what will happen to you? Will you stay here or go... somewhere else?"

"Who knows? I remember my life as if it was a dream, but I have no memory of the time between that moment and this, and I am as ignorant as you as to what will come after."

"Isn't this... well... like the after-life?" I had overheard Mokuba and Kaiba's conversation that morning (just as with me and Yami, true privacy was impossible here.) I'd heard Mokuba's question about his mom, and seen Kaiba's quickly covered start of surprise. My own mom was safe at home, but everyone has someone who's gone, so Mokuba's question was mine, too. Kaiba had called a dragon to answer it. I would turn to a friend.

"Then where are..." I couldn't quite get the words out.

"Those who have left you to go beyond? I know no more than you. This is not paradise, nor is it the halls of judgment. We have not yet met Anubis and Osiris. It is a world, poised between yours and the unknown... a barrier and a protection. I know no more of what lies outside its borders than you. Perhaps death is as unknowable as life."

There was an uncomfortable pause. I looked at Maahado... still in the purple robes, the tall hood covering his face.

"You don't have to be the Black Magician," I said awkwardly. "At least not on my account."

Maahaado seemed to blur. I blinked, and then he was in what were (for him) ordinary clothes. His headdress and robes were only slightly less ornate than the Black Magician's get-up, and they were
"Thank you," he said. He looked down. "I would that my pharaoh felt the same."

"Was that the original cause of your rivalry with him?" I asked nodding towards the figures circling high above us.

"In part," he answered.

"Is Kaiba so different from the man you knew?" I asked.

Maahado thought for a moment. "I have never seen anyone, not even the High Priest, fight as Seto Kaiba did yesterday. He was armed with nothing but two thin blades of his strange metal. He had no magic within him. He should have lost. Yet he faced down demon after demon, without flinching or faltering… each strike perfect. And yet for all his strength, he is fragile. The High Priest never wore his heart as openly as this one. He is harder, as his steel is harder than our bronze; but possibly all the more likely to shatter."

"He has," I said.

"The pharaoh's doing," Mahaado stated.

"Yes," I answered, although it hadn't really been a question.

"And does the pharaoh also feel responsible for the rebuilding? Strength and vulnerability. It is a seductive combination. For the pharaoh, it may well prove fatal."

I thought of Kaiba and Yami, of the way they dueled, of the way the air seemed to heat, sparked by the fire in their stares. I thought of the desires that Yami couldn't keep from leaking through our bond, the feelings we both pretended didn't exist, because they had no home.

"Were they lovers when you knew them?" I asked hesitantly.

"No. The pharaoh would have taken Seto as a lover, if the high priest had ever given a sign that he would have agreed." Maahado's lips tightened. "Seto should have been proud to serve his pharaoh in whatever capacity he was desired. Instead he refused to acknowledge the feelings everyone could see were present, knowing that the pharaoh would never order his compliance."

"And you?"

"I would have been honored. But that was not my prince's wish."

"How about Yami… Atemu, I mean… now that he's back? Does he match your memories?"

"How can he when he does not truly remember himself? He looks at me and sees a card in his hand and nothing more. The pharaoh, I have served with my life. You, I have just met. Yet you are the one who names me Maahado."

"Where is Yami?"

"Why are you here?" Maahado asked me. Everyone seemed to be asking me that lately. I wondered if his answer depended on mine.

"I need to know that this is what Yami wanted. If Yami came here because this world is where he belongs, then I will accept that. But if he is here only because he thought there was no place for him in Domino, I'm here to show him he's wrong."

"You came of your own accord and for your own reasons. Yet your coming has proven to be like
the first pebbles of an avalanche... impossible to predict, so clear to see once set in motion. You have become part of a larger battle."

"Now why doesn't that surprise me?" Kaiba said as they landed.

"There is more at work here than you realize," Mahaado warned.

"You and Isis really need to get together. According to the pair of you, I'm always out of the loop on some great cosmic mystery. I've never given a shit before, and I'm not about to start, now." Kaiba turned to me, without quite taking his eyes off Mahaado. "You ready to go see Yami? I just stopped by to give you a lift."

"You did?"

Kaiba shrugged. "I still owe you for Battle City."

I was used to Kaiba's incomprehensible notions of debt by now, but I couldn't help asking, "For what?"

"That duel on the pier. I'd asked Yami how the hell he expected to hold onto friendship when his friends had turned against him. I asked him what good his 'faith' would do him then. He wasn't the one who gave me my answer – you were. I used that in Noa's World. I decided that even if I discarded everything else, I would hold on to my faith in Mokuba. Just like he did for me... that time. And it worked."

"I remember your duel with Noa," I said. "You forgot the part about making sure that both you and Mokuba survived."

"I didn't forget. It was unimportant."

"Then you missed half the point. You and Yami both. Life is never unimportant. And now you're trying to convince Yami of something you don't even believe in yourself."

I didn't expect Kaiba to answer me, so I wasn't surprised when he just nodded towards the dragon and said, "You coming or not?"

"It is time you met. Maybe it will set both your and my pharaoh's minds at rest," Mahaado said to me. He looked at Kaiba. "I will not interfere. I will let you dig the grave for your own hopes, yourself... as you so clearly intend."

"I don't have hopes. I have plans. And you're damn right you're not going to interfere," Kaiba said as he climbed back on Kisara. Considering their last meeting, that hadn't gone badly. At least Kaiba and Mahaado hadn't tried to kill each other, except with glares.

Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter. Maybe I'll eventually get that whole punctuating-dialog thing right. (I'd say 'get it write' but that's too bad a pun, even for me!) As always, any mistakes are my fault!

Thanks to Kagemihari: We've talked a lot about Mahaado, and the version of him in this story, specifically how Mahaado sees himself as the pharaoh's to command, owes a lot to Kagemihari's ficlet, *Those Whom the Gods Mock* at: community(dot)livejournal(dot)com(slash)ygocard(slash)4133(dot)html
AUTHOR'S NOTES: One reason I picked the manga version of the AE arc was because Kaiba wasn't there for the adventure; showing up at the very end of the ceremonial battle. So where Yugi and company were swept along by the entire adventure and caught up in the idea of fulfilling destiny, this would have looked very different to Kaiba since he had not been there.

**Kisara Note:** The other reason I picked the manga is because of Kisara. In the anime she's given an extensive back story, we see flashbacks of her childhood. The manga however leaves the inference somewhat open whether Kisara is a girl whose soul could take the form of a BEWD or whether she was the vessel of the BEWD; the human expression of an elemental demon who arrives to both test Seto and to aide him and the pharaoh in protecting their nation. I tend to prefer this interpretation: that Kisara is, first and foremost a dragon. For me this is one of the more challenging elements – in a world where the characters have some say over their appearance, deciding how they would appear and why.

**Writing Note:** Sometimes it's odd both writing about the characters and talking about them with other people. For example I was in an interesting discussion, partly sparked by Dragonwrangler's story, 'Comfort' as to whether the BEWD was Kisara, herself, or was a separate entity within her; and whether the BEWD was female, male or neuter. Anyway, the hardest part was not rambling on, because I didn't want to 'spoil' my own story, but this in one take on the idea.
The Puzzle within the Puzzle

Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

CHAPTER 5: THE PUZZLE WITHIN THE PUZZLE

Mahaado was right. After all, even a fairy tale prince (and Yami was not quite that) deserves a little warning when the most difficult decision of his life is about to be exhumed. It was ironic in the way that fairy tales should be ironic, but seldom are: the first decision Yami had made by himself in 3,000 years had been to end his life. And now he was being second-guessed.

Are some events fated? That is a question no mortal can answer. But there is no arguing that because of the personalities involved, some things seem inevitable. Yami could have done nothing other than to comply with what he saw as his destiny. And yet, such a decision would not sit comfortably on his shoulders, would chafe like a poorly cut garment, would itch in the hollow of his back, no matter how hard he tried to shrug it into a more accommodating shape.

For if Yami was a man shaped by a past world that no longer felt real to him, he was also drawn to the future world he had denied.

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

I sat by the bank of the river, but the fertile fields and flowing water brought me no peace. The reeds teased at my sandaled feet. My arms and brow were weighted with gold. My linen garments hissed like Sugoroku's tea kettle every time I moved.

They were here. Kaiba and Yugi. The two halves of the life I had known.

I had been vaguely surprised that Kaiba had not been there for my final duel with Yugi. I knew he was in America chasing down his dreams; that he was probably unaware of all that had happened since we had boarded the plane after the Grand Prix. And yet… it had seemed almost unreal to fight a duel this crucial without seeing his tall form on the sidelines; without hearing his deep voice rumbling as he explained the strategy to Mokuba, who surely must have grasped the rules and tactics almost as well as Kaiba or myself by now.

I had thought that I had seen him with Mokuba at the edge of a dune, just before my departure. I had almost raised a hand in salute, had almost waited to talk to him; but neither of us had ever been good with farewells, and besides… it had been time.

I had spent the hours since then, surrounded by the friends and subjects who seemed as insubstantial to me as the shadows we had all become, searching for my high priest. And yet I refused to admit that the most I could have found in Seto was the echo of Kaiba.

Some things are not destined to be… second chances at life among them.

And yet, Kaiba and Yugi had followed me. I wondered what had brought them, and felt my pulse quicken at the thought of being needed, of having a purpose, again. And at the thought of seeing them.

I looked at the figure in the sky above me; watched it head towards me, growing larger and clearer
with each downward spiral. I smiled. It was so like Kaiba, who loved grand entrances, to arrive on
dragon-back.

Then he was in front of me, hands even more tightly clenched than usual. Mokuba and Yugi were
dismounting behind him. I took one look at Kaiba's face – at the furious glare, at the muscle jumping
in his cheek from the effort of keeping his lips pressed together. I heard his teeth grind just before he
finally opened his mouth. He had apparently come all this way to yell.

"You god-damned fucking coward!" Kaiba roared. He had obviously spent the time since my
departure running this tirade through his mind over and over. "After all this time… this was your
solution? How dare you challenge me to rebuild my life when you weren't willing to do the same?
How dare you try to convince me that my life was worth living when you were just waiting to end
yours? How dare you tell me that the road to our future lay open when you all you wanted was to
follow yours to the grave?"

"It's where the path ended," I said, realizing the futility of speaking to Kaiba of fate.

"Because you decided to quit, rather than play it out – wherever it led! Are you going to pretend you
didn't have a choice? Are you a liar as well as a coward?"

"It wasn't that simple," I replied. I had no desire to join Kaiba in argument.

"Bullshit!" he yelled.

"After being given so much, it would not have been right to grasp at more," I explained. "I had done
all that I was sent to your world to accomplish. My ancient country was safe, as was your world.
Yugi no longer needed my protection. Everything I had lived for had come to pass."

Yugi surprised my by asking, "Isn't just living enough? Why do you need to live for something?"

"Because it's easier," Kaiba spat out, answering for me.

"It was necessary," I said.

I should have known that Kaiba would not let my statement pass unchallenged.

"And when does necessity become an excuse, coward?" he hissed.

Kaiba was right in a way. Yugi and I had defeated our final adversary. It seemed I had no purpose,
no reason to exist any longer. I hadn't really thought about what I wanted from life, what I wanted
for myself. Perhaps that was an abdication. But for Kaiba, of all people, to come all this way to
berate me for my choice; for Kaiba to have the gall to mock me for sacrificing myself for what I saw
as my aibou's future…

The hypocrisy of his tirade was stunning. And that was when my own temper soared to match his.

"You tell me. You're the expert at that," I snarled back.

"I was fucking ten," he said, not bothering to pretend to misunderstand me. "And I made the right
choice that day. It's how I can recognize that you made the wrong one. No, worse – a craven one."

"I have never questioned your decision. Can you really say the same for yourself? But whatever
doubts keep you company through the still watches of the night – and I am sure they tear at you like
birds of prey called to a feast… they have remained undisturbed by me. How dare you come here
like this, challenging me?"
"You're right. This is stupid. I don't know what I thought would happen if I found you. I don't know why I thought it mattered." He laughed bitterly.

"It does matter. You know it does," Yugi interrupted.

"Don't kid yourself, Yugi," Kaiba said, turning briefly to Yugi. He swiveled his head to stare at me once more. "I thought I knew you," he said to me. "But I didn't. The Yami I knew, the Yami I…." Kaiba paused. All of a sudden, he looked weary. I was slightly shocked at the sight. It was the first time I'd ever seen him look tired. Then he straightened his back. The fire was back in his eyes, and the venom was back in his voice. "It doesn't matter why you did it. Because the bastard who could pull a stunt like this isn't worth my time. Have a nice death, Yami."

Abruptly, Kaiba turned around and strode to his dragon without looking back, with Mokuba following in his wake. I watched them take to the air as dramatically as they had arrived.

It was the first time Kaiba had called me anything but 'the other Yugi.'

I looked at Yugi (the real one). I was confused. When I had last seen Yugi, he had been smiling as he waved goodbye to me. What had changed?

"I can't believe we found you!" Yugi said, running towards me. "And I can't believe it's been only a few days since our duel. It feels like…"

"Forever," I finished for him, and hugged him close. "Why are you here, aibou?" I asked, the familiar word slipping out without thought. Yugi stepped back.

"Not you too! Everyone keeps asking me that!" Yugi wailed with mock exasperation before adding seriously, "The real question is: why are you here?"

"Where else should I be? You no longer needed me."

"Is that all you think you are, Yami? Something to be needed, like a card that gets pulled out of its deck only when it's wanted? You deserve better than that."

"Whatever life I had was over 3,000 years ago. I had a mission, not a life, Yugi – and it ended."

"You had something else, Yami… a body and a future. Why did you walk away from that?"

"It was time," I answered.

"Time for what?"

"I'm not sure." I couldn't explain the thoughts that seemed to dance at the edge of my consciousness, just out of reach. So I settled for saying, "It was time for you to live your own life, for one thing. I was given the privilege of seeing your world… of knowing you. I had the satisfaction of walking through that door knowing I was leaving you with your friends… and hopefully in Anzu's arms."

"Do you think I'm so weak that I couldn't live my own life unless you were gone for good?"

"No, aibou," I said, distressed.

"Do you think that Anzu wouldn't give me a second look unless you were permanently out of the picture?"

"No," I said, giving voice to my hopes instead of my fears.
"Do you think I don't want you as my friend?"

"Never that!"

"Good. Because that's why I'm here – to tell you that if you thought there wasn't anything more to you than your powers and missions – you were dead wrong. And if you thought I'd be better off without you… if you did it for me…" His voice trailed off.

"I made the decision I thought was best. I can't quite explain it, but I could hear this place calling me… as if it needed me, as you no longer do. I never wanted to hurt you, Yugi. You know that, don't you?" I couldn't prevent a note of uncertainty from creeping into my voice.

"Of course. It's just seeing you… looking so alive… it's hard to believe you're…" His voice broke off again. There were tears standing in his eyes, although none fell. As if in response, my own vision blurred.

The regrets I had tried to lull to sleep ever since my arrival, had stirred at Kaiba's passionate accusations, but my answering anger served to keep them at bay. At Yugi's hastily choked-off sentence they sprang to new life and crowded suffocatingly close.

"Don't worry. We'll figure it out," Yugi said, although what there was to figure out was beyond me. I had followed a path long fated. Whatever doubts I might have, whatever barely imagined dreams I regretted relinquishing, there was no going back. But I couldn't stand to remain at odds with Yugi, so I was glad to let the matter drop.

Yugi obviously felt the same, because he said, "Well, since we don't have a dragon for a taxi, we'd better start walking to wherever you call home these days."

"How do you feel about staying at a palace?" I asked.

He laughed and we walked back to town, our arms around each other's shoulders.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

Nobody said anything as we flew off. I didn't know where we were going, nor did I care. I just needed some distance, although I wasn't sure why. I was too tired to even process what had just happened. Eventually I looked down and saw signs of habitation.

There was a settlement below us; a town really. It was to the North, just where the compass had indicated it would be when we had first arrived. It was, I suppose, vaguely Egyptian… a sort of ancient Egypt of the mind. There was the expected palace, and I guess you'd call them manors, and smaller dwellings. It all seemed ridiculously clean and well maintained for a culture that had no plumbing to speak of. Not that I was sure anyone else was seeing exactly the same thing as I was. I had learned to be wary of appearances in this place.

I looked away from the town. It was probably full of people who were all cheering their pharaoh's return, who were all too ready to tell Yami that this was where he belonged – as if 'belonging' wasn't just another illusion.

I swallowed bile. I didn't want to stay in this theme park version of an ancient world.

"I don't stay there either," Kisara said, as if I had spoken aloud.

"You wouldn't fit. The streets look too narrow," I pointed out, quelling the satisfying image of her crushing a house or two.
"I would fit, physically. But it is too stifling. And despite your smaller size I think it will do as poor a job of containing you."

"Okay, that's settled then. No town. But we still need a place to sleep," Mokuba said.

Kisara gave a rumble of amusement. I was learning to identify the sound.

"I have a place that will suit us better."

She was right. We were high on a bluff that overlooked the town, so we could see how small and unimportant it really was. Set back from the edge was a shallow bowl, where the stones had been worn smooth and finally indented by 3,000 years of service as Kisara's bed. Mokuba and I walked to the center of the hollowed area. Kisara was beside me. She turned in a circle and flamed the edge of the bowl with her lightning breath until the stones glowed red.

"That should keep us warm through the night," she said with satisfaction.

"We could probably cook on it too, if you made it a little hotter," Mokuba said.

"Spare your cards," Kisara said with the contortion of her mouth that I had begun to recognize as her grin. "I will return with a meal fit for a pharaoh."

The food was still hot when she returned and the water was still cool. She probably had raided the palace. I started to shove it away.

"Are you refusing my offering?" she asked.

I picked up a piece of grilled meat and choked it down, before pushing the rest towards Mokuba, and saying, "I'm not hungry."

Mokuba and I probably would be staying at the palace if I hadn't just ranted at its owner. But I didn't regret it. It had felt so good to just yell like that, even if none of it was really what I had come to say. Or maybe it was. I wasn't sure anymore.

When I had seen Yami walk through that door, all I had felt was anger; a blind rage that had swept me after him. I thought I had figured out all the angles, and in a way I had – but I had lied to Mahaado all the same, without even realizing it. I had had no plan for what I would do when I finally came face to face with the reality that Yami had rejected his future; that he had preferred the shadows of his past to embracing the life that was for the first time within his grasp.

I had been a fool. It would certainly be in keeping with my understanding of the world if, having convinced me of all the values Yami had seemed to hold dear, he had turned his back on them. If that was a betrayal, it had been my own fault for having had hopes, for having believed in someone besides Mokuba. I had said that once to Pegasus, had told him that anyone foolish enough to trust deserved to be betrayed. He had laughed at me.

But I wasn't quite ready to let go of my illusions either… not after starting to rebuild my life around them. I shook my head. I was tired. It was getting hard to think.

Dinner was over, or at least Mokuba had finished eating. I looked at Kisara. She was even more awe-inspiring than I had imagined. "Pegasus didn't do a bad job," I said. "But he was a fool to think anyone could capture a Blue Eyes White Dragon on a card."

Mokuba stared at me, mouth open. It was the first time Pegasus's name had been mentioned between us since Duelists' Kingdom. But this was the first time I'd thought of my one-time partner, not as the
man who'd taught me my final lesson on man's infinite capacity for malice and betrayal, nor even as Mokuba's kidnapper… but simply as the person who'd first tried to bring my dragon to life; as someone who had, in his own way, tried to honor her.

I turned away from Mokuba's unanswered questions, and walked to the area where we'd be sleeping. The ground was covered with a thick growth of moss. I must have been more tired than I had thought, because I couldn't remember if it had been there before. It was soft. Mokuba had unzipped the sleeping bags and spread them in the center, one for use as bedding, the other as a comforter. Kisara was right. It was warm.

'We have seen the pharaoh. That is enough of a victory for one day. Leave tomorrow's battles for tomorrow.'

There was that voice in my head again. And again, it was right. I was suddenly too worn out to stand. No matter how big a disaster the encounter had turned out to be, I had found Yami. And I had met my Blue Eyes White Dragon. I lay down, my eyes still open; I wasn't quite ready to surrender to unconsciousness.

I hate that stage between wakefulness and sleep, when you can feel your mind start to shut down, your body start to slow. No matter how common an experience, it always made me feel a bit defenseless. It's funny the way we rehearse for dying every night.

Mokuba came over and lay down next to me. Kisara curved her immense body around us. They say you can't miss what you've never had, but like most platitudes, that's a lie. Maybe you can't miss it accurately, but that doesn't mean you don't feel the gap between what your life is, and what it could have been. And you can't help but wonder what it is that you don't even know you're missing, this lack that you don't even have a name for, that you can only judge by its absence.

Lying in the darkness, caught between Kisara's warmth and Mokuba's, it struck me… I felt safe. I felt like it was okay to go to sleep. Had I ever felt this way? As I had told Kisara, if so, it had been a long time ago. And the answer probably didn't matter.

Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter, and for helping me (hopefully) wrestle the meeting scene at least to a draw.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: I always find myself torn between the original anime and the manga, because I love them both. And loving the Kaiba brothers as much as I do, I really like the filler arcs in the anime (Noa's Arc, DOMA, and Grand Prix) because they give so much background on them. So when I write, I tend to blend both the manga and the anime into the back-story. In this case, I've included the filler arcs as part of the background, then switched to the manga for the Ancient Egypt arc.

The hardest scene to write was the one where Kaiba and Yugi finally catch up with Yami. I found it interesting that at the end of the Ancient Egyptian arc, Yami says that what's ever on the other side of the door is where he belongs, but he never says it's where he wants to be. The other thing that struck me is how he asks, after defeating Zork, what he's supposed to do next, as if he doesn't have a clue what to do without a mission.

I can also see Kaiba being so focused on reaching his goal of finding Yami, that he never really stopped to consider what he'd do once he did find him. I think part of him might not have believed it was real, that Yami really chose to die, until he was face to face with him. And I think Yugi might
not have interrupted, partly because Kaiba was pretty unstoppable by that point, and partly because he was, however offensively, saying things Yugi wanted Yami to consider. But I also wanted Yugi to be an equally important part of the meeting, and to be the one who actually gets Yami to think. I see Kaiba and Yugi as playing different roles in Yami's life. Kaiba is usually the one to challenge him and to push him past what he thought he could do, and Yugi is the one who believes that he can accomplish anything he sets his mind to, so I was trying to capture that dynamic.

**Kisara Note:** It's funny, I was watching the subtitled version of the Isis duel, and it struck me how much I love the relationship between Kaiba and the BEWD. You can feel the affection and trust between Kaiba and his monster. I'm afraid that that's the relationship (platonic) that's always fascinated me, and it's the one I want to try and show. The character, Kisara-as-a-human-girl-who-lived-in-Ancient-Egypt is interesting, but she doesn't quite match up to the BEWD in my affections.
Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

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CHAPTER 6: NEW BEGININGS

This is a story about death – as are all fairy tales. Kaiba had been given a gift – or had seized one left unattended. For who among us faced with the loss of a friend would not kill for the chance to rail at them for their stupidity and selfishness in departing? Kaiba was not wise, but he was honest enough to recognize that anger is a just reaction to death; experienced enough not to be ashamed of his rage; and innocent enough not to know that yelling at the newly deceased is unseemly. Kaiba might have entertained doubts upon falling asleep, but by morning he was ready for a rematch.

But as easy as it is to forget – there are two Kaiba brothers in this story, and it's time for the younger one to have an adventure of his own...

MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE

When I woke up, Nisama was still dead to the world. I wasn't surprised. I was pretty sure that he hadn't slept since we had walked through that door, three days ago. Once he'd managed to find Yami and get us to a place of safety (against all odds, as usual) he'd just collapsed.

Sleeping snuggled up against the curve of a dragon's tail was certainly novel. It was more comfortable than you'd think. I'd always assumed that dragons would be cold-blooded, but Kisara was radiating a faint, comforting warmth.

I was wide awake now, though. And bored. I knew from experience that Nisama might be unconscious all day, and there was only so long I could sit there staring at his sleeping face. I tried to climb over Kisara's tail as gently as I could. I wasn't sure how she felt about being walked on. I'd thought she was asleep too, but as I reached the ground, one of her blue eyes opened. It really was the same color as my brother's.

"You are rested?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, not adding that I was bored. I mean she was big; her claws were about the size of my head… and for all I knew, her temper matched my brother's.

I looked down at the town. It didn't look very lively, but it had to be better than staying on a cliff with a sleeping brother and a dragon.

"You wish to explore the town?" she asked, seeing me glance down.
"Kind of," I said. "But Nisama'll probably freak if he wakes up and if I'm not here. I don't want to worry him."

She made a sound of approval. It was somewhere between a rumble and a purr.

"I will explain to him that there is nothing to fear. The town is hidden and protected by spellcasters. If there is even a hint of danger, I will have you back here before Kaiba," again there was that amused rumble, "can draw breath to yell. And if he wants you, I can fetch you when he wakes up."

She was ready to protect me, but she was doing it for Nisama. I liked her priorities.

"Sounds like a deal!" I said and headed off before she could change her mind. As I reached the corner, I turned back for another look at Nisama. I was glad I did. Kisara had coiled her tail around him a little tighter, and was trailing one wing across him like a blanket. One of his hands had come up and was grabbing it a little. As odd as it sounds, he looked… cute. Part of me wished that we'd remembered to bring the digital camera (we seemed to have brought everything else.)

Even before Gozaburo… even in the orphanage… even before everything… I never remember my brother sleeping with a stuffed animal. Trust Nisama to hold out for the real thing.

It didn't take me long to reach the town. It was early; there weren't too many people up. I headed towards the town square. I was looking around, trying to believe I was really here, when I heard the clatter of pots breaking behind me. Before I could react, I felt hands covering my eyes.

"Gotcha!" a voice called out.

The hands were small; the voice was high-pitched. A girl's voice, or a child's. But by the time I had taken that in, it was already too late. The instant I had felt those hands blinding me, I'd reached backwards and up... to grab her dress by its back collar and throw her over my shoulder, just like Nisama had taught me.

By the time I realized she wasn't a threat, she was on the floor, where she'd fallen in a tangle of skirts and legs and blue eyes; her hair even wilder than mine. I recognized her of course, even though her hair was brown instead of blonde. I'd seen Yugi's deck often enough to identify the card she'd become after she had... well... died.

But even though I knew who she was, or rather, who she'd turned into, it seemed rude to call her Black Magic Girl, as if she'd never had a real name.

"Hi, I'm sorry, I'm Mokuba, what's your name?" I blurted out as I held out my hand. She grabbed it and jumped up, smoothing out her dress. The Black Magic Girl's was a lot shorter.

"I'm Mana. Wow, you're quick. Are you training to become a warrior?"

"No, I just live with one," I said.

"I know. I've seen you. You're the boy who stands next to the High Priest when he duels in the other place."

"You mean you can see what's going on? When you're... you know… a card?"

She nodded, "Only when there's a duel going on that our keeper is involved in."

That would explain the antagonism between the Black Magician and Nisama, but it didn't make me like him any better.
"Which way do you like me better?" she asked with a grin. "Like I am now... or like this?"

She seemed to blur, and then she was in her Black Magic Girl get-up – the sparkly cheerleader outfit, the weird hat. She looked older, and her hair was blonde now. I didn't know what to say. The Black Magic Girl outfit was cuter, but I kind of liked her looking like a girl, not a card. And I was pretty sure that any answer I gave would be the wrong one, anyway.

"I don't know," I said. "I mean it's kind of like my doing this," I pulled my hair back, "and asking you which one you like better. I mean now I'm just Mokuba with his hair pulled back."

She giggled.

(Wow, I had picked the right answer.)

"Turn around," she said. Mana was back in what must have been her regular clothes, but she still had a dash of glitter across each cheekbone, and her hair was still blonde. It was a simple dress, tied at the waist. The collar had slipped off one shoulder as she rummaged in her bag. It wasn't as glitzy as her Black Magic Girl costume, but it wasn't bad either. I liked looking at her, but I turned around, anyway.

"Here, hold this," she said. It was a leather thong, with beads at each end. I felt her fingers gently combing through the tangles in my hair, then pulling it back. I handed her the tie.

"Look!" she said, leading me to an ornamental pool, so that I could see my reflection. My hair was pulled back, only the bangs covering my eyes as usual. It wasn't as startling a transformation as hers, but I looked older, too... less like a kid, and a lot more like my brother.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm sorry about earlier, but my brother got sucker punched by that asshole of a Black Magician, and I guess I'm still a bit jumpy."

"His name is Mahaado! And he's not an asshole!" she yelled. "You have no right to say that! Everyone respects him!"

"I'll bet!" I shot back.

"They do!" her face crumpled a little as she said that, and her voice trailed off. "Well, kind of..."

"What do you mean?" I asked, more quietly.

"Well, nobody really sees him. All they see is the pharaoh's most devoted servant... predictable... loyal... boring Maahado. And he's fine with that. He says he's proud to be a weapon in his pharaoh's hand. But he's so much more than that and he doesn't even get it!"

I nodded. "I know just how you feel," I said. And I did. After all, I was Seto Kaiba's kid brother. I knew exactly what it felt like to look at the man I loved more than anyone on the whole planet, and know that no one else was ever going to look at him and see the same person I did.

"But everyone respects the High Priest," she argued.

"But I bet nobody likes him, even here," I answered. "And back home it's even worse. I guess Yugi likes him, because he likes everyone. But the only person who really liked him or respected him just died."

"The pharaoh?" she said.
"Yeah. That's why I'm here to get him back. I don't know... as far as the others go... I thought if they got to know Nisama a little, if they found out what his life was like, all the things he'd given up for me... if they ever once realized he was their age... maybe they'd like him better. I guess it was just a dumb, stupid idea. I mean even here... the first thing Nisama did was get in a fight with... well, everyone – even the Holy Elf. I guess that's just the way it's always going to be. Even finding Yami didn't change anything," I said, suddenly feeling defeated.

"Don't give up! The pharaoh has always respected and cared for the High Priest. And Maahado can be a stubborn self-righteous prick sometimes." She looked at me sideways, her smile daring me to play her game.

"Same with Nisama. Well you can delete the self-righteous part," I smirked just like my brother would have at her look of disappointment, before continuing, "And add hot-tempered, instead."

I'd never said anything bad about Nisama, before. I looked at the sky, waiting for it to fall, or at least for Kisara to come storming in after me. I switched my view to Mana. She laughed. I joined in, feeling like I'd just jumped off a really high diving board into a deep pool. It was scary, but wonderful.

"And smug," she added

"Definitely smug. And reckless," I countered.

"And over-protective," she continued.

"Not to mention bossy." I offered.

"And sometimes, just plain stupid!" she yelled in between laughs. I nodded as best I could while gasping for air and howling along with her.

This place really grows on you. The fact that she was some sort of supernatural being bothered me a whole hell of a lot less than you'd think. Spirit or not – she was cool.

I was still chuckling when I heard Kisara's roar and saw her circling overhead.

"Oh. My brother's awake. I got to go," I said awkwardly, stuffing the hair-band back in Mana's hand. "Maybe I'll see you again..."

"If you're going to the palace, you will." Mana watched as Kisara landed and my brother jumped off.

"He uses the Blue Eyes White Dragon to run his errands?" she asked, eyes wide.

"What can I say? In addition to being smug and bossy and hot-tempered and reckless and stubborn – he's also as cool as they come."

She laughed and waved goodbye as Nisama joined me.

**YAMI'S NARRATIVE**

I was with Yugi when Kaiba strode into my hall, trench coat flaring behind him; Mokuba at his side. I wasn't surprised to see him. Whether he was trying to tease out the meaning of friendship, or pursuing his victories, or fulfilling his promises – Kaiba never could let anything rest. Show him a scab and he had to pick at it.

Although anger still radiated from him, he seemed quieter, like a man determined to hold on to his
temper. This forced calm couldn't last. It was time for Round Two. All things considered, it was surprising how much I had missed him. But he was so vibrantly, so uncompromisingly alive, as if his fiery nature could ward off the chill I had felt going through that door.

He looked at me, blue eyes flashing, familiar now from two lifetimes. I didn't want to fight him. I never had. We probably would, anyway… and I knew that part of me looked forward to that, too.

"I'm glad to see you," I said sincerely.

He grunted.

"You came all this way, Kaiba. Try talking."

"I don't know what to say to the person who turned his back on every thing he ever told me."

"I didn't. Kaiba, my place is here."

Kaiba smiled mirthlessly. At least he wasn't yelling.

Yet.

"Your 'place' is wherever you make it. My 'place'… Mokuba's 'place' was in a state run orphanage."

"This is hardly an orphanage," I said, insulted. "Try opening your eyes, instead of seeing only your past."

"Fuck you, Yami!" Kaiba yelled, his temper breaking as I had known it would. "Be my guest! Stay in this world that you think is such a fucking paradise. But it's not. It's death. And for all the things I've fucked up, that's the one thing I've never done."

"Have you come all this way to call me a coward?"

Yugi interrupted quickly, "No, to offer you a second chance, to tell you that you can still make a second choice."

"I've chosen my road," I reminded them.

I should have known Kaiba wouldn't accept such a flimsy answer. "So pick a new one… if you have the courage."

"You don't understand. I wasn't running away from your world. I looked at that door and suddenly knew I was needed here. I have a mission here. I can feel it."

"You are correct," said a voice behind me. I turned. I hadn't seen him since Weevil Underwood had thrown the five cards that gave him life over the side of Pegasus's ship on the way to Duelists' Kingdom… since Jonouchi had jumped into the water after them.

Kaiba hadn't seen this particular demon since Death-T, but he didn't react, except to stand even taller and plant his feet slightly farther apart, as though braced for a fight. Mokuba clutched Kaiba's jacket, and one of Kaiba's hands came up briefly to rest on his brother's head.

Mahaado bowed to Exodia's towering figure. "My Lord," he said. I wondered if I was expected to bow as well, but it was an action that had never come naturally to me.

Exodia inclined his head slightly towards us in acknowledgement, then surprised me by turning to Kaiba. "Did you not wonder how you had gained entrance to this world so easily?"
I saw Kaiba's twin look of surprise and impatience and chuckled. Of course Kaiba hadn't wondered… or more precisely, as long as events served his purpose, he hadn't cared. His suspiciously easy passage to another realm had been just one more item thrown onto the pile of things he preferred not to think about.

"You came for your own purposes," Exodia explained. "But you gained entrance because you – all of you – served our needs. This place exists on the border of your world. It blocks the forces of darkness and chaos, which would consume our world, and then sweep out into your own. Despite its peaceful appearance, we exist on the edge of a battlefield."

Kaiba interrupted, "Everything does."

Exodia ignored him and continued, "For as long as we hold sway here, both our worlds are safe. But if the Lord of Darkness… if Set…"

"What did you say his name was?" Kaiba demanded, incredulously.

"Set, the lord of darkness and chaos."

"I'm so glad Jounouchi isn't hearing this," Yugi snickered.

Kaiba glared at Yugi, his expression clearly stating that one more word and whatever truce they had established would be over.

Exodia ignored Yugi's interruption as well.

"You are his namesake," he told Kaiba. "It may explain why he did not seriously contest your arrival. Your name may have amused him, as well as tickled his vanity."

"If it's supposed to impress me that I've been named after your god of evil, I've got a news flash for you – I've been called worse. Get to the point of this nonsense, if you have one."

"I do. My message is simple. It is not just this world that is threatened. Set's agents have made forays into your world as well. Dartz, Malik… some of your greatest enemies, wittingly or not, have been Set's tools."

"Are you going to blame the Big Five on him as well? Why not go all the way back to Gozaburo, while you're at it?" Kaiba sneered.

"Not all the evils of your world can be laid at Set's door," Exodia replied. "Some are home grown. But the fact that there are other evils that exist and must be contested, does not make this threat any less. Left unchecked, Set will destroy not just our world, but your own, as well. We have held him off through the millennia, but just as the tide will eventually erode the shoreline, we have been fighting a long defeat. Set has inexorably shifted the balance in his favor. The most we could do was to stall, buying time against a future deliverance that we could not imagine… until now. You have come here on the winds of change. All of us – Set's forces as well as our own – are part of a world that has vanished long ago… and none of us hold dominion over the one that has replaced it.

Even with your help, victory against his forces is not inevitable. But neither is defeat."

"Nothing is inevitable," Kaiba said flatly.

"That is a belief of your world, not mine. Perhaps the chaos you bring will be a match for Set's more familiar one."
Kaiba snorted. "And you expect me to believe that you let us in here so we could kill your all-powerful eternal god for you? Just like that? If this was a video game, I'd send any storyline that had the Head Boss so easy to kill, back for redevelopment. No one would buy it."

"Of course you can not kill Set. He is a god, and can not be slain by mere mortals."

"If we can't beat him, what do you need us for?"

"Set can't be killed. But I didn't say he couldn't be defeated."

"This is getting boring. If he's so powerful, why can't he just wave his hand and destroy you all?"

"He can. But he won't."

"Stop playing games with me," Kaiba growled.

"Playing games is exactly what we need you to do. This is a matter of life and death for us, but what can a god know of such things? It is indeed a game to Set, a way to pass the time. What interest would there be in certain victory? Set plays by rules long established and agreed to by our gods as well. Set has placed his general and his minions here, as one would set pieces on a game board. He must now allow events to unfold as they will. If we can locate and destroy Set's forces, it will force him to reset the board, to start over – and that will take millennia, as happened 3,000 years ago when the pharaoh defeated Zork and Akunadin. We do not look to kill Set, only to force him to begin his game anew. That will be a hard enough task, without adding the impossible to it. We do not seek to destroy evil forever, only to stall its progress, to buy our world and yours some peace from his attacks, before they too renew themselves, for the game is the one constant, wherever it is played."

"Does that mean we're going to have to fight Zork again?" Yugi asked.

"No. Set does not repeat himself. For a god, the true enemy is boredom."

"But it is a continuation of that endless battle, nonetheless," I said. "So this is why I am here – to once again defend my ancient people and my friends. I will answer your call."

"You can count on me," Yugi added.

Kaiba snorted. "Now why doesn't that surprise me?"

Exodia looked at Kaiba. "It is here that Set will launch his opening attack. If you would protect your own world, you will first defend ours."

I could see Kaiba weighing Exodia's words against our previous battles, against all he had observed since his arrival here. He glanced through the open doorway at Kisara who was waiting outside, as though he needed to remind himself which side she was on. He gave a nod so infinitesimal that no one unfamiliar with him would have caught it. Then his face was once again a blank mask.

"And if I refuse to cooperate?" Kaiba asked, his voice light and conversational.

Yugi and I looked at him in shock.

"Then both worlds will be lost. Your world, like ours, will fall into darkness," Exodia replied.

"I've lived in darkness before. You'd be surprised at how quickly you get used to it." Kaiba smirked.

"Is that what you want for your brother?" Exodia asked, his casual tone matching Kaiba's.
Kaiba's lips tightened fractionally, but his face betrayed no other sign that Exodia's words had affected him. Before he could respond, Mokuba laid a hand on Kaiba's arm, and looked up apologetically. Then Kaiba's younger brother squared his shoulders and faced Exodia.

"If you've done your homework, it couldn't have escaped your notice that Nisama tried to kill me. Next time chose your bargaining chip more effectively."

"Well played," Exodia remarked. "But indulge my curiosity. Why are you doing this? Why do you need to turn this into a confrontation?"

"Because at last, I've found something familiar – a negotiation," Kaiba said. "I have something you need. And you have something I want."

"Kaiba…" I growled. "Have you heard nothing? The fate of the world is at stake, and you're asking what's in it for you?"

Exodia ignored my interruption as well.

"And is he to be your spoil of war?" Exodia asked Kaiba. I was surprised to see the ancient Duel Monster nodding in my direction.

"Kaiba! Now you have gone too far! Do you think I have no mind of my own, that you dare to haggle over my fate, as if I was a sheep at a farmers' market?" I hissed, incensed at his presumption.

Kaiba's lips twitched upwards. "I'm not. The choice of how to live your life is yours. It always was, even if you're too blind to see that." He turned to Exodia. "Yami belongs to no one but himself, whether he knows it or not, whether he's too cowardly to accept the responsibility for his life or not. The Holy Elf said we could bring one thing back with us. If Yami so chooses, it will be him."

"Agreed. As we have promised, so shall we abide. Only the pharaoh can decide if he has come here temporarily, in answer to a call for help from a foreign land, or if he has finally returned to his true home."

"That's it?" Kaiba asked incredulously, looking discomforted by Exodia's acquiescence.

"The situation is unchanged. If you are more comfortable with a bargain than a friendship, so be it."

I stifled a laugh. Exodia had described Kaiba exactly. It was no wonder that Kaiba had always found Yugi, in his very openness, so difficult to fathom. And yet, they had come to find me equally, like the two halves of a puzzle; like the two halves of my heart.

My annoyance with Kaiba had vanished. For Kaiba had just fought to give me the right he most fiercely treasured. A right I had never truly known or acknowledged: the right to make choices, freely. When this was over, I could go home… if I could decide where it lay.

"Then we seem to have a deal," Kaiba said, arms crossed, spine straight, conceding nothing to his new ally, even as the figure of Exodia towered over him.

Exodia inclined his head; the audience was over. But Kaiba didn't wait to be dismissed. Before Exodia finished his gesture, Kaiba turned his back and headed for the door, Mokuba running at his side.

Kaiba paused when he reached me.

"I once thought your dependence on your friends was your greatest weakness. I waited for it to bring
you down. I was wrong. But you had a fatal flaw, nonetheless. You covered it well. But your need to find a preordained place, your need to believe that such a thing exists, was your true weakness. And it led you to turn your back on even the ties of friendship."

"We all have weaknesses, Kaiba."

"Not all of them prove deadly," he answered.

"Unlike you, I never gloried in the risking of my life, nor held it cheaply," I retorted. "I but bowed to necessity. As you now have – and to the same demand. Tell me, Kaiba – if Exodia had not acceded to your request – would you have denied his?"

"Does it matter?" Kaiba asked with a wolfish grin, as he strode from the room. I watched through the doorway. With one fluid motion, he swept onto Kisara's back. He paused to help Mokuba up, and then they were aloft, leaving me the echo of his words at our initial meeting in this world: 'And when does necessity become an excuse?'

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Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter. Believe me, in the original version half of Exodia's conversation remained in my head.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: Thanks to Kagemihari and Lomelindi. If you're writing a story with a villain, one of the hardest decisions is just who that villain is going to be. When I first started plotting this out, all I knew was who I didn't want it to be. Since I was in the middle of using Akunadin and Zork as the central villains in 'It's Déjà Vu all over again,' I didn't want to repeat myself. Then I talked to Kagemihari who suggested Set. I pictured Kaiba's reaction on hearing that and was hooked on the idea. Which is when Kagi reminded me that Lomelindi was using Set as her bad guy too. (Well he is the God of Evil/Darkness/Chaos/Bad Stuff.) So I toddled off to Lomelindi to ask if she minded if I used the idea of Set as well, she said 'sure, go ahead,' and here we are.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: It's funny, but until people started pointing it out to me, I'd almost forgotten that fairy tales usually end with finding the princess (with apologies to Yami.) But I guess I was thinking more of those quest or journey type fairy tales, so finding Yami just isn't enough to end the story.

Also, it never felt right to have Yugi, Kaiba and Mokuba just waltz through that door, and have it be that easy. I figured for them to be able to open it, there had to be a reason why the inhabitants on the other side needed them to get in. So the main thing I needed to figure out was why they were all needed in this other world so badly. I guess part of the story is about all the reasons Kaiba and Yugi needed to get there, and the other half deals with what this world needs from them, and how those two things play off against each other. (Or possibly it's that I can't seem to avoid complicating things.) And I have to admit that I liked the image of Kaiba being willing to save the world, but unable to resist haggling over the terms, and as a businessman, figuring everything's up for negotiation.

It feels a little odd writing a Yugioh story that's not set in Domino, which at this point is starting to feel like home. I decided not to try and recreate Ancient Egypt, because I wanted a more Duel Monster flavored world. Also after Pegasus ran out of stone carvings to copy from he created his own monsters, so in a way the game grew beyond its origins, and I wanted this world to reflect that. Of course, way too late I realized this meant that I had to basically figure out what rules govern this world, so that events make some sort of logical sense.
**Mokuba and Mana:** It struck me that there are a lot of similarities between Mokuba and Mana. They are both know their minds very decidedly, without this coming across as childish stubbornness. They are brave and fiercely loyal. Despite their maturity and frequently being in situations beyond the usual range of childhood, they manage to retain the resiliency of childhood and some of its sense of play.

They both have older brother/mentor figures that they are devoted to, and act in support of. Mahaado is definitely very respected as a member of the pharaoh's court. But I think he sees himself as the pharaoh's man, rather than as an individual. This is purely my own speculation (which is what fanfiction is good for, no?) but I can see where after 3,000 years that kind of subservience and denial of self, might chafe Mana, who adores Mahaado as a person in his own right. And it struck me that that combination of loving someone, and feeling that both that person themselves and the world a large undervalues them, might be something Mokuba and Mana share.

**Weevil Underwood Note:** I've been using the original names for this story, rather than the dub ones. The only exception I've made is with Weevil Underwood, because I felt since he is a minor character mentioned in passing, I didn't want people to stop the flow of the story to ask themselves, 'Who's Inspector Haga?' Of course I realize it's possible people stopped reading to ask, 'Why wasn't she using Inspector Haga?' But there are times when you just have to flip a coin, and this one came up heads.
Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

MANGA NOTE: Yami and Kaiba have two duels that either don't appear in the anime, or appear in a radically different form. Their first shadow game occurs when Kaiba steals Sugoroku's BEWD from Yugi. Yami challenges him to a shadow game (or penalty game) to get it back. Yami wins when Kaiba summons the BEWD, but the dragon destroys itself rather than follow his commands. Yami inflicts a penalty game on Kaiba where he is trapped in the illusion that he is in the Duel Monsters world and is killed by his own monsters. Kaiba creates Death-T to avenge this loss. Mokuba insists on being one of Yami's challengers. Kaiba misreads this as a personal attack on him, and when Mokuba loses he forces him to go through the Death Simulation chamber he had designed for Yami. Yami rescues Mokuba, and defeats Kaiba by summoning Exodia. He shatters Kaiba's heart, giving Kaiba the opportunity to rebuild it without the darkness that was destroying him.

CHAPTER 7: MIRROR, MIRROR

Have you ever noticed how many fairy tales deal in death, or at least with its semblance – yet how few linger on the grieving victims left behind? Nor do they truly deal with the departed even as they hold them spellbound within death's trance.

What of Snow White, lying in her glass coffin? After escaping from her stepmother only to be trapped again, was she glad of a chance to rest? Did memories of the dwarves or her eventual prince keep her company through her journey and tempt her to rejoin the living?

Maybe fairy tales are meant for children after all. The good come alive again after true love's kiss, the bad die, and nobody mourns, except the poor dwarves who sit over Snow White's glass tomb, eternally vigilant, eternally faithful – only to lose her again to some Johnny-come-lately prince.

It is, I suppose, a lie by omission, a merciful falsity, for times when reality is unpalatable. But it feels like a cheat, like a different way to stack the deck… to parade death through a story, without ever alluding to the emotions that come to the wake and follow the mourners home.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

We had fought three true duels. (Duelists' Kingdom didn't count.)

I'd lost them all.

I should have hated Yami.

I had, at first.
Not because he had beaten me, although that had been unpleasant enough. But because every time I looked at Yami, I saw our first shadow game. I saw my dragon vanish in my hands, as if she couldn't bear to be held in them. I saw the look of contempt in my relatives' eyes as they dumped us in that orphanage. I saw the sneer in Gozaburo's.

I should have hated Yami more with each loss.

Instead, each time, I felt a piece of my past fade. I came a little closer with each defeat to the true future that was the prize in all my games.

I had tried to fill the losses in my life with victories. It didn't work, but I couldn't stop trying because soon, there was nothing in my life but endless winning. I had let go of everything crucial to me in pursuit of meaningless trophies. Somehow, those defeats to Yami had filled a void left empty by all my relentless victories.

And then there were the times we had fought side by side.

Three times.

(Unless you count the time he had combined my deck with his own in Noa's World.)

By the Grand Prix, it didn't matter. His duels had started to feel like mine, and I wasn't dueling anymore. I no longer needed to tally my life in carefully staged victories and defeats… or rather, I had found a new battlefield. What mattered now was keeping hold of those crucial things: rebuilding my life, keeping my promises, fulfilling my dream of a Kaiba Land where kids could play at the games that had never been fun to me – and most of all, being Mokuba's brother. These things were all the victory I needed. This was the true future I had been straining for, and it had been within my grasp all along.

I owed Yami.

And now he was dead and all I could do was ask him why.

Or scream it.

I had meant to be reasonable. But every time I saw him, the anger… at him for lying to me, at myself for believing in him… had risen up in my throat, choking all softer words.

Anger had been the emotion that had kept me company throughout the years at the orphanage, it had carried me through my time with Gozaburo. Whenever I had needed it, it had been there for me – my old, reliable friend. It wasn't until Yami, that I began to question its presence at the center of my life.

And then Yami had left, like everyone else.

Knowing there was a reason didn't help. There's always a reason, and they're never good enough.

At least Yami had had the decency to do it in front of my face.

When my mother had died, my dad had disappeared. Oh, he had still lived at our address, on those rare occasions when he wasn't at work. But even when he had been home, he hadn't been there, but off somewhere with my mother… as if without her, our family didn't exist. Even though me and Mokuba were sitting on the floor in front of him, we were never really in his field of vision.

I seldom bothered reminiscing. But sometimes I wondered if right before he had died, he had started to look at us and see us again; if he had remembered that he had a family, or if that was just another
fairy tale – one I had told myself. It was hard to know the truth. Right after our adoption, before I had closed the book on that part of my life, I had checked the police report. His car had skidded on a patch of ice and swerved into a tree. I guess I would never know if he had tried to avoid the collision, or if he had seen a door of his own, and run through it as fast as he could.

Just as Yami had.

I could say, as I had said to Pegasus when he taunted me at Duelists' Kingdom, that it was my own fault – that betrayal is the wages of trust. I could say that Yami had been a fraud all along; his lessons, lies.

But I couldn't. They had become a part of me.

*The road to our future is open.*

Yami had told me that before our last duel. I had given those words back to him as I left the ruins of my past at Alcatraz. It was a promise. Whatever Yami had done, or why, I would be faithful to it.

I missed him.

My anger was tainted with loss. Here, in a dragon's lair, I could admit that to myself.

I was sitting on the edge of Kisara's cliff, staring at the palace. Mokuba came over. I guess he'd decided that I'd brooded long enough.

"C'mon," he said, tugging on my sleeve. "It's time for bed."

I turned and saw Kisara, curled up in place. So yesterday's sleeping arrangements had become routine. I can't say I objected. There'd been something… nice about lying in the darkness, breathing in Kisara's scent, hearing her strong heartbeat as I drifted off to sleep. I'd liked waking up to the realization she was still at my side.

"I'll even tell you a story," Mokuba added, as if he had to sweeten the deal. I didn't correct him. We sat down, leaning against Kisara. Mokuba was true to his promise. The first words out of his mouth were, "Once upon a time, there was this guy, Orpheus…"

"Orpheus? Isn't that a myth, not a fairy tale?" I asked.

"Myth, fairy tale – what's the difference? Do you want to hear the story, or not?"

He sounded just like the staff at the orphanage. I bit back a smile.

"Anyway this guy, Orpheus, had this wife. And they were really in love," Mokuba continued.

"Of course they were in love. It's a fairy tale," I couldn't resist saying.

That got a smile from Mokuba, but he didn't stop his story to respond. "And Orpheus was the best musician in the world, so everything was perfect. Until his wife died. Now most people would have given up at that. But Orpheus wasn't most people. There was one thing he could do better than anyone else on earth…" Mokuba grinned at me, then added, "Music was his signature card, in a way. And he figured if mortals loved his songs so much, maybe he could use it to bargain – even with the gods."

"If you've got it – flaunt it," I agreed. "But there are some flaws in your analogy. Yami's not my lover."
"Did I say he was? But how many stories do you think there are about guys waltzing into the underworld and demanding people back? And you've got to admit the important part's right on target."

I nodded. I was enjoying this. I knew who Orpheus was, of course. Since so many of Kaiba Corporation's business ties were in the West, my education had included memorizing common figures from Greek mythology, on the theory this would make me appear well-rounded. I didn't let on that I probably knew the story better than Mokuba. I didn't want to disappoint him. Besides, I wanted to hear his take on things.

"So," Mokuba said with a theatrical sigh, "Orpheus snuck into the underworld. There was this three-headed dog named Cerberus guarding the door to the underworld. But Orpheus played so beautifully, that Cerberus just rolled over like a puppy and let him go past. And he walked right up to the King of the Dead, Hades, and his queen, Persephone, and launched into another song. And his song was so beautiful and so sad that they both started crying– and do you know how hard it is to make the King of the Dead cry? When the music'd softened them up, Orpheus started bargaining, and he kept singing and asking for his wife back until Hades finally agreed she could go home with him. There was a catch, of course – there always is. Orpheus couldn't look back to see if she was following, or the deal was off. He had to trust that everything would work out."

Mokuba stopped and looked at me.

"So how does the story end?" I asked.

"Does it matter?"

"If you're not saying, I'm guessing it didn't work out too well," I commented, as if I didn't already know the ending. I frowned. Yami probably would have said that the story had a fitting moral: Orpheus's wife was dead and destined to remain so. I thought Orpheus's failures rested on his own shoulders. Coming up with the perfect plan is one thing. The true test is whether you can pull it off. Orpheus had managed to outwit death, only to be defeated by his own hopes and fears, instead. I wondered which view Mokuba subscribed to… after all, he had picked the story. "Are you trying to tell me that like Orpheus, I came on a fool's errand; that I should just accept Yami's death?" I asked.

"Would I ever tell you that?" he asked indignantly.

"Guess not." I smiled slightly. "But you cheated, Mokuba. This wasn't a story. It was a vote of confidence from my vice president and partner. You know, once we get home I can look up the ending for myself."

"By then the official version won't matter. You'll have written a new ending for yourself, just like you always do. I like watching you fight fate, Nisama. It reminds me that every now and then, it can be whipped. I've never seen anyone beat death before. Today wouldn't be a bad day to start."

We sat in silence after that. Eventually Mokuba slumped down until he was curled up at my side, his head leaning against my lap. I listened to his breathing and stared at the sky. One thing I'd always liked about the mansion was that the grounds were large enough and far enough from Domino's streetlights for me to see the stars. Here, they were even clearer. And however strange this place was, the constellations above me were familiar.

"Mokuba is wise," Kisara said.

I nodded. I wondered how a being as big as Kisara could have, when it suited her, so soft a voice.
"The Holy Elf spoke truly when she said that if one is to seek for the core of your heart, they must look to Mokuba."

"I couldn't have found a safer place to store it," I said.

"It is strange. Perhaps your soul was made to exist in separate parts."

I didn't understand that, nor could I think of a response. That was okay, because Kisara accepted my silence until I was ready to break it, just like she always did. "I was just like Orpheus," I finally said. "I had fucking beaten Gozaburo. Mokuba should have been safe. Instead I almost killed him."

"Mokuba survived," she answered. "You did what Orpheus could not."

"Not alone," I pointed out. "Not under my own power. Not without Yugi and Yami."

"Then Orpheus should have brought a friend," she said.

I could have argued that whatever had followed, neither Yugi nor Yami had been my friend at Death-T, but I didn't. A companionable silence fell between Kisara and I. My eyelids drifted shut, and for once I didn't feel the need to snap them open. I wasn't letting down my guard. I was resting. There really was a difference. It was interesting, this comfortably drowsy feeling; part of me wanted to delay sleep for as long as I could to enjoy it.

"I'm glad I got to meet you," I said to Kisara, impending sleep slurring my words slightly.

"And I, you," she answered. "There are some roads it is well to walk down, little one, however they end."

Her words weren't exactly optimistic, but I took comfort in them nonetheless. They felt like absolution.

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

Memory is truly a double-edged sword. I remembered Seto, my High Priest… remembered loving him… wanting him… I remembered living with the knowledge that he had felt the same. We never once spoke of it. My responsibilities and Seto's pride had proven an effective gag. For if he did not speak, how could I? Any declaration of desire would have been tantamount to ordering him to my bed. It was where we both wanted to be… but I gloried in his reckless, soaring, stubborn pride. How could I be the one to clip his wings?

Of all the memories I had struggled so hard to regain, only those of Seto seemed real. But when I looked back on my high priest, my mind played tricks on me. I saw him, not in ceremonial robes, but in a trench coat.

I had come so far to regain my past, my memories, my name… only to have them turn into the dust that they were. Only to wonder if I'd spent what chance I had at a second life on a fool's quest. Why did finding my past seem to require me to turn my back on all that I had learned since being reborn, to renounce the friends I had made?

I had thought that I was leaving the world to them, that we were each where we belonged. But Yugi had come all this way to tell me, however gently, that I had been wrong. As in his way, had Kaiba. I'd been stunned to realize he considered my death a betrayal, and I was surprised by the ease at which I could read each conflicting emotion, as if this place had stripped a layer from his façade.

And from my own.
I couldn't deny Kaiba's emotions, and I couldn't discount his words, however conscious I was of the hypocrisy evident in both.

If there was one trait I objected to most in Kaiba – it was the way, belying his seeming selfishness, he would treat his life as if it had no meaning; as if it truly was, as he had once claimed, a single meaningless chip to be staked in pursuit of his goals. I hated seeing the way he so routinely discarded himself. The way he stubbornly refused to see that he had succeeded, that it was time to let go of the safety net of protecting Mokuba, and live to his own life… if he could find it.

We were more alike than I had been willing to admit.

I too had seen my life in term of missions accomplished rather than days savored. I had a country and later a world to protect, I told myself… only to wonder if this was an evasion as well as a duty.

Coming here was the only decision I could have made. But, I could not deny that Kaiba's words at our meeting harried me. Because following the predetermined path had felt smothering, if safe. It had felt like a surrender as well as a homecoming. And Kaiba's challenge, like Kaiba himself, was dangerous and unpredictable… just as life is.

Tonight should have been yet one more triumph – because in the face of Exodia's words, even Kaiba had to admit that my choice was just. And yet that did not feel satisfying. For the number of times Kaiba was wrong was balanced by those few times when he was devastatingly right.

"When does necessity become an excuse?" Kaiba had asked me.

I was afraid that, as far as I was concerned, it was on the day I had turned my back on the chance for my own life.

I was glad when Yugi interrupted my thoughts.

"What happened back in Egypt after I left?" I asked him. "How was everyone?"

"Okay. Shaken. Upset." Yugi laughed. "Jounouchi and Kaiba got into a fight. Jounouchi asked Kaiba why you would have thrown away your life if you didn't want to. Then Isis started talking about destiny. I thought Kaiba was going to test her reincarnation theories out right on the spot."

"I wish I had been there to see it."

"I wish you'd been there, too," he answered.

"Aibou," I said, serious once more, "there was a reason for me… for us to be here."

"Yeah, I know. It's just like old times. And you were right – we couldn't have gone back to the way things were. We'd both come so far together – but it was time for each of us to truly become the people we were meant to be. But everything's different now. You are your own person. You just have to decide where that person belongs. You know," Yugi said awkwardly, "when this is over, you'll have a choice to make."

"I know." I paused, then took a deep breath and said, "You've come all this way, and you haven't told me once what you're thinking, and I can't sense it anymore. Do you think I should come back with you?"

"What I think," Yugi said earnestly, almost impatiently, "is that you need to make that decision for yourself. I want you to forget me and this world and our mission, and think about yourself, for once."
I stared at him. How was I supposed to do that?

Yugi smiled at the look on my face. "Don't worry," he said. "Whatever answer you come up with, it'll be the right one. Look at all you've done, Yami. You taught everyone around you to believe in themselves… me… Jounouchi… even Kaiba. Now you just need to have a little faith in yourself."

**YUGI'S NARRATIVE**

I guess it made sense that after leaving Yami, I ran smack into Mahaado. I didn't have Isis's blind dependence on faith, or Kaiba's need to deny it. It was more that I couldn't help noticing how weird life was sometimes. And another thing I'd noticed was that once coincidences got started, they weren't going to stop any time soon.

"Hi," I said, knowing as the word left my mouth, that Mahaado was probably used to a more formal greeting.

"Well met," he responded. "I was on my way back to my quarters. Will you join me? It is just myself and my ward."

Except for his servants. I guess Mahaado was so used to them, he didn't notice.

"Mana, I have brought one of the outlanders home," he called as we entered.

There was a strangled cry and then an awkward wait. A servant came and brought fruit. Even Yami felt at home being waited on. It made me feel like I was in a restaurant. And Kaiba, who must have had an army of servants in that mansion of his, preferred (if Mokuba was right) to sleep in a dragon's nest.

"Oh, it's you. I was expecting… never mind… well met, Yugi," Mana said as she entered the room.

She wasn't what I expected either. I'd seen her in the Memory World, and in my deck of course, but she looked different – or rather like a mix between the two. She was in more, well, Egyptian clothes, than the Black Magician Girl's sparkly outfit, but fancier than usual, like something Isis might have worn, and her hair was Black Magician Girl blonde. She looked almost like she had gotten dressed up for someone, except that didn't make any sense.

"Hi," I said. I wasn't sure what else to say.

"Hi, Yugi," she replied, smiling. "It's funny seeing you here, after all the times I've been in your world."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I'm glad I came though, whatever happens. I feel better knowing I did the right thing following Yami; and knowing that Yami made the right choice."

"How so?" Mahaado asked.

"I was afraid that I had pushed Yami into leaving… that I hadn't been a good enough friend. I was afraid that after all he did for me, I let him down. But it wasn't like that. There was a reason all along. I should have had more faith in Yami… Atemu, I mean."

"It is natural for you to think of him as 'Yami.' I have never thanked you for being such a faithful friend to the pharaoh. He was surely blessed to have been reborn into your household," Mahaado said.

"Thanks," I answered awkwardly. "But that's just what friends do for one another. It's a little freaky
though… I should have trusted that Yami came here for a purpose. But if I had, I wouldn't have come myself. And Exodia said that we were needed too – not just Yami. So in a weird way, Kaiba was right too – for all the wrong reasons. He's good at that." I shook my head. "I don't know. It makes you wonder when you're making your own decisions, and when something's giving you a push."

"Well, whatever your reasons, I'm glad you're here. I'd like to see the others too. Well, maybe not the High Priest…” Mana said.

"He is not the High Priest, but an even more obstreperous incarnation. I have no interest in him. Or his cub," Mahaado announced stiffly.

"Mokuba?" I asked.

"He bothers me. He is a reminder of how much things have changed," Mahaado said.

"He's loyal. Some virtues remain the same," Mana said, unexpectedly. The two of us stared at her and she added defensively, "I've seen him at every duel, just the same as you have."

Mahaado sighed. "And yet if I read what Exodia said correctly, change is needed if we are to defeat Set; if we are to continue in peace. It is a hard road to walk."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Either way, I think you're going to end up facing some changes. And I didn't think about how much you'll miss Yami – if he comes back with us."

"I expected his life with you to slip like water through his fingers. I expected him to let it go as easily. I thought it would start to feel like a dream from which he would gladly awaken. Now I am not sure." Mahaado shook his head. "All I have ever asked is to serve my pharaoh as he needs me, in whatever guise I must take. I had hoped it would be as his councilor and the leader of his guard. Yet, it is the pharaoh's life to spend as he will. Exodia, who speaks for the gods, has decreed it so. I am not his warden."

"No," I said, "you're his friend. And I know how tough it was to watch him leave. It'll be even harder if I have to do it a second time."

"But you will, if it is what is required of you. As will I," Mahaado said somberly.

"Well, I think the cub's kind of cute," Mana burst out. If it was a distraction, it worked amazingly well.

Mahaado let out a roar of laughter. "Mana, the things you say! What will I do with you child?" he chided gently.

Thanks to Bnomiko, especially for reminding me if one of your characters is going to tell fairy tales (or in this case myths) they have to include the ending.

REVIEW NOTE: I reply to all signed reviews or reviews that have an email address directly. I reply to all unsigned reviews and post a summary of all replies on my LJ. The link is the first one on my Biopage. I generally post replies there when I update the next chapter.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: Kaiba's holding on to a lot of anger. But that's one of his basic operating styles. In the tag team duel he fights with Yami against Malik's henchmen, when Yami tells him to control his anger, that it will only cloud his judgment, Kaiba yells back that battle is anger and that
anger makes him stronger. I think this is partly true in that his rage fueled his determination never to yield – which is what allowed him to not only survive all the blows his life handed him – but to triumph against so many of them. It's only at Alcatraz, when he tries to use his anger to almost literally destroy his past, that he starts to understand it is his devotion to Mokuba and Mokuba's love for him, and his dreams that give him his true strength. Even so, I think under stress anger is the first card in his deck that he'd reach for. Interestingly High Priest Seto comes to a somewhat similar conclusion in that he decides that Bakura's anger has made him stronger.

Yami often comes across as being supremely self-confident. But I think that's true only when he's in his element, so to speak – dueling, protecting Yugi and saving the world. In fact – that's about the only times when we do see him. Even in DOMA, when he is on his own – he has his mission of saving Yugi and defeating Dartz. But I don't think he has much experience just *being* as opposed to *doing*. In the manga, just about the only time we see Yami with any leisure time is when Yugi pushes him on that sort-of-date with Anzu. And as she notices he's uncomfortable and unsure of what to do until she takes him to a card shop.
Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's a poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

CHAPTER 8: A COMMON ALCHEMY

Some changes are as decisive and as obvious as walking through a door to the after-life. Think of the Little Mermaid, trading her voice for feet. One moment; one irrevocable decision, whose consequences are clear if (in the non-Disney version) not pleasant to contemplate. Other changes start so slowly, so simply, that their path is as natural and as hard to follow as a child's journey through adolescence.

In this case, it started deceptively simply, with two conversations that seemed unrelated.

It started with something small. A hair tie. Mokuba needed one.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

I watched Mokuba rummage through our neatly packed belongings.

"What are you doing?" I finally asked.

"I need something to hold my hair back. You know, in a pony-tail."

That made no sense. I kept my own hair styled, even here. It's strange that something as fragile as an immaculate appearance can often prove to be an effective armor, but I hadn't survived this long by overlooking a potential advantage, no matter how slight.

But even at home Mokuba had never been interested in brushing his hair, unless forced – much less in any more advanced form of grooming. That's when I remembered that despite the difficulties inherent in using Kisara's breath to heat water, Mokuba had washed his face that morning without being reminded.

It was odd, but that could wait. Small as it was, I had a task. I looked around Kisara's lair. I spotted the leather tie threaded through the zipper on my pack.

"Will this do?" I asked.

Mokuba looked unduly grateful, but Kisara was waiting to take us to the palace, so I filed the moment away for future study. As we landed in front of the palace, Mokuba asked, "Can I go into town?"

I shrugged and nodded. Kisara would keep an eye on him, if needed. And I didn't blame Mokuba for
being bored, for wanting to stretch his legs a little. Besides, I was already focused on the potential
tactics of this latest game. Like it or not, Yami and I had a mission to fulfill. And I was spoiling for
another fight at the palace.

"So," I said to Yami, as I entered his hall, "we're back to being reluctant allies again. At least it's
familiar."

"I had hoped we were friends."

"Define: friends," I countered.

"There are some things that you must define for yourself. Are you so angry that you will deny our
friendship?"

"When we bring out the best in each other?" I mimicked, throwing Yami's words at Alcatraz back in
his face.

"Kaiba, why are you trying so hard to enrage me?"

"Because I'm trying to find out if there's anything human left in there. You got angry enough with
me, often enough when you were alive. Or was your anger just one more thing you turned your back
on?"

"I renounce nothing!" he said fiercely. "Unlike you, I am not so blind to all else that I would let the
world fall into darkness without trying to stop it!"

I'd been trying to work up a fight, but that sounded so much like the Yami I'd come to know that I
grinned, spoiling the mood. "I see you haven't lost your taste for self-righteous insults."

He eyed me as one might a feral animal that was being suspiciously docile.

"I am glad to see you also, Kaiba," he said sincerely. "I missed you."

I turned away to address Mahaado. I was here for business. I had an idea. I wanted to see if it was
practicable. Our goal was as clear as the goals in a video game. We had to find Set's base and destroy
it along with the leader of his forces. The only glitch was that no one seemed to know where they
were.

"Is there a limit to how far you can go and still be able to blink in and out?" I asked Mahaado. "You
had no trouble popping in when Yugi needed you, but you didn't greet us at the door."

"There is indeed a limit," Mahaado answered. "We can cover distances with serial jumps, as the
Holy Elf did when she met you near the portal between our worlds, but it is tiring. Only spellcasters
have this gift, and the energy it takes could weaken the defensive spells that keep our settlement safe
and undetected."

Yugi surprised me by asking, "What about when I called you that first time? We were far enough
away that those Necros Soldiers felt safe in attacking. Wasn't that out of your range?" I had to remind
myself that Yugi had been part of all those duels too. It shouldn't have been so easy to overlook the
duelist who had just beaten Yami in a fair fight… but it was.

"That was different," Mahaado replied. "We are still connected to the cards and must come when
summoned. The ability to call us at need is a unique gift, shared only by those of you who have lived
in the time of Pegasus' cards. It may be why Exodia believes that you are our best hope for victory."
As Mahaado spoke, a plan took shape in my mind. If we could find Set's lair (and I was still not pleased to find that my namesake seemed to be the resident troublemaker), we could fly there, then summon all the reinforcements we needed.

"Why is their encampment so hard to find?" Yugi asked. "It must be as big as this place."

"Just as our settlement is shielded from their scrying, so theirs is hidden from us."

"In other words, you can't use magic and you're helpless without it," I observed. "Pathetic. But what about your eyes? It's not invisible, is it? If we walked into their base camp, we'd see it, right?"

"Of course. But you are newcomers here. How do you expect to find it? The landscape changes at will."

"The scenery might change, but that doesn't mean shit if the coordinates remain the same. If we find it once, we can find it again." I said confidently.

"Do you think us so backwards and lazy that we have not looked? We have sent out foot and wing patrols, surveying every royal cubit of land at great labor and cost. It has availed us naught. Every time we have come close to narrowing the choices enough to locate his lair, Set's general has moved his base, forcing us to begin anew. Our only consolation is that he has been just as unsuccessful in discovering our settlement." Mahaado scowled. "Each time we have thought him trapped, all that has rewarded our efforts are the ruins he has left behind to taunt us."

"I bet moving an operation that big isn't something Set's general does lightly. If his place is anything like yours, it must take a lot of time and energy," I observed.

"Of course it does," Mahaado said brusquely.

"Good." I smiled.

"How do you propose to accomplish what we, with all our shadow powers, could not?" Mahaado asked skeptically.

I smirked. "It's time for you to meet some 21st century magic – it's called 'probability theory and triangulation.' If we can plot out where the attacks have taken place, assuming the range of their jumps is the same as yours…"

"It is," Maahado confirmed.

"Then we can triangulate the paths they would have had to travel to reach the confrontation sites, and determine an origin point for all the attacks. That's probably their base of operations. We can locate his headquarters before he's aware we're looking for it."

"Let's start with the attack on us," Yugi said, as Mahaado unrolled a map.

"The attack was south of here," I said, making a mark.

Maahado was getting interested in spite of himself. Luckily, he had been methodical enough to keep a log of the encounters he'd had with Set's forces. I could tell at a glance it wouldn't be enough data, but it was a start. I flipped through it. There was no point in pretending I couldn't read the hieroglyphics.

"I bet Set's castle is to the southeast," Yugi said.
I glared at him. What was he babbling about? He was probably barely passing high school math.

Yugi grinned back. "In case you didn't know, in fantasy books, the bad guy's castle is almost always to the southeast."

I growled. Yugi obviously read the same books Mokuba did. I didn't, at least not unless it was for business. But his assumption that I was ignorant (not to mention unprofessional) irritated me.

"I know the scenario. Did you think I did the special effects for 'The Hobbit' without reading the source material?"

"That's right! I heard you'd been with the film crew in New Zealand. So what did you think of it?"

"The dragon was beautiful. I liked watching it destroy the town."

"A dragon destroyed a town, and you approve of this atrocity? Can you not recognize evil when you see it?" Mahaado yelled.

I could have said that it was just an imaginary dragon and an imaginary town in an imaginary world … but this hardly seemed the place for that particular observation. Besides, Mahaado had pissed me off with his unthinking sureties, so I said, "Good and evil are not defined by the level of chaos or even damage they bring. A fire rippling through a forest is destructive, but there is no evil within its flames, and they have their own terrible beauty. Growth and change are the fire's offspring. Nothing, not even this world, can remain in stasis forever."

"That is Set's creed."

"I don't believe in Set, any more than in the rest of your gods."

"In your godless time then, is there nothing you hold sacred? Nothing you would define as evil?"

"The right of everyone to forge their own destiny – if they have the strength to do so – that is sacred and inviolable. And anything that threatens that, whether it's a human or a not-so-human tyrant – or an unthinking devotion to some illusion of destiny, is evil. I'll gladly fight your war. I've been fighting it my whole life. Do not expect me to do so for your reasons."

Mahaado nodded and drifted away again. Yami raised his hand in the same salute I had given him as I had flown off from the ruins of Alcatraz, as I had reminded him that the road to our future lay open. My eyes narrowed at the sight. Yami smiled back. I turned back to the task in front of me. If we were to fight Set, first we had to find him.

MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE

I always worried I'd have nothing to say to a girl… or that I'd have to listen to her giggle about stuff I didn't get. But Mana talked just the right amount, and what she said usually made sense.

"Mahaado has never stopped missing the world he knew… the life he had. But I don't really remember it. My life is here, in this world. I can't imagine living in a place where you couldn't change the seasons, or the setting, or the color of your hair." She laughed and went from blonde to brown to blonde again.

"You never did say which color you preferred…" She pouted.

(Wow, a girl was teasing me!)
"And I'm not going to," I answered. "I know a trap card when I see one. Besides, this way I can be mysterious. You have to guess."

And I was teasing back! I couldn't believe how much fun this was.

Then Mana punched me and we ended up chasing each other around the fountain. It had been an ornamental pool when we had first met, now it was a European style fountain, complete with mermaids and fish shooting water out of their mouths. In one corner, a little stone cupid was peeing on a jade frog.

I caught her. It wasn't much of a contest. I was a lot faster. Somehow we ended up sitting the fountain's lip. My arm was around her shoulders and she was leaning on me.

"Why do you do that?" I asked. "Bring in stuff from other worlds?" It gave the place an odd patchwork look, but it was cool.

"I like visiting other places. I like playing with this one. Isn't it pretty?" she asked pointing to the fountain.

"It's my favorite place here. Can anyone do this?" I asked.

"Pretty much. It's easier if you're a spellcaster… or a priest. Mahaado's both," she said proudly.

"What can he do?"

"Anything!" she said, as though I was putting him down. (Well, I was, but only in my thoughts.)

"He doesn't though," she complained. "Mostly he just undoes my creations. He has no sense of style!"

She had just added a bunch of live rainbow colored fish to the fountain. I saw her point.

"Seto didn't do much either, when he was here," she added. "It was one of the few things they had in common. On the rare occasions he noticed me, he'd say, 'Changing something for aesthetic rather than functional reasons is a waste of time and effort. Focus a little more, not on how something looks, but on how it works.'"

"Seto?" I asked, realizing with a squirmy feeling in my stomach, that however much that sounded like my brother describing a duel disk, Mana could only be referring to that weird past life version of Nisama that Isis had kept going on about.

"The High Priest," she confirmed.

"Where is he?" I asked, wondering why I hadn't seen him.

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't really understand time. He disappeared a while ago. Maybe he became your brother. No one ever tells me anything."

"Did you ever try hiding behind things, or cracking the door just a little bit so you could hear better?"

"Yeah. But I keep getting caught. It's really embarrassing."

"Well, if you ever want anyone spied on – just tell me. I'm real good at it!"

We smiled at each other and sat by the fountain a bit more. We'd pretty much run out of things to say, but it was nice not needing to talk. I'd always been afraid I'd be bad at being with a girl, and I
KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

I'd gone as far as I could with Mahaado's log, but as expected, I needed more data. Mahaado was out collecting it from his fellow cards. There wasn't anything I could do at the moment, so I collected Mokuba (who was waiting for me by that weird fountain that never seemed to stay the same for two hours in a row) and headed home.

It was late, now. Mokuba was asleep. It was that time of the night when stray thoughts chase each other through your mind and you're too tired to shoo them away.

I seem to have been named for the Egyptian God of Evil. Given that I had spent my formative years designing bombs and missiles, I was in no position to quibble with the whole destroyer of worlds/agent of death label. But I couldn't help wondering if my parents had known. My given name formed no specific word in my native language. The first character referred to shoals and straits and treacherous water; the second meant person. However you looked at it, it was an ominous name to give a newborn.

They had been right on target with Mokuba's name as well. Wooden Horse. His very name made me grin. It reminded me of the reason I wanted to spend my life creating games. I wanted to see other kids wearing his smile.

Wooden Horse.

It was an appropriate name on all levels. For Mokuba, like the original wooden horse that Odysseus designed to sneak his soldiers past the walls of Troy, could be deceptive; his strength as well hidden as the Greek army.

I approved.

But thinking of one horse name led to another. I leaned against Kisara and sighed. This place was affecting me more than I wanted to admit. Bargaining with the Duel Monster who had helped Yami shatter my heart hadn't fazed me. (Hell, it had been fun.) But ever since my arrival here, the memories I thought I had pushed aside, kept creeping back. I wasn't sure why.

'Time is not as linear as your world would have it. It ebbs and flows differently here. Nor are Duel Monsters the only things to spring to new life. You can try to ignore your memories, but there are times when they will not be silenced.'

I caught myself before I grunted in acknowledgement. It was one thing to hear voices. I was damned if I was going to answer them.

Kisara had heard my sigh.

"What are you thinking of?"

"Pegasus," I answered. "I knew from the first moment I saw those Blue Eyes White Dragons, that we belonged together. Pegasus used to tell me that. He came over every night, when I was working on that first Duel Chamber. He'd stand behind me and massage my shoulders."

"Don't bother," I told him.

"You have no idea, my boy, how much is riding on these shoulders. The least I can do is to ease them," he murmured back.
No one had ever done that. I liked it. I’d sit there working, hoping he’d go further, wishing my shirt wasn’t between us. He didn’t, but he did something almost as unexpected. He talked to me. It wasn’t his usual monologues. He’d ask questions. He sounded like he actually wanted to know the answers.

"You seem so sure of yourself, my boy. Indulge my curiosity. Why are you so certain you can bring my Duel Monsters to life?"

I looked at the Millennium Eye that matched the puzzle around Yugi Mutou's neck. It was a safe bet that if Pegasus was as intent as I on bringing Duel Monsters to life, he had met up with them, too.

"Some people believe in magic," I said. "I believe in myself."

"Nothing else?"

"Power," I paused then added, "Loyalty."

"It takes strength to hold to such an austere outlook at such a young age."

I shrugged. The rules I lived by were my own concern. But I couldn’t help boasting, "It’s all that I need."

Something in his glance made me look back at him, wondering how much he could see. He caught me at it.

"Does my eye bother you?" he asked.

I shrugged again.

"I can see it doesn’t. I have only one eye, but you are the one whose vision is shuttered. Do you ever see anything but the path you are carving step by step?"

"There is no other road than the one I am making; no other future than the one I will into being," I told him.

"So delightfully fierce. It's no wonder you want those Blue Eyes White Dragons."

"They’re the most powerful cards in the game."

"Is that how you think of them? As a tool?"

Pegasus was their creator. I couldn’t lie to him. Not about this.

"No. You asked me what I believe in? I believe in them. They’re free and proud. They can take anything anyone throws at them without flinching. No matter what happens, nothing can drag them down, no lesser mortals can chain them. They’re beautiful."

"Just like you," Pegasus said. His breath was warm on my ear. His hands were softly kneading my neck, right at the base of my skull. I leaned into them. "Never doubt it, my boy. I think the fire in your soul can warm even the dead to life. It is a match for anything, even for those mighty beasts. We will put it to the test one day."

I could say that I was indifferent to his praise, but what would be the point of lying? I fell back into silence.

"And now?" Kisara prompted, bringing me back to the present.
"Now I wonder… did Pegasus mean anything he said? Was any of it true? After Duelist's Kingdom, I always assumed it was just bullshit. But here we are, and… we were meant to be together, weren't we?" I couldn't help the note of anxiety that colored my voice.

Kisara nodded before I finished my sentence. "We were. Pegasus was a true artist. He could not lie – not in this. He could not draw any incarnation of me without including you in the frame."

"But it was a con from the beginning," I protested.

"It was also the truth."

"How could it be both?" I asked.

"When Yami told you that the demons you needed to face were not in your deck, but the anger and bitterness in your heart… when he told you that the road to your future lay open, that you would find a place where rivals and friends were one – did he lie?"

"I don't know," I said. "I wish I did."

"Then you know the questions you need to ask."

Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing the chapter, and listening patiently to me babble on about the (very) little I read about Egyptian measurements.

REVIEW NOTE: I reply to all signed reviews or reviews that have an email address directly. I reply to all unsigned reviews and post a summary of all replies on my LJ. The link is the first one on my Biopage. I generally post replies there when I update the next chapter.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Okay, I admit it: I'm a huge fan of Numb3rs on tv – and Charlie is, of course, my favorite character in a stand-out group. But it also occurred to me that there are differences in outlook between Mahaado and Kaiba that go beyond personality (because in many ways they have a lot of similarities) and have more to do with the fact that one is the product of an ancient culture, and the other a modern one. I think they have different beliefs and would use different strategies to deal with the problems they've been presented with, and I wanted to show that. I also wanted to show a contrast between Mahaado's attitude and Mana's. Where he is upholding (and perhaps clinging to) his traditions, she is excited about the future world she gets glimpses of.

Royal Cubit Note: I originally had Mahaado say they'd searched the area foot by foot, only to realize (thankfully before posting) that the most common Egyptian measurements were based on hand and arm length (oops, wrong body part!) The royal cubit is approximately 52.5 cm or 21 inches. In Egyptian terms it's equal to 7 palms or 28 fingers.

Pegasus Note: I've always been attracted to the idea that Kaiba might have been a bit infatuated with Pegasus. First he designed the Duel Monsters game, which seems to be one of the main things holding Kaiba together at that point in his life. Also, Pegasus might very well have appeared to Kaiba as this older, sophisticated man, who was completely in charge of his own destiny.

Mordor Note: In the Lord of the Rings, Sauron's realm, Mordor, is in the Southeast. I stuck in the 'almost always' because, although I can't imagine Yugi plowing through The Silmarillion, Morgoth's great fortress was in the North. And as there are other fantasy books out there (there are, right?) compass directions may vary.
In Honor of Hippasus

Chapter Notes

Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

CHAPTER 9: IN HONOR OF HIPPASUS

Numbers were the priests' domain, used for ordering their world – setting boundaries for the living, measuring embalming fluids for the dead, and needed to appease the ferryman who demanded a counting song as his price for taking the departed on their final voyage after meeting Osiris.

The notion that numbers are more, that they are a way to uncover the unseen laws of our physical world, is a modern one. As is the idea that there is nothing beyond our knowledge, if we can but find the right questions to ask… the belief that it is our curiosity rather than our faith that brings us closest to the gods, wherever they may reside. These concepts belong to Kaiba's world, not Mahaado's. In the end the number line is a line drawn in the sand, separating two worlds.

It is ironic that for all the darkness of his past, for all his brooding nature, the things crucial to Kaiba's heart: Mokuba, his dragons, and his holograms, are all made of light. For where ancient duel monsters were called from stone, the modern ones are shaped from light. It is another line in the sand, this one laser bright; and the original artist was not Yugi or Yami or even Kaiba (for all the game came to define them, and they, it) but Pegasus.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

Mahaado had come up with the necessary data. I was back at work, marking the coordinates of each incident involving Set's forces on the map: a red dot for attacks, a blue one for sightings. Each dot was marked with the number of enemies who had appeared, how long it had taken them to arrive, when the event had occurred, and whether there had been any spellcasters among them. I was trying to discern a pattern to the incidents that would lead me to a starting point as I worked.

"I don't see what you hope to gain from this," Maahado said.

"Well, considering you guys haven't gotten around to inventing the 'zero' I wouldn't expect you to," I answered, not looking up.

"We did well enough without it to reset the boundaries every year, after the annual flooding of the Nile."

"If that's all you think math is for – counting sheep and setting property lines…" I sneered.

'Numbers are the responsibility of the high priests,' said that voice in my head. Oddly enough, it was
telling me something I didn't remember knowing.

"We built the pyramids!" Mahaado yelled, incensed.

"That doesn't mean you understand the laws that govern them. You know that they stood for 3,000 years. Do you know why?"

"They stood because they are eternal. What other answer matters? What can you do with this 'zero' that we can not?"

"Multiply quickly and efficiently, for one thing."

"We have a calculating table for that. It was a gift from the gods."

"Not unless your gods were vacationing in Babylon or China, where it was invented."

"What's a calculating table?" Yugi asked.

"Another name for an abacus," I answered, looking up from the map long enough to sneer at Mahaado. "You're 2,500 years behind the times. The zero was born in Babylon, then reborn in India. It traveled to Arabia, and made its way to Europe, where the only people to realize its value were businessmen. They challenged a group of scholars and churchmen to see which was more powerful – the abacus or the zero."

"Which won?" Mahaado asked, curiously.

"We did of course. There is nothing more powerful than the human mind. Any gadget – from your pitiful abacus to a supercomputer is a mere toy compared to the mind that could invent it. All your faith does is blind you to that truth."

Mahaado glared at me. Like I cared.

Yugi's sudden laugh broke the tension. I had no idea if he found something funny, or if it was a strategic move. I'd noticed before that he had a pathological need to put people at ease.

"I'm kind of sorry the abacus lost," Yugi said. "Just think of how much more fun school would be if no one ever had to memorize the multiplication tables."

If he had been trying to lighten the atmosphere in the room, it worked. I turned back to the map, and Mahaado and the others eventually drifted away. Soon only Yami remained. He was sitting behind me. I could feel his eyes on my back.

"You don't have to stay," I said, without turning around. "I'm not the one who might suddenly disappear."

Yami sighed, but refused to take the bait.

"I'm not bored," he said. "I've never seen anyone think so actively."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I growled.

"It means that I like watching you work."

At Yami's words, I remembered another assignment, another room, another man staring at my back as I worked.
I was working on the schematics for the original duel chamber. Pegasus was sitting behind me, about where Yami was now. He was doodling while he watched me.

"Why do you always have to sit behind me?" I asked Pegasus irritably.

"I like watching you work," Pegasus replied. Finally he laid down his pen and came to look over my shoulder. He was smart enough to understand my diagrams, even if he couldn't create them himself. I was the only one who could make his visions live. And I was so obsessed with recreating the Duel Monsters that haunted my dreams, with forcing them to obey my commands that it never occurred to me Pegasus might have an obsession of his own – or that he might be chasing after a different ghost. Hindsight's a bitch that way.

"Such a bright boy," Pegasus murmured, as he began massaging my shoulders.

I grunted. That I was smart certainly wasn't a news flash. I'd heard about what a genius I was all through the orphanage… every time the staff shook their heads over the reverse miracle of my remaining unclaimed and unadopted. Even Gozaburo had paid grudging tribute to my brains; he had wanted them badly enough to accede to my demands. But all the praise had done was to make the word 'genius' meaningless to me – except as a reminder I had a weapon in my arsenal that most people didn't.

"I don't mean your obvious intelligence," Pegasus surprised me by saying, as if he could read the thoughts in my head. "I was referring to your brilliance – it's as if light and fire was somehow trapped within your being, just as it is with the Blue Eyes White Dragons."

I grunted again. The thought of those dragons ate away at me, but I wasn't about to say that, either.

"You haven't gotten them yet, my boy – but you will. They were never meant to be held in anyone's hands but yours."

His hands moved up to my neck, kneading the muscles. I usually hated to be touched, but Pegasus had an artist's hands.

"I like watching you work…"

I shook my head to clear it, but the words remained and I could no longer tell who was speaking them. I walked to the door, my steps purposeful – as if I had a destination beyond mere escape.

Outside, I took a deep breath of cool air. After having been swallowed by my own darkness, after needing Yami's unasked for help to break free, you'd think I'd hate even the transitory darkness of the night. But I didn't. I liked being enveloped by its cool, soft winds. I liked looking at the constellations shining above me, moving in their impossible to detect geometric patterns. There is always light within darkness, and the night sky reminded me.

And abandonment is not betrayal.

And there are always reasons, even if they're never enough.

I knew that. But Yami's leaving had made me doubt everything he'd said and done, had made me wonder if all the bitter lessons of my past were about to be proven true, now that I had finally learned to rejoice in their defeat.

I had come out here to be alone, but I wasn't surprised to find Yami by my side. Somehow we always wound up side by side. When had it started to feel natural? When had I started, despite everything, to trust it?
"I had a reason for leaving," Yami said as if finishing my thoughts. "I was needed here. I could feel it with every fiber of my being even though I couldn't explain, even though I didn't know why I was being called to this place. And it was confused with so many things… Yugi… my need to find my past…” He shook his head as if to clear it. "But I should never have left without trying to explain the inexplicable. I owed you that."

I remained silent, staring at the sky as if I could actually see the path of the stars.

"There was a reason," Yami repeated, then surprised me by adding, "but reasons are never enough, are they?"

I shrugged, but felt a little of my rage dissipate, as if Yami had played a diffusion card against it. For the first time, the silence that lay between us wasn't hopelessly contaminated by anger.

"Except for DOMA, and that one time at the Grand Prix, you haven't dueled. I never got the chance to ask why you stopped," Yami said.

Even Mokuba had never asked. I had probably trained him too well. It was strange. Except for Pegasus that time, and Kisara now, no one but Yami had ever asked me what I was thinking.

"I was saving my cards for a battle worthy of them." I laughed mirthlessly. "It seems I found one. I was right all along. This is no mere game. It never was."

"But you were wrong to take no joy in the playing of it, nonetheless," Yami replied.

I shrugged again.

"Kaiba, why did you follow me?" Yami asked, after a pause.

"Losing equals death," I quoted. "That was Gozaburo's equation, never yours. How could you have agreed with him in the end?"

"I didn't."

"You lost. You died."

"Kaiba, I was needed here. Why can't you accept that?"

"Because it's an evasion, not an answer. You shattered my heart once. Did you think I wouldn't recognize that was a vote of confidence that I could rebuild? At Alcatraz… all my careful strategies… my deck… and still I lost…"

"Your deck is too dependent on sacrifice."

"It is a strategy that has served me well," I pointed out.

"But it will not lead you to the true future you seek."

"Nor you," I said, turning over a trap card. "That's why I'm here. I told you at DOMA – I will repay my debts."

"You owe me nothing. Whatever future I had ended before we met. Kaiba, I have no future."

"Neither did I until Death-T. I was trapped in my past until you freed me to find my future. Now I ask that you show the same courage you demanded of me."
"As long as my heart is in the cards, that deck will never stop fighting… I remember you saying that to me when I faced Noa," Yami told me. "I remember how you looked saying it. I remember believing it with you. But Kaiba, I have been deaf to death's summons for 3,000 years. Isn't it time to accept the inevitable?"

"How do you know it's inevitable until you fight back?"

"I have not stopped fighting. And our next battle is already laid before us. But isn't there a time when the fighting must end?"

"Not if it means giving up," I answered.

Yami nodded, then stopped himself and asked, as if trying to puzzle it out, "But aren't there some things you must accept? Some battles that you must walk away from?"

I knew what he meant. I had fought Gozaburo beyond the grave. For the sake of my own sanity, I had had to walk away from that battle. And yet, leaving the field had left a bitter taste in my mouth. Part of me had never truly disengaged, and Yami knew it.

"No," I answered. "If I ever completely abandoned even my most self-destructive battles – something inside of me would break even more irrevocably than when you shattered my heart."

Yami nodded as if he understood. As if he agreed. He probably did. He was a fighter too, a true duelist. He had proven worthy of my trust in life – or so I had thought until his death. I remembered Kisara's words. Had Yami been lying to me all along? Or was it just that in his rush to find his name, he had forgotten, for one fatal instant, who he was?

"You were always the one to challenge me," Yami said, his voice low. "The one to make me feel like nothing was inevitable but the triumph of the human spirit. You have not lost that gift."

I stared at him, unsure of what to say.

"Even when I was but a shadow," Yami continued, "I felt alive in your presence. If I told you I missed that; if I told you I missed you, what would you say?"

"Do you regret it?" I asked, not knowing what answer I wanted. I've never believed in regrets. I wasn't sure I wanted Yami to feel any.

"There is a battle still that must be fought and won. I am needed here. That has not changed, and necessity has always been what drives us," Yami replied. "It has been bittersweet though, to realize just how much I had; just how much I lost. I would not have our friendship added to the count of things sacrificed."

I nodded, silently.

"Seeing you again, has been a blessing unlooked for," Yami added.

I looked down at him. We had moved closer to each other each time we had dueled, as if each battle had conspired to bring us to this point, where we now faced each other, no longer wanting to fight. Yami had said that there was a place where rivals and friends were one. Had it taken his death for us to find it?

We were standing so close now, much closer than we had ever stood in life. Close enough for me to see his tri-colored hair growing from his head like a living thing; denying the fact that its owner had chosen the opposite course, and that hair is dead matter anyway. Close enough for me to see the way
each individual hair on his eyebrows swept up to form a slash. Close enough for me to see the way his eyelashes cast half-moon shadows on his cheekbones in the starlight, every time he lowered his eyelids. Close enough for me to catch his scent…

Close enough for me to suddenly want to be closer still… to want to close this artificial gap between us…

Had I been angry at Yami for choosing death, or myself for wasting my chances in life? Or was it simpler? Was I just mad at him for leaving and the reasons didn't matter?

I drew in a breath, and took a step back, instead.

What I was feeling now was not anger, nor even loss. It was something more dangerous: desire. Was this the answer Kisara had sent me to find?

I turned abruptly and abandoned the field.

"Coward!" hissed the voice in my head. It had turned mocking, as all my voices eventually did. That didn't change the fact it was right.

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

It was only now, watching him walk away, that I realized throughout the duels, throughout the years, Kaiba had let down his guard enough to let me in. And I hadn't seen it. Kaiba had fooled me along with everyone else – or perhaps some impulse of self-preservation (since I couldn't even call my body my own) had kept me from peering too deeply beneath his façade. It had led me to leave him without a word… as if we had never been enemies, as if we had never been rivals, as if we had never been friends. As if I'd never wanted more.

I was no longer sure if I had come to this world in answer to a dire cry for help, or if I had been driven here by my own fears. All I had known was being a disembodied spirit. Being a person, having a body, had just never felt real to me. Had I turned to my past because my thoughts could not encompass the future?

Kaiba had seen me first and foremost as an opponent. But he had always seen me as a man, neither a ghost, nor a preordained pharaoh. Thinking of Mahaado's unthinking adoration, I wondered if Kaiba was the first to see me so; the first, besides Yugi, to want not my commands, but my thoughts.

Kaiba had come to find me. That had to mean something, probably more than he was aware of. I had loved Kaiba, fruitlessly, throughout two lifetimes. And tonight, I had seen a flicker of an answering desire in his eyes. That possibility tantalized me… and left me frustrated beyond enduring by the thought that, in the end, this was one more chance that would inevitably elude me.

I wasn't surprised when Yugi came outside to join me, as he always did when I was perturbed. It seemed that our bond could survive anything, even my death. But Yugi's presence reminded me: however gently he might express it, however much he would respect my decision, Yugi might very well consider my remaining in this world beyond the end of our mission to be an act of cowardice.

"Yami… Atemu, I mean…" Yugi said hesitantly.

"Don't," I said. "When you call me Atemu, I can feel my life with you vanishing before my eyes. I spent years searching for my true name. Tell me, aibou… did I find it or renounce it?"

Yugi shook his head helplessly. "I don't know."
"Once everyone had their place in life, and it never changed. An appointed path that no one questioned. Is it wrong to want that certainty?"

"That must have been simpler," Yugi said.

"If I truly believed, as the Black Magician does, then it would indeed be simpler. But I don't know what I believe anymore."

"He'd like it if you called him Mahaado." Yugi said.

"I should. He has been my loyal servant in every guise. But… to call him Mahaado feels like one more relinquishment of self. And yet he has earned the right to hear his name." I shook my head. The confusion I had carried within me ever since hearing Kaiba bargain with Exodia for my freedom swirled around me, as all encompassing as the Shadow Realm's mists where I had fought so often. "I came to this place. Once I would have said it was of my own accord. Now I'm not sure. If I belong here, why do I resist letting that other life go?"

"You followed Kaiba, tonight. Have you told him you're thinking things over?"

I shook my head. It was one thing to confess my doubts to Yugi. Another to do so in front of Kaiba.

"I find it impossible to speak of uncertainty to Kaiba, to expose my indecision to his scorn, as well as my own. Hesitancy is not truly in either of our natures, nor in the nature of our relationship, such as it is."

"Have you told him anything… about your past… you know, about how you both felt about each other? You're not his pharaoh anymore."

I shook my head again. "The old impediments have vanished, but new ones have arisen in their place."

"What if he feels the same way you do? Do you want to risk missing out on that, whatever happens?"

"What if he does feel the same? Should I open my heart only to teach him a deeper shade of loss, if I remain?" I shook my head. "I hurt Kaiba by leaving him without a word. I will not add insult to injury by referring to the nature of the wound. I will respect his silence with my own."

Yugi nodded. "I see your point. Don't worry. When you need them, the words will come."

As always, I was buoyed by Yugi's faith.

"I have missed you, aibou," I said.

Yugi nodded. "Same here."

We stood for a moment in companionable silence. Then I was surprised to see the Black Magician (no, Yugi was right, and I must learn to call him Mahaado) follow Yugi out into the courtyard.

"Can this version of Seto really do as he has claimed?" Mahaado asked.

Yugi answered for me. "Probably. As much as Kaiba boasts, he usually delivers. And except when he's bragging about how he's going to beat Yami and me, he doesn't overestimate himself."

"It is hard to believe," Mahaado said, "that someone who has renounced magic, could wield it nonetheless."
"I always though of math as a pain in the ass, not magic," Yugi muttered.

I was surprised to see Mahaado smile as he left us and walked back into the palace. Even he was susceptible to Yugi's warmth. As soon as he was out of sight, Mokuba appeared. I wondered if the timing was coincidental, or if the younger Kaiba had waited for him to leave.

"Where's Nisama?" Mokuba asked. I realized that I hadn't seen the boy all evening.

"Kaiba needed some air. He went for a walk. Where have you been?" I asked.

"Around," Mokuba answered, pawing the ground like a restive pony. "So how are things going?"

"Okay, I guess," Yugi said. I was reminded that the outcome of Kaiba's calculations would be a battle.

"I'm sorry you got dragged into this," I said to Mokuba.

"I didn't get dragged into anything. I'm not a kid. Nisama's never treated me like one, and I'm not going to take it from you, either. And I'm glad I came. I'm having a great time!" he said with unnecessary force.

His comment seemed odd to me, until I remembered that despite his boast, Mokuba was much younger than the rest of us. This all must have seemed like one of his brother's virtual reality games.

"Your brother should be able to narrow down the location pretty soon," Yugi continued.

"And he stopped working to go for a walk?" Mokuba asked incredulously.

"I think he needed a break…" Yugi's voice trailed off as he realized how bizarre his words sounded. "This has been hard on him," Yugi continued. "I mean Yami did the only thing he could…"

"Nisama knows that," Mokuba interrupted. "He just doesn't like it. He might have needed you to show him about friendship, but there's nothing you can tell him about loss that he doesn't already know."

"He needs to accept that Yami did what he thought was right."

"I bet you don't believe that yourself," Mokuba said to Yugi as if I wasn't there; as if I was truly a ghost. "And in case you haven't noticed, my brother's not big on acceptance."

"Then he still has a lot to learn about friendship," Yugi said.

"No argument there. The thing with Nisama is… he really is looking for another way to live. He's been doing it ever since… you know… Death-T…" Mokuba struggled, but managed to get the word out. Yugi and I both nodded. "And he really thought you and your friends had something, Yugi. He couldn't quite figure it out, and it drove him nuts. That's why, even though he didn't show it, he kept hanging around you guys. He wanted to understand. Nisama just isn't used to the idea people could care for each other – except me and him."

"Yugi has been my mentor as well," I said.

"I better go find him," Mokuba added. "He probably went to the fountain to look for me. But there's one thing you both have to understand. No matter what it looks like, Nisama came here out of friendship."

Yugi nodded, but Mokuba didn't leave. He turned to me instead. "You never cut him any slack,"
Mokuba said. "He liked that. You were there in Noa's World. You saw why he needed to destroy his past so badly, that he didn't care if he went down in flames along with it. Even I didn't know that he felt like that. And you didn't buy it for a second. You turned around and dared him to find a better way. He's doing that, now. He's trying."

"I know," I said. "Whatever happens, I'm touched by the gift he has given me, and honored that he considers me worthy of his challenge. If friendship indeed resides in the cards, his have proven true."

Mokuba nodded. "Maybe you should try letting him know that," he said as he left.

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*Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing the chapter, and getting Yami to the right degree of chattiness… not to mention listening to all kinds of rambles about ancient mathematicians and number systems.*

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:** I wasn't sure if you would see this on my LJ, so thank you, J: I can't believe I put the wrong army in the Trojan Horse! Also thanks to Desidera for reminding me that I had mixed the Roman and Greek names for the god of the underworld and his wife. I went with Hades and Persephone, because as Kaiba had learned this as almost a bit of trivia, I think he would have learned the Greek names.

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** The Egyptians were great practical mathematicians. They reset the boundaries every year after the annual flooding of the Nile, they build the pyramids, and the kept copious inventory lists. But most of the math historians I've researched seem to conclude that they were uninterested in theoretical math.

In contrast, the Greeks believed that math, particularly geometry, was a reflection of the perfection of the gods. In a total tangent, this led Pythagoras (remember the guy from the triangle) to execute Hippasus (the guy from the chapter title). Hippasus, depending on the version – because history that old, like fairy tales, comes in a variety of versions – was either the person who discovered irrational numbers, or the person who publicized them. (Irrational numbers are those pesky things that don’t end or repeat when divided - the square root of two and pi being the most familiar examples.) Anyway, this was considered to be blasphemy – because how could the supremely rational gods tolerate irrational numbers? So Hippasus was either thrown from a cliff into the sea, or taken on a boat and tossed overboard. I realize this has absolutely nothing to do with *The Newly Revised Book of the Dead* (except that Hippasus seems to have had a Kaibaesque stubbornness), but it's a great story, and I love the idea of Pythagoras as a cult figure leading a mob or murderous mathematicians.

Anyway, neither the Egyptians or the Greeks had a zero as part of their number system, which for some reason, I find fascinating. I got Kaiba's little history of math rant from a really cool book, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* by Charles Seife.

**Pegasus Note:** A few people asked about Pegasus after the last chapter, so I thought I'd talk about him a bit more. I guess it's appropriate that Pegasus managed to worm his way into this story, since he's the one responsible for creating Duel Monsters as a game.

I think Kaiba would have admired Pegasus, and wanted his attention/approval - after all he's the man who invented Duel Monsters and designed the BEWD. Also Pegasus had accomplished, at a fairly young age so many of the things Kaiba wanted for himself. I think there might have been an element of Kaiba wanting/needig a father figure in his attraction to Pegasus; I can see him wanting his attention in an almost childlike way. But I can also see, given Kaiba's age at the time, some infatuation mixed in there as well – although I can see it as an infatuation that would have almost
been more powerful because it was unexpressed and unacknowledged by either of them.

On Pegasus's side I think he had a vital interest in getting to know Kaiba, and getting Kaiba to trust him as far as possible - because he needed Kaiba's technology to 'restore' Cynthia – in fact he needed it as badly as Yugi's puzzle. There are also signs Pegasus has some success at getting to know Kaiba. He knows a lot about the Duel Disk for example – even though they are working on the proto-type Duel Chamber, and Kaiba was not planning on doing the Duel Disk as a joint project or sharing the technology. He's the only one who's not surprised when Kaiba shows up searching for Mokuba, which indicates he has an idea how important Mokuba is to Kaiba. So I think he might have gained more of Kaiba's trust than Kaiba was aware of. That may be why he shows some consciousness in the manga and the anime that what he did to Kaiba could count as a betrayal.

I was actually trying to say something about uncertainty through Kaiba's memories of him, which is a running theme in the story. Given that so much of what Pegasus had said was a lie, or at least said to influence or distract him, Kaiba didn't know if the positive things Pegasus said were also just a lie. In away that's a parallel to the things he's wondering now about all the things Yami said to him about himself and his future.
Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

CHAPTER 10: THE HIDDEN CASTLE

It's appropriate that fairy tales are about magic, because they practice a sleight of hand all their own. Take that spoiled brat of a princess in 'East of the Sun, West of the Moon.' She promised a frog a kiss for saving her father's life by retrieving his medicine, or (more selfishly) for finding her golden ball, when either tonic or toy fell into a well. Whatever the version, her pledged word meant nothing to her. For who would expect a princess to keep a promise made to a frog?

Instead, when the poor amphibian hopped into her castle, innocently certain that even royalty must prove true to their vows, she hurled him to splatter against her bedroom wall. She felt no remorse (or none worth mentioning) until she saw the lifeless form of a beautiful young prince lying at her feet. By breaking the body of the frog, she had restored the youth to his true shape – only to deliver him to the goblins who had put the hex on him in the first place, and now carted him off to eternal servitude in their castle (you guessed it) east of the sun and west of the moon. And so the forsworn princess trudged off to find the hidden castle, fulfill her vow, deliver her kiss, and finally claim her (somewhat undeserved) happy ending.

The moral is clear – and it's even one that Seto Kaiba would applaud: promises are meant to be kept whatever the cost – and dire consequences rightfully await the forsworn.

But is that truly the story the author is telling? For mixed in with that stern message is another, more comforting one. If fallibility, and even faithlessness, are woven into our nature, we have the saving grace of being able to learn from our mistakes. We can strive, as the princess did, to atone for our actions and their consequences – and if we are lucky, succeed in making amends. If the seeds of destruction are in our hands, so too is the ability to heal.

For all the harshness of the moral, the story is about second chances.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

I was back at the palace the next morning. I had a job to finish. I looked at the map, just to double check my conclusions one last time.

"There are three possibilities," I announced.

"I would not have believed it," Mahaado said, looking at the map. "You have done something that all of our magic… all of our faith, could not."
He probably thought that was a handsome admission.

"The calculations weren't that difficult," I answered. "You probably could have done them yourself, if you weren't so close-minded."

To my surprise, he didn't argue the point. "Perhaps. I certainly would never have thought that mere numbers could be used this way."

'The zero is truly an amazing creation. It encompasses everything from the void from which all life came, to the infinity of the gods who exist unseen around us.'

There was that voice again. I was getting to like it (when it wasn't calling me a coward.) This time, what it was saying was good enough to repeat. So I did, and smirked when Mahaado's eyes widened at my words.

"Eloquently expressed," he commented.

Since I wasn't about to tell him I was hearing voices, I turned back to the map. "Well, if you're done talking about irrelevancies, let's get back to the problem at hand. There are still three possibilities. I think we can discount the one closest to us. If it was truly a base, even you would have stumbled across it before. That leaves two choices that are equally likely. We need to find out if one is the true base of operations and the other an outpost, or if Set has split his forces."

I saw no need to mention the fact that the farthest site was directly to the southeast. I wasn't going to dignify Yugi's lucky guess by calling it a prediction – or admit that his ridiculous hunch might very well prove on target.

"The dragons could fly reconnaissance on your sites," Kisara offered. She usually waited outside, but she had known something was up, and had squeezed her bulk into Yami's audience hall. It was even bigger than it looked. And it wasn't like anyone was going to ask her to leave. She was even bigger than she looked, too.

Mahaado shook his head at her statement. "You could fly over the closest site. But the moment you appeared deeper into his territory, Set's general would be aware of your presence. It would tip our hand unnecessarily."

"Set's general?" I said. I was kind of disgruntled at not getting a crack at the big guy himself, god or not.

Mahaado stared at me. "Didn't you pay attention to Exodia's words? Set is no more here than Isis or Osiris or Horus. This is not the realm of the gods. It is their battlefield."

"Or their chessboard," I muttered.

"That's another reason why Exodia needed us four, isn't it? Because you're all familiar to Set's forces. I bet his spellcasters can track you, but not us," Yugi said. I wasn't surprised that he had gotten the point so quickly. I was getting used to the fact that he wasn't as dumb as he looked – or as weak.

Mahaado nodded. "You are correct. We are as familiar to Set's forces as his own general. We are all tied to this place, and his forces can sense and track that binding. They will feel our presence from the moment we leave our own domain. You are unfamiliar; even the pharaoh has not fully embraced his realm. One or two of you may be able to travel undetected."

"One or two?" I asked sharply.
"They were able to track the three of you once they picked up the Holy Elf's scent. Possibly the size of your party was enough of a disruption in and of itself. Yet the pharaoh arrived at the door unassailed. There is no safety in numbers."

I grunted. At least he was being logical for once.

"There is safety in friendship. Two need to go, so that they can help each other along the way, and make sure the information gets back," Yami said.

"So the only thing to decide is who's going with me," I said. Everyone stared at me. "The sooner we get this over with the better. And if we have to make adjustments to the map along the way, I'm the only one who can do it."

Besides, sitting around here was driving me crazy. Anything, even this ridiculous mission, had to be an improvement.

"You are not going alone," Kisara announced. "I will take you to see these locations."

"Great, and we can take bets on how long it'll take someone to get wind of your presence. Forget it," I said.

"I will come," she insisted.

"No. You will stay here and guard Mokuba. If you would help me, you will protect him."

She bent her neck. "I acquiesce," she said softly.

I was glad Mokuba was off exploring the town. I'd never left him before, except for that time when I was in a coma. Then again, I'd never had anyone I could trust with his well-being. But, I was sure Mokuba'd have something to say about remaining, and it wasn't a conversation I wanted to have in front of everyone.

Yami looked at Yugi.

Yugi nodded in return. I wondered if they could still read each other's minds, or whatever it was they did, because Yugi said. "It's okay, Yami. I've never stopped you from doing what you needed to do yet, and I never will."

"Thank you," Yami said. "This is what I was called here to do... the beginning of the battle I was called here to fight. I am sure of it. I will go with Kaiba."

"There is much to do here as well. By the time you return we will be ready for battle," Mahaado said. I could see his eyes light up at the thought of finally getting to meet his enemy head on.

"Now that that's been decided, I will go and consider who will be needed to fly patrols of the no man's land between Set's domain and our own. It is controlled by neither and both sides may travel and fight there without arousing suspicion. My dragons will check on this third location, and make sure that the borderlands through which you will travel are clear," Kisara said.

Yugi swallowed. "Your dragons will be in danger," he said.

Kisara drew herself up to her full height and looked down at him. "The ones I will send are sacrifice monsters. If they give their lives, they will have fulfilled their purpose. You must respect their nature."
The contrast between them was ludicrous, but Yugi didn't back down.

"I disagree," he said. "Sacrifice is something we might all have to do, but it's not our purpose in life. No one is born for no other reason than to die."

"Your words may be true for humans, but I am a dragon," Kisara said as she glided from the room. Yami said turning to me, "Just so long as you remember that not all dragons are made for sacrifice. When we leave together, I would have you return in one piece."

Did I say that my anger had dissipated a little? Maybe it had, but at Yami's words, at his show of concern, at his presumption in lecturing me about staying alive, my rage flared anew. I pushed aside last night's confused emotions. Anger was much cleaner. I breathed it in with relief; let it clear my head of all useless thoughts.

"Don't worry, unlike certain pharaohs I could name, I have every intention of staying alive," I retorted. "And I don't see what all the fuss is about, anyway. I hate to break it to you, but you're already dead."

"We will not sicken or age, unless we will it," Mahaado interrupted, as if he didn't realize this was between Yami and me. "But if we are slain in battle, then we must leave this world."

"Considering how many duels I've seen you in – and how many times you landed in the graveyard – if you were that easy to get rid of, this would be one big, empty world," I pointed out.

"Whether in this world or yours, a duel is different. When you duel, we are but agents of your will. The risks here, as in a shadow game, are assumed by the duelists themselves. But when we choose to hazard our lives – either in battle, or by dueling on our own behalf, then we assume the same danger as you – the risk of disappearing. For the pharaoh, as for you, the danger is even more acute, for he has no avatar, no card-self to fall back on. And those who depart this world do not return."

"You can't be deader than dead," I argued.

"But we do not feel dead. And what lies beyond this world is still the unknown… and that is always frightening to contemplate."

"Only if you're afraid of living," I sneered, turning to Yami. "Because every day that you're alive, you're facing the unknown. Only a coward would prefer death."

"I have taken your insults long enough, Kaiba!" Yami roared. "For all your boasts, have you ever once lived for yourself? What has your life been but a slow death?"

Despite my anger, I grinned. I had finally broken Yami's temper, snapped him back to my level, reminded him that, despite everything, he was still human enough to get spitting mad.

"And I'm tired of your self-righteous platitudes," I shot back. "Who are you to prattle on about friendship when you walked away without a backwards glance? Who are you to question my decisions when your own have been even worse?"

"At least my decisions were based on more than anger and hatred. At least I had more than despair pushing me to this course. After Death-T you were in a coma for months. You dare to call me a coward? Admit for once that you did not intend to return!"

"That was two fucking years ago! How can you talk about change, and then throw my failures in my face? This is why I hate the past. Because it follows me around like a stray dog that refuses to leave
no matter how hard I kick it."

We were both breathing heavily, as if we had been trading punches instead of insults. Predictably, Yami was the first to call a halt.

"You're right. That was unjust. I should not have lashed out at you through my own confusion and doubt."

Yami paused. I was glad. I didn't want him to apologize when every word he'd said was true. It seemed like I'd been trying to trade my life for Mokuba's safety forever, and the only thing I'd regretted about any of it was that it hadn't worked; that it had led to my almost killing him instead.

'You may not have succeeded in throwing your life away, but Mokuba is safe. Why isn't that enough?'

I didn't have an answer – for Yami or for the voice inside my own head. But I looked at Yami and found that my anger was gone. "It's okay. At least it proves you're human," I told him.

"After Death-T... what did make you decide to return?" Yami asked quietly.

"You know why. I wasn't ready to give up, and I still had obligations to the living. I just needed reminding. You called to me. I heard you. I was trying to do the same for you. Pretty stupid of me."

"No," Yami answered, "It was brave to come so far for a friend."

"I refused to believe I had wasted my respect on a coward or a cheat."

"You know you did not. We are needed here, and that must take precedence over everything."

"Always," I agreed. "Any freedom we win for ourselves is carved out against necessity's constraints. But life imposes enough bonds on us, without our adding to their weight. What will you do when your obligations are complete, Yami? Will you simply look for new chains?"

"I could ask the same of you," he said.

I refused to break eye contact, even though, once again, I had no answer to give him. I'd been trying to find a true future, but I couldn't pretend I'd gotten there – or that I even knew if I was finally on the right track. I wondered if the upcoming battle would provide an answer, as battles so often did.

The silence stretched between us. Finally, Yami shook his head and muttered, "Yugi was wrong. Sometimes the words simply will not come."

Although I agreed with the sentiment, I couldn't keep from snapping, "What are you babbling about now?"

I wasn't really angry anymore, but I was trying to keep the fight going, since it felt so familiar. I didn't expect Yami to understand that, so he surprised me by saying, quietly, "You are the one who's lived by viewing life as a battle, by being constantly ready to attack. Anger is your game Kaiba, not mine. Use it as your sanctuary, if you must. But do not entomb yourself within its walls. That would be as big a denial of life as the one you accuse me of."

"You lost any right to tell me what to do when you walked through that door," I returned.

"I never had the right to order your existence. Only the right to advise, to care, and to sometimes grieve. Those are the rights of a friend, and I will never relinquish them. Neither have you, or you
would not be here, standing before me, trying to entice me into a fight neither of us truly wants."

He was right, but agreeing suddenly felt like it would be as irrevocable a decision as the one that had brought him here. For once, I was the one who wanted to let the matter drop.

As if in answer to my silence, Yami came up to me, and said, much too quietly to be heard by anyone else, "Last night we stood so close. Closer than we had ever stood in the world outside. For the first time I saw the possibilities that had eluded me before; since I could not reach out to them with Yugi's hands. Whatever happens, I want you to know, you have always had my regard... you have always been worthy of it."

I had nothing to say to that, so I turned back to the map, and the task of refining our plan of action.

**MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE**

I came back to the palace to find Kisara guarding the front entrance.

"I have been waiting for you," she said.

"Why?" I asked, with a sick feeling that I'd been off with Mana when I should have been inside.

"Your brother has discovered two possible locations for Set's headquarters. We must send out scouts to determine which is the true seat of his power, so we can attack before he has the chance to elude us once again. It is important you understand. If we can defeat Set's general, his forces will scatter. Just as in a chess match, capturing the king will end the game.

"So if we beat the head boss in his castle, we win?"

"Not entirely. Not forever. Eventually, Set will regroup. But it would take several millennia for him to set up a new game."

"Close enough for me," I said. "When are we leaving?"

"Only two may travel undetected," Kisara said gently. "Your brother and the pharaoh."

"What?" I yelled.

"The smaller the number the more likely that they will avoid detection. All of us here are too familiar. Set's spellcasters would instantly detect our presence. The scouts we send must be someone from your world, not ours."

"Why not Nisama and me? We're a team. I can't let him go without me," I argued.

"If you go, all he will focus on is keeping you safe. He will not care for his mission – for you are his mission. Nor will he care for keeping himself alive."

I scowled because she was right. But I didn't want to let Nisama out of my sight for days in this strange place.

"He does not know how to be apart from you," Kisara said. "If you ask, he will not refuse you. But neither will he take the proper care to return."

"But we're a team," I repeated.

"Yes, but you are also two separate people. You must let Kaiba learn this. You both need to know that you can let each other out of your sight – without losing each other. To truly be together, you
must learn to be apart."

Nisama had a point about the people (and monsters) in this place. Except for Mana, most of the stuff they said made absolutely no sense. But I couldn't quite ignore Kisara's words, because I couldn't shrug away the feeling that she knew Nisama as well as me… or at least knew a different part of him. All those years with Gozaburo, she had been a big part of what had kept him sane, even though in the end, neither she nor I had been enough. Yami had been the one to bring him back, not me. I didn't like it… but maybe if I wanted Nisama to find himself, sending him off looking with Yami wasn't such a bad idea.

I grunted, since I didn't know what to say.

"I would never deny you the right to face death at his side. But although there are always risks, this task should not prove as perilous as you fear," Kisara continued. "I promise that if you face Set's general, you will do so together and share the same fate. Until then, let Kaiba undertake this journey. Do not insist on accompanying him."

"Why do you call him Kaiba, and not Seto?" I asked, knowing it was a stall. Kisara probably knew too, but she answered anyway.

"He is no longer of this time. He needs a modern name."

I grunted again, to show I was listening. Besides, it always worked for my brother.

"Mokuba, why did you come?" she asked. I wasn't sure if Kisara was starting a new topic or returning to the old one.

"You know why… to find Yami."

"I'm not asking why your brother is here. I'm asking for your reasons. Did you truly come here for Yami?"

"He's a great guy and all… but, no. I came because of Nisama. I can't really explain it… Nisama got so mad at Yami for doing all the stuff he does to himself, all the time, without ever thinking twice. I thought maybe if we came, somewhere along the way, he'd catch a clue."

I stopped, but it wasn't because I'd run out of things to say. I dug in the ground with the toe of my sneaker.

"And…" she prompted.

"People leave. That's what they do. But this time, with Yami… Nisama got so mad. It was the first time someone got through to him. And I didn't want him to just push it all down again, to pretend it didn't happen, that he didn't care. I thought… even if Yami doesn't come back, just this once… I'd like Nisama to get a chance to say good-bye."

"Then let your brother go on this journey. There is much that he and the pharaoh have left unsaid for far too long."

I snorted. "They look in a talking mood to you?"

She gave a matching snort, before saying, "Your brother is a creature of extremes. If he can find his way around his rage and hatred at the pharaoh for leaving, he will love the pharaoh, instead."

Yami was important to Nisama. That was such a singular fact in and of itself that I'd never though
about the 'whys' before. But love? I shook my head. I'd already figured out that Kisara's mind didn't work like a regular human's did – it made odd leaps. But this seemed like a stretch, even for her. I was about to argue the point, but Yugi had wandered out in time to hear her words. And he didn't look surprised.

"You think?" I asked.

"I know," he answered. "At least on Yami's part. And I don't think he's alone in this."

"Even if you're right," I said to Kisara, "What if Yami doesn't come back with us? How does talking to Yami help Nisama, then?"

Kisara didn't have shoulders exactly (well, not like mine), but she seemed to shrug, anyway. "Despite all our efforts, even spellcasters can not predict or control the future. This is an impasse that has stood through 3,000 years and two lifetimes. It must be cleared away before either can truly move on – in life or in death."

"If Yami stays here, my brother's going to be hurt."

"If the pharaoh leaves him again, Kaiba will be hurt – whether he acknowledges his pain or not, whether he admits to the reasons for its existence or not. Your brother has accepted great pain on your behalf. He deserves the chance to decide what he will risk on his own."

I couldn't think of an answer, so I turned to Yugi.

"She's got a point, you know," Yugi said.

"About Nisama?"

"And Yami."

"How come you're not going? I thought you and Yami were a team, too," I asked.

"If I had gone, instead of your brother, Yami would look to me, like he always does. But that has to stop. When we dueled, I sealed his Monster Reborn. Yami took that as a sign he was meant to die. The other night, he asked me what he should do. If I told him that to come back… he'd probably do it. But it's his life. He's the one who has to decide to live it. I can't do that for him. I want Yami to come back even more than you do, Mokuba. But Yami has to learn to make his own decisions. Otherwise he's just as trapped… otherwise he's just as dead, wherever he goes."

I grunted. It was better than admitting Yugi was right.

"But I can't tell Yami that he owes it to himself to live his own life, and make my words stick," Yugi continued. "Your brother's always been the one to challenge him; to push him beyond what he thought possible."

I couldn't argue with that, either. I was just the same as Yugi. At Death-T, I'd known Nisama was wrong – every step of the way. And I'd taken each step with him, anyway. I'd have killed Yugi and Jounouchi and Honda and Anzu, rather than tell Nisama he was wrong. We'd always been like that. Nisama had spent months checking out Gozaburo. I'd taken one look at him and known he was nuts. Sometimes I wondered: if I'd have told Nisama, would he have listened? But telling Nisama what to do had never been my job. I didn't say anything to Yugi. I couldn't, not about this, but Yugi answered me anyway.

"I love Yami, just like you love Kaiba, but neither of us are good at pushing them the way they need
to be pushed – the way they push each other. Sometimes you have to accept that you can't be everything – even for the people you love. It's hard, but sometimes you have to let them find their own way."

I nodded. I'd already admitted to myself that Kisara was right and I had to let Nisama go, but Yugi was making me feel better about the whole thing.

"You were right the other day," Yugi said. "They're friends, even if they don't always act like it or accept it. I'm going to trust to that."

"They have a mission," Kisara said. "That will ground them. It always has."

"Yeah," said Yugi. "There's a lot more at stake than even Yami's future – and he knew it all along. We're needed here… not just for this world, but for ours."

"I'm worried about what happens after we save the world," I said sourly.

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Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter and helping me get my compass headings in order.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: One of the things I really liked about Battle City was that while Yami, Yugi, Jounouchi and Kaiba were all, in their own ways, committed to stopping Malik and his Rare Hunters, Yami, Kaiba and Jounouchi all had their own personal quests: Yami was trying to win because he believed getting the three god cards was the key to recovering his memories, Kaiba believed that winning on the site of his adoptive father's weapons factory would enable him to defeat the anger and hatred in his heart and move into a true future, and Jounouchi wanted to prove to himself that he was a true duelist. I like the way these personal goals all existed within the framework of the larger story, and how they played off against each other. Anyway, presumptuous as it sounds, I wanted to try to do the same type of thing: that while Yami, Yugi, Kaiba and Mokuba have a collective mission to defeat Set, they all have their own personal journeys as well.
Monsters, Real and Magical

Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

CHAPTER 11: MONSTERS, REAL AND MAGICAL

A happy family, untouched by death, is the fairy tale of the fairy tale world, rarer than the unicorn in a universe where the scarcity of parents is the rule and not the exception. It makes sense, as most things do if you stop to think about them. For how is a hero or a heroine to triumph over adversity if nothing adverse ever happens? And what could be more adverse than death? For as Jung (the first person to discover one could spend a distinguished career talking of fairy tales as long as one remembered to term them 'archetypes') recognized, the young hero must be set adrift on the river of the collective unconscious, so that his mettle may be tested as if it was a stone in a gold-digger's sieve.

And yet, these heroes and heroines face only the illusion of friendlessness. For when human help fails, magic comes to the rescue. Where would Cinderella be without her fairy godmother? Or Snow White without the seven dwarves?

But what happens to those children for whom help – magical or otherwise – is late in coming? What if it arrives only after they have given up all hope of assistance and embarked on the task of rescuing themselves, unaided? Will they recognize either help or magic when it finally makes its belated appearance, or will they treat it like yet another unwanted intruder in a life that has already spiraled out of control?

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

Kisara had sent her dragons out. They weren't due back until the next evening. The wait felt as interminable as the 3,000 years I had spent in limbo. I was too restless to stay indoors, although I had no destination in mind as I left the palace. I met Mahaado in the courtyard. When he saw me, he assumed his Black Magician robes. Seeing the purple material against his pale skin reminded me of how faithful he had been, and for how long.

"You have the right to expect the return of your pharaoh in the form in which he left," I said.

"I am your vassal. That has not changed whether I am a card in your hand or a man kneeling in service before your feet. The only 'right' I seek is the right to fulfill my oath of loyalty." Mahaado was speaking, as was his habit, in terms of eternal truths. They were his truths. I wondered if that made them mine…

"The gods may have the wisdom of the ages," I told him gently. "But I do not." I would have added
that I was a man, not a god, but doing so would have dishonored Mahaado's beliefs. He was still in his Black Magician robes. The least I could do, I thought, was command him to be himself.

"Please, wear the garments you feel most comfortable in. You gave your life for me and our nation. I am in your debt," I said.

He bowed and when he arose, he was dressed as a member of my court, again.

"You are my pharaoh. If I had an unlimited number of lives, they would all belong to you."
Mahaado paused, then added, "Exodia gave you a choice. That does not mean you have to take it."

"Doing nothing is still a choice, even if one by omission," I said.

He bowed in acceptance of my answer and walked into the palace I had so recently quitted.

Today, the town was making me almost as restless as the palace, but I wandered through it nonetheless. I found myself approaching the pool or fountain in the middle of the town. Something about the way it kept changing drew me back to it. Today, even from a distance, I could see it was an ornamental pool. The carefully arranged rocks and shrubs gave it the look of the town garden back in Domino. I was willing to wager the pool would have golden carp swimming in it.

I had time on my hands… time to ponder what a strange thing time truly is. When I had first been reborn, I had deemed Yugi a child. And yet I had been younger than he when I had died. A little less than sixteen years of walking the earth, followed by three millennia of shadows, a half-life spent in a timeless limbo, and then two more reborn as a spirit. That was the tale of my years. It made me feel both ancient and barely born at the same time.

Kaiba too had that quality of being both very young and very old – although for different reasons. He had never asked me why, despite my threats, I had spared him at Death-T. I was glad. It had saved me from having to tell him I had looked into his heart and seen a child. I had hated the person he'd become by Death-T, but the boy that existed in some small part of his soul, the boy he had starved until he was almost as wraith-like as I… that child I would protect. In the end I had refused to hurt Kaiba beyond the wounds he had inflicted upon himself.

As though my thoughts had summoned him, I saw Kaiba as I approached the pool. His back was to me. He wasn't alone. He was standing before the assorted, familiar monsters that were the foundation of his deck. Only his dragons were missing. The last time I had seen Kaiba surrounded by his Duel Monsters like this had been at the penalty game I had imposed upon him at our first meeting. They had been about to kill him, then. Now they were listening to his words. If Kaiba was struck by the contrast, he didn't show it.

"This is the battle you have been waiting for – and we will fight it together," Kaiba was saying. He added softly, almost too quietly to be heard, "Is this why you have stayed by me through the years? Because you were counting on me to bring you to this place and time?"

There were more powerful monsters in Kaiba's deck, but his Battle Ox was the one who stepped forward.

"Do not insult us – or yourself. Can you really doubt our fealty to you?"

"You have truly been my faithful comrade throughout the years," Kaiba said. "No, I do not doubt your loyalty. I can only marvel at it."

The Battle Ox sank to the ground, his mighty axe laid across his bended knee. He bowed his head. Despite the many duels Kaiba had fought, I was seeing him in defense mode for the first time.
"I remember when we met," Kaiba said, still speaking in that same soft voice. "You were in my first pack of cards. My father's relatives didn't know I had saved the money from my last birthday for something special. The rest of the pack were all weak cards. They were useless to me. But you were everything I needed to find in myself; the two cardinal virtues: steadfastness, and the strength to hold to my promises. Eventually I scraped together a deck. I won cards from other kids, I saved any money that came my way. I managed to get the Mystic Horseman and the polymerization card needed to form the Rabid Horseman." Those two now joined the Battle Ox, kneeling, as horses and centaurs do, by bending the right foreleg and their proud heads. Kaiba reached out and stroked the Battle Ox's cheek. "But you were the first. If I am ever in danger of forgetting how close we are bonded, you are right to rebuke me."

Given their willingness to stand by his side, to lend their strength to his, I had long known Kaiba could not have claimed their devotion without offering an answering one in turn. Nor was it in his nature to be miserly when giving his loyalty. But even knowing that, seeing the depth of their bond was a revelation.

I thought of my own deck. I loved it as deeply. "Why then, am I now so uncomfortable with my own familiar monsters?" I murmured to myself.

"Do you not know the answer?" the Holy Elf asked softly as she shimmered to life before me.

"You were in the crowd… I saw you," I said, gesturing to the monsters surrounding Kaiba.

"At the moment you seem to have the greater need of me."

"Mahaado was right," I said, answering her question. "I have not fully embraced this world, and so I feel estranged, even from my cards, as if embracing you means forsaking Yugi and the life I have lived by his side. It seems I'm not quite ready to abandon that existence, even though I'm not ready to return to it, either." I smiled grimly. "Yugi was right as well. I can not live as much a wraith in this world as I was in the one outside. I must decide where I belong and hold to that life as tightly as I can. Maybe then I can embrace all my friends, past and present, with a heart that's all the stronger for having overcome its doubts. Anything less dishonors all of us. It is different for Kaiba," I continued. "Once again we are on opposite sides of the same coin. He has no doubts where he belongs. And he has spent his life making duel monsters come alive. This must seem like a dream come true to him, an opportunity to be seized." I smiled. "It is when he is with his monsters that he reminds me most of my High Priest. Seto had the same look on his face – half wonder, half pleasure at his own cleverness – as he called monsters from stone. And now I have his even more intense reincarnation in front of me, reminding me of just how powerful memories can be… and just how little I have lived."

The Holy Elf put her hand on my shoulder and said, "The future need not be a repetition of the past. It need not have the same ending."

I smiled as she left. It was the lesson I had tried to teach Kaiba.

I had remained in the shadows; Kaiba's back was still to me, his monsters, the Holy Elf notwithstanding, had remained focused on him alone. My presence had remained undetected. I started to retreat. I had not intended to witness Kaiba's meeting with his monsters, or to see a part of his soul that I had only glimpsed in the shattering of it. I had forfeited the right to look more closely into Kaiba's heart when I had walked away from him in the world outside.

Before I could take more than the first backward step, Kaiba's duel monsters bowed and vanished. Kaiba sank into a bench by the water; the dark red lacquer of the wood making a striking contrast with his black shirt and pants, with his long white duster. Instead of retreating, I stepped forward.
"I'm surprised to see you here," I said. I had noticed that unless he came for what he could define as business, Kaiba avoided the town and its human inhabitants.

"Kisara was meeting with the dragons." Kaiba's face lit up with reflected joy. For the first time I could believe that he was Yugi's age. "They were all there, filling the valley at the edge of the town – from the humblest to the proudest, from the Harpy Lady's overfed pet to Kisara herself. Kisara was in her Blue Eyes Ultimate form. I didn't know she could do that." His gentle smile looked out of place on his ordinarily fierce face as he added, "She said that I had taught her. They were all there – even the Curse of Dragon from your deck. However many times they may duel against her, they are also all akin. They all owe her at least some allegiance and will answer her summons. She gave them their missions and they flew off. The sky was full of wings and the air sounded of thunder. It was... beautiful."

He said that last word wonderingly, as though he had never used it before. I nodded. I hadn't seen them, but I'd heard the roar of their wings as they had passed over the palace.

"I'm waiting for Mokuba, now. He said something about wanting to go to town and see some friends." Kaiba shook his head. It was hard to say if he was puzzled that Mokuba had made friends in such a short time, or that he had taken the trouble in the first place.

I laughed. "He's a boy. He could probably find friends in a desert."

"I suppose he is a child, after a fashion," Kaiba said, as if that word was also unfamiliar.

"You have given him something precious, Kaiba. A childhood," I said seriously.

"Have I? I sometimes wonder. He would have become a killer to please me. Has he now become a child for the same reason?"

"How can you doubt such a thing? Are you so unfamiliar with happiness that you refuse to acknowledge it even when it smiles up at you?" I asked.

"Doubt is the essence of parenthood. The need to control the wild variables that could, in a heartbeat, deprive you of the most crucial thing in your life," he said quietly.

"Following destiny might be my delusion, but believing you can control the future is yours," I told him. "If there are times when I should fight, there are also times when you must learn to ebb and flow with the tide."

"It's not that simple," Kaiba said.

"Only because you refuse to have it so. You love to win, and yet you can not accept victory without first looking for a new battle to fight."

"Are you any different? Or is this the voice of experience I hear?" he asked sarcastically.

"It is easier to see your own flaws when someone else is wearing them," I admitted. "But that does not make my words any the less true."

"You manage to make hypocrisy sound noble. It's quite a talent." Kaiba snorted, but there was a note of amusement and even friendship in the sound.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

I collected Mokuba. Kisara joined us and we had headed home. It was late now. Mokuba was
sleeping. I was leaning against Kisara, staring at the sky as usual. Had I given Mokuba a childhood? It was a hard question to answer. It had certainly been a long shot from the beginning. Yami said that I had, but partial victory is a concept I've never agreed with.

"Or even understood," said that voice. I stopped myself from agreeing out loud, even as I wondered for the first time what would happen if I answered it.

In some ways the first real battle I had fought had proved to be a partial victory, which could explain my distaste for the whole concept. I had learned the lessons which were to guide the rest of my life, but at a cost which had almost proved total.

We had lived on sufferance in their house. Under the weight of everyone's expectations, and with a heavy financial incentive, my father's cousin had taken us in after the funeral. I never made the mistake of thinking that implied affection. These were the years that had welded Mokuba and I into a team that nothing, not even my own betrayal, could shatter.

I had expected to live in their house until I reached my majority and could provide for myself and Mokuba. I had no illusions that I would ever see the money our father had left us. Cynical as my thoughts were, I'd been naïve. I'd underestimated the amount of time it would take them to defraud us and strip our inheritance by almost ten years.

"The pittance your father left you has run out. Proud as you are, I don't think you'd be happy living as beggars in our household," she said to me. "Nor do I propose to allow it. I support the city orphanage with my taxes. It's time I got something in return. It is the proper place for the pair of you." She was the one talking. She was the blood relative to my father. Her husband stood behind her as if this had nothing to do with him. He was the nominal head of the family, but he was content to have her do his dirty work. As much as I hated her, my contempt for him surpassed it.

"You were quicker than I thought you'd be," I answered.

"Your father was a fool and a spendthrift. You have no one but him to blame for your situation."

"My father wasn't a spendthrift," I answered just as coldly. Given the circumstances, I couldn't disagree with her other accusation. Our present situation proved that he'd indeed been a fool.

She snorted. "He was irresponsible."

"Yeah. But he wasn't the one who stole our money," I said.

I knew this much about my father: he'd believed in taking care of his responsibilities. However little he'd shown it, we'd been his foremost obligation; our well-being, his first priority. I'd never doubted that, and I wasn't going to start now. He'd worked long hours, especially in the three years that had separated my mother's death from his. He had been diligent in discharging his responsibilities and had been promoted at work accordingly. I was sure he'd left us properly provided for.

But he'd also believed in family. The woman before me had been his cousin. Common sense could have told him that that mattered far less to her than to him. She and her husband had rarely been around during my mother's pregnancy, and they'd disappeared after the funeral. But technically, they were family, however little they acted it, and my father had looked no further before deciding to consign our future and inheritance to them. It was clear what had happened. My father's weakness was about to cost us dearly.

"The only stupid thing my father did," I added, "was believing that you'd look out for us." Expensive as this lesson was, I would profit from it. From here on out, I would trust no one but myself. In a way
it was a relief... I felt freer than I had at any time since coming into their house. I no longer had to pretend to be a child.

"You little brat," she snarled, reaching out to smack my face. For the first time, my hand came up to block her. "You just gave up the right to hit me," I told her.

"The orphanage said that it was unlikely anyone would want the two of you – especially since you're so old. I told them not to bother trying to keep you together – that you'd be better apart," she said spitefully.

"You think I won't win? You don't know shit. Mokuba's mine – and I'll take care of him just fine." I ran my hand over the Battle Ox in my shirt pocket.

"You?" she laughed. "You're just a spoiled brat. And your brother's not even five. He doesn't even understand what's going on," she sneered.

"He understands that we're a team. That's all either of us needs to know."

Maybe I had more in common with my father than I'd thought. Family honor had mattered to him. I knew better. 'Honor' was just another empty word. But family – in the shape of Mokuba – was everything.

And I was going to start out right. The first words out of my mouth after I told Mokuba that we were moving to the orphanage in the morning were a promise. "It'll be okay. I'll take care of you, always."

"I'm scared, Niichan," Mokuba said. He still called me 'Niichan,' back then. I couldn't remember when he had switched to 'Nisama,' most honored brother, or why.

"I promise, Mokuba," I answered.

He nodded, satisfied.

"I need you to promise me something in return," I said.

"Anything."

"Promise you'll do what I tell you. You can't ever let anyone see you can be hurt, Mokuba. Because if people know they can hurt you – they will."

"Why?"

"I don't know, Mokuba. That's just the way things are."

"They're our family. Why don't they want us?"

"They're not our family," I said fiercely. "Our family is the two of us. And that's all the family we need. They're just people whose house we stayed in for a while, just like we'll stay in the orphanage until I can get us another house. Don't worry, Mokuba, by the time I'm done, we'll be living in the biggest house in Domino. We'll have a big TV and videos games and everything!"

"I just want us to be together," he said tearfully.

I smiled grimly. "Don't worry, Mokuba," I repeated. "No one's ever taking anything that's mine again."

We had survived – thrived even – but the memory was still bitter, as if its poison would never fully
dissipate. The night felt colder.

I sensed the presence of the one Duel Monster I hadn't spoken to earlier in the day. He'd been there of course, but as was his habit, he'd skulked in the background, biding his time. As was my habit, I'd ignored his presence until I needed a weapon. He was waiting for me now. "It figures he'd show up here right on cue," I muttered to myself, as I stood up. I pressed my lips together to keep from saying anything else. Even to Kisara, I wasn't going to bad-mouth a member of my deck. "I'd better go see what he wants," I added as I started walking.

As if in answer, Kisara drew her tail tighter around Mokuba; her breath was stirring his hair. I turned from the sight to face my demon.

"Why are you here?" I asked when we were face to face.

"No words of praise or faithfulness for me?" He grinned.

"You are a weakling," I told Saggi.

"Am I? Or am I a mirror? I am the monster that exists to sacrifice himself endlessly in the pursuit of your goals and promises – whatever the means, whatever the cost. The monster whose life exists only to be staked, like the meaningless chip it is, in whatever game comes next."

"You describe yourself well," I said. Part of me hated Saggi for being the sacrifice I had made of him.

"I have no existence except as a sacrifice – and as the expression of your anger and determination to win at all costs. Are those things weaknesses or strengths?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've never known," I said, refusing to be less than honest, even with Saggi. Especially with Saggi.

"Neither do I," he answered. "The one thing I do know is that I am the last bitter card in your deck – and you will turn to me time and again at need."

"I have in the past, and I will in the future," I agreed. "In your own way, you have served me as faithfully as my dragons or my Battle Ox, and you are as much a part of my deck."

"I wondered if you would acknowledge that. You have grown, Seto Kaiba. I would that you had grown beyond your need of me."

'So do I,' that voice murmured. 'But some mistakes take more than years to undo.'

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Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter and for reminding me that even Kaiba was nine, once.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I really love the decks. Part of this is visual; I think the monsters are cool. But mostly it's that I love the way they reflect the characters, and the way the characters have different attitudes towards their decks. Yami and Yugi look on their decks as friends, and two of the most important cards in Yami's deck contain the spirits of people he knew as a pharaoh. This shows in their attitude when they have to sacrifice a monster. Both Yami and Yugi show a genuine regret, even when sacrificing a monster to call up the one that will win the duel for them - in fact the only time Yami doesn't is in the duel against Rafael when he's influenced when he's tricked by Rafael (and his own impatience and desire to win) into playing a card designed to bring out his evil side.
In contrast, Kaiba is considerably more unsentimental (duh!). He accepts that some monsters' purpose in his deck is to be used as a sacrifice. I think this mirrors the attitude I tried to show Kisara as having. It also mirrors his attitude towards himself: since he clearly views his own life as a sacrifice, it's not surprising he's equally unsparing of his monsters.

Kaiba's deepest relationship is with his Blue Eyes White Dragon. But he shows respect for his other cards, even though he uses them as tools of his will. He takes an almost childlike glee in the sheer over-the-top destructiveness of his Battle Ox and Rabid Horseman - at least if his maniacal laughter is anything to go by.

At the other end of the continuum, I find Saggi almost as interesting as the Blue Eyes White Dragon, though far less attractive. It is by far the weakest card in Kaiba's deck, and the only monster he has that's under 1500 attack points. Interestingly, he's also physically the weakest and least imposing of Kaiba's cards. He's only in Kaiba's deck at all as a means of spreading the Duel Monsters' equivalent of biochemical weapons. I find it strange that Kaiba, who almost worships strength, has Saggi as one of his key cards. I think Saggi ties into Kaiba's most negative view of himself - as the helpless child who designed weapons for Gozaburo. In that way I think Saggi is almost literally, his whipping boy.

**Age Note:** Making any guesses about the characters' ages always makes me nervous because it's really based on estimates - and everyone has a different one, that they believe in passionately. Here's how I came up with the ages for Yami: In the Memory World arc in the manga they say that the Millennium Items were created 15 years before that arc. Then you see a flashback of a baby Atemu being held up by his mother as Akunadin rides off. Atemu looks older than a newborn, but younger than a year. So I'm guessing he was almost, but not quite 16 when he died. Okay, let's fast forward to Domino. It's almost impossible to tell how long the story takes, since you have no idea if there's a gap between some of the arcs, or even if everything is happening on sequential dates. To make things more complicated I'm drawing on both the manga and the anime, so I'm starting from the beginning of the manga, but including all the filler arcs (mostly because they have a lot of Kaiba.) Anyway, I figure from the beginning of the manga to the end of Memory world, including the anime filler arcs, has to take at least two years - especially since a lot of stuff happens before Death-T, and Kaiba's in a coma for 6 months afterwards. So I'm guessing that puts Yami's amount of conscious existence at somewhere between 17 - 18. I like it that this matches the rest of the characters in age.
Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

CHAPTER 12: THE LA JINN, WITHIN

Where would fairy tale characters be without all-powerful and readily available magical help? Aladdin conjures up his genie as easily as Kaiba would draw La Jinn from his deck. One rub of the lamp and voila… an instant magical assistant – and in the Disney version, he even has Robin Williams' sense of humor.

And they accept this magical companionship so casually. I would run screaming into the night if a strange old lady popped into MY pumpkin patch. Cinderella doesn't even blink. And Aladdin barely pauses to breathe on his way to blurting out his first wish – so it's a safe bet that asking what's going on is even further down on his list of things-to-do-today.

But what happens when the voice you hear is coming from inside your own head? It's less showy than a genie, and even more readily available, but is it also easier to ignore? For who listens to their own idle thoughts, much less answers them?

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

Kisara's dragons weren't due back from their scouting mission until evening. It was odd, having an afternoon to myself, and nothing to fill it with. I ended up walking to the river. I hadn't been back since Kisara had taken me there to meet Yami. I needed to remind myself that this was real. That Yami was dead. That he was never coming back. That this was his choice.

When we had both been alive, Yami had accused me of denying the connection between us, even as it pulsed through our blood every time we saw each other… every time we dueled. He'd been right. And he'd been wrong. There was a connection. It hadn't been enough. That hurt, although knowing he'd been shaken off balance, knowing that he was confused and upset too, was balm in the wound.

I'd tried to help Yami the way he'd helped me, tried to shatter his prison as he had mine, tried to convince him living was braver than dying.. That hadn't been enough, either.

Was I, I wondered, the better man for facing the challenge Yami had refused, for being able to will myself back to life from the embrace of a cold and distant place? Or was I the weaker one since I'd failed to save him as he had saved me? Or was it simply that we had each accomplished the tasks we excelled at?

Seeing Yami should have convinced me he was dead. Instead it reminded me of how vibrantly alive
he was. How alive I had always felt in his presence.

And now, in the coming battle, Yami could die.

Again.

He could disappear in front of my eyes.

Again.

'What are you going to do, now that you know?'

"Nothing," I answered. "It's Yami's decision. It always was."

(Great. I had graduated from hearing voices to answering them.)

'That's not what I meant. Kaiba, why did you come here?'

"You're the voice in my head. You tell me," I growled.

"You came because you couldn't let him go, leaving so much unsaid and unacknowledged between you. It took seeing him here to make you realize that, didn't it?"

He wasn't just a voice in my head, now. I could see him. He was shadowy, but real enough to glare at. I threw a medium-sized stone through him, watched it skip on the water. It was the High Priest that Isis and the rest had kept going on about. I suppose I should have been shocked to see him, but I wasn't. After all, I'd been hearing his voice in my head for days now. It had sounded too much like me to be anyone else.

"Never mind me, why are you here?" I challenged. "What made you decide it was time to drop-in in person?"

"Do not deceive yourself that it is an easy task to assume even this insubstantial state, even briefly. Anyone less skilled at bringing shadows to life could not have done it," he boasted.

"So I'm a fucking genius, in any lifetime – for all the good it's ever done me. Why's it so difficult? No one else seems to have any trouble materializing."

"No one else has another version of themselves already walking the Earth. We can not both occupy the same time and space."

I was a bit disgruntled to find that that made sense.

"So how come I don't have a bunch of useless memories of some idiot past life?" I asked.

"You are my reincarnation, not my double. You have, for better or worse, your own memories."

"Now that you're here, what do you want?" I challenged him.

"Must I want something?"

"If you're some version of me, you must be drowning in all the things you've given up on wanting."

"I want what you want," he answered. "The whole time we were alive… I never told the pharaoh. I never even acknowledged it to myself. I fought by his side every day. I would have given my life for his, gladly. I had to watch him sacrifice his for mine, instead. And I never said a word. How could I?
He was my pharaoh. He was my God, and I was his High Priest. Even I'm not that arrogant."

"Was that all that stopped you?" I asked sarcastically.

His glare matched mine. "No! Didn't you hear me? He was my pharaoh. How could I accept being subordinate in everything? And he had the duty to marry and sire heirs. Could you accept being an after-thought in his life? I never said a word. It was only after death that I gave life to my feelings. But he has changed… and you are not his servant."

"Servant?" I snorted. "Not likely. But he's dead and I'm alive. I'd say that's just as big a divide. And in case you missed it, I've got a news flash for you: Yami chose to die. What does that tell you?"

"That you are two people who will always be driven by your promises and duties. But must they always drive you in opposite directions?"

"Sure seems that way."

"You now have a respite, Kaiba. A grace period between imperatives, a moment when all else is in stasis. Do not look to the future so hard that you bypass the present. There are always reasons to remain silent, but as I have learned, to my sorrow, in the end, reasons are never enough. I know all about silence. I would have given the pharaoh my life, but all I could do was to carve a stone tablet in his honor."

"I know. I saw it," I said, soberly.

"It's the reason our hands are not quite touching – so close and yet we could not cross that slight gap, bridge that last small space."

"That's your life, not mine."

"Not yet. It's my past. Do you want it to be your future as well? Any of us would have been proud to be reincarnated into your world – to go to the pharaoh's aid. But I was the one chosen. Even here, I could not rest, with this still unacknowledged between us. The gods were merciful. They gave me, or rather you, a second chance. But they do not give infinite chances." He was on target about being unable to maintain his form for long, because he was already starting to fade as he repeated, "The only question before you, Seto Kaiba, is: what will you do now that you know?"

MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE

I'd been looking for Nisama, but he wasn't in the palace. Then I'd gone to find Mana, but Kisara was the only one at the fountain. Somehow I'd ended up talking to her, instead.

"I'm not sure why he's doing this," I said, kicking at the ground.

"Aren't you?" Kisara asked.

"Maybe he's just happy to find an enemy he can fight," I answered.

Kisara snorted. She sounded a little like Nisama when she did that.

"Or maybe…" I added, "I'm not saying you were right about them, but maybe Nisama just wanted to be on the same side as Yami, one more time – and this is the only way he knows how to do it – by fighting next to him. But I've never really gotten why my brother always seems to be looking for a battle to throw himself into, anyway."
"You're brother is a warrior. All dragons are," Kisara said.

There really wasn't much I could say to that.

"Warriors live by testing themselves. It is how they see the world," she explained. "He excelled at many of your imaginary contests, did he not?"

"Online and virtual games? Yeah, he still has the top scores," I boasted.

"But the only game to enter his soul was the one where he found a rival to test himself against; a rival to match him."

It was weird. She really cared for my brother. And she got what made him tick – even if she did seem to think of him as some kind of undersized, wingless dragon. But in that case, I didn't get why she'd punked out on him the first time he'd squared off against Yugi…

"Kisara," I asked, "why did you desert Nisama that time?"

"I would never abandon him!"

"You did. That first shadow game Nisama played with Yami. You vanished in his hands. He told me. Nisama was holding himself together until then, kind of. When you left him, it all fell apart. You made him believe he wasn't worth shit. How could you do that to him if you cared all along?"

"I have always loved your brother. And I will guard him, whatever form he takes. But I can not be other than what I am… a dragon of light. I could not serve one who had delivered his soul into darkness. I was trying to teach Kaiba this, but he was too far gone. I could not reach him."

"Because of me."

"Yes. Everything he is… good and bad… is because of you. You have been his greatest test."

"His what?" I asked.

The freaky thing was that crazy as everything she was saying sounded, I could almost see Nisama nodding along with her.

"Regardless of the world in which he is placed, Seto has chosen, and will always choose a warrior's path, a dragon's path. Such a road requires that those who would walk it must face its challenges. But for the pharaoh, Kaiba would have failed. Death-T would have been the sarcophagus of his soul. In the end though, your brother was not found wanting. As a dragon, I could not serve anyone less."

"I guess I shouldn't blame you," I said. "I mean if it was anyone's fault, it was mine. You know… all I wanted to do, back then, back at Death-T, was to show Nisama he wasn't alone; that he could count on me for anything; that I was just as bad and as tough as he was. But that wasn't what Nisama needed. Maybe if I hadn't insisted on challenging Yugi… maybe if I'd just stayed his kid brother, he'd have remembered he was supposed to be my Nisama."

"Mokuba, do you love your brother as he is, or merely as the reflection of the person you wish him to be?"

"Nisama's the greatest – just the way he is!" I yelled.

"Bravely spoken," she said. "Then do not grieve for the part you have played in shaping his character. It is an honor to be a warrior's most vital test, even if he does not survive unscathed."
Kisara was like Nisama in this: she didn't sugar-coat things. That made me feel like I could trust her, just like I did him. I leaned forward and pressed my lips to the front of Kisara's snout. As I pulled back, the tip of her tongue flicked out and rasped lightly against my lips in return. I wanted to laugh. I was more than ready for my first kiss. I just hadn't expected it to be with a dragon.

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*Thanks to Bnomiko for betating this chapter.*

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** I can see where for the High Priest Seto, Atemu being the pharaoh would present an almost insurmountable obstacle to their becoming lovers. In the manga, Atemu is shown as receiving not just the loyalty, but the homage of his court as their divine ruler. He also would have had dynastic responsibilities to produce heirs. I could see Seto willing to have sex with him if it was simply a matter of obliging his ruler's whims, but I think admitting he felt desire despite the fact he was in a subservient position and the limitations on what their relationship could be like would have been difficult to impossible. In a way, the limitations Kaiba is facing might have been easier to accept.

**Mokuba:** Mokuba's love for Kaiba has always been mixed with his realization of how much his brother has given up for him. One thing I've always found interesting is that he seems to sort of straddle a line between loving his brother despite recognizing how damaged and flawed he is, loving his brother for the person he is, and yet wanting his brother to be the person he might have become if their lives had played out differently. So I think Kisara's point is a good one, if one from a dragon's point of view – that Mokuba shouldn't grieve over being part of what has made Kaiba into the person he is.

**Baseball:** On a totally random note, I was at the Baseball Hall of Fame, and they had an exhibit on games played with a bat and ball through history. And the earliest recorded instance (in the exhibit) of a bat and ball game was in (you guessed it) ancient Egypt. There was this reproduction of a bas relief of the pharaoh Thutmose III carrying a stick and ball to play Seker-hemat with Isis. Of course I promptly started laughing.
Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

CHAPTER 13: TERMS OF ENCHANTMENT

If there's one thing everyone knows, it's that whether it's Snow White or Sleeping Beauty – or even the Frog Prince – the only one way to break a spell is with a kiss. That's odd, if you think about it – because for most of us, the enchantment begins with a kiss as well...

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

Kisara's first scouts had returned, reporting that the Border Lands were clear. The rest were due back this evening. It was hard waiting through the day, knowing that I'd be heading out tomorrow morning, leaving Yugi to wave farewell as he watched me disappear.

Again.

When I had walked through that door, I had walked away from my friends and the only world I had truly known. I had followed unquestioningly, the road laid at my feet. It had seemed simple, inevitable. Destiny always does. Then Kaiba had arrived, bringing (as was his habit) chaos in his wake. Perhaps he'd been well named after all.

But Kaiba carried something else with him and within him – life, with all its complexities and uncertainties and turbulent passions. It was easy to feel adrift in such a chartless world. And now, Kaiba was challenging me, as he had always challenged me, to chart my own course through life's confusion, to embrace its struggle.

I had a mission here; I had two worlds to protect. But afterwards… was my place here as well?

The past is the cradle that nurtures us all, the teacher that guides us as we grow, the friend whom we must eventually lay to rest. But was I obliged to follow my past to the grave?

For Kaiba had arrived, as always, on the wings of the future. And the future is, in the end, the victor of us all; it is the true King of Games.

And now, Kaiba was challenging me, as he had always challenged me, to play a game with that king; to dare to wrest some measure of victory from even so august an opponent as life.

Is it any wonder I desired him?
Kaiba was my match. It was a mating that had remained, through 3,000 years and two lifetimes, unacknowledged and unconsummated. And yet, I wanted Kaiba, not just as an echo of our past, but for the life that flared through everything he did and was.

I was too restless to stay in the town. Without thought, I wandered towards the river. I hadn't been back since I'd met Yugi and Kaiba there when they'd first arrived. Had I said that my path was aimless? It was, but I felt like I had reached my destination when I saw Kaiba at the river's edge, staring into the water. He glanced over his shoulder as I approached, and pivoted on his heel. As he stalked towards me, his white sleeveless duster flared in the breeze created by his stride, contrasting with his black button down shirt and pants. He looked both modern and slightly ageless, as if no one era could hold him.

I wondered if he was coming over to rant some more. I thought of Duelist's Kingdom, of Alcatraz, of the team battles we had fought side by side… how often had I stood patiently by while Kaiba's anger broke over me like a wave hitting a rock?

Kaiba stood before me, hands clenched at his side, eyes stormy.

"Am I destined to wait another 3,000 years for your anger to subside?" I asked, and waited for the inevitable explosion. I looked up into his face at his unexpected silence.

"Kaiba?" I asked. He looked different. The anger that he had been carrying ever since I'd met him, had dissipated, a little. When I looked in his eyes, I could see an echo in their depths.

"Seto cared for you. Did you not know, or did you chose to ignore it?" he demanded.

"Seto?" I asked, confused.

"Your High Priest. Ever since I came here… no, ever since I met Kisara… I've heard a voice in my head. At first I didn't pay attention; I've learned that the voices in my head are usually best ignored. But this one was different. It really belonged to a 3,000 year old version of myself. I didn't ignore it. I listened to it instead."

"Why? After all you have said any time any of us mentioned the past… I would have thought you would have treated any reminder as an intrusion into your life," I asked, shocked.

Kaiba shook his head, impatiently. "It should feel that way, but it doesn't. This isn't an 'other me,'" he said, repeating Yugi's pet name for me. "It is me. I'm just hearing myself more clearly than usual. And the next time I saw you, I wanted to be able to do something besides fight."

"Seto and I were never lovers," I said, answering his original question. "I would have… but he never said a word."

"He couldn't speak. You were his pharaoh and destined to marry elsewhere. And he could not be your vassal, not in this, not even for you. No more than I. For all that I've never won a duel against you…"

"We are equals," I said, finishing his sentence. "I told you that once, and I meant every word. And I am a pharaoh no longer. I was once called Yami by default. It was the name I carried while waiting to learn my true one. And yet it has become more real to me than the one that I was given at my birth."

"Perhaps it's fitting that the names that life bestows upon us come to define us even more thoroughly than names that are mere accidents of birth," he answered.
"Perhaps," I agreed, suddenly tired. "Kaiba, why are you here? Whatever was between Seto and myself, happened 3,000 years ago. And you've never cared about the past, anyway."

"You're right," he said, looking more feral than usual. "It's not the past that concerns me, but the present; but this moment that is passing even as we speak. The waste isn't only death… it's the things we do – or don't do – in life. From the moment I saw you in this field that first time, all I've been able to do was yell. I don't want to waste any more time yelling. I want to hear you scream, instead."

I smiled. How like Kaiba to make an avowal of desire sound like a declaration of war.

But my smile was a fond one. For Kaiba had spoken, in however a halting and graceless fashion, of his feelings.

Kaiba stood for a moment, both of us slightly stunned by his words. I wondered if whatever tide of emotions had carried him here had ebbed, leaving him stranded in front of me. Then he said, "You're the one with all the memories. Do you realize that this impasse has stood for 3,000 years?"

I nodded.

"Pretty stupid of us to treat time so cavalierly – when we know that it is the one thing that is not inexhaustible… the one thing that will slip through our fingers, no matter how hard we try to grasp it," Kaiba said fiercely.

Kaiba had come farther than I would have thought possible… perhaps farther than I deserved. He had come all this way to find me. It was time for me to meet him, as far as I could. I could not offer him the future. But Kaiba had spoken only of the present. Yugi was right, after all. Now that I needed them, the words were there.

"I have been drawn to you ever since I saw you smile as that Blue Eyes White Dragon came to life in our first shadow game," I told him. "I have wanted you, without realizing why, ever since you stood so tall atop Pegasus' Tower and dared me to cut your throat with my cards. It wasn't until I was here, looking for Seto, realizing I was looking for your reflection as well, that I knew my own feelings. And I spoke of them as little as you. Once again, you have been more reckless and braver than I. We both know death too well to fail to grab at whatever life is left within us – even here."

It was not Kaiba's anger crashing against me now, but Kaiba himself… his mouth and hands making me acutely aware of all that I had given up on. I had offered Kaiba a second chance at Death-T. Now, I'd been granted the same gift, at least for the present.

And the present is everything.

Kaiba was impatiently pushing aside my garments. Goal-oriented as he was, he probably would have barely paused to unfasten his trousers. But I wanted no trappings between us – neither ancient nor modern; neither my robes nor his coat. If we were truly to seize a moment out of time, we needed to come to it as we were born.

I slipped out of my garments, let them fall to my feet. I heard the hiss of his breath. Then, Kaiba started shrugging out of his own clothes as quickly as possible, his lips coming down on mine as his coat fell to the floor to mingle with my robes.

There was no movement Kaiba could make that was not graceful… and yet there was nothing of grace in his movements now. They were awkward, forced… as if in his need to inhale me, he could not pause for breath. Desire might have been new to Kaiba, but he understood desperation very well. It was exhilarating. But I had learned how capricious memory could be, and I did not want this
moment to rush by. I knew I could not capture its fleeting beauty, and so I wanted to savor it to the fullest before it walked through a door of its own.

"Kaiba, we have all the time in this world," I gasped.

He looked at me and grinned. "Time is an illusion. Just like everything else." He ran his hand through my hair and his fingers caught on its tangles. "I only believe in what I can hold."

He lowered his head back to mine and kissed me, more slowly this time, but no less intensely… a man holding on to his impatience, letting it smolder. For a moment I hesitated, wondering if this was wise, or rather knowing it was not. Kaiba's body could so easily become a tether to tow me back to his world.

But he was so beautiful, both slender and strong, although I could catch only glimpses of him – the turn of his head as he kissed my neck, my chest, the flash of a shoulder as we moved to the ground.

Kaiba lifted his head from mine. The pale oval of his face was framed by his chestnut hair and the vivid blue of the sky above him, as we lay in the field. Was this really happening? We stared at each other, our bodies suddenly still, like the pause before an important card is drawn. And in truth, this felt like the continuation of every duel we had ever fought… of the moment when the duel was over and we were left staring at each other; sometimes talking, sometimes silent… two voyagers in a world we had created, in a world that held only us two… until the next moment when Yugi's friends would call out, shattering our world, reclaiming my aibou's attention; reminding me that whatever life, whatever world we had glimpsed was as insubstantial as I.

I'd been powerful. But I had never been free… except for those moments when I had seen myself reflected in the blue sky bounded by Kaiba's eyes.

This moment… when my hands moved to frame Kaiba's face, with my lips almost touching his, felt like the natural consequence of all those moments after all those duels, as if this followed them as dawn follows night… as if we had been building a foundation without realizing it, until the pyramid took shape before our eyes.

I pulled his face back to mine, brought my lips to his; breaking the unintentional stalemate we had created; starting the game clock ticking once more. I couldn't pretend that this was what Yugi had meant. But kissing Kaiba was the first thing I had ever done solely for my own happiness.

It felt timeless, as if I had done this before… completed every kiss, consummated every touch conjured up in 3,000 years of longing. The warmth of his body, the sweat-slicked feel of his skin were the only things tying me to this place, this moment. But how could something be so timeless and yet, so urgent? For this wasn't the timelessness of history but that of need and desire.

It was a world where nothing existed but sound and touch, nothing but the harshness of our breaths, the faint roughness of Kaiba's fingertips, the hardness of the body that was grinding against mine. It was a world where time was measured by the way my heartbeat quickened in response to his, the way our bodies began moving in tune, counting out their own rhythm.

Then the world started speeding by, moving dizzyingly fast now, as if Kaiba's impatience had transferred itself to me, like the thin sheen of sweat flowing between our bodies. Now, I was the one clutching him to me, biting his neck and chest as if to deny the impermanence we had just agreed to, as if to leave a mark in this unmarked time.

The grass was tickling the backs of my legs, pebbles were rasping against my skin through the tangle of clothes cushioning my back. They felt blessedly solid in this suddenly dreamlike place, as real as
Kaiba's hands, as real as Kaiba's tongue, as real as Kaiba's body finally joining with mine.

This wasn't, this couldn't be real. Even something as familiar as the sky was suddenly strange when viewed over Kaiba's shoulder. How could my body have disappeared, or once again lost its boundaries, when all I was aware of was how Kaiba was making it feel… how the blood was rushing through it, how it ached in a way that felt so good I never wanted it to stop, until suddenly I found something better, something that had my mouth opening wordlessly? How could I be consumed, obsessed with matching Kaiba, with pushing back in time to each fierce thrust as if this was some new form of dueling, as if my world had shrunk to the meeting of our bodies? And how could I be falling when I was already on the ground?

This hunger, this rush of sensation, this grabbing for more even in the moment of satiety – was this the part of life that had eluded me in life? It was as if I could claim the future by being claimed in turn… as if I could just let it take me where it would. It was an alchemy beyond any spellcaster's talent… that we could be so joined and yet so free.

But even moments out of time do not last forever. Eventually we lay there, sated, feeling that odd sense of completeness slip away. And yet it had happened. It had been tangible. I could still feel him inside of me, could still taste him on my lips. It had been as real as the moment that followed… when we looked at each other, unsure of what to say. As real as the moment when we dressed, awkwardly and in silence, our hands occasionally touching like a reminder or a promise. As real as the moment when we parted – when I returned to the palace as Kaiba headed for his aerie.

It had been as real as the moment when Kaiba turned to me to say, "I'll see you in the morning."

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Thanks to Bnomiko for keeping me from getting tangled in my own sentences, and reminding me, however tactfully, that a love-making scene is supposed to be at least a little sexy.

REVIEW NOTE: I reply to all signed reviews or reviews that have an email address directly. I reply to all unsigned reviews and post a summary of all replies on my LJ. The link is the first one on my Biopage. I generally post replies there when I update the next chapter.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: I'm take note of which chapter ends up being the thirteenth, and this one strikes me as an odd one.

I think writing love-making scenes always make me the most nervous, because I tend, in writing, to see sex as a metaphor as well as a verb. So I want the scenes to make some sort of sense in terms of where the characters are, and even in terms of the sort of themes of the story, while still being sexy. I guess that's a lot of responsibility to put on a chapter…

One thing that's always struck me at the end of Kaiba and Yami's duels, particularly Alcatraz is the way Yami would stare at Kaiba, then looked shocked whenever Yugi's friends call out to him – which always signaled the switch back from Yami to Yugi. But it really looks like Yami had almost forgotten where he was and who he was, as if he was so caught up in the duel that nothing outside of it existed. So I was trying to recreate that sense here.

Another thing that struck me is that although a lot of the later parts of Yugioh are about Yami's search for his name, 'Kaiba' isn't the name Seto was born with either.
Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's a poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

MATH NOTE: A prime number is a number that has only two divisors – itself and the number 1. For example, 3 is a prime number because 3 can be divided only by 3 and 1. A square number is a number that can be written as the product of a number times itself. For example 4 is a square number because \(2 \times 2 = 4\). This actually becomes relevant later in the chapter, which is a bit frightening.

CHAPTER 14: BIRDS OF A FEATHER...

There's a reason fairy tales end with a kiss. Kurt Vonnegut once said that it's perilous to include romance in a story – for once a boy and a girl meet (or, by extension, a boy and a boy) all anyone cares about is if they're going to kiss – and if they do, it's a happy ending – even if the world's about to explode.

I suppose he's right. And it is a fitting warning to anyone foolhardy enough to try to combine romance and adventure in the same story. On the other hand, even after the first kiss, people – even fictional people – often find that they still have a lot of life left to muddle through.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

Anyone who expects sex to change anything (much less to solve anything) is a fool.

It only feels earth-shattering.

I wasn't in favor of having feelings, but once mine had been shoved into my face, I wasn't about to hide from them either. Like I told Yami, I've never backed down from a challenge yet, and I wasn't going to start now – even if I had no idea where going forward would lead.

I knew the mechanics of sex well enough, though it had always seemed to me to be a waste of time. There was nothing anyone could do for me that I couldn't do for myself just as efficiently. And the one time, I'd wondered if adding another person might enhance the process, the man I'd resisted imagining as more than my business partner had been much more interested in stringing me along. My fantasies had remained just that, a longing that had been all the sharper because it remained unconsummated and almost unacknowledged. Pegasus's strategy had been as flawless in this as in all his duels. He hadn't needed his Millennium Eye to tell what was on my mind, and he'd obviously decided that wanting him would prove more distracting than having him. It had been an expensive but valuable lesson. Desire was just as much of an illusion as the holograms we were designing.
together.

Until today.

Yami had said that I still had the ability to challenge him. Well, in return, he had kept the power to confound me, to make me question every assumption that life had ground into me. He was dead, and here he was making me believe in life's endless possibilities all over again.

When Seto had vanished after our talk by the river, he had left me with the might-have-beens that had eaten him alive for 3,000 years, with all the regrets that had turned him into a ghost. Then I had glanced over my shoulder and seen Yami – and all I could think was that I wasn't going to let this opportunity pass by without at least trying to seize it.

I don't know what I'd expected… maybe nothing but the relief of laying my cards on the table, deliberately, defiantly face up. The one thing I'm sure of is that despite everything Seto had said, I hadn't expected Yami to want me, I hadn't expected to hear him say that he thought I was brave.

Yami had looked so exotically alien – his skin sun-kissed, the blond streaks in his hair a shade lighter, his arms, ankles and forehead chased with gold. His very clothes were a reminder of how unfamiliar he'd become, how far away he'd moved from all that I'd known of him.

Then, slowly, deliberately, he'd stripped himself of his golden ornaments. His garments, the trappings of an ancient world, had fallen to his feet – and he was, once again, the man I'd come to know – the man I'd come, against my better judgment, to trust; the man I'd come, against all expectations, to desire.

Naked, I could see how finely tuned his body was; how strong it was, despite its apparent slightness – and I've always admired strength, in whatever form it takes.

I'd wanted to cover that mouth with my own, to cover that body with my own. All I could think about was fucking him and getting it over with as quickly as possible. But Yami was right. He told me to slow down, and once I did, I realized I didn't want this moment to rush by before I could capture it. I'd kissed him as slowly as I could, as if I could memorize the nuances of his skin, record each choked moan, as if I could log every touch into memory and save it forever. Just as exactly, I recorded my own sensations, the silken flow of skin on skin, the exultation of finally sinking into him.

I'd never imagined that my life would have a moment like this in it. Nothing had prepared me for the feel of Yami's body against mine, the feel of Yami's body under mine, the sound of Yami's cries in my ears. It was as if, against all odds, blind rage had led me to a consummation I hadn't realized I was searching for. The Holy Elf had been right, at least in this: there is a world of difference between seeking and finding.

I hadn't been aware of Seto at the time. Then again, I hadn't been looking for him, or thinking of anything but how good it had felt. But I was sure he'd been at the party. I searched my mind for him.

"Was it good for you?" I asked with deliberate cruelty, although I'm not sure why I felt the need to be cruel. Seto hadn't pushed me anywhere I wasn't willing to go, and I certainly had no cause to complain about the results. Anyway, for once my attempt at sarcasm fell flat.

'It is a desire that has been 3,000 years in the fulfilling,' he replied, seriously. 'Even without a body… even through this filtered experience… it was exquisite.'

It had been indeed.
The satisfaction of being with Yami had been more than physical. But nothing had changed, and I knew it. I was still alive and determined to stay that way, whatever battles lay ahead. Yami was dead, (by his choice) – and that wasn't likely to change either. In a way, it was business as usual.

This affair (or whatever it was) came with its expiration date already stamped. That was okay. Everything does. Most people prefer to ignore that little detail. I took comfort in it. At least this time, I knew the score up front. Permanence is another thing that only fools believe in. When you think about it, death's like a trench coat – it goes with everything.

And it was never going to sucker punch me again.

I should have been prepared for my first meeting with death. I should have known something was wrong. The information had all been there. It was supposed to be a party. The next-door neighbors were in attendance. So were my aunt and uncle. There was food on the table. But there was no music and everyone was talking in hushed voices, holding conversations that broke off as soon as I came near.

I was waiting for my new baby brother to come home. For three people to come through the door.

Three.

Three is a prime number and prime numbers are cool. They are what they are, you can't break them into smaller pieces. Our family had been a prime number, but when my parents carried my new baby brother through the door, we'd be a family of four. It wasn't a prime number, but at least we'd be a square number. That was pretty cool too. And if mom had another baby, our family would be a prime number again.

I'd really wanted a dog. Mom had said that a baby was better.

"Are you sure?" I asked her. I had my doubts. "Dogs are fun."

"I'm very sure," she answered, patting her belly. It was pretty enormous by now. "You'll see. When he gets a little older he'll be able to play with you."

"So would a puppy," I pointed out.

"You'll be able to play video games together. A puppy couldn't do that," she replied.

I nodded. That made sense. I wondered how long it'd take for him to be big enough to be fun.

Now I was waiting again. I was sick of waiting. I frowned at the room, at the not-quite party. I walked over to my neighbor. "When will Mom and Dad and Mokuba get home?" I asked, trying out my brother's name.

She swallowed, even though she hadn't been eating anything. "Wait 'til your Dad gets home," she said.

I was waiting. That was the problem. I was about to ask her again, when the door opened and my Dad walked in.

One person, not three.

His hands were full and he had a big bag I'd never seen before over his shoulder. I looked closer. That's when I noticed my new brother must be that lump hidden by the blanket in his arms.
Two people, not three.

Two is also a prime number, but it was the wrong one.

I took a step towards my dad. "Where's Mom?" I asked, my voice high-pitched in that suddenly silent room.

"She's gone," my father said quietly.

I stared at him stupidly. "Where'd she go? When's she coming back?"

"Never," my dad answered. "She's… dead." He hesitated on the last word.

I felt sick, like I'd just been punched in the stomach, real hard. Or like I was in an elevator and the cable had just snapped. Even worse than the nausea, the dizziness, I felt dumb, like I should have seen it coming.

It was logical. It should have been obvious. She'd been sick the whole time. But I'd been blindsided by my own stupid need to believe that everything would be the way it was supposed to be.

I'd looked at my dad, and the only thing I could think of to say was, "But she promised she'd be back in a few days. You promised everything would be okay."

"Grow up! This isn't one of your stupid video games," he yelled. "People die, and they don't come back to life, and no one can promise otherwise." For the first time I felt my father's hand across my face, rocking it with the force of his blow.

His mouth dropped open. He stared blankly as if, like me, he was trying to make sense of what had just happened.

"Seto…" he whispered, as if relearning the name he had given me. I don't know what he would have said next, because my next door neighbor came up to him, touched his arm awkwardly and slid the bag from his shoulder on to hers before taking the blanket, my brother still wrapped inside. I couldn't see my father's face, but I could hear him trying to catch his breath. His shoulders were shaking as he walked into my parents… no, into his bedroom and slammed the door.

My next-door neighbor came over to me, as my father left the room.

"Sit down, Seto. Come meet your brother," she said, leading me to a couch. I sat down and she put the blanket in my lap. "Sit still," she said. "Here, hold his head up with your arm like this…"

I looked up at the bedroom door, but it stayed stubbornly shut. I looked down at the bundle in my lap instead. With my free hand I pulled the blanket back. My new brother had managed to sleep through everything. I wondered if he was deaf. He had this red face, and black fluff on the top of his head. It stuck straight up. It looked funny. I grinned at him even though his eyes were shut. He was about the size of a puppy, but he was all curled up like a cat. I liked holding him. He was warm. I tightened my grip. As if in answer he snuggled into me, as if this was where he belonged and he knew it.

Looking back, I can't remember why I'd ever wanted a dog in the first place. It would have been just one more thing to lose along the way. But my mother had turned out to be accurate in her estimation of Mokuba's worth.

I was in Kisara's lair. Her dragons had returned from their scouting assignment. The way was clear. Yami and I would be leaving in the morning.
There was no way I was spending my last night with anyone but Mokuba. I looked at him. Here was another truth I couldn't walk away from: I had come all this way not for Mokuba, nor even for my promises – but for myself. And now I was going off on another hair-brained journey, without him this time (although there was no one I'd rather leave Mokuba with than Kisara.) Now that we were together, I didn't know what to say.

"Mokuba…" I started, for once having no idea what I was going to follow that up with.

Mokuba shrugged.

"After all the people who've died on us, I'm not surprised you finally decided to hunt one down and demand some answers," he said.

That was as good an explanation as any, I guess.

"Besides," Mokuba added, "This is the second time you've done something like this."

I looked at him, puzzled.

"I disappeared right in front of you at Duelists' Kingdom," he reminded me. "You followed."

That memory still had the power to make me shudder. I reached out a hand to touch Mokuba's shoulder, to reassure myself he was at my side. For a moment I wondered which was the illusion… was I holding Mokuba or was I still trapped in a playing card in Pegasus's hand? Mokuba crawled into my lap and hugged me tightly. He added a pinch for good measure. I pulled myself together enough to answer him.

"You weren't dead!" I insisted.

"I was gone. And you came after me."

"I didn't succeed," I muttered. In the end I hadn't been the one to bring Mokuba home.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Mokuba laughed.

I nodded. "And that's the most important thing to me… knowing that you're safe. Mokuba… tomorrow… I have to go," I said.

He nodded. "And you need me to be your little brother one more time. I won't let you down."

"You couldn't," I told him.

"Well, if that's settled, I thought of the perfect story," he said, sitting beside me once again.

I leaned back against Kisara. The truth was I liked listening to his voice as much as he liked mine. I suddenly realized that when Mokuba and I talked, I had no sense of the High Priest's presence. He never intruded when Mokuba told me stories, leaving me free to work out the answers on my own. In that, he reminded me of Yami, who'd always been ready enough to offer his high-handed advice, but had left me free to follow it (or not) in my own good time. Maybe being a spirit gave one a delicate sense of boundaries.

"Once upon a time this king and queen wanted a baby daughter," Mokuba began, reclaiming my thoughts. "So the queen went to this magic well. And the spirit of the well said that she would grant the queen's wish, but it would cost her everything she had. The queen went home and nine months later she had a baby daughter. They had 11 sons, already. The whole kingdom was happy, but then
the queen died three days later."

That part, at least, was familiar.

"The king got married again. Except nobody knew it, but the new queen was this evil witch."

I stifled a groan. Of course she was an evil witch. Didn't the plot ever change?

"When the girl turned 15, one morning she heard her stepmother saying this spell. This wind swept through the castle, and her brothers were gone. But the princess saw 11 swans flying off, and she knew they were her brothers. She set off to follow them, but they flew too fast for her. She lost track of them in this forest."

Well I certainly admired her priorities, even if I was contemptuous that she had failed this easily and this early in the story. Even I had put up a better fight.

"She met this bear, and asked him where her brothers were."

Why was she asking a bear anything? This random shit drove me crazy.

"He told her to go to this magic lake in the middle of the woods – and there she would get her answer…"

I couldn't help it. I groaned aloud.

"What's wrong, Nisama?"

"This is exactly why fairy tales piss me off!" I said. "Any self respecting bear would have eaten her for a snack. Instead he's helping her! It's ridiculous!"

"Everybody needs a little magical help every now and then – even if sometimes it's late in coming."

I didn't want to ask what he meant, so I nodded for him to continue.

"She got there just as the sun was setting, and the swans flew to the lake and turned into her brothers, but at dawn, they turned back to swans. After they flew off she asked the wind what she could do to save them. And the wind said that she had to knit them sweaters made of nettles – they're these really prickly plants…"

"I know what nettles are," I said, nettled myself.

"And the kicker is – she couldn't say a word, or laugh or cry – not even to her brothers the whole time, or the spell could never be broken."

Actually that sounded kind of peaceful.

"Her brothers took off, to fly around the world, because that was part of the deal. She kept knitting for years, living alone. Then one day a prince came to her island, and they fell in love at first sight. He asked her to marry him, and she nodded 'yes.' So they went back to his kingdom and were married. But his mother hated the princess. So when her son was away, she accused the girl of being a witch because she never talked and spent all her time knitting these shirts out of nettles. And everyone decided to burn her at the stake before the son got back. But just as they were taking her to the town square to kill her, her brothers flew overhead. She threw the shirts on them, and they turned back to princes, so everyone could see why she had done everything." He looked me straight in the eye and said, "Because no matter what you think, the reasons why people do things matter. And the
queen apologized and the prince came home at that moment, and they all lived happily ever after… well maybe except for the youngest brother."

"What happened to him?"

"Well with the trial and all, she didn't have time to finish the last sleeve, so instead of a left arm, he got stuck with a swan's wing."

"I like that part best," I said. And I did. After all life is never perfect, and everything has a price. I wondered if Mokuba was waiting for me to find the moral. Except for a vague thought that you were clearly better off relying on your family, rather than stray princes, no matter how good in bed they turned out to be, nothing was coming to mind.

"What about the princess?" Mokuba asked, "Did she succeed? Was she the hero?"

I used to play games with Mokuba. I'd give him a number sequence, and he'd have to find the pattern. This was the same, only with words. I wasn't sure how to answer Mokuba. When all was said and done, she hadn't won, not all the way. I knew better than to say that aloud, though.

"I guess it depends," I answered, instead. "To the mob, she's probably still a witch, and no one's going to tell them differently. She did use magic, and the 'whys' don't matter. And the prince's opinion doesn't count. He loves her."

"Shouldn't his opinion count extra then?"

I dodged the question. "And the brother forgives her because he always forgives her. Maybe he's a bit like the prince and the 'whys' are all that matter. Or maybe all he cares about is that the… princess… is his sister and he loves her," I said, not sure why it was so hard to remember that the main character was a girl. "Are you sure the princess is the younger sibling? It feels like she should be the older one."

'And male,' I thought, although I didn't say that aloud, either.

"No!" Mokuba said fiercely. "It's right the way it is."

I replayed the story in my head, wondering why he sounded so vehement. I thought about the princess with her tangled mane of hair covered in nettles. The younger sibling who carried on in silence for most of the story – but who wasn't afraid to ask the wind and stray bears for help… the one who kept trying to turn her older brother human again… who loved her brother with all her heart, despite knowing he was never coming all the way back, despite knowing that the spell could never be fully undone. My eyes widened.

Mokuba came into my lap, as though I had been the one telling him the story.

"I'm glad the brother thinks the princess is the hero," he said.

"I'm glad the brother thinks the princess is the hero," he said.

I smiled at him. "Of course she is. She looks at him with that damn swan's wing and thinks he's perfect. What more could any brother ask for? He's the luckiest guy in the story."

It was only later, as I was shifting a sleeping Mokuba into a more comfortable position, that my eye fell on my pack. The leather throng was back on the zipper. But Mokuba's hair was still in a pony-tail. I turned his head gently. He didn't wake up. In place of my leather strip, was a black suede tie, with obsidian beads at the ends. It was beautiful in its simplicity. It wasn't surprising I had missed it. It blended into his hair perfectly. I wouldn't have said that it was Mokuba's style, but I wouldn't have said washing his face regularly was either, and he'd been doing that for a while now. Two things
were obvious: some thought had gone into its creation, and it was not a present one gave to a child.

Nor was I surprised that Mokuba had a secret. Mokuba and I had always kept secrets from each other. At least this one seemed harmless.

That didn't mean I wasn't curious. I leaned against Kisara and watched Mokuba's sleeping face. Much as I had enjoyed his story, I would have preferred to have heard the one that lay behind the tie holding back his no longer unruly hair.

Like me, Kisara was still awake. There was something comfortable about sitting in the darkness with her.

"All these years... I've never left him, even for a day, except that time, after Death-T."

"You have never had someone you could trust to watch over him before," Kisara pointed out.

"I couldn't even trust myself," I said. "I don't blame Gozaburo for my failure. I knew what he was. I've never pretended different. And he was honest. He told me what to expect, right from the start. He even gave me a chance to back out, to go back to the orphanage with Mokuba and pretend that chess game had never happened. But I couldn't."

Kisara's sigh sounded like steam escaping from a tea kettle. Her breath ruffled my hair.

"If you knew how to back down you would not be here."

I laughed at that, wondering if she considered it a compliment. "True enough. I didn't mean to kill him though." It was the first time I'd ever admitted it. "I never thought about what he'd do if I won, if I actually took Kaiba Corporation away from him. All I thought about was winning."

"You didn't kill him."

"Didn't I? I knew he believed that the defeated deserve to die."

'Losing equals death.' It was a belief I struggled against and kept coming back to within myself, just as I had wanted to prove my worth to Gozaburo even as I had plotted to defeat him. And total as my victory had been, part of me had been disappointed in my mentor, and furious that he had chosen to die rather than continue the fight.

I couldn't have put any of this into words, but as though she could hear my thoughts, Kisara answered, "He chose to jump out that window. You can not carry the weight of that decision. It was his to make. You must learn to accept that."

"Isn't acceptance just a fancy word for giving up?" I asked.

"Not always. Sometimes it is not an abdication, but an acknowledgement that you can not fight on another's battlefield. The wisdom lies in discerning between the two."

"'Losing equals death.' That was his last lesson to me. It's the hardest one to let go of."

"If you truly believed that you would never have returned from Death-T. You would never have lived to hold my loyalty."

"Thank you for waiting for me..." I said. "For waiting until I was ready to be your partner, and Mokuba's brother again."

Once again, her breath ruffled my hair. "I will always wait. I will always be here to see your
triumphs. The harsher the battle, the sweeter the victory, the more valor to the warrior," she said.

"There was no sweetness in this."

"Not for you perhaps. Your brother would disagree. So would Yami."

For a moment I wondered how she knew. Then I realized that my collar had slid down a little – and Kisara could see in the dark. My neck probably looked like I'd been attacked by a vampire.

"You and Yami have broken a 3,000 year impasse," she said.

I laughed. "I guess that's something to be proud of."

"You could have walked away. You could have lied to yourself, denied your feelings. You didn't. That is always something to be proud of."

'It never pays to argue with a dragon. Especially this one,' Seto said in my mind.

I'd come to the same conclusion. I leaned a little further into Kisara, and looked up. The stars looked familiar. I stroked her scales. "When this is over, I'm going to miss nights like this."

"As will I. Will this be all you miss?"

"No. Does it make you feel better to hear me admit it?"

"Hearing you face your fears always makes me feel better."

Seto was right. There's no arguing with a dragon.

"Go to sleep, little one," she added.

I heard Seto's voice like an echo: 'Leave tomorrow's battles for tomorrow.'

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Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter. I always get nervous when you don't have much to object to!

REVIEW NOTE: I reply to all signed reviews or reviews that have an email address directly. I reply to all unsigned reviews and post a summary of all replies on my LJ. The link is the first one on my Biopage. I generally post replies there when I update the next chapter.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: Okay, I confess: 'The Wild Swans' (to give it its most common title) is my all-time favorite fairy tale, even beating out 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Cinderella' by a narrow margin. It's one of those fairy tales though, that seem to have an endless number of versions. It's attributed to three different story tellers. Some times the heroine's enemy is the queen, sometimes it's the archbishop. Sometimes she and the prince have children, sometimes he's a king. And there are anywhere from 6 – 12 brothers, and they turn into everything from swans to geese to ravens to ducks. (I have to admit the idea of them turning into ducks cracks me up.) Anyway the only detail that stays the same is that the youngest of the brothers ends up stuck with a bird's wing instead of a left arm. Like Kaiba, that's my favorite part of the story.

I find writing Kaiba's relationship with his biological father is a bit of a balancing act. I really don't mean to make him into the bad guy, here. But I also think he would probably have been overwhelmed by his wife's death, and too devastated himself to give the son the emotional support he
needed. Also when I think about how Kaiba almost uses his anger as a refuge from any emotions that get too uncomfortable, it seemed that his earliest role model for that might have been his father.
The Quest Continues

Chapter Notes

Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's a poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

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MANGA NOTE: After Yami defeats Kaiba in their first game, he sentences Kaiba to a penalty game where Kaiba experiences the illusion of being killed by his own duel monsters. To protect his brother, and get revenge, Mokuba challenges Yugi three times. The first time he challenges him to Capsule Monster Chess, after threatening Yugi to get Yami to appear. When he loses, Yami imposes a penalty game that has Mokuba experiencing being trapped in a Capsule. Then Mokuba (who's nothing if not persistent) tries to poison Yugi, but ends up being poisoned himself. Finally at Death-T he plays Capmon with Yami again. When he loses, Kaiba forces him to undergo his death simulation chamber, even though Kaiba knows it could kill Mokuba. Yami saves Mokuba and goes on to defeat Kaiba at Death-T.

CHAPTER 15: THE QUEST CONTINUES

The declared quests are not always the important ones. Could anything have been more splashily, shamelessly promoted than Battle City? And yet the journeys that mattered there were private ones – Jounouchi's trek to discover the heart of a duelist; Malik's vendetta against, in the end, himself; Kaiba's frantic search for a future free of the hatred of his past; and Yami's equally desperate quest for his name and memories.

The ending of Yami's quest was the beginning of this one. And once again, is the public journey to find Set's headquarters the important one?

YUGI'S NARRATIVE

It was morning and Yami was ready to go. I walked with him to the courtyard, where Kisara and Kaiba were waiting. Mokuba and Mahaado and most of his council were there as well. I probably had the same fake smile on my face as when Yami had walked away from me through the door that had brought him here in the first place.

Kaiba was wearing his pack again. He had what looked like a really big sword in a sheath across his back, but I was willing to bet it held not one sword, but two. I'd seen him use those dual kodachi. I couldn't imagine he was leaving them behind.

Yami was armed as well. He had a khopesh at his waist. It was a heavy, curved sword. It looked almost like it had a kink in it. Mahaado had called it the weapon of the pharaohs. I guess Yami remembered how to use it, but it looked weird. It made him look like he belonged here for real.
I turned to Mokuba. "Do you want to stay with us while your brother's away?" I asked.

Mokuba glanced at Kisara. She inclined her head gracefully. "You should be in the company of others of your kind. I will stay in the courtyard of the palace and guard your sleep."

"You mean you're going to follow me wherever I go?" Mokuba asked, startled.

"I will respect your privacy. My only intention is to ensure your physical well-being and your brother's peace of mind. And I do not believe you would jeopardize either."

Mokuba was still looking pretty stunned, but I couldn't miss the satisfied expression on Kaiba's face. And if there was one thing Mokuba had probably learned over the years it was how to accept the inevitable, no matter how bizarre. So he just looked at me and said, "Thanks, I'll move in after they leave."

Mahaado came forward to say his farewells to his pharaoh. I hugged Yami goodbye.

"Come back safe," I said.

Yami nodded, and climbed on Kisara. She was going to take them to the borders of the land under our control. They'd be going on foot the rest of the way. If they didn't have to summon any monsters, and didn't get spotted by a patrol, hopefully they'd find out which of the sites Kaiba had identified was the headquarters, and make it back before anyone on the other side even realized they'd been there. Once they reached the borders of our lands where they could summon Kisara without tipping our hand, she could take them back to the palace in style. By then, Mahaado figured he'd have his troops ready to attack. Hopefully we'd be able to surprise the bad guys, defeat Set's general, and finally win this game.

That was the plan, anyway. I had to admit it sounded like a video game. I looked again at the sword at Yami's side. I felt a moment of doubt, seeing him going off without me. I swallowed, unsure of what to say, when Kaiba surprised me by turning to me and saying, "The first rule of gaming is: once you've set your cards, never regret playing them, no matter how they fall."

I nodded and gave them a thumbs up sign.

I expected Kaiba to follow Yami, but he said, "Damn, I knew there was something I'd forgotten."

Kisara snorted at his words. It almost sounded like laughter. Mahaado looked up at the sound. In that instant, Kaiba dropped to the ground. He had thrown his right leg forward as he fell, his left one was cocked back. Mahaado was standing in the scissors created by Kaiba's legs. It all happened so quickly that the only way I could figure it out was by putting it all together in my mind later. Kaiba's legs swept together, and Mahaado fell heavily to the pavement, striking the back of his head. His staff flew from his hand. Kaiba grabbed it and pointed the business end at Mahaado.

"Does this thing work for anyone?"

"Are you going to try?" Mahaado asked.

Kaiba laughed and spun the staff in his hand, the blunt end catching Mahaado on the temple, landing exactly where Mahaado's blow had when they had first met.

"Kaiba," Yami growled.

"I'm coming. I just didn't want to leave with unfinished business between us," Kaiba explained, as if what he'd done was the most reasonable thing in the world.
Kisara snorted again. She was laughing, all right. I stared at her. Maybe I was as naive as everyone thought, because I would have expected Kisara to stop him, or at least to reason with him. It never occurred to me that she might be as crazy as Kaiba, or maybe they were both following some peculiarly dragonish code of conduct.

One that Mahaado seemed to agree with.

"I should have expected that. All in all, it was a fair enough return for my blow at our first meeting," Mahaado said as they took to the air.

I would have gone back to the palace, but Mokuba had remained in the courtyard. I could tell from the way he was standing, staring at the sky as though he could still see Yami and Kaiba, even though they were out of sight, that he wasn't going to move until Kisara came back and reported that they had landed safely.

It wasn't right to leave him just standing there. He was just a kid, and the fact that he wasn't crying made it worse. He'd looked like this when Kaiba had been in that coma. This time I didn't want him to wait alone.

"It'll be okay," I said. "Sometimes it's been close, and it's sure gotten scary, but we've never failed yet."

Mokuba nodded, but didn't leave. I stood beside him. We didn't talk much. Every now and then one of us said the kind of meaningless things you say when the silence starts getting on your nerves. I was glad when Kisara returned, telling us that the drop-off had gone as planned.

"Thanks for sticking around," Mokuba said, giving me a shy smile, as he climbed on Kisara. "I'll be back with my stuff later."

It was later, and I was standing outside of Mokuba's door. If it had been Jounouchi or Honda, I might not have bothered knocking, but Mokuba was still a Kaiba, so I did.

His room was neat; it was hard to believe he was thirteen. The one thing that was out of place was so familiar, it took me a moment to realize what had changed. There were duel monster cards in piles on the table. I'd never seen Mokuba show an interest in them before.

"If you want, I can help you build a deck," I offered.

"They aren't mine," he said.

"They're your brother's right? I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you used them."

Mokuba got up and went to the window. His back was to me as he said, "You remember what happened those times when I challenged you?" he asked.

"Mokuba! You can't be afraid of Yami or me?" I asked.

"That wasn't what I meant. This has nothing to do with you," he said.

"You can't think your brother would ever hurt you again!" I said, even more disturbed.

"No, I know he wouldn't."

"Then, what's the matter?" I asked.

"You never asked me about Death-T… about why I was there helping Nisama when I knew he was
wrong. I needed to show him I was just as tough as he was… that I'd kill for him if that's what he wanted. I wanted to show him that I could protect him too. But Nisama needed me to be his little brother, and I couldn't be both his kid brother and his defender. Not then." Mokuba went back to the table, swept the cards up and put them away. "But I'm never letting him down again."

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

We had a mission. I would have said that it gave us something to focus on, but since all we were doing was riding (albeit on dragon-back) or walking, it gave us a lot of time to think.

It was hard to believe that only a day had passed. We hadn't talked about what had happened yesterday, although the chances were high it would happen again.

And yet how in honor could it?

I cared for Kaiba deeply. I had cared through two lifetimes. How then could I be the means of his hurting himself?

And yet I wanted him so badly, wanted him in a way that went beyond regret, beyond my fear of hurting us both. I wondered if his recklessness had infected me, because come what may, I wanted this time together. But it was one thing to be willing to pay whatever price was levied, myself. Had I a right to inflict that accounting on Kaiba as well? It was probably too late, I acknowledged. Kaiba had chosen his course.

I wanted an answer, I always wanted answers… but there was no answer beyond how good it had felt. I wanted a path, but the only map was the one of Kaiba's body, of how strong it was, of how his muscles seemed to lie in wait beneath the silk of his skin, of how tightly he had held me as if we could provide our own permanence, impermanent as it was.

How could confusion feel this good?

When I first emerged in Domino, my actions had had no consequences – or none that I recognized. Then Yugi had taught me better, until consequences were all I saw.

Yesterday, Kaiba had spoken only of the present. I had always believed that the present could not exist without the past to ground it. Now I realized it was equally meaningless without a future to steer towards.

I remembered Kaiba telling Isis on his battle ship, "The only future path I acknowledge is the one I choose to walk down." He had sounded so certain, and his conviction had led him to carry the day. And yet, as much as I treasured his words, replayed them in my head – they felt alien. All I had asked was to find the person I had been, the world I had known. But that had turned out to be an illusion, as insubstantial as one of Kaiba's holograms.

I had given Kaiba no hint of my own indecision, even as uncertainty gnawed at me. There is nothing crueler than false hope. Kaiba had made his peace with my death. I had no right to burden him with my doubts and ambivalence as well.

If I had to find my own way in this pathless land, it was fitting that Kaiba was my companion. And I guess it was inevitable that the first thing we did was to get into an argument.

As soon as Kisara disappeared from view, Kaiba checked his compass and headed off, without talking – or even turning to see if I was following.

"Mokuba might put up with your behavior, but I will not," I shouted after him.
"Leave Mokuba out of this," Kaiba snapped.

Saying good-bye to his brother must have bothered Kaiba more than he had let on. Unwillingly I felt some sympathy for his feelings, if not his actions. It had been hard leaving Yugi on the other side of that door. This time the separation was only temporary, but walking away from someone who's become a part of your soul is never easy.

But that didn't mean I was going to excuse Kaiba's behavior, either.

"Grow up!" I said.

That got him to stop.

"Excuse me?" he asked disdainfully.


"Some of us don't find walking away so easily done."

"Some of us trust our friends to understand."

"I understand all right. That doesn't mean I approve. Do you want friends or followers?"

"For someone who affects to scorn the past so thoroughly, you delight in clutching it to you."

Kaiba stood stock still. His jaw tightened. He didn't say a word. I smirked. It was his way of admitting I'd scored a point. "Do you think we can start over?" I asked with false gentleness.

"Fair enough," he ground out. "There are two sites. It's logical to head to the farthest one first. That's probably the main base. Then we can check out the other possibility on the way back."

"There's no logic inherent in that," I objected. "The base could just as easily be at the nearer location."

"But we're still going to have to visit both. It makes sense to do the biggest part of the journey first," he responded.

"Do you realize what you are doing?" I asked. "You are following a hunch and trying to pretend it's the result of thought rather than feeling."

"It's not a hunch – it's a philosophy. I don't believe in backtracking. There are times when you can only go forward, no matter what the endeavor."

"Fair enough," I echoed. "We'll follow your route. But here's another philosophy you should contemplate: learning to walk alongside your friends, rather than always leading the way."

"All things considered, don't you think it's time to quit with the lectures?" Kaiba asked sarcastically.

"When have I ever chastised you?"

"You disappoint me Kaiba. You can not build using hate and anger as your foundation. I expected better from you," he mimicked. I couldn't believe Kaiba was quoting my words at Alcatraz back to me. "Sure sounds like a lecture to me," he finished.

"How come you remember that, but consistently manage to forget my telling you how much I respect you?"
He grinned. "Anger and disappointment are a lot more familiar."

I shook my head, truly regretful now. I had heard Kaiba speak of his past at Alcatraz and I had witnessed enough of it in Noa's World to know: I did not want to become precious to a man who had lost so much.

**KAIBA'S NARRATIVE**

We walked for hours. It'd been pretty silent since our initial beef. I was too busy studying the landscape to talk. We were in a forest. It looked peaceful. But looks can be deceiving. We were in non-secure land, and I wasn't about to take anything for granted.

Tactics aside, I didn't see the need for talk. I wanted to concentrate on storing this time in my memory. It was okay if it was a silent movie.

"The sun's going down. It'll be dark soon. We should look for a place to rest for the night," Yami said.

"What difference does it make whether the sun's up or down? We should keep going," I said. "The moon will be out tonight, and there aren't any clouds. It'll probably be light enough."

"The sun sets very late and rises very early, here. We should use the time in between to rest, while we can," Yami answered.

"Why bother?" I grunted.

Yami sighed. "Let me try to put this in a way you'll understand. We'll be more efficient tomorrow, if we take the time to sleep tonight."

That was Mokuba's argument. It rarely swayed me, but I had to admit it usually proved true. Not that that mattered at the moment. The sun was barely setting while we were arguing; the last rays were still visible.

"Why do you do that?" Yami asked, as I kept on walking.

"Do what?"

"Keep pushing forward as though your life was a race you couldn't wait to finish."

I laughed mirthlessly, "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not the one who's dead."

'Touched,' said Seto's voice in my head.

I shook my head as though I could shake Seto out of it. When I looked at the darkening sky there was a dot in the distance, circling as if searching for something – probably us. I could tell now, it looked like an enormous bird of prey, a Whiptail Crow, most likely. Whatever it was, I was betting it was unfriendly. Since its flight pattern hadn't broken or paused, that probably meant it hadn't spotted us, yet.

Yami saw it too. We both dived for the bushes, thankful they were there. We lay under them, peering up through the leaves at the sky. I curled up so my legs wouldn't show. Yami was at my side.

"There seem to be some disadvantages to being tall," Yami quipped.

"There are drawbacks to everything. In this case the benefits far outweigh them," I answered. It was true. I never wanted to look up at anyone again. Even though my last confrontation with my adoptive
father had taken place in a virtual world, I'd felt a definite satisfaction in having surpassed him in height, along with everything else.

The damn bird was still circling overhead. It was a Whiptail Crow. I bet it agreed with me that size was definitely an advantage. It hadn't spotted us, but it was keeping us effectively pinned down, unable to move without risking being seen. I reminded myself this was only temporary. Soon, it'd be too dark for that crow to see anything.

"I hate waiting," I muttered.

"I know," Yami said. I couldn't believe he was grinning at me.

Before I could reply, a dragon came bolting across the sky, belling a challenge as he approached the crow. It was a Gray Wings, a sacrifice dragon as Kisara would have named him. Somehow knowing that if he was slain he would vanish from this world, made him more precious. My arm tightened around Yami.

"He really is beautiful," Yami said as he watched Gray Wings' slender body twist in mid-air as he changed directions.

"You only have one dragon in your deck – and it's a fossil. I didn't know you cared for them," I said.

"Always," he answered. "You don't have to own something to appreciate it."

The Gray Wings and the Whiptail Crow were circling each other. Each kept trying to slash the other with their talons. It looked almost rehearsed, the way each monster would lunge and then back out of range of the answering attack. It was the kind of duel where each combatant waits for the other to make a mistake, and the one who blinks first, loses.

We crawled under a low tree, where we could still stay hidden, but could observe the battle more clearly.

Yami said, his eyes still on the fight, "It's hard watching him, knowing you can't deflect him, wondering if this battle will be his last."

I nodded. I wondered if Mokuba felt like that sometimes, watching me.

Gray Wings flew in as though making another attack. Suddenly he swerved upwards, his golden body flashing in the dying sunlight. He twisted and plummeted just as swiftly, and landed on the Whiptail Crow's broad back; his talons sank into the bird of prey's shoulders. The Whiptail Crow made a desperate effort to shake him off, but Gray Wings shrieked in defiance and rage and sunk its fangs deep into the crow's unprotected neck.

The Whiptail Crow shattered into a million shards that melted and dissolved before they reached the ground. The dragon circled twice and then headed back the way he had come. The sky was once again clear.

"I guess now we know why they call this the Border Lands," I said. Now that the danger had passed, it was nice watching the darkness fall through the curtain of branches above us, watching the stars come out. Somehow my arm had found its way around Yami's shoulders again.

Seto had been right. For all its dangers (or maybe because of the unearthly nature of them) this really did feel like a moment out of time; a respite between Yami's relentless search for his past, and my headlong dash for my future.
I looked at Yami, and wondered what it would be like having a past you were urgently trying to remember, instead of one you were desperate to forget.

"Was it worth it?" I asked in the gathering darkness. "Getting your memories back?"

"I didn't. Not really…"

I stared at him.

"I got them back, but they are not truly mine," Yami clarified. "Those events happened to another person long ago. Those emotions belong to another lifetime. Mahaado, Mana… they know the man I was in a way that I do not."

"So there really is no such thing as a free lunch," I laughed. "Never get into a bargain where you don't know the terms."

"As you did?" Yami asked, the familiar edge, the familiar need to score a point back in his voice.

"I knew what I was getting myself into, all right," I answered. I paused. Yami had a life and a world here. I could see that. And despite what he'd just said, the past and all that shit mattered to him. When this was over, we'd be going our separate ways. None of that changed the fact that I owed him an answer. Maybe it made it easier. After all, when this was over, Yami'd be taking anything I told him to the grave.

"My mistake was thinking I could go into that nightmare and come out whole," I told Yami. "I never underestimated Gozaburo. I overestimated myself. You know… this whole time… since Death-T… I tried to kill you and Yugi, and I never once said…"

"Don't," Yami said, his finger on my lips, forestalling my words.

I looked at him. The moon had come out. It was almost full. Its light was shining off Yami's cheekbone, highlighting his delicate collarbones. He truly looked like a ghost. I reached out a hand to trace the line of his face, half-surprised to find it was solid.

"I am here with you," Yami breathed into my hand.

I closed my eyes as his lips replaced his finger on my mouth.

It was madness. We had a mission. Yami was dead. This should have been the last thing I wanted. Instead it was the first.

It was madness.

Or did the true madness lie in not grabbing what was offered?

"Being here with you," Yami said, "is a blessing unlooked and unasked for."

I tightened my hold on him. His words reminded me of just how temporary this idyll was. I could feel events moving towards some unknown conclusion as surely as Yami. And yet this time felt like a respite, a gift, as Yami had said, unasked for. By its nature it was as fragile as a soap bubble. If it was destined to be as brief, at least it would be indelible. There are things worse than loss.

One day, Yami would vanish as easily as that Whiptail Crow. Before he did I wanted to feel every inch of him, every permutation of desire. I wanted to take him in, absorb him through my very pores if I could.
I rolled him over so I was blocking out the sky, so he couldn't see anything but my face in the moonlight. The more we did this the better I'd remember it — though I'd be lying if I said that was what was on my mind. Or maybe it was. I wanted to brand him into my muscles, my synapses, so I could think of him and come, even when I was back home. I never wanted to do this with anyone else. And maybe if I shut my eyes, I could make myself believe he was there, that it was his hands on me, not my own, even after he left, even when there was a stone door that was never opening again between us.

Or maybe I just wanted to enjoy this while I could.

Kissing him felt just as good, just as right as it had yesterday. It felt just as real, he felt just as solid.

We had rolled again, and now Yami was covering me now like the slightly-too-small blanket Mokuba used to clutch at night. Not that I was looking for anything so tame as comfort. Nothing gets the blood pumping like danger survived.

Yami could disappear tomorrow. So could I. But tonight, his lips were covering mine, his tongue was playing with mine. I could feel his breath on my neck as he moved towards my ear. It was coming faster and harsher, even though the threat was over. He started unbuttoning my clothes. I didn't feel like moving, except to return the favor.

As each piece of clothing was removed, Yami's hands began their exploration, each touch like a grain of sand falling through an hourglass. Each touch insistent, yet almost annoying in its lightness, until their accumulated weight acquired a momentum of its own, reminding me that I've never let a game go by, content to be a spectator instead of a player.

I didn't want delicacy. I wanted Yami's hands on me, making me feel him. I wanted him to want me so badly he couldn't think of anything else. I pulled his head to mine, nipped at his lip, then kissed him, my tongue thrusting into his mouth. This is what I wanted, contact and heat. It was time to remind him what yesterday had felt like.

Yami took me up on my dare. His mouth skimmed my body, stopping only when he reached my groin. I was glad that unlike when he dueled, Yami wasn't wasting any time on his preliminary moves.

'Glad' didn't even to begin to describe what I was feeling, now that Yami'd gotten down to business.

His mouth was on me, his fingers were inside of me. It should have felt like an intrusion but it didn't. Because all that mattered was that this was Yami and this felt good. All that mattered was that I was hungry for whatever was going to happen next. All that mattered was that I wanted to feel like there was no tomorrow.

This wasn't about games or destiny or any of that bullshit. This wasn't about anything but Yami and me, this wasn't about anything but how good it felt to have his fingers right where they were. This wasn't about anything but what I was doing in return. My hands were bigger than Yami's, my fingers were longer. They made a good sheath. I was pumping him hard and fast. I wanted him as excited as me. Hell, I wanted him out of control.

Sometimes I get what I want.

Yami gasped for breath, his damp hair falling across his face. He didn't look like a god or even a pharaoh. He looked like a man.

I liked him naked.
"Kaiba..." he said, lifting his face from my body, breaking contact. It was hard to tell if there was a question in his voice.

"What the fuck are you waiting for?" I growled.

He laughed at that, a sound that immediately turned feral. His eyes narrowed. This was the Yami I wanted. This was the only Yami I would allow to take me. He moved forward as though he was going to kiss me, and bit my neck instead, his teeth holding me in place for a moment.

I gasped in surprise and pleasure. This was what I wanted, an attack as fierce as the one we'd just witnessed.

Except it wasn't an attack – it just had all the excitement, all the exhilaration of one, had my heart beating as fast, my breath coming as heavy. Had me wanting the climax to get here just as badly, the same way I felt just before turning over the winning card in a duel, the same way it felt shattering those Necros Soldiers with my kodachi.

Yami was with me all the way. One look at his straining face, his twisted features, confirmed it. Then he was inside of me, then his hands were on me, then we were screaming. It felt inevitable; like two magnets that have been repelling each other for far too long – then you reverse polarities and suddenly they come together with an equally satisfying crash.

We were slamming into each other, rivals as well as lovers, as fierce in this as in everything else – and as well matched. He was making me groan out loud. I had him sweating. It was perfect. It was everything I wanted, and it was happening again, opposite and yet the same. The same intensity, building until I felt like I was going to jump out of my skin, building until I realized that despite how good it felt, I couldn't take another minute of this tense waiting, this feeling of being on the ragged edge of ecstasy. Then as suddenly as a card being thrown on the dueling field, it all came together.

I was flying, I was falling, and although we weren't fighting, I was winning. Nothing existed beyond the way our bodies fit, the way our bodies felt, the way I was frantic and at peace at the same time. The way Yami was with me, the way his mouth was slightly open, the way he stared at me, intense and blank at the same time, as if pure sensation had wiped his memory clean once again. The way in this alien place I had the brief illusion of coming home.

And then it was over. We were lying in the dirt, still hidden by the tree's branches... spent, slightly stunned, just like yesterday. Yami looked at me, eyes heavy lidded. This time, he had something to say.

"I am glad we have this time, fraught with danger as it is," he said.

I nodded as if Yami could see me with his eyes closed. Maybe he could, because he turned over and went to sleep.

I wondered if I was ever going to remember this in enough detail to make up for it being over.

'I'm sorry.' I heard Seto's voice in my head.

"For what? In case you didn't notice, I was having fun," I said roughly.

'I didn't see further than how much I wanted this, than how much we both needed it. I had to live with losing the pharaoh once. In my zeal to recapture what we never had, I may have sentenced you to losing him yet again.'

"So what? There are worse things than loss."
Seto's voice fell silent. I sat, staring at the night sky. I was taking the first watch. Yami and I couldn't both sleep at the same time, in a land that had proven so threatening.

I found myself thinking of the first and last real conversation I'd had with my biological father. We had been alone in the kitchen. Mokuba was still asleep. My father had surprised me by looking at me and suddenly announcing, "I won't be working on Saturday, son."

I looked up at that. It was unexpected. Well, so was him talking. We usually sat in silence.

"Why?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Work isn't my only responsibility. It's past time I remembered that." He cleared his throat. "You still have the Giants' team picture on your wall."

"They're my favorite team. The winningest team in baseball," I said proudly.

"The Hanshin Tigers are coming to the Tokyo Dome later this month to play them. That's a rivalry that goes back to when my father was a boy."

"The Tigers stink this year," I said.

"That doesn't matter. The game will be a good one. Rivals always play better for each other." He paused. "It's not that far to the Dome. Do you want to go?"

"Not without Mokuba."

He looked down. "Yes, Mokuba too. He's also my son." He paused. "He looks very like your mother."

I hated it when people said that. It made me feel like he was going to die soon, too. And he couldn't. I wouldn't let him.

"His hair's messier," I said.

My father gave a little half smile. It was as close as he'd gotten to a real one in years. "It certainly is… much messier. But he's only three. I think he'll eventually grow out of it."

"I wouldn't hold my breath," I said. I suppose it was something he remembered Mokuba's age. But of course he would have. Mokuba's age was equal to the number of years my mom had been dead, and that was how my father measured time.

That had been the end of the conversation. He'd ruffled my hair and left for work.

We'd never made it to the game. Two days later, he'd crashed his car into a tree… leaving me with only fragments of conversations to replay in my head. I'd never know if he had actually bought the tickets, if he was ready to try and find his family again – or if his offer had just been a passing spasm… just another unfulfilled promise.

And I'd never know if when faced with a choice between starting a new life with us, or the hope of rejoining my mother in death – he had chosen the latter.

His death had taught me one thing. There are worse things than loss, and uncertainty is one of them; being left with nothing but this vague sense that there might not really be anything to mourn, except in your imagination. I had made my decision. There was no going back.

This time I wanted to know what I would be missing for the rest of my life.
Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter, and helping me cut down on the confusion.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: I could see Kaiba no sooner getting together with Yami than deciding this wasn't going to last. And I think in some ways that might even make it easier for him, because then he really doesn't have to worry about revealing himself or his desire – because if Yami's staying anyway, what difference does it make? So in an odd way believing that Yami is going to stay, that this isn't permanent, might make it easier for him to be more open.

On a more random note, I have to admit one of the things I find interesting about writing is the way you end up looking up information an an odd assortment of things like Japanese baseball teams, ancient Egyptian weapons and the phases of the moon.

BASEBALL NOTE: With its emphasis on statistics, I can see where baseball might have appealed to Seto as a child. Figuring out what baseball team he might have rooted for was another story. I was tempted by the Chunichi Dragons, because how could I resist a team named the Dragons? But kids tend to root teams that are geographically close to them. That would put Domino close to Nagoya. However, the thing I could find the most agreement for was that Domino was in or near the Tokyo metro area, which meant that Seto would be more likely to root for one of the three Tokyo based teams. Which made the choice really simple.

The Yomiuri Giants are Japan's most famous and most successful baseball team, with 20 Championships. (Contrary to Seto's boast, the winningest team in baseball is the New York Yankees, with 26 World Series Championships.) Anyway, I think even a young Seto would be unable to resist the lure of so much success. Then I read that critics of the Giants complain that they are to arrogant and boastful – which just so sounded like a team that would be perfect for the boy who was going to grow up to be Seto Kaiba.

I have to admit, getting to mention baseball in a chapter that gets posted right before Opening Day (in the U.S.) makes me happy.

YOU SAY KHEPESH, I SAY KHOPESH NOTE: When looking up what weapon Yami might carry, the khopesh was identified as a weapon carried by the pharaohs. Unfortunately, some sources spelled it 'khopesh' and some sources spelled it 'khepesh.' However the site that actually had a picture of a pharaoh holding it, used 'khopesh' so I decided to go with that.
CHAPTER 16: REMEMBERED SELVES

Quests are big, bold endeavors, full of danger and battles and things that go bump in the night. And then there are the times, usually in the evening, where the characters just sit and talk... when they forget the grail and remember themselves. Like the night when Frodo and Sam sat on a staircase in Mordor and talked about whether stories ever really end, or the nights when Molly Grue watched Schmendrick bungle magic tricks as they rested in between wandering through King Haggard's realm in search of unicorns.

They're so quiet, these moments... why do they echo so loudly? Are they the interlude, the break in the action -- or do they carry the soul of the story itself?

MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE

After Yugi left, I went back to studying Nisama's cards. I was kind of sorry I'd come to the palace. I liked the idea of being in the same place as Mana, but it was lonely being here all by myself, knowing Nisama wasn't right next door. It reminded me of when he had been in that coma. It wasn't the same, but it felt the same anyway.

I was holding Nisama's cards, but they didn't really remind me of him. He'd taken his deck and enough cards for a side-deck, maybe 80 or so in all, with him. His familiar monsters were gone, along with the magic and trap cards that would make them more fearsome, more powerful, than they already were. What were left on the bed in front of me were the magic and trap cards and the effects monsters that served no purpose but defense. I touched one of them -- 'Ready for Intercepting'. It could delay an opponent's attack for one turn before being sent to the graveyard. It hurt to look at the chubby knight crouched behind his shield... it hurt to look at all of them... just lying there waiting in vain for a chance to protect Nisama.

He'd ignored them, like always. He'd bought them, but he'd never put them in his deck, had never used them. My brother had always been too busy trying to get back at anyone who attacked him to bother with protecting himself -- or maybe he just didn't know how.

But I felt better knowing his Blue Eyes White Dragon cards were with him. He wasn't planning on using them, because that would alert Set's guys to their presence, but if things got bad enough for Nisama to break cover, Kisara was only a summons away.
And right now, she was the closest thing to my brother. I wandered outside. Kisara was curled up in front of the palace door. One blue eye opened as I approached.

"You witnessed his descent into despair and darkness. Rejoice at his journey back," she said.

I guess it was her way of saying 'hello.'

"That doesn't mean shit if he doesn't survive," I answered.

"You are wrong. Honor always matters."

"Maybe to Nisama and to you. But not to me. His life is all that matters."

"That is your fear talking. It is unfounded. If Kaiba and the pharaoh do not kill each other, then I think no one else will manage to accomplish that task," she said, total assurance in her voice. I relaxed a little.

"I guess so. They're pretty awesome together," I said, trying to match her confidence.

"Enough doubts for one night," she replied firmly. "Perhaps it is time for you to concentrate on your own journey. It is not a substitute for your own time and place, but this world contains much that is good."

It's hard arguing with a dragon. Clearly, she'd said all she was going to about my brother – for tonight, anyway. And her words reminded me of Mana. Most things did. I wondered what it'd be like…

"I wish I had a sister," I blurted out.

She looked at me, head cocked.

"Well, one who wasn't a dragon."

She seemed to shimmer, then shine. I squinted my eyes shut; she had turned that bright. When I opened them, I was standing next to a girl, not a dragon. She was really something. She was about as tall as Jounouchi's sister, and she had long hair like her, too. But Kisara didn't look anything like Shizuka – or anyone else for that matter.

She was thin, just like Nisama was, but she also looked strong, just like him. Kisara had pale skin and white hair. So did Bakura, but this was different. Her hair and skin were the color of moonlight. She seemed to glow. And her eyes hadn't changed. She still had dragon eyes.

But I'd heard her on the subject of being human enough to know how she felt about it.

"What'd you do that for?" I asked.

"Don't worry. It is temporary. I can change forms at will. You wished for a human sister," she answered.

I hugged her. "You really are just like my brother."

"Then why didn't you talk to him? Why do you require me in this form, instead?"

It was hard to explain. I wasn't sure if Kisara was right about Nisama and Yami, but I was willing to bet he'd never kissed anyone in his life. I mean, I could count on one hand the number of times Nisama'd hugged me since Gozaburo – and they'd all involved near-death experiences. Besides…
"It's the kind of thing you need to talk to a girl about," I mumbled.

"What do you need to say to a human female, that a dragon can not hear?"

"Have you ever kissed anyone? Like for real?" I blurted out.

"I was a human for so short a period, and most of it was during a war. There is much I did not get to experience. Kissing is said to be pleasant."

"Yeah, I know. At least people seem to like it in the movies and on TV. But the idea of putting my tongue in someone's mouth... that always sounded gross. I wonder what it's like. I tried running my tongue around inside my own mouth. It felt pretty good, but would Ma... a girl's mouth feel like mine?"

"I think not, or there'd be no point to the whole enterprise," she said.

I sighed. Kisara might have looked like a girl, but she still sounded like a dragon.

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

I opened my eyes to sunlight. I blinked and sat up, confused. The plan had been for Kaiba to wake me halfway through the night, so that I could take the second turn standing guard. Kaiba had apparently decided to stay up all night instead. I remembered Yugi telling me that he wasn't sure if Kaiba had slept at all the entire time they had been looking for me. The answer was obvious.

I opened my mouth to chide him for neglecting his own health, especially in such tenuous surroundings. Since I'm sure that would have proved a fruitless endeavor, it was probably just as well that the sight of Kaiba flipping through his deck distracted me.

Except for his Holy Elf, Kaiba's deck was entirely male – or neuter. Now for some reason, Kaiba seemed to be going through his back-up cards, sorting the females into three separate groups.

"Nemuriko... too young," Kaiba said to himself as the baby sea imp went on the first stack, still sucking her thumb, her eyes blissfully closed.

"Harpy Lady... Shit, I hope not."

Mai's favorite card landed in the middle stack.

"Cure Mermaid... Aqua Spirit... hmmmnnn... Mokuba seems to visit that ornamental pool or fountain or whatever the hell it is pretty often," Kaiba said to himself as he placed them on the last pile.

"What on earth are you doing?" I asked.

"Someone gave Mokuba a hair tie. I'm trying to figure out who." He shook his head. "It wasn't a present you give a child. It was... personal. Like something a girl would do."

"How are you dividing them?"

"Monsters that are obviously ineligible... monsters that I'd have to do something about... and everyone else. I brought all the cards I could think of, but I don't know," he said looking at the three groups with dissatisfaction. "None of them feel right."

I thought of Mokuba. He was warm, enthusiastic, loyal – and with more than a hint of mischief in his make-up. It occurred to me that the creature Kaiba was looking for might not be in his deck at all.
YUGI'S NARRATIVE

I'd been so caught up with finding Yami, it'd taken his leaving again for me to realize – it had been just as big a change for me. For the first time in over two years, I was alone. I wasn't really, of course. There was a whole town here for starters, and all the Duel Monsters I'd come to think of as my friends were only a summons away (not that I'd interrupt whatever it was they were doing.) But Yami wasn't here with me. I'd come here to set him free in a way that felt even more final than it had at our ceremonial battle, and now I missed him.

The Holy Elf had said that seeking and finding were two different things. She was right. We'd all found things we hadn't known we'd been looking for. Kaiba had found his Blue Eyes White Dragon, if nothing else. Yami had found he had a decision to make (if nothing else), and he couldn't just walk away from it.

And me? I guess I'd found a place where I could be alone (most of the time) and think. I'd been a little afraid of this moment, when I'd be all by myself. Usually, when I'd been alone before meeting Yami, it'd been because nobody liked me, except Anzu – and that had only been out of pity, not friendship. You can't really be friends with someone you think of as a whiny little kid. And part of me was afraid that now that I was alone, I'd turn into that crybaby again.

I was walking outside when I noticed the commotion at the end of town and went to investigate. Mahaado was drilling his troops. The training field hadn't been there yesterday. Today it was full. Even though Jichan owned a game shop, I hadn't realized just how many soldier-ish monsters there were – mainly because I carried so few in my deck. Mahaado had troops of his own. Now they had been reinforced by an additional wave of duel monsters. I recognized some as the back-up cards in Yami's deck. The rest must have come from the stack of cards Kaiba had left behind. I wondered if it had been what Mokuba had been looking for last night. Mahaado's troops would be in the first wave when the battle began.

His plan was starting to take shape. Once we knew the location of Set's headquarters, Yami, Kaiba and me would go there and summon the first group of Mahaado's troops. The dragons would fly the rest in as soon as they could, so once we hit Set's headquarters, the pressure wouldn't stop until we'd won. Even after everything that had happened, it all seemed so strange.

I blinked as I saw Mokuba practicing with the others. I felt a moment's doubt. Even Mokuba was out there with a sword – and the thought hadn't occurred to me. It made me feel like I was back in school before I'd met Yami… back when I'd sit indoors by myself while everyone else was outside playing basketball, waiting for Anzu to come and urge me to join the fun. It wasn't just that I knew I'd suck at basketball – it was that I didn't like their games and didn't know how to pretend I did.

Looking at everyone on the field made me wonder if I was still the same kid – the one who couldn't fit in. Part of me wanted to run to Mahaado and demand a sword. Then I set my jaw. Yami had only been gone a day. I wasn't going to start doubting myself – or at least, not this quickly. That would be like admitting I was a wimp after all. And I wasn't going to ask for a weapon. It wasn't just that I'd suck even worse at sword-fighting than at basketball. But, I hadn't come all this way just to pretend to be someone I wasn't. I thought of my friends back home. I wasn't going to go back and tell them that in helping Yami to find his way, I'd lost my own.

I sat on a rock and watched Mokuba. The Celtic Guardian (of all people) was sparring with him. Given his age and size, Mokuba wasn't bad, although he was easily the least skilled fighter out there. Mahaado came over as the troops took a water break. I waved Mokuba over as well.

"You looked good out there," I said as the boy joined us.
"Not really," Mokuba contradicted. "I mean, I practice with Nisama, and he's taught me a lot, but until I get bigger and stronger, I'm not going to be a match for anyone out there. But that doesn't mean I have to be a liability, either. And I'm not going to sit on my hands when Nisama needs me to be strong." He threw some water on his head, and ran back to his sparring partner, even though the break hadn't ended.

"He didn't mean that as a personal insult," Mahaado said.

I laughed. "I know. Mokuba's not really thinking about anyone but his brother right now. Anyway, I can only be who I am. That was true even when I had no one but Anzu, and it'd still be true if my friends disappeared tomorrow. I'd say Yami taught me that, but how could he teach me something I always knew? He sure made me feel better about it though. I'm not a warrior – ancient or modern. What I am is a duelist – a true duelist as Yami liked to say. And I'm Yami's friend – and Kaiba's and yours. And when the duel goes down… when my friends need me – I'll be there. Until then, I'm not going to beat up on myself for all the things I'm not… or at least I'm going to try not to."

"Your wisdom is so quiet, it is often overlooked," Mahaado said.

"Thanks. Now all I have to do is to keep repeating it to myself until I believe it."

"Good counsel bears repeating," Mahaado said, "even to oneself."

I nodded. "I guess Yami's not the only one who has some thinking to do. I used to worry about living up to him. Now I'm just going to try to live up to myself."

Mahaado was right, it did feel good to say all that out loud. Yami used to be the one to do that. I always agreed with him, but he was the one making the speeches.

"Bravely spoken. I will be honored to duel by your side," Mahaado said as he walked back to the middle of the field, ending the brief rest.

I watched for a while longer, but they were clearly going to be there all day, and it was equally obvious that Mokuba wasn't going to leave until the last drill had been completed. I wondered if Mahaado had softened towards him any. As Mana had said the other night, loyalty is a very old virtue.

As I wandered off, I wondered why the Flame Swordsman wasn't there. Then I remembered, none of us carried him in our decks. He probably wouldn't make it to the battle until later.

I ended up by the fountain in the center of town. It looked like one from some city in Europe today. I'd seen pictures of ones that looked just the same in history class.

I missed Jounouchi, and I was worried about him and the rest of the gang. I wished there was some way I could find out how they were doing. I knew the Holy Elf had said no time had passed in our world, but still…

Of course if Jounouchi had been with me, he'd probably be out on the training field too – causing havoc with his street fighting style. Just thinking about it made me laugh. I could see him… his eyes flashing, his blonde hair getting into them with every move. I bet he'd laugh every time he beat one of them, just like Kaiba had, but his joy would be more innocent, somehow. It would invite you to laugh along with him. The Flame Swordsman reminded me of him so much. There was a reason he was Jounouchi's soul card.

The Flame Swordsman could probably tell me if Jounouchi and the gang were okay. But Jounouchi was the one carrying his card, not me – and Jounouchi was far away. Trying to summon the Flame
Swordsman without a card would just be a waste of time. That didn't stop me from wishing with all my heart that he was here, anyway.

"What is it you desire?"

I looked up, blinking as I took in the tall figure, the blue tights, the red kilt, the broadsword held loosely in his hands. His helmet was off, and his long blonde hair was all messed up. He really did look just like Jounouchi, down to the slightly crazy-in-a-good-way look in his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, confused.

"You were thinking of me, and of the man who wields me."

"How is Jounouchi?" I asked eagerly.

The Flame Swordsman looked puzzled. "He is fine… except for having just crashed into a closed stone door. He is just about to draw breath to curse Kaiba for whatever he did to cause the door to close. He is unaware that any time has passed since your departure."

"That's great!" I said in relief. "I'm sorry to bother you. I just needed to know that they were okay."

"Do not apologize for caring about your friends. It is your greatest strength. Without your help, Jounouchi would never have grown into a duelist worthy of holding my loyalty."

"Jounouchi was always a true duelist on the inside!" I said, hotly.

"Yes, but he needed you to teach him that this was so. He needed someone to believe in him before he could believe in himself."

I always feel awkward when people compliment me, so I searched for something else to say. "I'm still don't get why you're here. I mean I thought I needed a card to summon you."

"If you know a card so well you can picture it… and your need is great enough… you can summon any card."

"Wow! This place is really something. I didn't see you out there with Mahaado. I'm sorry if you'll be missing the battle."

He laughed. "I won't be missing the battle. I simply won't be in the first wave. That rankles. But don't worry, the fight can't end without me!"

I grinned back. He really did remind me of Jounouchi.

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

It was late. We'd finally stopped for the night. I had held my tongue all day.

"You took both watches last night," I reminded Kaiba.

"You said it yourself. The nights are short. It was easier to just stay awake," Kaiba answered.

"You can't keep doing that. I'll take the first shift tonight."

Kaiba looked at me as though he was about to argue, then nodded. He lay down and closed his eyes as though preparing for sleep. His breathing grew slower. Then his eyes flickered open again. It was a process that repeated itself several times. Every time I thought he had finally fallen asleep, his
eyelids snapped open.

"Go to sleep," I repeated impatiently.

This time his eyes stayed closed. But every now and then the lids twitched as if he wanted to open them, but remembering his agreement, was holding them shut. It didn't look restful.

I had been annoyed all day, assuming that Kaiba's refusal to sleep implied a lack of trust in my willingness or ability to keep watch, picturing it as one more slur on my faithfulness. Now I wondered if he was simply unable to sleep. I knew better than to ask.

I'd always understood Kaiba, as far as anyone could. His obsessive campaign to grab a true future for himself mirrored my own relentless pursuit of my past. Both were doomed, illusory quests.

And Kaiba understood me as well. Not the part of myself I wished to show the world: the proud King of Games, the caring friend… but when I was angry or desperate – or afraid of the defeat that seemed to be closing in on me… then Kaiba was there, and it seemed that a rival could reach where a partner could not. Or had we found that place where rivals and friends were one, without recognizing the boundary line even as we had crossed it?

I wondered why my old rival had stopped challenging my decision to stay. Then I realized: Kaiba had added me to the long list of things he could not rely on.

It stung.

I would allow it nonetheless. I owed him that much. But, I could not look on Kaiba without wanting to help.

I had challenged Kaiba at Alcatraz to let go of his demons, to rebuild his life on a stronger foundation than anger. I had been surprised and touched by how seriously he had taken my challenge. Even here, even now, I wanted to live up to the trust he had placed in me.

If I could help him to find a future free of the past that clutched at his heels, if I could get him to accept Yugi's charge to me – to truly live his life instead of marching through it – then I would feel some measure of happiness, wherever I found myself. It wasn't what Yugi had told me to do, but I felt that if I could help Kaiba to a sense of peace, then some measure of that feeling would be conferred upon me as well. I didn't need Yugi beside me to know what he would say – that this was another excuse. So be it. Maybe in looking after Kaiba, I would stumble across myself.

There was no point in both of us pretending that he was asleep.

"Yugi told me I have to think for myself. But how can I think of myself apart from Yugi when he has been the reason for my existence? It is unfamiliar," I admitted quietly.

"And you're looking to me for advice?" came Kaiba's sarcastic rejoinder. "Yugi's an idiot. Thinking of yourself is a luxury, not a right. It's what you get to do when everything else has been taken care of."

"If that's what you believe, why did you follow me here?"

"Why do I do anything? I was angry," he answered.

"It is an emotion that has served you well – as long as it remains your servant and not your master."

Kaiba grinned. "Nothing, not even anger, is ever mastering me again."
"It's strange being here. I've never really been on my own. Even DOMA was different," I observed.

"I seem to remember you enjoying yourself through DOMA," Kaiba said.

"When I was with you, yes. But even when I was by myself, I wasn't alone. I had my mission to keep me company: to be reunited with Yugi; to rescue him."

I sighed. Kaiba looked at me, one eyebrow slightly raised. It was an invitation to talk, if I desired.

The night with its moonlit darkness, with Kaiba lying at my side, made it easy to talk. Maybe it was the knowledge that Kaiba and I were alike – more alike than either of us felt comfortable in admitting, for all that it was the glue that bound us.

"When I went through that door, I knew I was going to the after-life, but it didn't feel like dying," I said. "Now I wonder what this place is. I had hoped to see my parents here."

"So did Mokuba."

"I don't remember my mother very well. I was young when she died."

Kaiba grunted something that might have been an acknowledgement.

"I remember my father better. He was a wise and strong ruler." I looked at Kaiba's carefully neutral face. "At least that's what I remember hearing Shimon tell me," I admitted. "It sounds like a fairy tale, doesn't it? I guess I don't remember him as well as I thought, even after getting back my memories. I do remember him always trying to do what he felt was right… I remember him teaching me that doing the best you could was the true measure of a ruler – and of a man. I remember him worrying."

"Not a bad epitaph," Kaiba commented. "Many earn less."

"I never thought about them when I was with Yugi. How can a disembodied spirit have parents? But I wanted to remember them so badly. And now that I have my memory back, all I can recall of them is the vague sense of being loved and of loving them in return. Now I can see how little I truly knew them. I suppose I was too young when they died, and too often in the care of others. I remember Shimon and Mahaado more clearly. And my High Priest. I wish I remembered my parents well enough to mourn them properly."

"Maybe that's the best one can hope for – to experience something so thoroughly, that one can grieve for its loss intelligently," Kaiba said.

Was he speaking of us? That would indeed be a tragic epitaph. I wanted to leave Kaiba with more than grief. I thought of my father, again.

"At least I remember him enough to be proud of him."

Kaiba stiffened, and I suddenly realized that rarely as I had heard Kaiba mention Gozaburo, he'd never once referred to his natural father. Now Kaiba was lying tense, eyes closed. This time, I pretended he was asleep. I tried to tell myself that at least he was lying down.

**KAIBA'S NARRATIVE**

I lay there with my eyes closed, fooling nobody. Being told to go to sleep made it paradoxically impossible even before Yami had started yapping at me. I must have had a bedtime, once upon a time. I just couldn't remember. There had been an official 'lights out' deadline at the orphanage, of course, but I'd never paid any attention to it. The rules were just for show. I'd lain in bed obediently
enough until sneaking off to a staircase or the bathroom, if I needed light to study or work something out. I certainly had no intention of wasting several hours of uninterrupted quiet by sleeping them away. I'd plotted our escape and developed chess strategies instead. Besides Mokuba (who was too young to notice) no one cared if I was rested, as long as I wasn't dropping dead on my feet. In a way, it had been good training for Gozaburo.

And now I was supposed to 'relax' and go to sleep with someone watching my every move.

It was strange, not having Mokuba here. Not that we shared a bedroom back home – but still he'd always been right next door, not miles away.

Not that I needed him to sleep. Or Kisara.

With my eyes closed I could almost imagine I remembered my mother telling me to go to bed, but it felt like it had happened in another lifetime. I wondered if this was what it had been like for Yami… getting his memories back only to feel like they had happened to someone else.

When I had heard Yami talk about his father, I'd froze – any response I could have made had lodged in my throat. My feelings about Gozaburo were mercifully clear. He had been my adversary from the start – and little as I wanted to admit it, my mentor as well. He had given me a clear target – something to fight against and measure myself by: first by battling him directly, then by struggling to rid myself of his influence over my life and to rid the world of the weapons I had unknowingly designed for him.

My biological father was a more complex affair. It was hard deciphering what I felt when I'd put so much energy into feeling nothing at all. I'd spent so many years forgetting him that it was hard to reverse the process. He'd had a hand in giving me life and in giving me Mokuba. I supposed I was grateful – especially for the latter. And though my father had often seemed lost in his own grief-stricken world, I had known what to expect from him, and that had carried its own security. It was a stability that had ended with his life.

But I couldn't escape the thought he'd been a bit of a mediocrity to have been defeated so easily by life and death. He hadn't had Gozaburo's raw aggression, or Pegasus's over-the-top creative genius, or even Yami's determination to do what he thought right – his preachy arrogance. Everyone who'd made an impression on me since had been relentlessly, uncompromisingly, themselves. They'd been memorable.

Unlike Pegasus and Gozaburo, however, my father had probably cared about me – at least he hadn't meant to betray or even hurt me. It had happened almost unintentionally. I looked at Yami. I seemed to have come full circle.

I thought of Yami's comment. Was I proud of my father? In the end, I hadn't known him well enough to be proud or ashamed.

"What?" Yami asked, and I realized I'd spoken aloud.

"I don't know that I've ever been proud of anyone but Mokuba," I said instead.

"You can be proud of more than one person," he said. "It doesn't have to be rationed. I'm proud of you and Yugi."

"Yugi's a hell of a duelist," I acknowledged, knowing that Yami would take the bait.

Yami's face lit up. "He is, isn't he? It's even better now that he knows it."
"Are you supposed to be so happy about losing?" I asked sarcastically.

"How would you feel if you were dueling Mokuba?"

"I could only lose to Mokuba. Without him, there is no victory. I promised to be his father. I didn't always live up to my end of the bargain. Or maybe I did..." I laughed, aware of, but unable to stop the hint of insanity in the sound. "Maybe going crazy and trying to destroy your sons is part of the job description." I got control of myself and continued, "I'll keep as true as I can to my promise, but one day Mokuba won't need me the way that he does now."

"What will you do then?"

The image of Yami walking through that door flashed through my mind.

"I don't know," I answered. "But the one thing I won't do is walk out of his life."

"Maybe that's what Yugi meant. That I didn't need to go for us to be two separate people."

I thought of Mokuba and his latest secret. Watching someone you loved become an independent person was probably a lesson I'd be learning myself before too long. That was... scary, but okay. I felt ready to take on the future, and it was what I'd been working for all along, after all. I relaxed a little, like someone surveying a job that against all odds was about to be satisfactorily completed.

But Yami's words had stirred the past, and as Seto had warned, it was not quite ready to be laid to rest, along with my stewardship. "I guess like anything else," I said softly to the night air, "the father I was given holds less of a place in my thoughts than the one that came with a price tag attached."

"Do you think of everything in terms of costs paid? Does everything come with an internal bill?"

"Not Mokuba. Not everything. Some things are beyond price."

I exhaled slowly, felt the air whistle through my lips. Somehow as we had talked my head had ended up leaning against Yami's thigh. One of his hands was resting on my head. Every now and then he stroked my hair. It was an odd sensation. He was touching me but he didn't seem to want anything from me in return. It should have been unsettling, but it felt relaxing instead. Even knowing that this was all temporary, I couldn't deny it felt... nice.

I closed my eyes. Yami was right. This was a marathon, not a sprint. I'd be more efficient in the days to come, if I rested now. Maybe if I lay here quietly, I could pretend I was asleep.

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Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter, and helping to keep Kaiba's cards in line. Thanks to everyone who suggested defensive cards.

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** Quick! Think of a Yugioh orphan! Chances are Kaiba is the one that sprang to mind. (Well, or maybe Malik, but I'm Kaiba-centric.) But like everything else about Kaiba, he's sort of so flamboyantly, archetypically (okay, I know that's not a word) an orphan, it was somewhat of a shock to realize the same could be said for Yami/Atemu as well. I'm making a bit of an assumption here, but in the manga you don't see or hear of his mother after the scene where she's holding him in her arms, and as for his father, thanks to Bakura unwrapping his mummified body, there's no doubt about his being dead.

Although Atemu (to use the name from his past) clearly loves and honors his parents, I have to
wonder how well he knew them, and whether he knew them as people as opposed to as 'Dad' and 'Mom' or even as a pharaoh and his queen. It occurred to me that he might not have known them very well as people, might not have seen them very often with ceremonial robes off, and might have been too young to get to know who they were as people as well as parents. Ironically, getting back his memories might have taught him something about the limitations of memory, that it can't make up for what you haven't experienced.

And I also liked the idea that this made another parallel between Kaiba and Yami.

**Totally Irrelevant Flame Swordsman Note:** I realized (luckily) just before I was about to post that I had called him the Flaming Swordsman, instead of the Flame Swordsman.
AUTHOR'S NOTE: 'The Newly Revised Book of the Dead' just reached it's one year anniversary in being posted!

Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

MANGA NOTE: This story is based on the manga version of the Ancient Egypt arc. There are significant differences between the Ancient Egyptian arc in the manga and the anime. The main one is that Kaiba does not appear at all in the Ancient Egypt arc or the ceremonial duel between Yami and Yugi in the manga. He arrives at the very end, just as Yami goes through the door to the after-life.

CHAPTER 17: THE IMPERFECT SHIELD

Sleeping Beauty's nameless prince trudged through a forest of thorns to find her. The Frog Prince's forsworn bride literally trekked east of the sun and west of the moon to deliver her kiss. But as important as reaching the goal line was – and it was as important as happily-ever-after-love – maybe what mattered most were the things they learned along the way.

Did Yami make the wrong decision when he walked through that door because it denied us a happy ending? Or because he made it in defeat, and one should never celebrate a surrender of self, no matter the cause or outcome? Did Kaiba make the right decision in following because it worked and he found Yami? Or because in finding Yami he started on the much-delayed journey to find himself?

In the end, are stories about the ending, or are they about the journey?

YUGI'S NARRATIVE

I hate being mad. I feel all scrunched up inside, like eels are wriggling around in my stomach. And instead of yelling, I always cry.

Being mad sucks. And being mad at Yami was the worst ever. But I was mad… kind of… now that Yami wasn't here to yell at.

When Yami had been here, Kaiba had been the one doing all the yelling, not me. As soon as I'd seen Yami looking so confused, and looking at me for help, I forgot all those angry, uncomfortable feelings I'd carried the whole way to find him. It had been like always. We were friends and that was all that mattered. But now that Yami was gone again, taking Kaiba and his anger with him, all those upset, mixed-up feelings were back, like they'd just been waiting their turn.
Yami had been looking for his name and his destiny for a long time. He'd just learned his name – how could he have done anything but follow what he believed to be his destiny – even if it meant dying? I knew that. I just wish he hadn't needed me to help.

Yami might have been the one to walk through that door – but I'd been the one to open it. I could talk about friendship all I wanted, but nothing Anzu or Jounouchi could say, even if they were here, would make me feel like helping my best friend kill himself was the right thing to do, even if it was what Yami had wanted. How could that be something one friend does for another? How could it be something one friend asks of another?

But, I hated being mad at Yami. I mean, it wasn't really his fault. I knew that too. It wasn't mine, either. It just sucked. I never thought of myself as having opinions, but helping Yami kill himself went against everything I believed in.

In a way coming here had been like hitting the reset button on a video game. It might end the same way, and I'd live with that if I had to, but at least this time, it'd be Yami's choice from start to finish. And when I thought of Yami, I could remember him without seeing the moment when he'd lost. I could pick up a deck without seeing him turn from me towards that door – and without feeling like I was the one who pushed him through it.

Yami was still my partner, and I still wanted what was best for him. I just hoped he could figure out what that was.

I was restless. The truth is saving the world isn't the kind of thing you can refuse to do – but I was looking forward to going home and hanging out with Jounouchi and the guys. After this, even asking out Anzu might be easy. (She'd seemed jealous of Vivian and Rebecca – and they'd been after me, not Yami.) I was even looking forward to school – or finishing it at any rate – and helping my grandfather run the game shop. I'd had enough of adventures, but I'd never get enough of games.

Without realizing it I'd wandered to the edge of town. I could see the path leading up to where Kisara's aerie must be. It's usually not a good idea to barge into a dragon's den, but in one way or another, I'd been doing that for a while, and I wondered what the town looked like from up there.

Kisara was a friendly dragon – as far as dragons went. But no matter how friendly, a dragon is still a dragon, and none of them are really approachable. That's what made the thought of climbing the path so much fun in a not-quite-scary way, especially since I knew that a couple of years ago, I'd never have done it.

"Hi, I hope I'm not bothering you," I said when I reached the cliff top. I'd never talked to Kisara without Mokuba or someone around, and whenever I'd seen her in a duel, she'd been getting ready to attack. It made it hard to think of anything to say.

"Do you still think of me as an opponent?" she asked. I wondered if she could read minds or if I was that transparent.

"I'm not sure. It's what I'm used to. Besides you've never faced yourself – you're one scary dragon."

"And yet you have never been truly intimidated. Even when you faced me in this form…"

She seemed to blur and then Kaiba's Blue Eyes Ultimate Dragon towered above me.

"Sure I was," I answered. "I just wasn't scared enough to quit. And I had Yami with me. It's easy to be brave when you're with a friend. But I didn't know you could change shapes like that."

"I can assume any form that I held in life or as a card. When Kaiba created the Blue Eyes Ultimate
Dragon, it became a facet of my being as well."

If she could be anything she wanted, I wondered why she was a dragon and not a girl, but before I could ask, she shifted back to being the Blue Eyes White Dragon.

"This is the shape I prefer… my true self, if you will. Human bodies are too fragile," she said almost sadly. She whirled around like a cat before settling back on her haunches on the ground. "Kaiba faced my Ultimate Dragon form as well, in his computer lab. He wanted to see what it was like. He called me forward to test himself against me – and to try out his God card, back when he had Obelisk the Tormentor."

"What happened?"

"He destroyed me."

"Did it bother Kaiba?" I asked. I knew what it had felt like destroying the Black Magician in that duel against Yami.

"I don't know. He was laughing," she answered.

"Why?"

"He was a little drunk on the power of the card."

"Didn't that get you upset?" I asked.

"Because he is short-sighted? Because he confuses power with security, and so can not get enough of either? No, it didn't bother me. He was young and trying out his wings. In some ways he will always be young, especially in this incarnation, no matter how many years pass, or how they are counted."

I wondered if she was always this confusing.

"Do you know what my strongest memory of you is?" she added.

I shook my head.

"That time in the pharaoh's soul room with Shadi. He wanted to call me forward to destroy the Black Magician. But you knew the Black Magician could never harm you, who had protected and guided his liege so well. Your instincts are very good."

"Thanks," I said, blushing a little. It's not every day – even here – that I get complimented by a dragon.

"Yeah, Nisama always said there was a chance you could beat Yami in a head-to-head match-up, you know," Mokuba said. I almost jumped. I hadn't heard him come up the path behind me. Until Yami had walked through that door, the only sign Kaiba had ever given that he believed us was by leaving abrupt messages for Yami with me, as if I was Yami's secretary. Even while doing that, Kaiba had always managed to make me feel like an idiot with a thing for talking to myself. I guess it was logical that Kaiba would have noticed and compared our separate dueling strategies, but I was still surprised.

"He said it on that plane ride to America," Mokuba said. "I told him that I thought it wasn't fair. I mean he had to beat both of you to win."
"What did he say to that?" I asked curiously.

Mokuba shrugged. "He said that your opponent is whoever is standing in front of you, barring your way – and that counting heads is something losers do to excuse their own mediocrity. He said he'd like to see you duel Yami – you know, square off for real. Of course he was planning on taking on the winner, next."

I shifted uncomfortably. "Everything happened so fast…"

"And it's not like Nisama was a friend of yours, anyway," Mokuba challenged.

"I didn't know him well enough to be his friend – and that was by his choice, not mine," I returned. "Yami considered him a friend, always. It's funny – all those tournaments, and I never really dueled your brother. It was odd not seeing him though – in that memory world, I mean. There was this other version of your brother there. He was Yami's High Priest. But he looked just like your brother. Acted like him too, for the most part. I swear every time I saw him, I looked around, expecting you to be a few steps behind, carrying his briefcase or something. And then it was over and we were all back in our own time, and Yami and me were dueling. I'm sorry your brother missed it, too. Who knows, though… if he had been standing on the sidelines yelling at Yami like usual, maybe Yami would have won."

Mokuba shook his head. "Don't sell yourself short." He grinned. "Well, any shorter than you are."

"Look who's talking," I shot back.

"Yeah, but I'm five years younger. I bet I'm going to be as tall as Nisama, one day."

He was probably right, but I can't say I was looking forward to the day when it happened. But all the compliments were making me feel like a fraud. If I was as smart as everyone said, why did I have these doubts? Why did I feel like I'd screwed up the biggest duel of my life? I knew Yami would disagree with me, but I wanted to hear Mokuba's take on that ceremonial duel. Even though he was a kid, he'd lived with a duelist all his life.

"I should have tried to time it so it ended in a draw," I blurted out.

"What?" Mokuba asked.

"That ceremonial duel. I bet I could have worked it out so it ended in a tie."

"A tie?" Mokuba repeated, as if the word was unfamiliar.

I nodded. "Then Yami would have known I was serious – that he had to decide things for himself, and no destiny mattered more than that – or our friendship. I thought of ending with a tie as a way out when I was dueling Jounouchi on the pier that time, and we both survived. I wonder why it didn't occur to me."

"Well, if Yami hadn't come here, I bet Exodia and Mahaado and all those guys would have just thought of something else. I mean sooner or later we have to fight right? In either this world or in ours – and I'd rather it was here," Mokuba pointed out logically.

"Yeah, but Yami wouldn't be dead, and I wouldn't be mad at him," I said.

"Are you really mad at Yami? I mean, you don't hate him or anything, do you? He can't help being the way he is, even if he screwed up," asked Mokuba worriedly, looking like the answer mattered a lot. "You're not like forever-mad at him, are you?"
"No, of course not... I don't know... I mean, Yami did what he thought was right. I know that. I just wish it didn't hurt. I wish I could have found a way to get him to stop and take a look at what he was doing and why – and maybe it all would have been different."

"Did you ever think that maybe he wasn't ready to listen to you back in Egypt? Maybe it took dying to get him to sit still long enough to think things over. Maybe he needed someone to put the brakes on – and you were the only one that could do it. It'll be all right, Yugi. If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that things don't have to work out the first time around, as long as everything works out in the end."

I wondered which of our partners we were talking about.

**KAIBA'S NARRATIVE**

I really hated all this fantasy-land bullshit. I got it: we were in a life-or-death battle, and the outcome would once again determine the fate of not just this world, but our own. I grimaced at the thought of being caught up in something this absurd.

Again.

While I was under no illusions as to what would happen if that Whiptail Crow or those Necros Soldiers who had greeted us on our arrival caught Yami and me out in the open, so far, the trek had been uneventful.

We were still in the no man's land that existed between the territory under our control and that of the enemy's. The landscape here changed at will; each new setting frozen in place by the last spellcaster to shape the immediate environment. The places I found most interesting though, were the stretches where no one had cared, or had lingered long enough, to reformat the surroundings. The land was oddly formless there; neither desert nor forest; the ground covered with scrub grass and weeds, broken occasionally by pools of fresh water. It was an inhospitable environment for those wishing to stay hidden.

We walked through forests by day, or through graveyards, whose swirling mists hid us from view. Then we would rest, and cross the barren patches by night.

It was oddly peaceful, except for the ghosts.

Not ancient Egyptian ones, nor even the spirits of Duel Monsters past, but my own personal phantoms. I had once said that my future was buried beneath the rubble of my past. I had tried to push it aside like the crap it was. But like the cemetery dust that rose around us as we trampled through it, it refused to be so easily contained.

Yami was not the only one to have his memories returned to him.

I could remember being trapped in a card in Pegasus's hand, after I had lost to him at Duelist's Kingdom. He'd hold me and talk. It was eerily like all those nights we had worked together on the duel chamber.

Except this time, there were no hidden agendas.

"I'd apologize to you, but it would be a tad insulting to ask for forgiveness from the person I'm about to destroy, wouldn't you agree, Kaiba-boy? I value your opinion on the matter. I imagine it's an area where you have considerable experience," he taunted.

But I knew what he meant. There's no point in regretting something you'd do again in a heartbeat if
you had to. I wouldn't have said anything to Pegasus that indicated that much understanding, but the
point was moot. I was trapped in the smooth surface of a playing card. I could hear each word, but
there was nothing I could do to fight against them. Nor could I stop his hand from stroking the
surface of the card. I wondered why he kept coming back. At first I thought it was just to gloat, to
remind me of how thoroughly he'd beaten me. Then I realized that he needed to talk. And I was there
– unable to do anything but listen.

"Nothing exists for me but Cynthia," he explained. "A hologram of her is more real than you or Yugi
or anything in my life without her. When he gave me the Millennium Eye, Shadi showed me that
visions are so real you can touch them, you can lose yourself in them. I tried. I painted hundreds of
portraits as though I could catch her soul on canvas. I couldn't. Each likeness seemed to mock me
more and more by showing me all I had lost. Then I met you. You never spoke of it, but I knew…
you too had been touched by a Millennium Item. You too had seen its visions. And you could do
what I could not – you could recreate them. I could have hated you for that, but I needed you too
badly."

He looked at me, trapped in his card, the way he used to look at me as I designed the holographic
system he wanted to steal. Once I hadn't minded that look, that feeling he was seeing me. Now I
could only endure it.

My thoughts shifted as abruptly as the landscape sometimes did. It was earlier in our acquaintance,
before the inevitable betrayal had begun to show. I felt Pegasus's hands on my hair, brushing it off
my face. I thought he brushed his lips against the top of my head as well, before he sat down again
and resumed his endless doodling – but if so, it was too fleeting a gesture for me to be sure. It always
was. Back then he had still been much taller than me. Ironically I had reached my full growth only in
a coma… at about the same time he had kidnapped Mokuba.

"What are you thinking about?" Yami asked, reminding me I wasn't alone.

"Pegasus." I swallowed. Yami looked at me. I turned around and kept walking. It was hard to tell if
he was curious or concerned. Maybe both. I reminded myself that this was all ending, anyway. We
had this mission, this time together, and then it would be gone.

It's easy to talk to the dead.

"Pegasus would sit behind me while I designed those duel chambers. He said that he created the
Blue Eyes White Dragon with me in mind. That we were made for each other. Kisara said that it
wasn't a lie, but I don't know. Everything else he said certainly was." I paused. "It was the closest I
ever came to trusting anyone besides Mokuba… to respecting someone… to…"

"What happened?" Yami said. I was surprised by the harsh note of anger in his voice, by the concern
that had sparked it. It sounded genuine. Then again, it always had. It had taken me falling into
Yami's arms fighting DOMA though, for me to believe in it.

"Nothing," I answered. "That was the point. Pegasus didn't want me; he wanted me off-balance.
Then he stole Mokuba's soul and sealed it in a card."

"We're in a graveyard. You're seeing the ghosts of your past. But is that all you see in your future as
well?" Yami asked.

"You tell me," I countered.

"I can't. I can not see my own future, much less yours. Yugi told me to think of my future, of a future
as separate from his as our bodies now are – but I'm not sure I know how."
"If you don't carry the future with you, how can you know anything, even who you are?" I said impatiently.

"I've learned that the past is not all-encompassing. It can tell us who we were, but not whom we may become," Yami said. "You have always been ready to face the future, Kaiba. But, if you see in it nothing more than a continuation of the past, that is as big a denial of its possibilities as the one you accuse me of making."

"I see the future every day," I said. "Every time I look at Mokuba. His future is the only one that's ever mattered to me; the only one I needed to secure."

"And your answer was to try to erase your own heart?"

"The operant word is 'tried.' It's harder than you'd think." I swallowed again. "Pegasus said we were alike… he and I. He had a point."

Yami looked up at that. He wasn't agreeing. He wasn't arguing. He was listening. It was unexpectedly peaceful. I was going to miss this. I allowed myself to feel a shadow of the loss to come.

"He never saw anything but Cynthia, even after she died," I said. "Trying to kill us was easy for him – because we really didn't exist. Nothing did. Just like I never saw anything but Mokuba. I designed weapons for a madman for him… and because I wanted to win. Maybe Pegasus's motives were purer. I can't blame Death-T on anyone but myself. I certainly didn't do it for Mokuba – he was safe by then from everyone but me. Gozaburo killed because other people's deaths meant power and money to him. But I did it – or at least I tried to – because of my own pride and vanity. I never forgave Gozaburo. But my actions led to his death. Is that an absolution of sorts?" I laughed.

"You're not like Pegasus. And you're certainly nothing like Gozaburo," Yami said sharply.

"What makes me any different?"

"Your actions. In your ignorance, you designed weapons. In your madness, you created Death-T. You deserve to carry the remorse for those actions. But how can you focus on the future and yet refuse to admit how much you have changed?"

Pegasus had said that all I felt for him was an inexperienced boy's unacknowledged infatuation. Much as it rankled, he'd been right. He'd said that I had the same capacity as he did for self-destructive devotion. He was probably batting two for two. Certainly my limited track record had demonstrated a taste for entanglements that seemed designed to blow up in my face. At least this time I could hear the detonator ticking. That made it manageable.

But Yami had gotten me to question so many of my assumptions about life, that I couldn't help wondering if I'd done the same for him. I shook my head, trying to push aside the times, like now, when Yami sounded like he was considering coming back with us.

I didn't ask.

Once, I'd asked for a puppy, I'd asked for a home, I'd asked for a safe haven for me and Mokuba. I'd learned to be wary of asking for anything that mattered.

I was sure Yami's ultimate decision would be to remain. Yami believed in destiny. I believed it was something to be fought. He had a following that had waited 3,000 years for his return – and he wasn't the type of person to shrug that off, regardless of whatever doubts he might be having. I didn't ask. I was used to not talking. It was a hard habit to break.
Yami was probably just following Yugi's advice by looking his options over. And that was the final reason I wasn't going to ask Yami what he was thinking, much less ask him to return. I might never have beaten the shrimp in a duel, but I wasn't going to prove myself a weaker man than Yugi – not in this.

I hadn't noticed how fast I was walking until I realized that Yami had kept pace. He'd needed to take two steps for every one of mine, but he'd matched me.

We'd reached the end of the graveyard. We could see the curtain of fog end abruptly. Barren space lay ahead. We retreated slightly, back to the cemetery with its sheltering purple mists and overhanging trees. Luckily it would be dark soon. We could cross then by using the moon to guide us. Meanwhile, we had some time to kill. I was sick of talking. Maybe it was another retreat.

I looked at the sword at his waist. I'd been curious ever since I'd seen it. "How sharp is it?" I asked, gesturing to his khopesh.

He slipped it out of his belt and swung at an overhanging branch. I thought he'd missed until the rain of cut leaves fell to the ground.

"Nice show. Do you know how to use it on anything besides leaves?" I said, smirking.

He switched grips on the hilt and grinned back. "Try me," he said.

I drew my kodachi. Yami didn't look surprised to see two swords slide out of the sheath. I eyed his weapon again. I wanted to test myself against it. It was distinctive, intriguing. Or maybe it was just that it was so ancient it looked startlingly new. I considered the blade. Anything that curved had to be used for slashing, not thrusting. My kodachi had an advantage there – they could do either. Yami had a small leather wrapped shield. It meant he could only fight one-handed, but it provided more protection than the slim blades of my kodachi. It was like Yami to sacrifice some firepower on the thin thread of defense.

I circled Yami, crouched low, my body bent slightly forward, my kodachi held at my side with the blades pointing behind me. It was a classic opening stance; I could counter an attack from any angle.

Yami took in my posture and laughed. "Do you expect me to believe you're that defenseless?"

My grin widened, showing teeth. I'd forgotten – if you'd never seen how quickly I could bring my swords forward, it looked like my head and torso were unprotected.

"If you think I'm defenseless – try attacking," I said.

"Patience, Kaiba," he replied, still with that same smirk.

I changed my stance, one kodachi held high, the other at chest height for use as my own shield.

"Better?" I asked, neither expecting nor receiving an answer beyond Yami's grin.

I was facing Yami, now. I was tall enough that I probably could have skewered Yami without coming within striking distance of his own sword.

I moved forward instead, until I was close enough to be a tempting target. I wanted to see how Yami fought, how serious he was, to test the limits of his control. He would never strike at me if I were out of reach. If I wanted to see what he was made of, I had to offer something in return.

And I've never minded being a target. Getting tagged was another matter.
Yami moved in. I was right. The blade was made for slashing. But it was time that Yami learned that my kodachi were the equal of any shield. I caught the curved blade of his khopesh against the guard of my own sword and used it to turn his aside. I thrust forward with my other kodachi, intending to stop at the point of contact, but Yami's shield turned my stroke aside.

We were close now. Yami freed his khopesh and swung it at me again. I moved in still closer and turned my kodachi into it, blocking him once again. I took a half step back, careful to stay in range. Yami's eyes were intent now, the way they were on the dueling field. He closed the slight gap I had opened. I circled in response. He was good. It was more than just being well taught or even well coordinated. He'd fought for his life before. Some things can't be counterfeited. I wouldn't mind having him at my back, if it came to that.

But, I'd seen him in enough tight spots to know that I was stronger, my reflexes were quicker. I could have killed him where he stood if that had been my intention. It wasn't. I wanted to show him I could take him without touching a hair on his tri-colored head. It was exciting, trying to win without dying, without killing. And yet, it felt dangerous all the same. Doing anything with Yami made my blood run a little quicker.

Yami's sword had a kink at the hilt. It curved farther than any blade I'd ever seen. His attack had given me the opening I'd been waiting for. If I timed it right I could catch his sword between my own weapons.

I lunged forward, throwing myself towards Yami's still sweeping sword. At the last moment, when it was too late for Yami to react, I crossed my blades, trapping his khopesh. I spun around, my arms inscribing a circle in front of me at the same time as I turned, my coat flaring with my movements. Yami tried to swing his shield into my face, but he was too late.

The force of my spin wrenched his sword out of his grip. It landed on the ground out of reach. I drew my arms back then thrust the kodachi forward again, the blades still crossed until Yami's neck was resting in the vortex of the 'X' my kodachi had formed, one sword edge resting lightly on either side of his slender neck.

Yami's blade was in the dirt. Mine were at his throat, but I still couldn't believe it. I had won. It had taken coming to the after-life to do it, but I had finally beaten Yami at something. I threw back my head and laughed.

"Checkmate," I said.

I looked down at Yami and dropped one sword. I moved in still closer so I could use my left hand to raise his face to mine. I wanted to see him. I wanted to enjoy my victory to the fullest.

It was wonderful. Yami looked frustrated and angry. As I'd hoped, losing bothered him, but he also looked resigned, like it had happened before.

"I never won against Seto either," he said. "Seto was slightly quieter about it, but he took an unseemly delight in besting me as well. I suppose he's laughing at me, too."
"He's aware of what's going on? You can sense his presence?" Yami asked with a hesitancy that had nothing to do with the blade still at his throat.

"It's not like you and Yugi. He can't take over or walk around or anything. He's just here… and barely that. It's like those voices you hear in your head." I wasn't sure though, besides Yugi, how many voices Yami did hear in his head. I shook my own head in frustration at my inability to explain. "I know Seto's there but sometimes I can barely sense him. And he feels like me anyway."

Yami nodded.

"Why?" I asked.

"I would have liked for him to know… I, too, regret I could not find a way around my role as pharaoh and his pride."

It was my turn to nod. "He knows," I said.

"And I thought we had all the time in the world…" Yami finished softly.

"We have until sundown," I reminded him, dropping my remaining sword, to cup his face with my hands instead.

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Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter and listening to me obsess about shield choices (which sounds sexier than it was, since I droned on about actual shields.)

AUTHOR'S NOTES: I have to admit, it's hard writing a Yugi who's both angry and in character. But I think the ceremonial duel pitted two of Yugi's most deeply held beliefs against each other – his desire to help his friends in any way possible – and his belief in life and his sense of hope.

I can see him getting so caught up in the Memory World, and in the ceremonial duel – and with helping Yami – that everything else got swept aside. But afterwards I can see a reaction starting to settle in, and other emotions, including some anger reluctantly start to emerge. I can see those feeling being swept aside again when he has someone to look after or who needs him, but he's really in a place now where he has the time and quiet to listen to his own feelings. It's ironic because earlier in the story he told Yami that now that Yami had his own body it was time for him to figure out who he was and what he wanted – and now it's time for Yugi to follow his own advice.

It's funny, but although a lot of Kaiba's reflections and memories are fairly bitter ones, I also wanted to show that for all their doubts, Yami and Kaiba were enjoying their time together and enjoying each other's company. So I wanted to show them doing something fun. Of course whether play fighting with extremely sharp swords is – or more to the point – should be considered fun, is another matter. But I can also see Kaiba grabbing at a retreat from the intimacy of their conversation into physical activity.

Shield usage: By 1,000 BC, small shields were in use in Egypt, usually made of leather bound wood or bronze. I actually had trouble deciding which to have Yami carry, because bronze sounds more pharaoh-ish. But, although I found this surprising, leather bound wood was harder to pierce, and was lighter than bronze. So you would probably be more likely to want the wood one in battle, especially if you didn't know who you might be fighting or what their weapons were. And since Yami has to carry it a distance, and given his size, after chewing Bnomiko's ear off, I decided wood
was the best choice.
Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

MANGA NOTE: When Yugi first assembles the puzzle, neither he nor his friends realize that Yami has been released from it. Yami himself has no idea who or what he is, and only appears when Yugi or his friends are in danger to challenge the people threatening him to penalty games which cause the people threatening Yugi to lose their sanity and even in some cases, their lives.

Yugi has no memory of these episodes. He has these black-outs, which he is increasingly afraid to question as it becomes clear that he might be somehow responsible for Domino's steadily rising count of people who have mysteriously died or gone insane. Yugi's friends notice a difference when he plays these games, but are afraid to say anything, because each assumes the rest of the gang will think they're crazy, since the idea of there being a second person in Yugi's body is so wild.

It's not until Death-T when Yugi admits to them that he's come to wonder if he has another self, that they put the pieces together and accept that Yami's existence is real. And it's not until months later at Duelist's Kingdom that Yami and Yugi really come to trust and understand each other and form the relationship we think of when we think of Yugi and Yami.

DUELIST'S KINGDOM NOTE: There is also a difference between the dub and manga/anime versions of the Kaiba and Yugi duel at Duelist's Kingdom. In the manga and anime, it is much more strongly implied that Kaiba is either trying to kill himself because of his failure to rescue Mokuba, or at the very least willing to accept death as the price of his failure. When Yugi surrenders, Anzu yells at Kaiba that the most important card he owns is his life card, and Yugi had to protect that card for him because he was willing to throw it away.

CHAPTER 18: CROSSING INTO THE REALM OF CHAOS

Dragons never get a break – not in European-style fairy tales at any rate. Creatures made to challenge the winds are reduced to being humble (or not-so-humble) props, existing only to provide an appropriately terrifying yardstick for the hero to measure his courage by, their heads merely impressive trophies to carry home.

And yet, they resist every effort to contain them, to confine them to the decorative borders of their legends. Let's be honest, who's more memorable – St. George or the dragon? Whose adventures do you really want to hear? Whose silent voice echoes in your ear after the story ends?

One thing nice about growing older is that, provided fairy tales don't slip through your fingers, you find you can hold more of them in your hand. And if tales at home are unsatisfying, one can always
search farther afield for stories where dragons talk, and guide wanderers towards enlightenment (or at least a good inn)... and occasionally turn into off-road vehicles. For if not all dragons are wise, most of them have interesting things to say.

**YUGI'S NARRATIVE**

It was past midnight. I went outside. As I'd expected, Mokuba was there with Kisara. I wondered if I'd done the wrong thing in bringing him to the palace. During the day he seemed happy enough, but most nights found him curled up with Kisara. He always made it back to his room before dawn, so I don't know if anyone else noticed, but it bothered me a little.

I don't know why I was worried, or even why I came out each night to check up on him. I mean, he had a dragon looking after him. But still...

Usually when I came out, they were both asleep. Tonight, only Kisara had her eyes closed. Mokuba was sitting up, leaning against her like she was an overstuffed pillow.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he answered. There was a pause. Mokuba nodded his head towards Kisara. "There's plenty of room for two."

"How are you doing?" I asked as I plopped down next to him.

Mokuba shrugged. "I don't know. Fine, I guess. I just hope he's... they're..."

"They'll be okay, Mokuba," I said.

"I hope so," he said. "It's hard though, having nothing to go on but faith."

"Wasn't faith all you had to go on at Duelists' Kingdom – faith in your brother, Yami and me? And it was all any of us needed."

Mokuba nodded. "You're right. I just need to hear it over and over. It's all right during the day. I'm busy. But at night..."

"They'll be fine," I repeated.

"Yeah. I mean, Nisama can fight like nobody's business. And Yami had that big, fancy sword. I guess he knows how to use it. Besides, if they get jammed up, they have a whole army of Duel Monsters only a wrist flick away."

"I don't only mean physically," I said. I thought back to a conversation I'd had with Kaiba before he and Yami had left. Kaiba had come over to me on one of his rare breaks from trying to target the location of Set's forces. He'd looked even more wound up than usual.

"That girl was right at Duelists' Kingdom," Kaiba said, with the air of a man determined to pay off all his debts.

"Her name is Anzu," I corrected.

Kaiba nodded. "I made my life your responsibility when I gave up on it that day on Pegasus's tower. I should not have put that obligation on you, even by omission. That was not my intent."

"Don't worry about it. It's okay," I told him.
"How can that be okay?" Kaiba asked, irritably.

I sighed. "Look, you've always done what you had to for Mokuba, right? And you never minded. I bet you'd say it was a privilege."

Kaiba nodded, warily.

"So if offering help is a good thing, how can accepting it be bad?"

Kaiba glared. "I don't have an answer for you," he said, managing to sound fierce instead of uncertain. "Perhaps the coming battle will provide one."

I tried to think of what I could tell Mokuba, without giving away a conversation Kaiba might very well have considered to be private.

"Look, I know Yami is going to try and figure out what he wants... if only because I asked him to," I said. "But I think your brother's also ready to deal with whatever's eating him. At least he said he was ready to test things out. Yami and him may butt heads, but I think they'll help each other. They always do."

I jumped up when a loud rumble sounded in my ear. I looked at Kisara's face. I'd thought she was asleep but one blue eye had opened. "He is a dragon. That is our way. How else are beliefs to be tested except through battle?"

"So it's okay if Nisama and Yami kill each other as long as they learn something from it?" Mokuba asked indignantly.

"They will not kill each other. Then they'd have no one left to fight with," Kisara said smugly.

Mokuba rolled his eyes. "Well, if Nisama's a dragon, what does that make Yami?"

"A pharaoh. And they are almost as stubborn, and just as combative."

Even Kisara thought of Yami as a pharaoh. Maybe she was right. I looked around. This was a good place. Yami had friends here. I wouldn't blame him if he decided to stay. Maybe this was where he belonged. Maybe it was his destiny, after all.

As much as I wanted Yami to return, I was getting to be okay with the idea of being by myself. If he came back with us, we'd know how to be friends, now that he wasn't a spirit anymore, now that I wasn't his host. And if he stayed here, I'd carry his memory in my heart, just like I had once carried him.

"Your brother told me when he left that once you set your hand all that's left is to play it out," I said to Mokuba. "But I have to admit, sometimes I wonder if I did the right thing, coming here. Yami was okay with the idea of sacrificing himself, with just sort of going along with the program. So after saying good-bye, who am I to barge in here and tell him he's wrong? Who am I to tell him he has choices?"

"His partner," Mokuba answered. "Isn't that what it's all about? Seeing the stuff he misses? I've always known that my brother needed me. He's a practical guy. He'd never have gone to the lengths he did for something he didn't need. But I couldn't put the pieces together – until Death-T. Until the months afterwards when I sat by his side, talking to him... trying to tie him to me with words... trying to give him something to come back to. As smart as my brother is, there are some things he just can't do for himself. He gets so focused on his goals, his challenges, that he forgets everything... even who he is. Every now and then, he needs someone to remind him."
"Mokuba," I said a little desperately, "How did you manage to forgive your brother?"

He shrugged. "Forgiveness is just a word. I don't even know what it means. I love him, that's all."

"Weren't you mad?" I asked. I understood why he hadn't stayed mad, why even Death-T hadn't broken them apart. They were brothers, and had been through a lot together. But, I was curious. Mokuba had never shown any anger at all, not at Kaiba, anyway.

For the first time, Mokuba looked uncomfortable.

"I can't... I couldn't..." he said. He swallowed, and looked away. I was about to change the subject when he looked back at me and said, "You weren't there before..." he swallowed again and went on, "before Death-T, before Gozaburo, even. Back then, no one wanted me. No one but him. But that was okay because Nisama wanted me more than a home or parents or anything. And you weren't there when we got adopted," he added challengingly. "Do you think he went down without a fight? I'm not dumb. I know Jounouchi and the rest of your gang look at him and see only the way he acts and the stuff he did. But I look at him and see all of it."

"I didn't even know I was mad at Yami until he left with your brother," I said. "I don't want to be. How do you get to be un-mad? I don't know... everything's so strange... this is the first time I've been just me in a while, and I keep thinking about all this stuff that I never thought about before."

"Sometimes it's easier to think when it's quiet," Mokuba said. "Like it was so quiet, that time, in my brother's bedroom, watching him in that coma. You know, until then, I'd never realized that my brother's just five years older than me... not until I stood there staring at him in that wheelchair. He looked so damn, fucking young. Then he woke up."

I nodded. "It's funny. When I first completed the puzzle, I set Yami free, but I didn't even know he was there. He'd take control of my body to protect me, and I thought I was having black-outs." I looked at Mokuba hesitantly. Yami and Mokuba had some history that went back before Death-T, but I'd never known exactly what it was – or wanted to. Mokuba nodded at me and I continued, "But even after I figured it out, even after Death-T, I kept on letting Yami take over, because I assumed he'd be better at it. I always felt guilty, but it wasn't until I got here that I realized why. It wasn't only because he was the one fighting my battles, it was because I let him – like that was the way it was supposed to be, like that was his job. All along, I was his crutch and I never saw it until it was too late."

"It's not too late if he still has a choice," Mokuba said softly.

"One I pushed him into needing to make. Oh well," I sighed. "At least this time I'm pushing him into thinking about himself, not through a door to the after-life."

Mokuba nodded and I let the subject drop. Mokuba didn't need me to tell him that you could love someone without loving every decision they made.

**YAMI'S NARRATIVE**

We had crossed into Set's realm last night. The landscape hadn't changed much. We were still in a sparse forest. But ghostly purple tinged mists swirled around us, giving the woods a haunted look. For all of Kaiba's taunts, the settlement Mahaado and the others had built felt alive. Here for the first time, I felt the chill of the graveyard.

We heard them before we saw them, which wasn't surprising, given the steadily thickening fog. We had thought ourselves relatively safe – nothing could spot us from the air given the almost opaque
mist and the cover the trees provided. But the danger was nearer at hand. Whoever they were, they weren't bothering to move quietly. They were probably bored and not expecting to see anything suspicious – a state of affairs that I hoped would continue unchanged.

Kaiba and I moved as quietly as we could away from the sound of their footsteps, although the fog, while providing cover, made it hard to judge distance or direction. We retreated behind a clump of trees and squatted down, hoping the tall grass would provide whatever screen the mists didn't. Then I saw them, through a break in the trees. They were shadowy, their forms indistinct in the fog, but I could make them out. If Mahaado's information was correct, it was a routine patrol by Set's forces: four underlings, Wandering Mummies this time, and a low level spellcaster.

Kaiba recognized the duel monsters as easily as I. They drifted towards us, trailing linen rags and rotting flesh, their bones showing through the remnants of their skin. They were becoming clearer with each step, or maybe my sight was aided by memory.

"I always pictured them lumbering along brainlessly… sort of like the mutt," Kaiba whispered. "But these guys move well. I bet they're fast. I'll have to update the data for their holograms when I get back."

Kaiba's voice was low in my ear; his lips tickled it. I stifled an impulse to laugh. Kaiba's single-minded earnestness was unintentionally funny, but the situation was too tense for mirth.

"Do you think they're looking for us?" Kaiba added, noting how their dead and staring eyes were scanning the landscape.

I shook my head. "Remember, Mahaado said that when we crossed into Set's domain, we were likely to run into a routine patrol."

"Will anyone be alerted if this group doesn't return?"

I shook my head again. "According to Mahaado, it is a common enough occurrence for patrols to not return. Also they are often out for weeks."

"They have a spellcaster. Isn't he more valuable? Wouldn't he be missed?"

"It's a Zombie Priest," I said thoughtfully, looking at the black-robed figure. "Mahaado said that any monster under five stars is considered expendable. His disappearance wouldn't be noticed. In fact, since he can transport himself at will, Set's general will be more likely to take his absence as a sign that everything is fine. Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"Talk about wishing for luck in a nightmare," Kaiba said as he released his kodachi from their sheath. I drew my own sword in response, and slipped my shield on my left arm.

Kaiba was right not to trust to luck in Set's domain. Whether by accident or design, the mists parted. We were exposed and had little time to act before the spellcaster transported himself to safety – and reported our presence.

Kaiba raced towards them with a yell. I followed, but he outpaced me. Two of the mummies ran forward to meet him. They were armed with swords like mine – only older and more weathered, as if they had lain buried under the sand for millennia. I was doubly glad we had sparred yesterday. At least Kaiba had seen a khopesh in action.

Kaiba reached the nearest Wandering Mummy. He feinted with the kodachi in his right hand, letting his opponent parry his first strike, then quickly thrust home with the blade in his left. The mummy shattered, leaving the field in front of him clear. As I neared the fight, the Zombie Priest raised a
bony hand, pointed at Kaiba and said, "Die, stranger."

"You first," Kaiba snarled back.

Blue fire streaked towards Kaiba from the Priest's fingertips. Kaiba reacted as quickly. He used the kodachi in his left hand as a shield. The smooth surface of the blade deflected the unearthly blue flames to the nearest Wandering Mummy, even as that monster moved forward to block Kaiba from reaching his prey. Risky as it was, Kaiba's move worked. The blue fire meant for Kaiba encircled the mummy, instead. He became invisible in the flare that shot towards the sky. The air was suddenly thick with the pungent smell of charred and rotting flesh, half suffocating me as I tried not to breathe. Then the mummy disappeared, taking those other-worldly flames with him. A clean wind swept through the woods.

I glanced at Kaiba as I tried to plan my angle of attack. I had sparred with him. Now he was fighting in earnest. He was in danger, but for a split second, looking at him, I was mesmerized. Kaiba fought the way he made love – with his whole body, nothing held back. I felt the blood sing in my veins. I was Kaiba's rivals, not these intruders. It was time to remind him, it was time to remind all of them that for today at least, he was mine. It was time to join the party. I circled around to the side to attack the remaining two mummies.

As I approached them, the Zombie Priest began an incantation, his hands flowing like his words, tracing a pattern in the air. But before he could complete his spell, Kaiba was on him, dual kodachi flashing in unison, as he inscribed an 'X' across his enemy's chest. The priest was powerless before Kaiba's onslaught, breaking into a million pieces like his henchman. I smiled with satisfaction at the thought that Kaiba had prevented his escape. Then the two Wandering Mummies facing us seemed to blur. When their outlines became clear, four were standing before us. The Zombie Priest hadn't been trying to escape, but to win. If Kaiba's kodachi had not cut him down in mid-spell, I wondered how many more of his minions we would now be facing.

We had no time to ponder the danger that had been averted, not while danger remained in front of us. I turned towards the Wandering Mummy closest to me. I lunged forward with a yell, swinging my sword, letting my momentum give extra strength to its circular arc. The blade passed cleanly between the monster's head and shoulders. I had a glimpse of his head hitting the ground and rolling, the linen unraveling to reveal his decayed face. Then his body crumpled. It broke apart and dissolved before hitting the ground. I turned. His clone jumped at me, khopesh flashing, ready to cleave flesh from bone. As he soared towards me I ducked, and slashed upward across his chest with my own sword. For a moment I was blinded as the monster shattered around me. Kaiba must have finished off the other two because when I could see again, the space between us was clear.

Our breathing was loud in the sudden silence. Kaiba's hair was plastered to his head, covering even more of his eyes than usual. He was sheathing his kodachi, his movements efficient.

I could hear Mahaado saying, 'Those who fall in battle do not return.' I thought of that last monster. If he had reached me, would I have broken into millions of irretrievable pieces? Would Kaiba? I went to him, ran my hands through his sweat-soaked hair, and pulled his head down to a breath from mine.

"Don't ever shatter," I said.

"I won't," he swore. "And if I do, I'll fight my way back."

He was as reckless as ever with his promises. And yet I felt he'd do just that, whatever barred his way.
The fog rolled back in, bringing the night with it. I dragged Kaiba back to the trees that had provided such scant protection earlier. They were almost invisible now through the mists and the growing darkness. I yanked Kaiba's head down and kissed him with the same ferocity we had just shown fighting side by side.

Kaiba was bent slightly forward. The point where his neck began to rise out from his shoulders was close enough to be a tempting target, or maybe I was confused by the traces of battle that were still pulsing through my veins. Suddenly, I wanted to do what our enemies could not… I wanted to leave my mark on him. I bit him, sucking on the flesh of his neck, worrying it between my teeth. Kaiba groaned in response. We were pressed together. I couldn't resist. I swept one leg out from under him. Kaiba could have evaded me as easily as he had our enemies, and we both knew it, but he let his leg arch, weightless, to the sky. We fell backwards, into the leaves and grass, still clutching each other, undressing each other as we fell.

The battle was over, but Kaiba was no more ready than I to let go of its rush. Although I had swept his leg, by the time we reached the ground, he was the one on top, concentrating on me with the same intensity he had shown in battle.

"I want you to remember being fucked by me for all eternity," Kaiba hissed.

His words, as much as his assault, cleared my mind, before it clouded again with a desire, not for battle, but for Kaiba himself. As much as I loved matching his aggression with my own, that wasn't the prize. Now that I had tasted his blood, I hungered to be part of its rush, to throb in his veins as completely as he was aching in mine.

His lips covered mine once again; his tongue thrust into my mouth. His hands moved down my body, sweeping aside my remaining garments, finding their target as efficiently as his kodachi, until I was arching into him, wanting nothing more than for Kaiba to make love to me.

I looked at Kaiba's eyes, in the instant before he closed them. He was seeing me now, not our enemies, and the heat flowing between us was coming from this moment, not the battle. We didn't need the threat of death to feel alive.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

Maybe my brain had finally turned off or at least gone on stand-by for the night. Because by the time Yami and I hit the ground, the only thought left in my head was how much I wanted this, how much I wanted him. I'd once thought there was nothing better than fighting – that it was the only way to live, the only way to win. At first, feeling Yami's mouth on mine, feeling his body against mine, felt like a continuation of every battle I'd ever fought. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference. Yami was that exciting, and each moan, each gasp, felt like a new challenge. Except this time, the thing fueling me was both sweeter and less familiar than rage.

Yami was the difference, the thing that made this more than just another fight, the thing that made this more than a wet dream looking for a place to happen. Fighting for my life was familiar. Yami kissing me, touching me as if he would never let go, was still surprisingly new. Suddenly, my battle-fury was gone, and I hungered for a different form of passion.

Yami was looking at me like I was the only thing he saw, like he'd forgotten we were headed in two different directions and always had been, like he'd forgotten everything but the feel of my hands on his body.

We were in sync. When we did this, nothing else mattered. It was so easy for me to forget everything but Yami in return, to forget everything but the feel of him surrounding me, drawing me in. All I
wanted was for this to go on forever, even as my body knew better, was straining towards its climax.

Maybe sex with Yami was like fighting after all. It was only afterwards, when I was lying with Yami in my arms that I could think again. I've always been contemptuous of contentment. I figured people at peace had lost their edge, if they'd ever had one in the first place. Or maybe it was just that I've never been good at holding on to that feeling, the few times it had come my way. But then, for all my tenacity, I've never been able to hold on to the things that matter, even when they were clutching me as hard as they could in return, even when they refused to give up.

Like Mokuba.

I'd been so focused on making sure that no one separated us, it had never occurred to me that I'd be the one to let go first. I could remember the day it had started, could see it all clearly through my closed eyes.

I'd felt nothing but triumph that morning, nothing but anticipation of the victory to come. None of that had shown on my face. Instead, I stood still while one of the residential aides at the orphanage fluttered around me. I made a point of never learning their names. None of them stayed that long anyway, and the ones that did were inevitably the worst of the bunch. I scowled thinking of how Mokuba would get to like them and then cry when they moved on – until he finally wised up to the fact that we were just a job to them.

I wiped the frown off my face before she noticed. I was on my best behavior today. Nothing was going to interfere with my plan. Luckily she was too busy clucking over my hair to notice my face. I liked it long, the bangs covering my eyes. That bothered them for some reason, although they cooed over Mokuba's even longer mane.

"Stand still!" she ordered, brushing my hair off my face. I tolerated it. "We have an important visitor coming today," she went on. As if I didn't already know that. As if they hadn't been talking about it all week. As if I wasn't counting on it.

I looked at her, my face politely interested.

"Don't you smirk at me," she said. "Behave yourself today. No back talk, no smart answers. If he notices you, just smile and say thanks. Do you think a genius like you can manage that?"

I nodded and put on my nicest smile, hoping she wouldn't call it a smirk, again. I didn't want her to decide to punish me by denying me the opportunity to be patted on the head and given a toy by an important man like Gozaburo Kaiba. If I had anything to say about it, she'd regret her generosity in allowing me to stay – but by then it'd be too late.

She looked down at my brother and her mouth quirked into a genuine smile. "I never have to worry about you, my little pet," she said to Mokuba. "He's so adorable," she added to one of the other aides as she walked away.

She was right. Mokuba was perfect. But no one had stopped to look at him long enough to realize that – or to want to take him home with them. So now it was up to me to get us that home I'd promised him – the biggest and the best in Domino. And I was about to deliver, big time.

Gozaburo was perfect. He was the answer to my prayers – not that I believed in anyone or anything anymore enough to pray to it. It wasn't just that I knew I could take Gozaburo down. That was only half the game. I'd studied all his moves, not just the ones he made on the chessboard.

I grinned. If the aide had seen it, she'd have been justified in calling it a smirk. I was going to
challenge Gozaburo to a chess game on my terms and for my stakes – for a home for Mokuba and me. I had it all figured out. Anyone else would pat my head, smile, and walk away. But Gozaburo would say 'yes' instead. He'd want to crush me for daring to challenge him. He was arrogant and he liked putting people down. That was about to cost him.

I could taste it. I had him beat before we began, and the old fool wouldn't know what hit him, wouldn't know how badly I'd played him until it was too late. I had no doubt he'd pay up when he lost. His pride wouldn't let him go back on our deal. Besides, the only way he could get a rematch was if he adopted us. It was a fool-proof plan.

He didn't look like he'd be nice, and nothing in my research had indicated a softer side. But that was okay. The few nice people I'd met had been a distraction. In the end I hadn't been able to guilt or con them into taking the two of us. So this would work. It had to.

I felt Mokuba tug on my arm. I looked down.

"You sure, Nisama?" he asked, hesitantly.

"Absolutely," I answered, hoping he couldn't hear how fast my heart was beating, as the staff lined us up. The guest of honor had arrived. There would be a presentation of his donation to the orphanage and some speeches. Then, although no one knew it yet, it would be time for Gozaburo and me to play chess.

"I love you," Mokuba said.

It was all I needed to hear, the thing that kept me going. I smiled and put my hand on his shoulder. Mokuba wrapped his arms around my waist. The sight and feel of him steadied me. With him at my side, how could I fail?

Yami stirred in my arms, drawing me back to the present.

"It's strange… it's only now, with you, that I've become used to being alone," Yami said, his voice breaking into my thoughts. "You weren't there for the final duel. I was truly myself… truly separate. I was in my own body… in this body. It felt so strange. Like it wasn't real, like it shouldn't be happening. It didn't feel like a gift. Without Yugi, nothing seemed to matter. For the first time in millennia I had a body, but I didn't feel solid. I felt like a leaf that could be tossed by any stray wind."

I thought about that, thought about myself lying night after night in that small orphanage bed, with Mokuba in my arms. I thought about how he was all I needed, and how quickly, how easily I had forgotten. I'd gotten distracted with so many things… with proving myself, with beating Gozaburo at his own game… I'd forgotten winning had been a way to keep us safe, not an end onto itself. And each distraction had taken me farther and farther from Mokuba, farther and farther from myself – until Yami had shattered my heart back to its foundations. I'd never asked Yami why he hadn't killed me at Death-T. I didn't want to hear that he'd pitied me.

Even when I had had something as rock solid as Mokuba's love to hold onto, I hadn't recognized it, had treated it as though it was just another fickle wind, as Yami had said. Is there a surer way to guarantee a lifetime of doubt than to refuse to recognize certainty when it stares you in the face?

I wanted Mokuba. I wanted to ask him how the hell he'd managed to forgive me. He'd probably tried to tell me before, but I'd been too busy running from his words to listen.

"It's easier than you'd think to lose sight of yourself." I told Yami. I shrugged. "At least you didn't take anyone else down with you. Even here, you wound up ahead of the game."
Yami smiled. "That's probably the most forgiving thing I've ever heard you say."

"I've been there. It makes a difference," I answered.

That got Yami to look at me, even though there wasn't much to see in the darkness and fog that was still swirling around us.

"What is it, Kaiba?" Yami asked. "Why do I get the feeling, Set's minions are not the only thing you've been fighting on this journey?"

"You're not the only one to have your memories handed back to you," I replied shortly.

"You can't defeat a memory, Kaiba. You can only listen to it. What are yours telling you?"

"To keep fighting," I said. "That no decision is final. No victory, no defeat. There are some battles that must be re-fought endlessly. Gozaburo won. He turned me into everything he desired. That was his victory. But I couldn't let it stand. And yet I can't undo it either, or pretend it never happened. Just like I may never be able to hold onto the crucial things in my life, but I'll never stop trying."

I leaned down to kiss him, to hold him in my hands, once more.

Thanks to Bnomiko for listening patiently as I dithered about what kind of duel monsters Kaiba and Yami should fight. And thanks to the gang at the Pharaoh's Palace chat for adding to my knowledge of dragons.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: It's funny, but when you write a fight followed by a love-making scene, you have to make some of the oddest decisions. The first question was what duel monsters would Kaiba and Yami face. I mean, since the implication was they had an adrenaline rush from the fight which carried over into the romance part of the chapter, I decided whatever they fought couldn't be human or look too sympathetic. I mean there'd just be something wrong if they got turned on by killing the Celtic Guardian. Every kind of animal from alligators to zebras are in one card or another, but that would feel a bit too much like killing a real animal – to me if not to them. So I settled on mummies – which fit the bill by being vaguely humanoid, but being sort of non-human. Then I had to pick the specific mummies – and believe me if there's one thing Duel Monsters has plenty of, it's mummy cards. I was tempted by Poison Mummy since it has these cool robes, but I liked the name Wandering Mummy too much – since they're wandering around on patrol I just couldn't resist the pun.

Mokuba Note: One thing that's always struck me is not just the way Mokuba forgives Kaiba, but the way he never seems to hold it against him or want anything but the best for Kaiba. I think part of it is that he's very much aware that however insanely dangerous Kaiba became, he began that road with the best of intentions. I think Mokuba might feel it was disloyal to even think badly of Kaiba. I also think though, that part of it is that Kaiba has been the one constant in Mokuba's life, the one person who has (with the admittedly large lapse of Death-T) consistently valued him above everything, and made him feel valued. So I think it would be hard for Mokuba to be angry with Kaiba, I think that would be frightening to him, and something he'd shy away from even in his thoughts.

Title Note: Set has been identified as the God of a variety of things, including darkness, change, foreigners, deserts and chaos.
The Universal Anodyne

Chapter Notes

Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's a poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.

MANGA NOTE: Since the anime focuses mainly on the game of Duel Monsters, it's easy to assume that that's the only game Yugi, or more to the point, Yami knows. But in the manga, Yami plays all kinds of games for over a year before the Duel Monsters storylines get established. In fact they make the point that if it can be framed as a game or a challenge, Yami can instantly (and magically) absorb the rules and strategy well enough to play and win.

CHAPTER 19: THE UNIVERSAL ANODYNE

Dragons may be powerful, and unicorns, eternal, but in fairy tales, the thing that trumps them all is true love's first kiss. And no matter how many times or ways we hear it, we're always hungry for the next version, greedy for the moment when two people look into each other's eyes and the world stops… or at least goes on vacation.

Even when we're old enough to know better, even when we do know better, even when we know that last year's soul mate is this year's ex-lover, even when we know that even if true love lasts as true love is meant to there will still be sunrises when the first thing that greets you will not be the look in your lover's eyes, but their morning breath… even then, we still listen to the same story told over and over in different ways. And we always believe.

It's a victory of romance over logic. And yet, in its own way, that makes sense. For there's nothing logical about the way your breath catches when you glimpse your lover's cheek as the dawn creeps through the window shades, when you watch as their face becomes more distinct in the growing light – and suddenly find, regardless of morning breath, that your own breath has been stolen away by how precious the sight is. And no matter how many times in your life the sun has risen on this same scene, no matter how many tasks await the moment when it climbs above the window sill, suddenly this moment is happening for the first time all over again. And you sit there wondering, are all those stories about true love's kiss a lie? Or is it as eternal as a unicorn, after all?

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

It was lunch time, after a fashion. I was glad of the rest and even gladder of the smell of roasted rabbit. We carried provisions, of course – dried fruit and meat mixed with grain to form a hard flat traveler's bread. Kaiba looked on it with disdain. It wasn't the bread's almost complete lack of taste that offended him. But it was too sustaining and stayed fresh for too long to be quite real; it was another reminder of what he termed "video-game bullshit." It had become a ritual. Every time Kaiba
took a bite, he muttered, "I'm waiting for my life bar to increase."

Whether it would have lasted our entire journey was debatable. We wouldn't have starved to death or come close, but we probably would have had some hungry days. Luckily we were able to supplement our food supply with freshly caught meat – when we could risk the fire to cook it on.

I doubt Kaiba noticed, his mind didn't work that way, but I couldn't help but observe that whenever I was worried about supplies, or hungered for something beyond our flat traveler's bread, a rabbit or vole or some other woodland creature would bound out of the trees. It was similar to the way we would find a water hole or spring just after our water-skins were empty, and we had learned to fear thirst.

I didn't mention it. We had more fruitful topics for argument. And in case the fresh meat (not to mention the water) was a gift, I didn't want Kaiba's viper's tongue to offend the giver.

I hadn't realized Kaiba had packed shuriken, but given his skill at throwing cards, I wasn't surprised he knew how to use them, at least well enough to bring down small prey, although he was more adept with his kodachi. The fact he could start a fire and cook seemed more out of place, but I suppose in his mind it came under the heading of 'survival skills'.

"It's strange," I said, after we were done eating, "to be together for this long, and not to be able to duel." We couldn't duel even as a pastime. To do so would summon the monsters in reality and betray our presence to Set's minions.

Kaiba nodded. "Even fucking you doesn't make up for it," he said.


We were in yet another graveyard, under a beech tree. Kaiba and I hid all traces of our fire. Kaiba brushed at the leaves on the ground, then picked up the largest and turned it over in his hands. His grin widened and he started folding it, finally sitting again and setting it down in front of him. He grabbed another leaf and folded it as quickly.

I sat down as well to get a better look at the two folded leaf figures. They were facing me. One seemed to have horns and an axe, another a man's torso resting on a horse's body and four legs.

"Battle Ox and the Mystic Horseman?" I asked, laughing.

"In attack mode," Kaiba replied, seriously.

I should have known. For all his creativity, Kaiba was not a fanciful man, nor a playful one. His challenge was in earnest. That changed matters. I was more than ready to match him.

Kaiba had probably thought in terms of angles and planes and geometry. That was his language, not mine. But I was relieved to find that didn't matter. This was a game, and I was still, despite my loss to Yugi, the King of Games. My skills hadn't abandoned me.

A leaf fell in front of me, as though trying to attract my attention. It had gone slightly rotten, was covered with brown spots. I picked it up, instantly knowing the creature it was destined to become, and knowing as well just how to twist and fold it to create its form. My fingers moved as smoothly, as easily as Kaiba's had. When I finished, Kaiba studied the open-mouthed head, the serpentine body.

"Curse of Dragon?" he asked.
"With 2000 attack points – more than a match for either of your monsters."

"You forgot polymerization," he said, combining his two leaf monsters quickly. "Rabid Horseman," he said, setting down his new monster. The stem of one leaf was now pointing forward like a lance. Kaiba gestured to it and added, smirking, "And by using 'The A Force' I can increase his attack points to 2,200."

For an instant I had an image of Kaiba calling his Ultimate Dragon into being for the first time. This is when Kaiba felt most alive to me: when he was reinventing his world.

I took another leaf and quickly placed it over my dragon's head. "Mask of Brutality. It gives my dragon 1,000 extra attack points, more than enough to overwhelm your Rabid Horseman."

It was odd. For once I had no idea what we were dueling over. Neither did Kaiba. He was as used to attaching meaning to our duels as I. And yet, that didn't seem to matter. Yugi had always referred to dueling as "fun." Now, for the first time, I had a glimpse of what he might mean.

"Not so fast," Kaiba said. He leaned forward and blew on my monster, his breath whistling slightly through his teeth. The mask fluttered to the ground, delicately as a leaf. "De-spell," he said as his hand came down, smashing my Curse of Dragon flat. "I believe that encounter was mine."

I watched him crush my monster, entranced by this new game. We could create any monster we could imagine, but we were constrained by the need to have our creations stand up to the elements – whether the breeze was created by the wind, or each other's breath. I admired how easily Kaiba could bend the rules to suit his needs.

But I didn't need to look at his face to know that he was gloating. I picked up a handful of leaves and threw them at him, watched as a couple landed, their bright green contrasting with his chestnut hair. "That was just the first round," I said. "I still have 3,800 life points left. You haven't won yet."

**MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE**

We were sitting by the fountain.

"It's cool seeing all of this," I said, gesturing towards the town. "Knowing that it's real. That it's not just something he made up."

"Who?"

"Pegasus. I never got how Nisama and Yugi and the rest of them could get so hyped up over a game created by someone so evil. It's not like they didn't know. I hated that something Nisama loves so much had anything to do with that man. But it doesn't. Not really. Pegasus just stole the idea, like he did everything else."

"He gave us a portal to view your world," she said quietly.

"Believe me, he didn't do it for you. He's a total bastard. I hate him."

Mana didn't say anything. She just reached out and touched my hand.

"He used to come to the house while Nisama was designing that first duel chamber for him," I told her. "Pegasus would usually stop by to see me too. We'd play different games. He'd even let me pick
out the game. I couldn't figure out why he wasted his time on me. Most of Nisama's business associates just ignored me."

I chose Capsule Monster Chess of course. It was the game I knew best. I was doing pretty well until Pegasus said, "Does your brother know that you cheat?"

I stuck on my most contrite look. I cheated all the time. Getting caught was another matter. It wasn't that I cared about winning – but I was trying to show my brother I was just as tough and as smart as he was – and getting caught wasn't the way to do it.

"Are you going to tell him? I asked Pegasus in my most innocent voice.

"Why would I do that? Anything worth having is worth cheating for. I wonder though, does your brother let you cheat when you play him?" he asked, still in that same damn over-friendly voice.

"I would never cheat when I play Nisama!"

"Ahhhh… that is devotion. And does your brother return the favor?"

"My brother doesn't cheat!"

"Such loyalty. It's precious in one so young. I wonder where you learned it. I doubt it was from Kaiba…” he drawled.

I kept quiet. It was one of the things we never talked about. And I knew I wasn't supposed to say anything to strangers.

Pegasus went on still in that sing-song voice, "No, I didn't suppose so. I wouldn't have said that Kaiba was capable of feelings of loyalty or devotion, myself."

"You don't know shit! My brother loves me more than anything! Why do you think he did all this?" I screamed, because I was afraid everything Pegasus had said was coming true. It wasn't until I saw him smile, and heard him murmur, "So delightfully innocent," that I realized how badly I'd been tricked.

"You're not getting away with this! Whatever you're planning, I'm telling Nisama!"

"What will you tell him, I wonder? That I caught you cheating like a child, and you babbled about your brother's devotion to you?"

I glared at him. He'd won and we both knew it.

"Believe me, my unruly infant – there's no one who knows more of love than I, who knows all the things it can make a man do. The question isn't whether you can survive being blessed with such an emotion – it's whether you would wish to."

"If you hurt Nisama, I'll make you pay."

"I would have said that your brother was fairly impervious, myself… but perhaps you know him better. But you and your brother are only the means to an end." Pegasus looked at me and smiled. "You didn't really tell me anything I didn't already know in my heart. Your brother is searching for power, and love's the most powerful force on Earth. Besides, when you've lived with it as long as I have, you can recognize the same soul searing devotion in others. I just wasn't sure of the object." He laughed. "Don't worry. I promise you, my pet – I would never do anything to your brother, I haven't experienced myself."
"I didn't tell Nisama," I told Mana. "I didn't know what to say and there wasn't time. A week later he was in a coma. Three months later, Pegasus had me kidnapped. I hate him."

She bit her lip. It was freaky the way she wasn't saying anything.

"He used to sit there and tell Nisama he'd drawn those dragons for him, that they belonged together. He knew Nisama wanted to hear that more than anything. The bastard played us but good."

Mana still didn't answer and her silence was starting to bug me. It was like she didn't understand what I was saying.

"You don't know what it was like, being trapped in a card like that. It wasn't anything like being here." I waved my arm at the fountain and the town. "It was pitch black. I couldn't move. I didn't have a clue where I was or how long I'd been there. The only thing I knew was that my brother was counting on me, and there was nothing I could do to save him. I'd never felt helpless before, because I'd always had Nisama. Then I realized that he'd never had anyone – not the way I had him. I bet the way I felt then, is the way he feels all the time. And when Nisama needed me, I wasn't there. He woke up from a coma and found me gone! I'll never forgive Pegasus for that. Never!"

I expected her to agree. But she was still quiet. I kept getting louder with each sentence, as if my words could make up for her silence.

"What's your problem?" I finally snapped.

"If I was you, I'd hate Pegasus too," she said. I glared at her. I should have known she was too good to be true. I was about to storm off, but she tightened her hand on my arm and leaned into me. She smelled good. That confused me. I was mad at her – why was I noticing what she smelled like? Her face was so close to mine it was hard to focus on it. Her eyes were shiny like she was about to cry. She looked that upset.

"I get how you feel. Honest," she said. "But that's not the Pegasus I know. And, even for you, I can't hate the man who gave me freedom, who gave me a life beyond this place, a way to see a whole new world – even if only through a card's eyes."

I looked away. I wasn't sure what to say.

"And he was right about your brother's dragons, too," she added. "They really are bound to each other. How can you doubt that, now that you've met Kisara?"

I looked at her again. I'd never thought of it that way before. Everything hadn't been a lie.

**YUGI'S NARRATIVE**

I knew Mokuba and Mana hung out at the fountain a lot. But, if I'd known what they were going to be doing there, I wouldn't have walked in on them (not that they noticed me). I was glad I hadn't missed it though, because it was pretty funny.

Mokuba and Mana were kissing.

Badly.

It took them like three tries to get their noses out of the way, and then a few more attempts to figure out how to get their lips aligned. By the time they finally got the hang of it, they were either surprised at their own success, or they'd forgotten to breathe, because they broke apart and had to start the whole thing all over again.
It's not often I get to feel cool by comparison. I can't pretend I've gotten much practice – but I've never looked that dumb, either. At least I hoped not…

They finally stopped, and sat there staring at each other. I took a step backwards, hopefully out of their line of sight, intending to give them some privacy, or at least get out of there before they noticed me. I was glad I hadn't laughed when I heard a voice behind me say, "The whelp…"

It was Mahaado. I hadn't heard him come up behind me. And Mokuba and Mana wouldn't have noticed a bomb going off.

"You were aware of this?" he asked me, angrily.

I shook my head. "Not until a minute ago. It makes sense when you think about it."

"Must he infect everything?" he hissed.

"Mokuba?" I asked, startled. "He's a nice kid. Really. And he's only thirteen."

"She is fourteen. And she will be hurt when he leaves."

It was funny. Mana couldn't hear us. But just then she said, "I'm always going to look fourteen. But I'm not fourteen anymore, and I haven't been for quite a while. Nothing stands still… even here."

"I know just what you mean," Mokuba said. "I've always been 'Kaiba's kid brother' to everybody. And I'll probably still be calling him Nisama even when we're both doddering old men. But one day I'm going to look at him, and the name that'll come into my mind will be 'Seto,' even if I never use it." He stood up. "Come on, I'll walk you home."

"You don't have to," she said. But she was smiling.

Mokuba rolled his eyes at that. "I know I don't have to… stupid."

She smacked him at that, and they took off running back to the palace. I was just glad it was in the opposite direction.

"I don't think you have that much to worry about," I said to Mahaado. "They're kids."

"She is still my charge. I will always have something to worry about," he replied soberly.

**YAMI'S NARRATIVE**

Whether this was an idyll or the unlocking of a second destiny, I would treasure the memory of this time through my life and beyond.

It had been good to duel again, even with leaves. I had beaten Kaiba at lunchtime. We had duelled again this evening, but the wind had called a halt to our match. Neither of our monsters could withstand its pressure. It was night now. Kaiba had planned to keep the first watch, but we had made love and the shift had fallen to me by default.

I liked the night. I enjoyed its silence and the way the changing mists hid and revealed the moon and stars in turn, as if the sky and earth were playing a game.

How old was I, I wondered? The sixteen years I had lived as a pharaoh? The millennia I had spent unaware of the passage of time in my puzzle? The two years I had lived as a part of Yugi?

Awake, Kaiba seemed as old as I. Asleep, he seemed as young. Seeing him, with the moonlight
glinting off the planes of his face and his wiry muscles, he seemed almost as wraith-like as I. I resisted the urge to touch him, to reassure myself of the only thing that seemed real to me in this unreal world we were wandering through – his body. But Kaiba was asleep, and I did not want to wake him. I had seen how hard he fought just to doze in my presence. I wasn’t used to standing by while someone I cared about struggled futilely. But a pretence of ignorance was the only help I could offer that Kaiba would accept.

Yugi had told me to make my own decisions. Kaiba had ranted of free will. But I would not have chosen to feel this helpless longing to protect someone as defiantly self-destructive as Kaiba. It was too late. It had probably always been too late… from the moment I had first laid eyes on my cousin, 3,000 years ago… from the moment when Kaiba had grinned as he had taken a seat across from me and accepted a penalty game, 3,000 years later.

I enjoyed watching him sleep, and felt a certain rush of accomplishment. I loved knowing he felt this safe.

The moon was just past full. I had never noticed before; Kaiba’s left collarbone had a slight chink in it, as though the bone had been broken and badly reset. I closed my eyes, remembering my High Priest, remembering when that same bone had snapped, 3,000 years ago. We had been fighting a bandit troop. I remembered the heavy mace crashing down on Seto, missing his head, but sweeping him from his horse. I remembered seeing him disappear in a tangle of hooves and dust… certain that I would never again see the man who would never be my lover… certain that I had lost my last chance to make him mine. And yet, I was the one who had died young. I was the one who had left him.

I looked at Kaiba, at the scar that skidded diagonally over his ribs. It looked worse than it was. I smiled, remembering the day that my High Priest had earned an almost identical one.

We had been learning to wield a sword. Seto kept charging in. He always took the proverb, ‘the best defense is a strong offense’ a little too literally. Finally, either in exasperation at his stubbornness, or realizing that Seto would never learn except through experience, the weapons master had slashed him across the ribs. It had been a thin cut, but as Seto had grown taller, it had stretched a little.

This scar looked just as old, had widened just the same distance. I wondered if it had been earned in what passed for Kaiba’s childhood. Forgetting my earlier resolution, I ran my finger along its smooth surface. Kaiba jerked awake, body alert, eyes wary. He grabbed my arm and dragged me off balance.

"I didn't mean to wake you. Seto had just such a scar," I said, nodding my head towards his side.

"Training scar," Kaiba said briefly, before letting go of my wrist and closing his eyes once more.

"Training scar?" I asked, confused between present and past.

"Gozaburo wanted my reflexes battle-sharp. Trust me – they are – even when I haven't gotten what you would consider a sufficient amount of sleep."

"I never doubted you."

Kaiba grimaced at that.

"Do you remember Alcatraz?" I asked. "I put your card in my deck without needing to see it; trusting not just your integrity, but your skills. I trusted you with Yugi’s life and my own – and despite what you may think, it is of value to me."
Kaiba opened his eyes again. "You harp on sleep each night. It was a logical conclusion to draw."

"But wrong, nonetheless. I have seen the proof of your worth as a comrade, whatever the endeavor, whatever the fight."

Kaiba grunted, but did not answer. As he lay there, shining faintly silver in the moonlight, like his dragon, he looked almost as unreal as a Duel Monster. It struck me that in some ways he fit this world with its continual battles better than I. Was it wrong to take comfort in the thought that he was resilient enough to handle whatever the future brought?

And yet, for all his fierceness, he was fragile as well, wearing his vulnerability like an invisible trench coat that only I could see. For me, tenderness was the spark to desire. I reached out to cup one lean cheek, to brush his lips with my own. Perhaps Kaiba was right in this: there are things more essential than sleep.

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Thanks to Bnomiko: Is it a good or bad sign that I have now forgotten what I was whining about this chapter… oh yes… what small animal they should eat!

REVIEW NOTE: I think I forgot to include this in the last couple of chapters, but I reply to all signed reviews or reviews that have an email address directly. I reply to all unsigned reviews and post a summary of all replies on my LJ. The link is the first one on my Biopage. I generally post replies there when I update the next chapter.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: Well, I guess this is as close as I get to fluff… It's funny, but it took me a while to think about the fact that they can't draw their cards without attracting Set's notice and wonder what that might mean to them personally.

At first I was more caught up with making sure that they didn't draw their cards for any reason. Then I thought about what that might mean to them personally. I think Yami could use the break to sort out his feelings since Mahaado's actual presence, for example, is a reminder of the decision he still has to make. But I could see Kaiba, having had Kisara's presence as a way to relax enough to sleep, suddenly finding in her absence it was once again hard to relax enough to sleep in Yami's presence… and then gradually, unconsciously, accepting Yami as a substitute. I think in many ways it's a greater sign of intimacy and trust that Kaiba could sleep in Yami's presence, than for Kaiba to sleep with him.

And embarrassing as it is to admit, it took even longer for me to think about what it would mean to them as duelists for them not to be able to use their decks.

Ironically, although Yami is someone bemused by the thought that no meaning is attached to this duel, I think getting the sense of what playing for the sheer pleasure of it is meaning enough for any duel.

Mokuba Note: Usually Duelists' Kingdom and Pegasus's sealing the Kaiba brother's souls in playing cards is told from the point of view of what it means to and for Kaiba. But Mokuba got as tangled in Pegasus's plan as is older brother, and was also trapped in some kind of limbo state (although the manga makes it clear Mokuba was unaware of what had happened to Kaiba) so I wanted to look at those events from his point of view.

I also liked the idea that the end result of releasing all those emotions and being able to talk to someone about what had happened was a kiss.
In the almost-ooops-department: I had it totally fixed in my head that The Rabid Horseman had 2,200 attack points, which would have made a match-up with Curse of Dragon work. Except he only has 2,000, the same as Curse of Dragon… which was when I started to frantically search for a card or image that would not require an extra leaf, but which would give the Rabid Horseman a bit more bite, which is where the spell card, 'The A Force' came in. I didn't want to change the monsters used, because I liked the idea they were both using sort of foundation monsters from their decks.

Title Note: There are some words I just love the sight and sound of, and "anodyne" is one of them. An anodyne is something that soothes, comforts or alleviates pain. It was also the "Word of the Day" on June 28, 2000. Go Anodyne! Sorry if that sounds a bit silly, but (aside from the fact I can be very silly) it's great to get to use one of my all-time favorite words in a title.
**Awakenings: Rude and Gentle**

**Chapter Notes**

*Please let me know what you think. I've always felt (there's poem that said this) that until it's been read, a story is just ink on a page – so I'd like to hear from you.*

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**CHAPTER 20: AWAKENINGS: RUDE AND GENTLE**

Fairy tale characters live in a magic world where unicorns and dragons are as common as cows, where pigs can fly and it literally rains cats and dogs. They live in a world where anything is possible, yet all they want to do is break the spell.

Well, maybe Aladdin was okay with his endless wishes, but think of Beauty and the Beast or Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, instead. The message is clear and clearly daunting: "Enchantments are dangerous. It's time to wake-up."

For a prince trapped in the body of a beast, the desire to escape the fantasy that had become his reality is understandable. But what of Sleeping Beauty? Who knows what her dreams were? What if they were more splendid than the life she had known – even as a king’s pampered daughter? And what if she was awakening, not to a prince and her happily ever after, but to Cinderella's harried, bleak, pre-slippered existence? Would awakening still be a joyous event? Or would it come, not with the swan-softness of true love’s kiss, but with the shock of a glass of ice water thrown in her face?

And maybe the most persuasive, the most seductive fairy tales are the ones we tell ourselves...

**YAMI'S NARRATIVE**

The landscape became more disorienting the further we moved into Set's domain. We strode through graveyards and picked our way through bleak marshes. The fog grew thicker and more omnipresent, as though the land was hiding itself from our view. Even our voices were muffled... when we spoke. Kaiba had lapsed into a brooding silence. He was scanning the fog, senses obviously on alert; but increasingly I had the sense that a larger part of him was off on some internal journey, as well as the one by my side.

Then again, the same was true for me.

I wished Yugi was here. He understood how to live better than either Kaiba or myself. Maybe that was why he had declined to come... why he had left me with Kaiba, who was as inexperienced at living as I.

When he had faced Exodia that day, Kaiba had not just given me a choice. He had given me something even more precious – he had given me his struggle... a battle he faced every day, a battle
where victory was in the struggle itself.

Part of me would always be the pharaoh – the perfect King of Games. I had thought my life was a story which had reached the perfect ending… until Yugi had asked me how death could ever be 'happily ever after.' Perfection is death. Life is a far messier affair – and I would have to let go of one if I was to try to grasp the other.

I thought of Kaiba saying there were worse things than loss.

"If there truly are worse things than loss, I fear to discover them too late," I murmured. My voice sounded alien in the fog.

"Having nothing to lose is worse," Kaiba startled me by answering. "By the time we met, I was trying to cut every tie. I saw every obligation as a chain that could only slow me down. I was wrong, some things are crucial. One must always be prepared to face their loss, but one should never invite it."

Kaiba lapsed back into silence. I had once wondered if Kaiba's body was a tether that would haul me back to his world. Now I realized the opposite was true. It was I who was reluctant to become another binding on someone who held his life so loosely. And yet, were we not already bound to each other? Was that not the nature of life? Nothing defines us so closely as the people we value. If I truly valued friendship and even love, why was I denying them now?

My memories had been all I had wanted ever since I had gained enough awareness to feel my own emptiness, ever since I had learned to measure my own lack against the fullness of Yugi's life. I now had what I had once craved: a clearly defined place in a world that never changed. I had gotten my memories back, but in a truer sense they were not mine, and never would be again. My memories were eternal, but I was different. My memories were those of a semi-divine pharaoh… but I was human.

And confused, my thoughts as insubstantial and as annoying as the fog. I tripped over a root, regained my footing.

"It's unsettling not having a clear path to follow," I said.

I barely caught Kaiba's grunt.

"It's fitting though, I suppose," I added. "When you are following a path of your own devising, you can never see too far ahead along the road."

"Are we talking about this damn fog, or something even more surreal?" Kaiba asked.

"Both," I laughed. "This can't be a coincidence."

Kaiba groaned. "If there's anything worse than having to wade through this shit, it's having to listen to you talk about destiny while I'm doing it."

After his earlier honesty, Kaiba was feeling the need to retreat. But I felt an opposing urgency, an awareness that time was passing, for all that we were trying to ignore its rush.

"Look at us, Kaiba – you having your past confront you after burying it for so many years – me struggling to find a future I'd never believed in – and here we are stumbling through a fog to find a hidden fortress. How can you deny the only thing in this murk that is staring us in the face?"

Kaiba snorted. "Coincidence. The prize in a video game is never self-enlightenment."
"I'm serious. Call it what you will. It's real." As if to underscore my words, the mists surrounding us got even thicker. I could hear Kaiba cursing at my side. I could barely manage to make out him looking at his compass again. He checked the map against it, and altered our direction slightly.

"At least the compass is still functional," he said.

"This is a game to Set," I reminded him. "If we didn't have a fair chance at winning, what would be the point of playing?"

Kaiba nodded. "Everything runs on its own internal logic – and this world seems to be emulating a video game. So I guess it makes as much sense as anything else that maps and compasses would be allowable items. Yugi had a point," Kaiba conceded with some annoyance. "He said that fairy tales were just crude templates for video games."

"Yugi said that?" I asked. It didn't sound like Yugi, but I assumed that Kaiba had translated whatever Yugi had actually said into his own terms.

"Yeah. It's funny. It's easy to overlook Yugi – it's like he comes with his own camouflage. But he's more formidable than he looks."

"You don't think we look alike?" I asked curiously.

Kaiba snorted again. "Not even close."

We kept walking. I bit back a smile. Clearly video games were not the only things to operate according to their own internal logic.

**KAIBA'S NARRATIVE**

The closer we got to the site, the thicker the purple mists got. Soon they were thick enough to hide an army, much less a castle. But they hid us as well, as we moved unnoticed through Set's territory, drawing closer to his lair with each step.

"This is the problem with defense. If you rely on it to protect you, it leaves you blind as well," I observed.

"Neither offense nor defense can stand alone. Like a deck, they must be in tune with one another," Yami said.

Before I could reply, we caught a break. Someone or something must have discovered a need for clear weather, or maybe there was just a lapse in their concentration, because the fog suddenly disappeared. I'm sure Yami thought it was fate. I thought it'd be funny, if we spied them because the person responsible for keeping the mists going had taken a break to piss.

We raced up the hill we'd been climbing, eager for our first glimpse of the landscape in days. I fished my telescope (which seemed to be another allowable item) out of my pack. The site was large enough to be seen clearly, even from a distance, but the magnification would come in handy for scoping out the details. I relayed the information to Yami so he could copy as much data as possible before the mists closed around us again: how many square blocks the encampment had, how many buildings, how many people (or Duel Monsters) they could hold. There didn't seem to be any dragon sized aeries – which meant that all the dragons seemed to be on our side. Ironically though, the only dragon that looked like it would have felt right at home was Yami's Curse of Dragon.

There was a huge pyramid stuck right in the middle of the site. A couple of Necros Soldiers were standing guard by the door. "What gives? I thought those things were tombs," I muttered to myself,
wondering why one was smack in the center of town, instead of in a valley outside where it was supposed to be. That annoyed me. If you're going to bother recreating an ancient capital and army headquarters, why not get the details right? Not that it mattered. It was obvious that any place this big had to be their base of operations.

I scowled. I had seen something else, just as clearly as the base camp below us, and just as unwelcome: Yami and my time together would soon be over. We had a battle to fight, then we'd be going our separate ways.

I'd prided myself on being an adult from the time I'd first gained an awareness of the world. And here I'd been caught playing the oldest, stupidest child's game of all: let's pretend. Let's pretend Yami's not dead. Let's pretend this will never end. Let's pretend you don't know what's coming next.

There's nothing more insidious than illusions. I'd managed to blind myself to the knowledge that this affair was temporary, even as I'd repeated it to myself endlessly. But now reality was here, as intractable as death. It might as well be over sooner rather than later.

"Bull's-eye. This has to be it. Let's call in reinforcements and get the job done," I said, reaching for my deck.

"Are you mad? There is still a second location to scout out!" Yami protested.

"Look at the size of this place. Let's just get it over with."

"How can you pretend to know the size and scope of Set's total forces? Until we visit the second possibility, we can't be sure that this is his headquarters," Yami said.

"You know this is Set's base. For once in your life, stop pretending," I snarled back.

"I agree that it seems likely. But what if your guess is wrong? You said that anger would never master you again, but what of impatience? Before we launch an attack we must be sure of our target. We will only get one chance. Will you endanger our mission by acting precipitously?" Yami asked incredulously.

Yami was right. We had a mission. I had an obligation to see it through. Everything that happened had been of my own free will, and I've always been able to deal with the consequences of my actions. That didn't make being lectured by Yami any easier to take, or the knowledge that Yami had remained focused solely on our assignment, while I had let myself get distracted by him, by us, by the reminder that it was ending…

"Don't pretend to be so sure of yourself. I know better now," I sneered as I pivoted and headed for the second location. I didn't look back to see if Yami was following, or slow down when I heard him call out, "Kaiba, what's wrong?"

I glanced back over my shoulder. "Nothing. Let's just get this the hell over with. I'm sick of this mission. It's boring."

I turned back to our road, hugging the memory of Yami's injured face to me as I walked.

**YUGI'S NARRATIVE**

I saw Kisara curled up in front of the palace as I headed back from the center of town. At first I thought she was taking an afternoon snooze, but then I saw the gleam of her eyes through the slits at the bottom of her lids. Mokuba must be somewhere nearby – probably tempting fate by asking Mana out.
I walked over to Kisara to say "Hi." It struck me that she was a lot more approachable than Kaiba.

"Waiting for Mokuba?" I asked.

She nodded. "If it had not been for the boy, I would have tried to convince Kaiba to stay here. In time he could have learned to be a dragon in truth as well as soul. I think he would be happier so."

I could see her point. Kaiba had never struck me either as being happy to be human. But something in her tone made me ask, "Would that make you happier too… if he stayed?"

She shrugged. "He will not stay. He will always answer to other bindings. I have had 3,000 years to learn acceptance. The time has been well spent."

I didn't know what to say to that. Then what she said earlier hit me.

"You mean we can stay, too?" I asked. "It never occurred to me we had a choice."

"That is a creed of your world, is it not?" Kisara asked. "That you always have choices."

"Well… yeah… I guess… but this is different."

"Why?"

Put like that, I didn't have an answer.

"I wonder how Yami and Kaiba are doing," I said to change the subject. "I mean them being out there all alone…"

Kisara shook her head as if shaking off her thoughtful mood. She gave what sounded like a chuckle – the kind of laugh kids make after a dirty joke.

"I'm not going to pretend I didn't see the same things you did between them," I told her. "But Yami said way back when we were still trying to find Set's location that he wasn't going to say anything to Kaiba."

"Nothing is as fluid as intentions that go against the heart," she answered.

"Maybe. But Yami's pretty stubborn. It would take a lot to make him change his mind."

Kisara chuckled again. "We will know the answer soon enough. But has no one ever told you it never pays to argue with a dragon?"

Mokuba and Mana came out the palace, hand in hand. Mokuba had this big shit-eating grin on his face, like he'd just gotten permission to borrow one of his brother's sports cars to impress his date.

Kisara looked at them and muttered, "I must be growing soft, if not positively daft."

Mana ran up and hugged her, saying, "Thank you so much for agreeing to take us for a ride!"

Mokuba was taking his date dragon-riding. I grinned. If nothing else, the kid had a sense of style. And Mahaado probably approved of his choice of chaperones.

"Mahaado told me you were at the fountain…” Mana said awkwardly. "I guess it wasn't exactly private…”

"Everyone seems to wind up there," I agreed. "Probably because it's so pretty, and it's cool the way it
"Thanks! I like having new stuff to look at. Some people are too stuffy to agree."

I tried to look like I had no idea who she was referring to.

"I should have known Mahaado would find out. He always knows everything!" Mana said proudly.

"I hope he wasn't too mad," I said.

"He wasn't. I was surprised. He wasn't even mean to Mokuba. He just told him to come to the house properly the next time. Then he told me that he trusted me but he couldn't help worrying. I mean I knew he trusted me, but I've never made him worry before!" Mana said happily.

Mahaado came out after they were aloft.

"You just missed them," I said.

"I have missed many things lately," he said.

"Mana said you weren't mad…" I said tentatively.

Mahaado looked at the sky where we could see Kisara circling overhead. "When I look at the boy, I am reminded that even the High Priest has changed so thoroughly he does not remember his past. But that is an unfair burden to place on shoulders that have lived for so few years. As for the rest… Mokuba is diligent and honest. It is only my anger and fear that tells me otherwise, and it would be cowardly to pay heed to their voices."

"Mokuba's a really nice kid," I said. "I guess it's pretty natural they'd like each other."

"It was unexpected nonetheless... at least by me." Mahaado paused. "I have lived here, unchanging, for millennia. Now, so many things are passing me by. I am not unconscious of the irony. Even here, time waits for no one. Yet, even when I lived in your world, my beliefs were based on the eternal."

"But your civilization wasn't eternal, or at least it didn't stay the same. It changed over the years. I've seen it in the museum," I blurted out.

"Yes," he said. "It changed and disappeared."

"Yeah, but you're still here. That's pretty eternal, when you think about it," I said.

"So your advice is to learn a new definition of 'eternal'?" Mahaado smiled.

I was glad it wasn't really a question, since outside of saying "Yes," I didn't have an answer. We stood for a moment watching them. Mahaado nodded good-bye to me before continuing towards the town and saying, "Perhaps it is easier for a child to welcome the unexpected. Or perhaps it is just that the need of the young to try out their wings is also eternal."

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Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter, and for helping me get a little more of Mahaado and Kisara on the page, as opposed to letting them stay in my head.

REVIEW NOTE: I reply to all signed reviews or reviews that have an email address directly. I reply to all unsigned reviews and post a summary of all replies on my LJ. The link is the first one on
my Biopage. I generally post replies there when I update the next chapter.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Interestingly, I don't think that either Yami or Kaiba would have informed Yugi or Mokuba of the change in their relationship before they left. Part of the reason is time. They left early in the morning after having sex for the first time. I think Yami would have needed time to sort things out for himself, especially since this is possibly his first independent action, before he's be ready to confide – even in Yugi. And time was precisely what was in short supply, since they left the next morning. As for Kaiba… well can you imagine him saying anything to Mokuba? Also, as much as they love each other, I'm not sure how often they talk. Like Mokuba had no idea how strongly Kaiba felt about his past, and I think Mokuba sees a lot more than Kaiba has ever realized.

Also I liked the idea that while Kaiba and Yami are struggling through their feelings, neither of their other selves have a clue what's going on.

I can also see Kaiba using his thoughts to hold his feelings at bay…sort of repeating to himself that this was all ending as a way of hiding from himself how much he wants it to continue. I can see him telling himself it was temporary, and never considering whether he really believed or wanted to believe that until reality was staring him in the face in a way he couldn’t ignore.

**Mahaado, High Priest Seto and Mokuba:** Mahaado and High Priest Seto don’t seem to really get along in the AE arc in the manga, although they are both unquestioningly on the same side. Part of it is that they have very different ideas of how to protect the pharaoh, as in how far to ignore his values (and even orders) in his defense – and protecting him is vitally important to both of them. And part of it is I think simple jealousy in that they both want to prove their worth to the pharaoh.

I think for someone as focused on eternal values, Mokuba would be a constant reminder that things have changed and that his pharaoh had changed. But I also see Mahaado as a fair man, and one who believes strongly in being just. So I think he’d be able to recognize the unfairness of his own feelings, at least enough to control his actions.
To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This is my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think.

MANGA/ANIME NOTE: When everyone arrives at Alcatraz (the island where the Battle City finals are to be held) Yugi, Kaiba, Jounouchi and Malik fight a four way duel, named "Battle Royale" to determine which pairs will face off in the semi-final rounds. The two who lose their life points the fastest will fight the first semi-final match, the remaining two will fight the second, with the winners of these two matches facing off in the finals. Yami has reasons to fight with each of the other three first. He has promised Kaiba a match and wants to test their God Cards against each other, and he wants to stop Malik as soon as possible. But once the match starts, rather than playing to win, at first he plays to protect Jounouchi, deciding that the only way to protect him from Malik is by being his first opponent. Kaiba is predictably furious, and Jounouchi himself rejects the move.

CHAPTER 21: THE ORPHEUS CONUNDRUM

Fairy tales seem like such splashily enterprising things, full of danger and magical beasts and almost unimaginable events. Yet, for all the activity surrounding them, the characters themselves spend most of their time perfecting the art of waiting. Leaving Sleeping Beauty and Snow White undisturbed, even the Beast had to wait, however gracelessly and impatiently, for his Beauty to arrive to save the day.

But what if you know that the happy ending you secretly crave is the one that will never come true? And what if the day you are working towards is the very day that you hope will never arrive?

MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE

Drills were over for the day. Mahaado was a good teacher, if a strict one – although he had nothing on my brother in that department. I was still the worst fighter out there, but I'd gotten better. I was learning to use my shorter size to my advantage. I just hoped it would be enough. Landing in the middle of a duel would be cool – but the thought of winding up in some bizarre battle best left in a video game was too weird (and scary) for words. But if that's the way the cards fell, I wanted to make sure Nisama didn't kill himself trying to protect me.

I headed back to Kisara's aerie for lunch. She usually spent the morning sunning herself on the rocky ledge of her cliff and watching the town. I liked eating with her. She always managed to rustle up some food for me and it was fun seeing her wolf down whatever she'd caught for herself. I'd never seen a dragon eat before. With big animals, Kisara was impressively messy and equally efficient. Smaller ones, she'd pop in her mouth whole. I was just glad she wasn't eating them alive.
Besides, I liked touching base with her.

I heard voices as I approached. Hers and Mahaado's. I would have let them know I was there, but they were talking about me and Mana.

"There is truth in your words, and comfort as well – but I worry nonetheless," Mahaado was saying.

"Do you think anyone the High Priest had the raising of would be lacking in honor or careless of those he holds dear?" Kisara asked, but not like she expected an answer. I know a rhetorical question when I hear one.

"No, of course not," Mahaado answered anyway. "But regardless of what the pharaoh may decide, these three will leave. And Mana will miss him."

"The only way to guard against grief is to barricade your heart so thoroughly that nothing may enter. Is that what you want for her? And even that, as Kaiba discovered when the pharaoh left him, is not a sure safeguard against hurt."

"That is the last thing I would wish. You know that. It seems my fears have no answer."

"Fears of the heart rarely do. But perhaps this will teach her to see our world through new eyes."

"I would like that." I couldn't see Mahaado's face, but I could hear the smile in his voice as he added, "You think I should do the same, don't you, my old friend and nemesis?"

Kisara snorted.

"I thought to serve my pharaoh forever," he continued.

"You have in the past. You may still serve him in the future."

"As a card, not as a man," Mahaado said.

"We do not always get to choose the method of our service," Kisara observed.

"Is this wisdom or experience talking?" Mahaado parried, as if they were on the training field and he was still sparring.

"Is it not wisdom to learn from experience?" Kisara countered, softly.

"True enough," Mahaado acknowledged. "And anything is possible. Over the years I have even grown to appreciate talking to a dragon."

Kisara snorted again.

I also know an exit line when I hear one, so I started backing down the path so Mahaado wouldn't realize I'd overheard them. We met halfway down from the cliff top. Mahaado nodded in greeting as he passed me.

I didn't say anything. I wasn't going to admit I'd listened in, and besides, I agreed with him about Mana. As fun as being with her was – that's how much I was going to miss her when we left. We both knew that. It just didn't make sense to mope until that day came. Besides, it was easier to forget all that than you'd think.

It'd been weird hearing Kisara talking to Mahaado, though. She'd been Nisama's dragon to me. We'd talked about kissing and Nisama and everything, but even after seeing her as a girl, I still hadn't really
thought about her as a person.
Kisara nodded in greeting as I reached the top of the cliff.
"How come you don't like being a girl?" I blurted out.
She raised an eye ridge at that.
"Human bodies are so fragile… so easily broken," she said quietly.
"What if you'd… you know… stayed alive back then? Which would you have picked?" I asked.
"If I had survived to see Seto rule, if I had lived past the pharaoh's death… I do not know whether there would have been anything to tempt me to stay human."
"Huh?"
"I think only love could have proven to be so strong a lure, but no one can predict how or if love will grow. Some loves seem fated, others equally destined never to come to flower."
She'd managed to lose me again. I couldn't see what difference the pharaoh's death would have made, or why we were suddenly talking about love. I have to admit though, incomprehensible as her words were, something in the way she said them made her sound, for the first time, like a girl instead of a dragon.
"But things are as they are," she continued briskly. "My human form died. I became a dragon, and have chosen to remain so. I am content."
She hadn't really answered my question, but I'd lived with Nisama long enough to know – it was all the answer I was going to get.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

Yami was sleeping. It was easier when he was asleep. I didn't have to feel his eyes on my back as I walked ahead. And there was something about watching him sleep, about staying awake myself, that felt right. It was what I was used to. I just wished it wasn't so quiet.
There are times when reality stares you in the face, and it takes all your willpower not to blink.
Not that it mattered. When I closed my eyes, I could see my father's car speeding towards that tree. But the picture always faded out anyway from lack of details. The police report on the crash had been too sparse. It hadn't been worth the time and effort I'd expended to get it. They'd noted the tire marks on the road at the crash site, but hadn't described them. Were they skid marks… the rubber transferring itself to the pavement as he tried to stop or swerve out of the way? Or were they the result of a sudden acceleration? Did they lead straight towards their goal?
And I didn't need to close my eyes to see that day in the orphanage. It had started out routine. Another day, another family to evade. I wondered when the Director would give up. I wasn't leaving Mokuba no matter how many 'parents' he dangled in front of my face.
But these two were different. I'd liked them. Most couples I'd met were interested in adopting a genius child – as if that would make them any smarter, themselves. But the man didn't try to bullshit me. And although the woman was letting her husband do the talking, you could tell they'd discussed
everything beforehand. They were a team. You'd be surprised how rare that is, even among people who are officially paired.

"I'm sorry. Meeting a prospective parent must be awkward for you. I know it is for me," he said.

I shrugged. "I'm used to it."

They smiled at that, but they were sad smiles. She really did have a nice face. Mokuba would like her. I stopped. It wouldn't do to get ahead of myself.

"We were never lucky enough to have children. We have a house, but it is said that a child is what makes a house into a home. We have a small business I inherited from my father. I'd like to see it continue." He looked at his wife and swallowed. "We'd like a son," he concluded quietly.

He'd said that last bit calmly, but you could tell it was important. He wasn't pretending it was love at first sight for either of us, though. I approved.

"I understand you have a brother here, but that he will soon be leaving himself," he said.

"Who told you that?" I asked.

The man and the woman looked at each other, puzzled. "The Director. We asked him because we only have the resources to provide for one child. It's a big responsibility. He said that your brother was being adopted by another family…"

"He lied," I said flatly. "I want to be with my brother."

There. My cards were on the table.

"I'm sorry," the man said, standing.

I'd tried talking people into a two for one deal before. It had never worked. But those people had all been looking for a trophy. These two seemed to want a kid. For the first time I considered begging.

"His name is Mokuba," I said. "Do you want to meet him?" If they met him, I knew they'd agree.

The man shook his head. "We don't have the resources or the energy to care for two children," he said. It was only then that I noticed how much older he was than my father had been.

"You wouldn't have to pay any attention to him, and he could wear my old clothes. It wouldn't cost much more money, and I'd pay you back when I got old enough." I'd meant to state my proposition calmly, but the words came out in a rush.

The woman smiled. I could see she wasn't going to take me seriously. "Children are not stray puppies or kittens," she said.

I snorted. Clearly, she'd had a lot less experience with the process than I had.

"It's true," she insisted, as they left. "You deserve someone willing and able to care for you both. I'm sure you'll find someone."

In the end they'd adopted another boy. He hadn't been useful enough to be an ally, but he hadn't been a bully either. He was what people called "a nice kid"… in other words, a mediocrity. By their standards, they'd made a good choice.

They'd been surprised the Director had lied to them. I wondered what it'd be like to be that old and
still think people had a sense of honor. In a way I was glad Mokuba wasn't going to grow up with them. If he absorbed their childish beliefs, they could only hold him back. As for me – I had Mokuba. I didn't need a sense of honor.

There'd been something else odd about that day. Mokuba had noticed my abstraction. It was the first time he'd said anything about the offers I'd turned down.

"You liked them, didn't you?" he asked.

"They were okay."

"I'm sorry, Nisama."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

"If it wasn't for me…"

"If it wasn't for you, I'd have nothing. Never forget that," I said fiercely.

He snuggled into my arms, warm as a stray puppy.

The sweetest moments of my life have always led to the bitterest. I have never felt so complete, so peaceful, as lying there in that orphanage bed, with Mokuba in my arms. It had rarely been so easy to drift off since that night.

But when I woke up the next morning, I knew what I had to do. Meeting that family, seeing how decent they were, had convinced me of one thing: decency wasn't in the cards for Mokuba or me. And anyone brainless enough to think that stray kids weren't as expendable as stray puppies, was too stupid to be of use to me.

It all came down to control. I'd been, despite my best efforts, a dumb, stupid kid, hoping for someone to come and rescue us, to do for me what I should be doing for myself. My last doubts had left the room with that couple.

It didn't matter if my father had left skid marks or acceleration ones on that icy road. He had also left me Mokuba. We had ended up here. And if I was going to win a true future for us, I wasn't going to do it by relying on other people's sense of decency. I'd be better off preying on their weaknesses instead. That was the way the world worked.

I'd finally figured it out. I knew all about anger and wounded pride. They were strong emotions, but they could also be easily manipulated, and it was time for me to be the one pulling the strings for a change.

I'd finally figured it out. If I wasn't going to be able to convince anyone decent to adopt Mokuba and me – if no one sane could possibly want us - then I'd look for the biggest, craziest, richest bastard I could find… and make him pay.

I'd succeeded beyond my wildest expectations.

No matter how crazy things with Gozaburo had gotten afterwards, no matter how psychotic I'd gotten, I'd always felt in control. After all, it had been my plan, right from the start.

But that had been another illusion.

"I'm sorry," Seto said quietly.
He was in front of me, shadowy but distinct, even in the dark. Something had to be up. Seto and I weren't two separate people, not like Yami and Yugi were. Seto was more like some hidden part of my mind and he usually acted like it, content to curl up in some corner of my consciousness.

"What the fuck are you sorry for?" I snarled. "Gozaburo was my choice. So was this. If I made a sucker's deal here, I have no one to blame but myself."

"The pharaoh sacrificed himself for me. I lived with that burden, only to find that after death I bequeathed the payment for that gift to you," he said. "I was the one others gave their lives for… the one the man I loved gave his life for… and what has your life been, if not a sacrifice in the service of the ones you love? Perhaps my road made your road much harder."

"Bullshit," I answered. "I made my own choices. I saw a way out of the orphanage and I took it – regardless of consequences. That was my decision and the consequences are mine to live with." I thought of Mokuba saying that Yami had done Yugi no favors (a statement I agreed with wholeheartedly) and said, "If meeting you has taught me anything, it's that I prefer my road to yours. If you want to think in terms of inheritances – maybe that's the knowledge you gave me.

He shook his head. "I wanted this chance so badly, but the gods will exact their price for every gift granted. Once again though, I was not the one called upon to pay that price. The life I caused you to be born into was such a harsh one."

"You hear me complaining?"

"No, but I fear it left you with scant resources."

I paused, considering the note of guilt in his voice and wondering how much more he had to be guilty about. After all, Pegasus' most public offense – trying to take over Kaiba Corporation – had also been his most minor.

"This is all working out according to plan, isn't it?" I said slowly. "After all, when this is all over, I'll be heading back, Yami will be staying… and you'll have your body back."

"Do you accuse me of deliberately concealing my cards? This world does not work that way. My soul, if you will, went into the making of yours. No matter what world you reside in, I can not assume physical form as long as you live, and maybe not even after. I ceded that right to you."

I grunted in acknowledgement, uncomfortable with being on the receiving end of such a gift.

"It was not a gift," Seto said. "It was a necessity."

Seto had wanted his pharaoh badly enough to give up his life. I'd wanted Yami enough not to care how much it hurt afterwards. And Yami… what had he wanted?

I didn't want to think about it. It was time to get up. We still had a job to do.

I was glad this was ending soon.

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

It was very early in the morning, and we were covering the distance to the second site quickly now. We'd been taking shorter breaks. Kaiba had stopped pretending to sleep and I hadn't pushed the matter. Now, Kaiba had picked up the pace again, and I was almost running to keep up with his long strides.
It was disconcerting. Without realizing it I had grown used to the routine of the trek out here; walking with Kaiba at my side, talking with him, loving him. But something had changed from the moment we’d spotted Set's base camp, though I wasn't sure what or why.

"Let's just get this the hell over with. I'm sick of this mission. It's boring," Kaiba had said. Then he had stalked away from the site as if the ground or air had poisoned him; he'd marched away without looking back, without another word.

His silence now had an angry, resentful quality to it. It reminded me of our early duels, when our cards had done our talking for us, when Kaiba's few cryptic sentences had seemed to linger in my ear, their meaning just out of reach.

At times I wanted to upbraid him, if only to break the silence, if only to make him react. But how could I challenge him when my own course was so unclear? So I had remained as wordless as he.

The silence had continued, even after we had stopped during the night, even when we had made love – if you could call it that. Kaiba had grabbed me when we stopped for the night, kissing me without looking at me. I'd say he'd been going through the motions, except he'd been as feverishly intent as he'd been quiet.

Then he'd said my name: Yami

Three times.

First, he'd said it challengingly, daring me to correct him, to tell him I was Atemu, not Yami. Then he'd said it as if it was a gift, as if he was giving it back to me. Finally he'd whispered it in my ear as he came, as if he was unlearning it, as if he was leaving it behind.

For once, sex didn't make me feel closer to him, but alienated, as if he was moving away from me in the midst of our union.

That didn't stop me from wanting him. It hadn't stopped me from enjoying it.

I was the King of Games, but suddenly, I no longer knew the rules.

Was I truly called here for no purpose other than this war? And if my fate was in my own hands as Yugi had claimed, what of my destiny then?

I was tired of blundering through the fog, weary of an existence where questions were piled on top of questions, replacing the answers I’d thought I'd found. Perhaps this was part of life, to crave a clearly marked path where none existed.

I thought of Kaiba wondering if destruction was the essence of fatherhood, and then forging ahead regardless, trying to raise Mokuba as if those doubts, that knowledge, didn't exist; stumbling forward with an almost willful blindness. Perhaps we all go through life without roadmaps, each in his own way.

But if this unsettled feeling was part of life, did I want to join an existence that felt so rootless? It was as if I’d been given a body only to feel uncomfortable within my own skin.

And yet, it would be a challenge…

As ever, something in my heart lifted at the thought of facing a life long challenge. Was that fated as well? Or was it simply so deeply a part of me that I could no longer tell? Kaiba found it easy to sneer at the idea of destiny, but my allotment of hubris was not so great.
And so, I couldn't give Kaiba the answer he hadn't asked for. After having searched so long and hard for my memories, was I now willing to declare them meaningless? What of my other name, the name Kaiba never used… the name I, myself, shied away from?

"Do you miss it? Your name, I mean?" I called out to Kaiba. He slowed down enough for me to catch up with him, for us to walk abreast.

"How could I miss something I get called every day?" he asked irritably.

"I meant your real name."

"Kaiba is my real name," he growled. "I wanted it. It was my choice — all of it."

"Much as you like to pretend otherwise, events are sometimes beyond your control."

"What I couldn't control was the price. I could only pay it."

"Don't pretend you knew what you were getting into."

He stopped then, turned to face me, and said, "And don't you dare to play the victim to anything — not fate, not man. The only reason I survived was because I was the one setting events into motion, because every decision was mine — and no one, not Gozaburo, and not you, can take that away from me."

I was surprised. Kaiba had rarely spoken of Gozaburo, even when we had been talking. You could see the man's imprint on Kaiba only in the tracks he had left behind. But hearing Gozaburo's name reminded me of the Battle City Finals.

It's funny how we see some things only in retrospect. Kaiba hadn't been this angry since the Battle Royale at Alcatraz, since Malik, Jounouchi, Kaiba, and I had faced off in four separate elevators on the way to the top of his duel tower.

By his standards, I'd owed Kaiba a duel — the first semi final match. It was what I wanted as well… playing against him, God Cards in both our hands. But once the four-way match started, I hadn't thought of desires or rivalries or obligations… I hadn't seen anything beyond Yugi's need to protect his friend. And the only way I could do that was by making sure that Jounouchi didn't face Malik; that I was his opponent instead. I had seen what had happened to the last three duelists to challenge his God card. But it was a move Kaiba derided and Jounouchi himself rejected.

And Kaiba… what had Kaiba seen?

I probably should have asked before. But how could I? Back then we had only talked through our cards.

"I owed Jounouchi a duel, as well," I said suddenly to Kaiba. "And I didn't know it would take two God Cards to defeat Malik. I assumed you and I would face each other in the finals."

"You deliberately played less than your best. The reason doesn't matter," Kaiba said.

"How can the reasons never matter when they are what drive us?"

"It was a duel," Kaiba said as if that ended the matter.

"It was a duel but not a game," I answered. "I could not ignore the consequences. I trusted you to survive Malik. I didn't think you could be defeated by an opponent whose only weapon seemed to be
mere darkness."

"It was supposed to be every man for himself," Kaiba said stubbornly.

"You may have believed that at Death-T, but never before or since. After what you said at Duelist's Kingdom, after all you have done for Mokuba – are you going to pretend that you duel solely for yourself?"

"That's different. We're brothers," Kaiba said curtly.

"And what if you discovered tomorrow that no shared blood flowed in your veins? Would you disown him? You categorize things only so you can dismiss them more easily."

"Leave Mokuba out of this!" Kaiba ordered.

"Yugi's heart is so large, I think he considers all of humanity his brother," I said thoughtfully. "Is yours really so narrow that you are incapable of caring for anyone else? I don't believe that."

"What of you?" Kaiba asked sarcastically. "If your idea of friendship takes in all the world through three thousand years, hasn't it become so diluted that its meaning is lost?"

"Do you truly think that of me?" I demanded.

For the first time Kaiba refused to meet my gaze. He looked down instead, slightly, unconsciously, shaking his head with the movement. I felt my heart slow to its normal pace. For an instant I had wondered if he was right. But whatever he might pretend, Kaiba did not believe the accusation he'd just hurled at me. Why he had done so was a mystery I intended to solve before the day grew longer.

Kaiba shrugged and began walking again. "I don't know why you're bringing up this ancient history anyway."

"Hardly ancient," I replied.

"One day or 3,000 years – the past is the past."

"How can you pretend the past is dead and buried when Seto's voice is a part of you?" I asked incredulously.

"What difference does that make? So are Gozaburo's and Pegasus'. All the voices in my head are mine, now. Seto's welcome to join the crowd."

"And you see no difference between them?" I challenged.

Kaiba shrugged again. "I don't believe in chasing the past," he said.

"Running from it is just as futile. For how long will you continue to deny that the road you are walking – for all that you have carved it step by step – stretches in two directions?"

Kaiba scowled.

"And yet," I acknowledged, "I, too, have learned just how wasteful chasing the past can be, how you can search for your past so hard that you let your future slip by. Maybe that's why so many stories warn us not to look back. I can vaguely remember hearing them as a child, falling asleep to their warnings. But the past is what shapes us; we carry it with us every day we live... and beyond. How can we deny it, without denying ourselves?"
"Maybe there are some parts of ourselves that we should deny," he said shortly.

"But those dark places are not the sum of our being, any more than the past is the sum of our existence," I answered. "I will not believe that. And what of you? For how long will you see Mokuba's future and ignore your own?"

"What difference does that make, as long as I see a future?" he asked irritably.

"Because then, it's not yours, and no matter how much you strive towards it, you will never reach it. I know what it's like not to have a future. I thought it belonged to Yugi, not me. I thought I had a destiny, instead. My own feelings seemed of little account."

"You don't owe me an explanation. We don't owe each other anything," Kaiba said fiercely.

"Don't we?"

Once again, I felt on the brink of understanding. Once again, Kaiba did not respond. He picked up the pace, instead. I wondered if that was my answer. We reached the second site in silence. As Kaiba had predicted, it was only an outpost. There were tents but no settled dwellings. Since it was much closer to the edge of Set's land than his headquarters had been, he had probably found it a convenient staging area for scouting parties and raids.

It was still early. There was no activity from the camp below us. I had expected Kaiba to look triumphant at being proved right. Instead he looked angrier than ever, a hint of thunder in his face. I was eager for the storm to break. I could feel my anger rising to match his, as I heard him say, "I told you so"… as I watched him turn on his heel and stalk off in the wrong direction, away from the town where Yugi and Mokuba were awaiting our return… away from the settlement I had not quite learned to call home.

 Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter. I changed it a little after getting it back, so any mistakes are, as always, mine.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: Bnomiko made a comment while betaing about Kaiba denying that the road he's on stretches in two directions, a metaphor I liked so much, I couldn't resist using it!

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The anime makes it clear that Seto turned down many (probably saner) families on the road towards becoming Seto Kaiba, because these families inevitably rejected the idea of adopting Mokuba as well. I think there must have been a moment when he decided to stop relying on fate to throw a more compliant family his way, and decided to take more control of the process himself. I think this must have been a bitter moment for him because it must have felt like a rejection, all the more strongly because I doubt he would, even at that age, have acknowledged that was what he was feeling. And it probably stung because the person being rejected was not himself, but Mokuba. (Ironically, I think if he had found a nice, sane family willing to love Mokuba, that would have opened up a whole new set of issues…)

Also for someone with Kaiba's need to try and control events, even when those events are quite obviously wildly outside of his control, waiting for someone to want to adopt them must have seemed interminable. Both the manga and the anime make it clear that Seto researched Gozaburo before challenging him. I think, for him to have selected Gozaburo as a candidate, he must have already discounted looking for warmth or kindness as a factor in selecting a father figure, because you can see that Mokuba takes one look at him and is leery of this whole idea, but I think by then,
Seto had dismissed the whole idea of finding a family as, if you'll excuse the pun, a fairy tale.
To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think.

CHAPTER 22: THE JOURNEY OUT OF THE FOG

Kaiba had moved (or he thought he had), with his usual reckless speed straight from anger to acceptance, skipping directly to grief's last stage as if it was a race. For what is pop psychology if not a fairy tale in fashionably modern disguise?

But people, even people less functional than Kaiba (who had after all, despite the occasional homicidal lapse, managed to pilot a company and raise a brother) still pull their lives together and eke out some form of acceptance of death. And people, even people more well-balanced than Kaiba, still find that the death of a loved one sticks in their throat, and though the passing years help it to lodge more comfortably, they can never quite swallow it down. Time might help scar tissue to form, but it rarely heals all wounds.

And Yami found that for the times he had preached acceptance to Kaiba in life, the last thing he wanted Kaiba to assent to was his death. Luckily for them both, there are some things in life – and death is one of them – that, however common, are on some level truly intolerable. (Loss is such a damnable thing; is it any wonder so many of us resent it?) So Kaiba's acquiescence, though genuine, was shallow. And like a layer of ice laid over a river of fire, it was easily shattered.

YUGI'S NARRATIVE

There was a knock on my door. It was Mahaado. He looked at the cards spread out on my bed.

"You are selecting the allies who will be at your side when you duel Set's representatives?" he asked.

I nodded. "It sounds like I'll be needing them again."

Once we knew where we were going, Kisara was going to fly Yami, Kaiba and me to Set's headquarters. We planned to take our back-up cards with us so that we could summon as many monsters as possible on our arrival. Dragons would be flying the first wave of Mahaado's troops in with us. His combined forces were going to engage Set's army, and hopefully clear the way for Yami, Kaiba and I to enter Set's fortress. I wasn't sure what we'd be facing or what was going to happen after that – except that it was going to come down to the three of us. Unreal as it seemed, like any other penalty game, this could only be decided by a personal duel.

Mahaado said, "All is in readiness. The pharaoh will be back soon, bringing word of Set's location;
the last piece we need to set our attack in motion. We will be prepared for battle by their return. This plan will succeed. I can sense it."

I nodded again, trying not to look nervous. I didn't really know anything about battles – hadn't even paid attention in history class. But even I could see that Mahaado's plan really was as simple as the storyline in a video game – except if we failed we couldn't just hit reset and try again – and no one was going to be handing out extra lives.

"It is strange to fight so long a war, and to suddenly see the end in sight… or if not the end, to at least know we will be granted a time of peace before the battle resumes," Mahaado said.

"What will you do?" I asked.

"Rest," Mahaado answered. "Time moves differently here. I feel old, even ancient, but I do not feel as though I have lived millennia. Perhaps it is not just that time flows differently, but that we do not notice its passage, do not count or record the years. They come and go as they will, but leave no imprint on our minds."

I nodded again.

"Even so," Mahaado continued, "it will be good to rest. When we first arrived, it was a joy to be reunited with so many comrades. It truly seemed as though we had been granted paradise as a reward for our labors. We did not realize that this fight was as much a part of this world as the one we had left behind. But a world without battles would be a pleasant change. I will be glad of the chance to enjoy my friends unclouded by the shadow of chaos. Perhaps I have finally found something I do not wish to stay eternal."

Mahaado was so calm, it was hard to remember that fighting was all he had known.

"And what of you?" he asked. "What will you do when this battle is over?"

"I'd like to go home," I answered. "We have to do this, and I'll do my best – for you and Yami and everyone else. But I'm glad it'll be over soon. Duel Monsters is supposed to be a game. I want that back. I want to sit in class and play with Jounouchi at recess. That was when I had the most fun."

"Simple plans are the best… and the most likely to come to fruition."

I nodded. "And I'm ready to ask Anzu out. Maybe she's ready to say 'yes.'"

"Anzu…." Mahaado said. "Ah, I recall the name… the girl on the sidelines cheering…" Mahaado's voice trailed off.

"Cheering for Yami," I finished for him, my good mood vanishing.

"Not solely," he said. I wondered if he was trying to be nice. "When the pharaoh lived he belonged to Egypt. Now you want him to belong to himself. Either way, he will never be hers, except as a devoted friend."

"But what if she still wants him?" I asked.

"Your heart is so true in so many things. Has its insight failed you in this?"

"I don't know. Sometimes, lately, I've thought I have a chance with her. Sometimes, it's like I see her looking at me the way she looked at him… like I was someone special."
"You are. And not just because you have been the pharaoh's host and friend. You have been his teacher as well. I have always been fond of wagering. And I would hazard that to your friends… you are their pharaoh."

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

This fog was really starting to piss me off. If I wanted to be strictly accurate, I'd have to admit it had gotten better as we had moved away from Set's headquarters, but "better" is a relative term.

I just wanted to get this bullshit over with as quickly as possible. At least we had reached the second site quickly. I pulled out my telescope as soon as we came into range, wanting to stay as safe distance away as possible. The weather had finally cleared enough for me to see exactly how much of a fool's errand we'd been on, coming all the way here. The encampment was obviously merely an outpost, a staging area for scouting parties, just as I'd predicted. For once, I didn't take any pleasure in having been proved right. That didn't stop me from turning on my heel and saying, "I told you so. Let's get this show on the road," as I headed back the way we'd come, back towards Set's main base.

"You're going in the wrong direction, Kaiba," Yami called out.

"No, I've finally got it right."

"What do you think you're doing?" Yami asked.

"What I wanted to do two days ago. We're going back to Set's headquarters, calling up our cards and getting this battle over with."

"Mahaado and the others have been planning this attack since we left – if not for millennia. They're waiting for us to come back with information, Kaiba – not an impromptu summons to a battle!"

"If they're not prepared for anything, they're fools. Besides, they're cards. This happens to them all the time."

"They're not cards! They're my friends!" he yelled. "And I will not treat them so shabbily!"

"Hell, yeah – I'd hate to see you treat your friends badly!" I flung at him before I could stop myself.

Yami stared at me, aghast. I realized he'd recognized not just the venom in my voice, but by the note of hurt fueling it.

"Kaiba, I had a mission here… a calling," he said. "You have to accept that. I have no other answer to give you."

"Stop hiding behind our mission! Yes, we have a job to do here. But you didn't know that when you left. You just did!"

"I didn't know what was here – but I knew I was needed nonetheless. When you duel, Kaiba, you use your anger, logic and determination. You use your gift for turning all situations to your advantage. You duel with everything in you. It's why you're such a formidable opponent. I did the same. I dueled with my faith… with my belief that there is a reason for things, even if we can't see it. I was called. Even if I didn't understand why, I had to answer."

"I dueled with all those things," I shot back. "And with rage, hatred, and a blinding need not just to win, but to crush everyone in my way. And you told me to find a better one. That doing what came naturally – and believe me, all those bitter things came very naturally – wasn't good enough."
"It wasn't. You deserved more from yourself."

"And what of you?" I gestured to the bleak, mist-filled landscape. "Is this what you deserve? Hell, maybe rotting here is what you get for abandoning your life before it began. You're one self-righteous piece of work, you know that, Yami? I can't believe you're standing here in the after-life, or whatever the hell this place is – and you're still preaching at me! At least I never did anything so chicken-shit as handing my life over to some half-assed notion of destiny."

"No!" Yami returned just as quickly. "You handed it over to a madman and dared him to destroy you!"

I'd thought I was angry before, but now I was light-headed with rage. It felt like champagne was bubbling through my veins. The wind had died down again, but it was whistling in my ears, nonetheless. It was almost as good as sex, and it provided the same kind of release. And like last night, when it ended, I'd feel just as empty.

I pushed that thought aside to fling at Yami, "There was no other answer."

"And just how long did you search for one before deciding your life was expendable? An hour? A day?" Yami sneered. "For how long will you continue to act as if your life, your feelings – if you even acknowledge them except in anger – are valueless?"

"I did what I had to, and you know it!" I snapped back.

"Really? And when does necessity become an excuse, coward?" taunted Yami.

"That's right, throw my words to you back in my face, just like you've sneered at my beliefs in every duel we've ever fought," I said. "But Mokuba and I are still alive. So you tell me, Yami – in the end, who's the one who held his life card too loosely? You said the mutt was a better duelist than me because he was willing to fight for his life. What the hell does that make you?"

"If you're asking me if I gave up… if you're asking me if I forgot the meaning of those duels we fought, of the ones we watched each other fight – the answer is yes!" Yami yelled. "You want the proof that I'm flawed – take what joy you can in it! Is that what this is about? Finally winning? Finally proving me wrong?"

"No! This is about you lying to me. How could you talk so much about what I needed to do, if you weren't willing to face the future, yourself?"

It was, I suppose the fight we'd been having ever since I'd arrived here… the fight we'd put on hold while we'd pretended nothing existed but our bodies.

"Face the future?" Yami yelled. "You hide from it. You can only bring yourself to touch me by reassuring yourself that you'll lose me. And no man wants to feel like his lover is looking at him and seeing a corpse."

"That's just what you are," I sneered. "And it was your choice. Maybe when I get back I'll dig up your bones and hang them on my wall."

"Why? So you can fumble them before you go to bed each night? Not that it will help you sleep. Besides, why do you care? You're the one who's just waiting for this boring mission to be over. I don't know why you bothered touching me, acting like you wanted to be touched in turn, last night."

"I can't touch you. You're a ghost. And don't act like I've hurt you, like anything we do matters. This is just something we're getting out of our system before we go our separate ways," I shot back.
"Never that!" Yami yelled. "Of course it matters. Do you think that is all you are to me... that this time is merely a trinket to take to the after-life? God, Kaiba, some days I think I will long for these moments throughout eternity! Can you really be that blind?" His voice suddenly got much softer. "Or have I been so caught up with not looking beyond each passing moment that I failed to show that to you?"

"How can you value honor so strongly, and yet lie so easily?" Seto commented.

'Shut up!' I answered, but Seto's voice had gotten me to slow down, to listen to Yami's words.

Small as the pause was though, Yami had noticed it.

"Kaiba! Pay attention to me when I talk to you!" Yami yelled.

"I am," I answered.

And I was. I'm good at reading faces, always have been. I'd seen the emotions that flashed across Yami's face while we'd been fighting, the ones that lurked in his eyes when we made love. Regret and guilt. But I hadn't thought about the look in Yami's eyes before. I'd been too busy averting my own.

The guilt was interesting. Yami could be merciless, but he'd never been the kind of person who would casually hurt someone he'd named a friend. And he'd spent years insisting we were friends. I wondered how much it all bothered him. I hadn't asked.

"I don't want what I said to be true," I told Yami. "But that doesn't mean it isn't. What I want is irrelevant."

"Not to me. Never to me," he answered, his anger ebbing as the fog rolled in again.

"This is stupid," I muttered wearily. Now that the adrenaline from the fight was fading, I was tired. "We're trying to pretend the future doesn't exist – but we're coming closer to it with each second. It's time to stop kidding ourselves."

"It is not a lie to treasure this time," Yami insisted. "And we're not pretending the future will never arrive. We're just admitting we have no control over the form it will take."

"Even though our decisions are what will give it shape?" I asked.

"Even then."

Everything within me fought against what Yami was saying, even as I wondered for the first time if he was right, at least a little. If partial victories are hard to choke down, inconclusive truths are worse.

There was a silence. I was glad we were in a fog again. Yami couldn't get a good look at my face, and all I could see of him was his indistinct form... as if he had become a ghost again.

"You haven't asked me to stay with you," he said. Was that anger coloring his voice, deepening his pitch? Or something more painful? I took a couple of steps closer, as if that would help me decide.

"I can't," I said. "I refuse to be anyone's hostage to fate."

"Nor can Yugi, nor even Mahaado." Yami shook his head as though that would help him sort out his thoughts. "In Egypt, getting my own body felt like a punishment, not a reward. When I was without Yugi at DOMA, I felt so hollow inside. I never wanted to feel like that again. I though my memories..."
could fill that fathomless void. But they didn't."

"I tried winning. It was the only time I felt whole – that I felt safe," I said.

"But it doesn't last," Yami answered.

"No," I agreed.

"It's more than that. I needed to find my memories because I was afraid of who I might turn out to be – and I couldn't live with that hanging over me," Yami said. "When Yugi first completed the puzzle, the only thing I was aware of was his distress, even though I didn't know his name any more than I knew my own. I was in an alien world and the only familiar thing was the night, which was like the twilight of my puzzle… that, and the game in front of me." Yami shook his head again. "I don't like to think of that time."

"Why?" I asked curiously. "Because you felt trapped? Helpless?"

"No. Because I don't want to remember the person I was," Yami said. "All I knew was how to destroy. Nothing existed but the games and their penalties. Then gradually, I came to know Yugi. I learned where we were alike and when his thoughts were foreign. He was my model, as I tried to find my personality as if I was fitting together a puzzle, never sure which pieces were mine and which were his."

Piecing your soul together… well, I certainly knew what that felt like.

"But without my memories, I was afraid that all I had done was construct a hollow shell." Yami sighed. "I'm glad I'm not the person who first emerged from the puzzle."

"If that was true, it would be a shame," I answered.

Yami looked at me, startled.

"I get it – you didn't know shit about anything," I said. "But you waded in anyway, with everything you had. And you won. You knew what was crucial to you and you protected it. Yugi might have tempered that, but he didn't change it. I'm glad. I respect that person, and I wouldn't think much of anything that could be so easily altered."

"Thank you," Yami said quietly. "But I am glad I grew beyond the person I was, even though you are right, perhaps I should be more grateful that he is still at my core."

"Is that why you didn't say it, even when we were fighting?" I asked, just as quietly.

"What?" Yami asked.

"You didn't throw it in my face that loving Mokuba didn't stop me from trying to kill him."

"That was the darkness, Kaiba."

"Don't bullshit me. And don't excuse it so glibly. You were the one to stop me; to shatter my heart. It was right after I'd just tried to kill you, your merry little band, Yugi's grandfather… and Mokuba – in case you'd forgotten."

"I forget nothing. Yes, I shattered your heart. And in so doing, forgave it."

"That darkness, as you call it, wasn't something imposed on me. I was the one to invite it in. It was a home grown evil."
"I know. Do you think that matters to me?"

"Why doesn't it?"

"Because there is more to you than darkness. You prove that every day until I think you are the only one who can't see it."

Yami met my eyes. I was close enough to see them clearly now, despite the mist. The guilt was still there. Earlier, I'd asked myself what Yami wanted. Now I knew. Yami wanted me badly enough to break his own code of conduct. He'd wanted me badly enough to accept the self-recriminations that he knew would follow. We hadn't been lying to each other or even ourselves – we'd simply wanted this so much the costs didn't matter.

I reached out to touch his face, needing to see that at least for the moment, it was real. The fog had coated it with a fine spray. His cheeks were damp, his hair softened. I ran my thumb along his lip, collecting moisture. I licked my own.

"Whatever decision you make – just know that it was your decision. Promise me you will not hide behind destiny – or any other shabby cheat," I said.

"I promise," he answered.

Yami yanked my head down until our lips met. It was a rough gesture. I'd grown to like it. I was glad we were done talking. Words are over-rated. I had let go of my anger. I was ready to enjoy the feel of his lips instead, without needing to guard against their sweetness, now that I knew that the price we were willing to pay was an equal one. If I was being a fool again, at least it was a new kind of folly.

I broke his hold reluctantly. We were still in hostile territory.

"Don't you think we should move away from our enemy's outpost?" I asked.

Yami nodded, pausing to bite my neck, before leaning into me, before breaking apart. "You're right," he said. "But I must confess, at this moment, I don't care if all the hounds Set has ever spawned were after us."

**YAMI'S NARRATIVE**

Kaiba was, as was usual when dealing with practical matters, correct. We marched off towards the borderlands, towards the settlement and our friends, being careful to make a wide berth around the outpost we'd just sighted through Kaiba's telescope, scanning the surroundings for a likely resting spot as we went. Each mile added to the tension. I was ready to jump out of my skin by the time we found a graveyard.

Luckily we had grown used to making love amid tombstones.

This time we slipped inside a mausoleum. Light filtered in through a high, narrow slit of a window. As soon as we were through the door, I pushed Kaiba against it and pulled his head down to mine again. I barely tasted his lips before moving to his neck once more. I wanted to claim him, to mark him, had wanted it for hours.

I could promise nothing – certainly not the permanence Kaiba craved yet never demanded. That should have been a restraint. It wasn't. It spurred me on, instead. I surveyed my handiwork. It would fade within days, and yet I felt I would remember this moment; recall the taste and silken texture of Kaiba's skin throughout eternity.
But that was another illusion in a land of illusions. No matter what I wanted to believe, this wasn't a moment out of time. It was a moment that would fade, just like any other. Had Kaiba always known that?

Even when I had been a disembodied spirit without a memory to call my own, I had seen Kaiba as the more fragile, the more vulnerable of us two. And yet in many ways, he had always been the braver – or the more reckless – of us as well. And he had been the one person I had never felt a need to protect. I would trust to that… and I would trust to his ability to do what I had not… to survive… to endure.

We had been lovers for weeks. I was tired of the strain of living solely in the present. All it had done was to convince each of us that the other didn't care. Now, for the first time, I let myself truly feel how much I wanted him, how deeply I wanted to taste him, how completely I loved him. If this brought pain, so be it. Even death had not been able to outrun our feelings, or to outrun Kaiba, in his reckless, self-destructive capacity for love. Nor would I.

"I built walls around each memory of our time together, even as we were creating them," I told him, "as if I could imprison them within my heart and hold them forever. But I do not want to raise any barricade that denies you entry. I think I haven't been running from the past or the future… but from this moment… from the knowledge of what I'm doing to you."

"What we're doing to each other," Kaiba corrected.

"What now?" I asked, even though I knew the answer, had known it during our search for privacy, for a lair of our own, even though I was biting his neck between my words.

"You know what's next," Kaiba answered. "Are you going to turn coward now, at this late date? The nature of the game has not changed because we have both acknowledged the ante."

"I wanted you so badly, I didn't stop to think…"

Unexpectedly, Kaiba gave me his feral grin. "I know."

"Even now, I don't care."

"Yes," Kaiba said. His voice was quiet but firm, as if signing a contract, as if sealing a vow.

I was the King of Games, but the rules no longer applied.

Nothing did, but the man in front of me. We had moved in front of the stone sepulcher that stood in the middle of the room. Warriors from some long forgotten battle marched home in triumph along its sides. It had a flat lid. I pushed Kaiba against it. He fell back as willingly, shrugging out of his duster, the crimson satin lining contrasting with the icy white stone surface of our bed.

I undressed him slowly, slipped off my own clothes as well. Even here, he radiated heat and intensity, as if he wasn't a man, as if he was fire brought to life. I touched him, traced the line of his jaw, his deceptively delicate neck, wondering if my fingers would burn, wanting to be singed.

My breath caught at the sight of him: the blue irises of his eyes swallowed by the black of his pupils in the dim light, all white skin against red satin against white marble. As I stared, the air between us seemed to heat. Had Kaiba's fire transferred itself to me?

I leaned forward to kiss him, our tongues molten, melting together, until it was hard to remember to which mouth they belonged. Our stone house gave the illusion of privacy, and although we were trying to be as silent as ghosts, our hushed moans echoed like the wind that whistled outside.
Like a controlled burn, I moved down his body, fondling his nipples, running my hand along his torso. My tongue was a flicker of flame that warmed his legs, the crevice behind his knee… the one where his legs finally joined his torso. Each move drew an answering twitch, another groan.

Kaiba reached up to me, impatient as ever, for once slow to realize that the same fire that burned him had engulfed me, his hands lighting a match where none was needed. I responded as quickly, until Kaiba was thrashing beneath me, waiting, wanting to be consumed.

And yet there was a rare peace to Kaiba, even as we came together so furiously, even as he was reacting to each thrust as fiercely as ever. For he was surrendering… to me… to the unknown future that awaited us… to the love we had barely begun to acknowledge. Kaiba was freely giving me the one thing I had no right to request… himself.

I closed my eyes, surrounded by the sense of him, his scent sharp in my nostrils, the feel of his body moving desperately beneath mine, arching up again and again onto mine, muscles convulsing, drawing me in, possessing me in turn. The sight of him was imprinted on my closed eyelids: his head thrown back, his eyes staring unseeing upwards at some point beyond my shoulder.

I was the King of Games, and the only rule left was that fire burns everything it touches. The only rule left was that fire was the gift of the gods and some flames are a blessing. The only rule left was that I wanted everything Kaiba was offering.

Afterwards, I lay on him. The heat of our bodies had warmed his duster, had turned it into a blanket. My hand brushed the edge of the coffin lid on which we rested and I shivered. Living heat had no power to warm the marble beneath us. I moved closer to Kaiba, flung a leg and arm across him.

"I'll take the first watch," Kaiba said quietly. "I can't sleep yet."

"Only if you promise to wake me half way through," I answered.

He nodded and I drifted off, drowsily content… for the first time I hadn't sensed a part of Kaiba eluding me even as I was in the act of claiming him.

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_Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing and tons of encouragement!_

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** It's funny, but as I was writing this is occurred to me that writing a fight is similar in some ways to writing a love-making scene. I mean with a fight there's the set-up, which is sort of like foreplay in that the characters are working up to the main blow-out. Then the fight reaches its climax, and afterwards, everyone's emotionally and physically spent.

Oddly enough I was at the museum where they had an exhibit of Roman sarcophagi. So there I am wandering around, trying to find one with a flat lid that would be the right size for Seto and Yami to have sex on. Which definitely added a new dimension to my visit.

I also wanted to thank everyone who's reviewed. When writing a story this long, I can't say how nice it is to hear from people.
Respect Play

Chapter Notes

To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.

MANGA NOTE: At Death-T, Yugi wins when he manages to assemble the five pieces of Exodia. In the resulting penalty game, Yami no Yugi "shatters" Kaiba's heart, sending him into a coma, while he rebuilds it, this time, without the darkness that had literally taken over Kaiba's life.

CHAPTER 23: RESPECT PLAY

Two heroines forced into a semblance of death. Two heroes, compelled to find them. We all know that "Romeo and Juliet" is a classic tragedy, while "Sleeping Beauty" is a fairy tale, and in knowing their classifications, we think we know everything.

But think what a small change it would be to add the words "The tragedy of..." before Sleeping Beauty's name... or to start "Romeo and Juliet" with the words, "Once upon a time..."

What would happen then? Would Sleeping Beauty's prince fight his way through that forest of thorns to stagger to her bedside, bloody and battered, with only enough breath left to kiss her perfect lips? What if Sleeping Beauty finally woke up from 100 years of waiting, of dreaming of her true love, only to find his lifeless body stretched out on the bed beside her? In her madness and grief, would she pierce her broken heart with the stiletto-like thorn that still clung to her never-to-be lover's unmoving form?

And what if Romeo and Juliet got the fairy-tale ending they deserved? After all, in a fairy tale, no matter how many messages may go awry in the course of the story, one so critical would never miscarry so close to the end. Would Juliet have opened her eyes to see Romeo's face bending over hers, ready to welcome her back to life with a kiss? Would he have swept her off her tomb, onto his horse, and into their happily ever after future?

We switch two simple phrases and two worlds start anew; our assumptions are reset. For it is not what we don't know that inevitably trips us up, but what we don't even know that we don't know.

YUGI'S NARRATIVE

I felt a little awkward walking beside Exodia as he surveyed Mahaado's troops. I got why he was here; it was a morale thing, a way to show solidarity. You could tell his presence meant a lot to the monsters that would be going into battle. Even Kisara was there. And everyone on the training field seemed honored by his visit.
Well, everyone except Mokuba.

Exodia stopped in his review of the troops to speak to him. Mokuba was standing as straight as his brother ever had.

"Mahaado reports that you have improved. Thank you for your diligence."

"Don't bother. I didn't do it for you," Mokuba said defiantly. "I don't care what you want. My brother's not afraid of you and neither am I."

"It is good that you don't fear me, since we are on the same side."

"Not always," Mokuba muttered.

I knew Mokuba carried grudges. I just didn't know he could carry one for this long.

"Are you so sure of that, child?" Exodia asked. "Think back to the brother I met at Death-T and all that has happened since – then ask yourself if you truly wish that I had stayed my hand on that day."

Mokuba shut up at that. His eyes were even wider than usual as he stared at Exodia; his mouth was slightly open. He looked a little like his brother did when Yami and I turned over a card that not only cost him the duel, but made him re-evaluate his ideas as well.

Exodia continued walking through the rest of the ordered ranks before returning to the viewing platform that had appeared with his presence. Mahaado and I followed.

"I commend you," Exodia said to the crowd, "on your readiness and your restraint, committing just enough incursions into Set's lands to convince them we are following our usual patterns, but without being obvious enough to threaten them. It was a difficult line and you have all walked it skillfully."

I happened to be looking at Kisara when he said that. I hadn't known dragons could smirk before.

"You have done well, my friend," Exodia said, turning from the troops to Mahaado.

Mahaado bowed. "I am honored to serve one so close to the gods," he said.

Exodia laid one massive golden hand on Mahaado's head. "An affectation of modesty is expected. But genuine humility is as rare as it is admirable."

The duel monsters were still standing in rows, followed by a break and more columns of rows. They looked like pieces on a game board. I glanced at Mokuba who was still busy looking unimpressed, either by Exodia or by what he knew of his battle plan, which was probably a lot seeing how much time he spent with Kisara. I wondered if it reminded him of the kind of role-playing video games that Kaiba Corporation routinely produced.

"Are they are ready for the first assault?" Exodia asked, gesturing to the first column of monsters. I recognized some of them as Yami and my back-up monsters. The rest must have been Kaiba's.

"The three duelists will use their cards to summon them to battle upon their arrival at Set's headquarters, launching our attack. Dragons and winged beasts will meet them with the rest," Mahaado answered, waving towards the rows of monsters in the back of the field. He sighed. "It seems we are all sacrifice monsters now. I'm sorry I won't be with them when they launch their assault."

"You won't?" I asked.
"No. This attack for all its fierceness, is but a feint. These troops exist to force and hold the opening to Set's citadel, wherever it is, so that you may enter and face Set's General. He can only be defeated in a penalty game. I must wait in reserve for my pharaoh's call. I will be fighting a duel by your side, not a battle."

"You're not leading the troops, either?" I asked Exodia.

"No. If Set's champions wish to duel me, they must first know where to look. To risk myself carelessly, even in so noble a cause, is to risk us all. In this game, destroying the General, whether myself or Set's representative, will end the game for either side."

I nodded, hoping no one had heard me swallow. I looked back at the duel monsters in front of me, seeing, for the first time how they must look to Set's forces. Seeing for the first time, how literal the words "sacrifice monsters" were. And Exodia was our head boss, just as Set's General was theirs.

I was still staring at them a little blankly when the Flame Swordsman broke formation enough to grin at me and give me a thumbs-up sign. I could almost hear Jounouchi saying, "Oh man, could this get any cooler?"

Just thinking about Jounouchi made me smile back at his favorite duel monster. If you forgot the stakes, it really was like the kind of role-playing game where you have to find the villain's hidden fortress, just like Yami and Kaiba were trying to do right now. I wondered what would happen when we got there. Would there be some low level minions hanging around… the kind that were easy to destroy, the kind that wouldn't hurt you unless you were really careless, really new, or just plain unlucky? Then once we got inside, would there be a boss or two… with each challenge getting harder until you finally reached the head boss… the one that usually killed you a couple of times on your first go?

I swallowed again.

"What happens if we find Set's General and lose?" I asked.

"Then our gods must reset the game board. This settlement, and all who owe allegiance to it will vanish, and Set will have uncontested entry to your world as well," Exodia answered.

"I wish this was all just a game," I said.

"It is a game… to the gods," Exodia said gravely.

I nodded and squared my shoulders. It was a game, and I've never backed out of a game yet, never played less than my best before. I wasn't going to start now. And after all, Kaiba had the top scores on every online game ever played, Yami had been the King of Games before we'd known he was a pharaoh as well… and I'd beaten both of them. And now we were teamed together like we'd never been before. It was a game, it was that simple, just like the games Jounouchi and I played back home.

I just hoped it was easy as well.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

I'd kept my promise and woken Yami up after a couple of hours. I'd even dozed off long enough to be ready for the day ahead. I could feel Yami sitting next to me, but I didn't open my eyes. I liked lying next to him and I wanted to think, not talk.

Yami and I cared for each other, cared about each other. It was still so new it almost didn't make
sense, at least not the way Mokuba and I did. I'd grown used to the fact that caring for Mokuba was the one exception in my life, that it was unique.

Except it wasn't, anymore. It was an idea that would take some getting used to.

Except it wasn't going to last that long.

Yet this journey didn't feel like a waste of time, even if I wasn't going to get what I'd come for. Perhaps the Holy Elf was right, and seeking and finding are two different things. I'd certainly found something beyond expectation, beyond my experience.

Passion.

It was what I felt every time I looked at Yami, what I saw in his eyes when he stared back at me.

Shared passion… something as wild as I, as unpredictable as the journey that had brought me here… something powerful and exciting and uncontrollable, despite my efforts to rein it in by pretending it didn't exist, that it wasn't real, that Yami and I were simply a virus in each other's systems.

Passion.

I was glad to have found it, to have found Yami, even if I was going to lose him all over again, even if I was going to be the one leaving him this time when I finally went home – even though I was going to hunger for this, to hunger for him, for the rest of my life.

I wasn't ready to open my eyes. So I lay next to Yami instead, trying not to ache, trying to drift off again, trying to tell myself I'd succeeded. But I wasn't really asleep, so what followed wasn't really a dream.

I was a card in Pegasus' hand once again. Sometimes I could swear that that was my reality and everything that had happened since was just an illusion. Pegasus was talking, and I was there again. I could recall every word perfectly – and Pegasus, as usual, had had a lot of words.

"One more duel, and it'll all be over. I'll have everything I need to bring Cynthia back – if not to life then at least to its semblance. After my duel with Yugi, it'll be time for you to make your last sacrifice. I need one, Kaiba-boy, and you're perfect." Pegasus laughed. It wasn't his usual theatrically smug chuckle. This sounded sad. "I never thought of using the Blue Eyes White Dragon as a sacrifice before, but I'm begging for my heart's desire… how can I present any offering but the best? I'm sure your destruction can light the way to my being reunited with Cynthia. I need not only your technology, but the power of your soul to regain my love. Do not dare say that it will be only an illusion! Life is the illusion! Only love is real."

He was screaming now, as though I'd been arguing. Then he quieted down.

"Did you desire me, Kaiba-boy? Emotions are made to be twisted. And you never needed me as I need you, to warm Cynthia to life. You were lucky you felt nothing deeper than infatuation."

I still hadn't figured a way out of this trap, but at least I now knew the score. When we'd first started working together, I'd wanted Pegasus to… like me, to want me, even. Then I'd reckoned he was after my brains and my corporation.

He was. Crazy as it sounded, Pegasus was trying to create a holographic world so real, he could just walk into it and live there forever. But he needed more than my brains or even my corporation for that. I was good, but nobody was that good. But I'd forgotten to include, or more accurately, had discounted his Eye when making my calculations. As I'd learned, the Eye had the power to steal
souls. Pegasus was betting it also had the power to use them, to strip them of their energy. He was going to give life to his fantasy world, at the cost of my own.

So my original hope had come true in a way I'd never expected, in a way that proved, once again, the foolishness of having hopes. Pegasus wanted me all right, but he wanted me as a power source, like a long running battery or a high octane fuel.

Even knowing that, right now there was nothing I could do but listen. Pegasus stroked the surface of my prison, as though he was still caressing my hair, the line of my cheek, instead of the card's flat surface.

"I studied you carefully, Kaiba-boy. You were so cold, but so intense. I knew there was a volcano under the frost. I wanted to stir it to life, just a little, just long enough for me to steal its fire," he said. "You were a kid with his first crush. You should have been totally under my thumb. And yet the most I could do was distract you, but never blind you. Your actions were too ostentatiously unpredictable to be truly random. That's when I knew you must be carrying a secret as powerful as mine, locked in your stony heart." Pegasus laughed, quietly. "Even in the midst of my grief, you gave me something to puzzle over, to wonder at… even a little companionship. For that I'm grateful."

It was bad enough that he'd won. It would be the ultimate victory, if, against my will, I understood him. If, after all my evasions, he understood me.

"All I needed was one word; the name you had buried so deeply, your heart had to be shattered for it to be uncovered. Mokuba's name. You had turned yourself into a living sacrifice for him. Why should I not use you in the same role? And you'll be rewarded. I promise that the moment I am reunited with Cynthia, I will release Mokuba from his prison. He will rejoin the world to live out his life. Will that content you?" he asked. Pegasus continued speaking in that same damn soft voice, as though he could see the nod I was unable to offer. "I thought so," he whispered. "We both know what it is to love so deeply that your own soul, your own damnation counts for nothing. We are kindred spirits, my little Blue Eyes White Dragon."

I lay next to Yami, wondering if Pegasus was right.

After telling myself that it didn't matter, after telling myself that people leave, that that's just what they do, I had come all this way just to ask Yami: "Why did you leave me?"

I hated uncertainty. When I looked at my life (something I did as little as possible) all I saw were question marks, starting with whether my father had ever cared for us, whether he had wanted to stay. I thought of tire tracks leading to a tree. Were they skid marks or acceleration tracks? Had he been escaping as fast as he could? Just thinking about it, I felt the anger rising in my chest, breathed it in like the thinning fog. But was what I was feeling anger? Or was that just the card that always came easiest to my hand?

Maybe the death I needed to accept wasn't Yami's, but a much older one. And maybe what I needed to learn to live with wasn't death, but all that had gone before it.

And maybe Pegasus had been right, at least in this.

"We're kindred spirits, Kaiba-boy."

As if in answer, I remembered Yami saying, "There's more to you than darkness."

For the first time I understood my father, understood what Pegasus had surrendered to.
Obsession.

Of course I recognized it, even in this new guise. I'd been obsessed my whole life – with my goals, with my promises – with winning. Yet this was a new spin on an old acquaintance. This was passion's darker twin… this feeling that after years of denying that what I wanted mattered, it was suddenly all I could see. This feeling that nothing else was real, not even Yami himself, because in my need to grab him, I was losing sight of all the things that made him unique, that made him who he was.

And I didn't want to lose him. Not like that.

Pegasus had tried to drag his lover back. My father had tried to follow his. I'd never wanted to be like either of them. But I was, and I knew that now.

Except I wasn't.

Nothing is inevitable. Not even obsession. I had a choice and the determination to make it stick. And I had Mokuba. He'd been waiting long enough for his brother to come back.

I'd succumbed to darkness that one time, but I'd rejected it my whole life as well. Even here, even today. And in realizing that, I realized for the first time how wrong Pegasus had been. All things end. It is the natural order of life and only a fool rejects the knowledge. A lucky few get to order the time and manner of their passing. If Yami's time in my world was over, it was, as Yugi had said from the beginning, his decision to make. Mine was whether to accept it or let the darkness swallow me.

Except I was never letting it defeat me again.

"We're kindred spirits, Kaiba-boy."

"No, we're not," I said to Pegasus's phantom.

"What is it?" Yami asked. I wondered if I'd spoken aloud.

"Pegasus," I said, finally opening my eyes. "It makes sense he's haunting my dreams. We're alike. He wouldn't accept Cynthia's death. He let it destroy him instead. I've never known if my father crashed his car on purpose or not – but it doesn't matter. He stopped living the day my mother died. I thought I was different. But look at me. Am I any better? I'm stalking you right into the after-life."

"You came to give me a choice."

"Now who are you trying to kid? I came because I was mad." Yami laughed even though I wasn't joking. "It's your life. You're the one who gets to choose if this is where it ends." I remembered Kisara saying, "You cannot fight on another's battlefield." "Mine is only to accept it – or let it kill me too. That's what Mokuba and Kisara were trying to tell me." I shrugged. "I just didn't feel like listening."

"You've never been able to afford to listen to anything but your own determination," Yami pointed out. "Should you have listened to the voices telling you that you couldn't keep what was left of your family together? The voices saying you couldn't beat a Chess Grand Master at his own game? That you couldn't stop the family you'd been adopted into from destroying more lives with their weapons? You aren't wrong, Kaiba – except when you forget yourself. You're just extreme."

I stared at Yami. How had he managed to become the antidote to all those memories? And when I went home, would that be enough? Would it last the rest of my life?
"Do you remember what you said to me at Alcatraz?" I asked. "You said that the demons I was fighting weren't in my deck; that I had to let them go. I didn't know you were talking about yourself then." I laughed, shortly. "Maybe you didn't either. But I will let go of them. All of them. Even you. I promise." I leaned up on one elbow so I could look him square in the eyes. "I can't control you or your life or your death. It's the last illusion, and it's past time I admitted that."

"Whatever happens," Yami said somberly, "you have to know if I stay, it's not because I don't care."

I wasn't sure I believed that, but I was too tired to argue. Even though I had barely moved, I felt like I had fought a battle. Yami believed what he was saying. That would have to be enough.

Besides, it was what I wanted to hear. Maybe that would have to be enough, as well.

**Yami's Narrative**

After days of stumbling around in the fog, we had a clear task ahead. We had obtained the information Mahaado and the others needed. Now we were headed back… headed home.

Already the air seemed clearer; the sky was actually blue. I felt freer. We walked in silence through the morning, but it was a companionable one. I felt an odd sense of accomplishment. Kaiba's and my cards were finally on the table, face up. That made a difference. There's a reason why the card that forces you to reveal your hand is called "Respect Play."

Kaiba would be hurt if I remained. I had known that from the moment we had first kissed, but hearing it in his voice was another, harder, matter. That should have made me feel worse. Instead it reminded me that as much as we cared, we had never been gentle with each other. Kaiba had always been the one person I'd never needed to protect, the one person I could care for and hurt, the one person whose heart I could shatter, trusting to his strength to rebuild. That made him doubly precious.

And yet, I've always been protective; to me it was the essence of love. I felt it now, this urge to protect someone who believed that defense was a weakness… this frustrating awareness that I had nothing to offer that Kaiba would take – except perhaps my honesty.

Kaiba had said he would accept anything from me, even my death; that thinking he could control it was the last illusion between us.

Except it wasn't.

For once, Kaiba and I were fighting the same demon at the same time.

Uncertainty.

It was the one thing Kaiba and I feared worse than death. I had followed the certainty of destiny to the grave without once questioning if that was the ending I wanted. And Kaiba had pursued the illusion of control with equal devotion. He clung to the belief I would remain because it was easier for him to deal with death than with doubt.

I had followed what I thought was his lead in this, not wanting to burden Kaiba with my own indecision. But he had been wounded anyway, by the thought that I was traveling through our journey untouched, by the thought that he was the only one struggling with regret and loss. I had done him an injustice. Kaiba deserved to know my entire heart, even its uncertainties.

I didn't want any more walls between us. It was time to tear the final one down.
Kaiba…” I paused, wondering how to confess, taking a moment before saddling him with my own doubts. "I don't know if I can ever get used to being alone," I said. "To hearing only my own voice inside my head. But it took coming here to make me wonder if Domino is my home, as much as any place can be."

Kaiba looked at me suspiciously. However much he might champion change in the abstract, he was wary of any changes not of his devising.

"What are you trying to tell me?" he asked.

"That I don't know anything any more, not even in which world I belong."

"I thought you were staying here. I thought your decision was immutable," he said, frowning.

"As you pointed out when we first met in this place… few decisions are irrevocable," I said. "I thought this was my appointed path. Questioning that was such a new thing, I had started before I'd realized I'd begun."

"We've been alone over a week now. You took your time saying anything," Kaiba said sourly.

"I have no answer to give you, only my own indecision. And you had reached your own accommodation with what had happened. You assumed I wasn't going back, because it made it easier for you to accept my love if you also thought you would lose it."

"Don't push your cowardice off on me! Whatever 'accommodation' I made was based on a lie – and you know me well enough to know I would always prefer the truth!"

"But I had no 'truth' to give you… only my own confusion. And is there a vice you regard more meanly than indecision?"

"Since when have you cared what I thought?"

"Always. Do not ask for honesty and then use ignorance as your shield. When I chose to make love to you – for that is what we did every time, whatever colder euphemisms you use in your thoughts – it was because whatever happened, I wanted to have this… wanted it badly enough to risk hurting you; badly enough to risk spending the rest of an endless lifetime convinced I had made the wrong choice twice if I stayed. You felt the same."

Kaiba stared at me, as if I had rocked him back on his heels. I could feel the anger leech out of him.

"I didn't want you to have to live with uncertainty. I didn't want to make your journey even harder. It wasn't an insult," I said.

"Wasn't it?" Kaiba answered. "The only constant between us is that we've never held back. We've always trusted the other to be able to stand up to whatever we dished out."

"You're right," I said, tearing the last bricks apart. "I didn't want to face my own confusion, much less share it. Words sometimes seem to have the power to shape things into being, like the names of the duel monsters I once called from stone. It was as if speaking would make my confusion real, give it form. And I couldn't name what I was feeling for you, not when I didn't know if I could give it a future. I still don't know. But I refuse to deny it any longer, either."

He looked at me, eyes unreadable. He didn't answer. I didn't expect him to. He didn't need to. He had come to find me. Possibly for all their power, there are times when words are a poor second.
"And yet, after everything, even after all this time, you still don't trust me," Kaiba finally said.

"I trust you with my life," I insisted.

"No, I mean you don't trust me not to shatter."

"I trust you to always come back to yourself. Is that enough?"

**MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE**

I'd been bugged ever since I'd seen Exodia again. I guess it was no surprise I wound up outside looking for Kisara – or that I waited until I was sure that everyone else was asleep. As much as I liked Yugi, I didn't want to run into him tonight.

I was surprised once I got outside, though. Kisara wasn't alone. All the cards I thought of when I thought of my brother were there… his dragons, his Battle Ox… even Saggi. I'd been trying to avoid company, but didn't mind them being there. I guess you could say I'd grown up around them. They were familiar. All except for the chubby knight from Ready for Intercepting and his fellow cards – the ones that lived in my brother's briefcase, not his deck.

"What's up?" I asked Kisara.

"I am the captain of his deck. Is it so surprising I should want to hold council?" she replied.

"You? I thought he was the captain," I said, pointing to Kaiser Seahorse. His armor was as blue as my brother's eyes, or Kisara's. He took off his helmet and shook out his long brown hair. He looked less intimidating with it off. His crimson eyes matched Yami's. I'd never noticed before.

"I have stood in Kaiba's stead," he said. "I understand his determination and his pride very well. It is my own. But even I am not so arrogant as to seek to usurp Kisara's place. Kaiba is my liege – but she is my lady."

Lord of Dragons stepped forward. His helmet was under one arm. He put his free arm around Kaiser Seahorse's shoulders and nodded. "I summon the Blue Eyes White Dragon in your brother's name, but she is the one who honors me by choosing to appear."

"I see," I said, although I really didn't. I mean, they were duel monsters. Didn't they have to come when they were summoned? But then I remembered Nisama telling me about his Blue Eyes White Dragon disappearing before his eyes in that first shadow game he fought with Yugi. I shook my head. It was too confusing to think about. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything," I added.

They stared at me, surprised. "You are our lord's heart. How can your presence be an intrusion?"

"I see," I said, although I really didn't. I mean, they were duel monsters. Didn't they have to come when they were summoned? But then I remembered Nisama telling me about his Blue Eyes White Dragon disappearing before his eyes in that first shadow game he fought with Yugi. I shook my head. It was too confusing to think about. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything," I added.

Lord of Dragons sank into a bow. Everyone else, except Kisara, did the same. It was really embarrassing. "It is in part due to you that we have a duelist worthy of serving. We are in your debt," Kaiser Seahorse added.

"Are you here plotting strategy?" I asked, hoping that would get them on their feet again. "Or are you just hanging out because you know a battle's coming?"

I glanced at the Battle Ox. He shuffled his feet, but didn't answer. The Hitosame Giant closed his one eye, as if he could avoid seeing the question. Lord of Dragons and Kaiser Seahorse gave identical shrugs, tossed matching brown hair over their shoulders. Kisara chuckled.

"They are not mutually exclusive needs," Kaiser Seahorse finally said. Lord of Dragons smirked, as
if he'd scored a point by keeping silent until the other monster answered. Kaiser Seahorse turned to glare at him.

I grinned. The way they were collectively avoiding admitting that they liked each other reminded me of my brother. Maybe they were all the guardians of his soul, not just Kisara. I smiled in earnest, looking at them. Nisama couldn't have picked a better bunch.

"Nisama's okay, isn't he?" I couldn't help asking.

"I believe so," Lord of Dragons answered, looking puzzled and annoyed that he couldn't give me a yes-or-no answer. "We knew your brother was troubled even as he was assembling us into his deck for the first time. If we knew he was in peril back then, how could we fail to perceive it now?"

"But that was different," I protested.

"How so?" he replied.

"He wasn't in danger of dying, then!"

"How does one live in either world when the soul has been destroyed?" Kaiser Seahorse asked.

"I think," Kisara said, "that if he was in danger of leaving us, for whatever reason, we would know."

I tried to relax. I was doing an okay job of it until Saggi gave a sudden cackle. My brother's card or not, he always gave me the creeps.

"That must be comforting for the cub, considering what a fine job we've done to date of curbing Kaiba's worst instincts," he smirked.

He limped over to Kisara. I'd always thought of him as a weak card, but there was no fear in his face as he looked Kisara square in the eye. "You had four footholds in his world. He destroyed one, even as you were trying to warn him. Is that your definition of success – that three out of four isn't bad? Seventy-five percent is a mediocre score at best."

"We will fight our hardest for him," Kisara said.

"We always do. But we have not always won."

"No. And yet it is hard to deny that the few losses we have been unable to prevent have worked to his ultimate advantage."

"So when all else fails, hope that his defeats act as swaddling bands to control his tantrums? Do you think he would appreciate being treated as a child?"

"I do not seek to do so, although I would that I could have given him a childhood," Kisara said. The monsters behind her nodded.

Saggi laughed. "And what would he have done with one?"

"Do not pretend you feel differently. Did you not say you wished he could move beyond his need of you?" Kisara countered.


"It does to us. You are our comrade, and Kaiba himself named you a part of his deck."
Saggi gave a ghost of a smile. "Do you expect me to express gratitude?"

"No," Kisara said.

"That does not make her words any the less true. We all have different roles in his deck," Lord of Dragons added.

"And yours is not the lesser for being an unenviable one. We can not all carry his hopes and dreams. There must be balance in all things," Kaiser Seahorse finished for him.

As if their words had been some sort of signal, the get-together broke up after that. Some duel monsters headed out, waving cheerfully as they went, others seemed to melt into the night when I wasn't looking.

"There's one thing I don't get," I said, thinking of all those protective monsters I'd seen tonight, the ones whose cards were in my bedroom at the palace. "I didn't want to say anything because I didn't want to hurt their feelings, but some those monsters aren't even in my brother's deck."

"They are his nonetheless, even if he has forgotten. They live in the hope that one day he will learn to see them, will learn that preserving his life points is a victory in and of itself."

"Me too," I said. "I mean, he's come a long way. I know that."

Kisara's breath blew out softly. "He must walk his own road at his own speed."

"That Saggi…" I said.

"He spoke naught but the truth. But in his mouth, words are weapons. I wish I could have done more."

"Me too," I agreed again.

"And yet you came to find me; you were you were disturbed before meeting Saggi…" Kisara said. She paused, then asked, "Exodia's words affected you?"

I nodded. "It just brought it all back… you know… Death-T."

"And you feel responsible for what he became there."

I nodded.

"As do I, at times," she said. "Even though I know it foolish, I sometimes wonder if it was my failure, that I couldn't reach him in time, couldn't make him see where the path he was treading would end. I am glad he came here so that I could tell him that."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"That he had never sought to evade responsibility for his actions. He asked me why I was trying to take the blame he had already accepted, why I sought to place his guilt on my shoulders. I didn't have an answer."

"I do," I told her. "It's the same as yours. Because we love him."
Thanks to Bnomiko for pointing out all the things that didn't make sense the first time around.

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** Kaiser Seahorse and Lord of Dragons serve similar roles in Kaiba's deck. They are both commanding figures who can summon or tribute for other more powerful monsters. In Noa's Arc, Kaiser Seahorse is the captain of Kaiba's Deck, Lord of Dragons summons his Blue Eyes White Dragon. I guess I sort of see them as spiritual twins, sort of as brothers-under-the-skin. Miko asked if I also saw them as lovers. I have to admit that I don't know them well enough to be able to offer a guess.

**Manga Note:** In the manga it's not really spelled out just exactly how Pegasus intended to work this whole creating a fantasy world real enough he could believe his dead wife was alive again thing. He needed Kaiba Corporation's technology, but he wasn't simply trying to create a hologram, he was trying to give it substance. So, although I have to stress this is solely my own take on things, given that it was getting the Millennium Eye in the first place that drove him insane/convinced him he could bring his wife back, I'm assuming he was planning on using the power of the Eye in some way to accomplish this.

I find him a tragic figure, in the sense that I think his grief, combined with the Eye, drove him insane. I don't think he really saw Kaiba or Mokuba or anything other than his need to be reunited with his wife. I do wonder though – if he had succeeded, would he have been happy? Or on some level, would he have remained aware that this was all an illusion, and would that knowledge have eaten away at him, even more than her death?

**Respect Play:** One thing I find interesting about Kaiba and Yami is that that in many ways they do not see a need to protect each other, and that their respect for each other is based, in part on a respect for the other's ability to survive and triumph. I find this interesting because they are both such protective people. In many ways, the most significant relationships in their lives, Yami's with Yugi and Kaiba's with Mokuba, are based on protecting their loved ones. And in fact, though they would both regard needing protection as a weakness when applied to themselves, the fact that they have strong protective impulses towards their other halves in no way whatsoever lessens their respect for their partners.

I can see where, while they were both saying that they were only going to think about the present, Yami wouldn't tell Kaiba he was thinking about returning, partly because he didn't want to acknowledge is own hesitation, and partly because if Kaiba seemed to be adjusting to his death, he wouldn't want to reopen a wound – especially one that Kaiba was unwilling to admit had been inflicted. But I think once they were more open, once Kaiba said that he was going to let him go, Yami would feel that it was dishonest not to tell Kaiba that he was undecided about what he wanted to do when this was over. I could also see Kaiba resenting the idea that Yami had tried to protect his feelings. I think Yami would feel protective in that way without it lessening his respect for Kaiba, but I can see Kaiba having a harder time understanding that.

**Correction Note:** In Chapter 21, originally Yami says that he fought Jounouchi at Battle Royale because he didn't think he could survive Malik. I was really focused on stressing one thing the way Yami and Kaiba often do not feel a need to protect each other, and how that is a component to their respect for each other – as I rambled on about in the above paragraph. Anyway, after it was pointed it out, I ended up agreeing that Yami would never have spoken slightingly of Jounouchi's survival skills, because he makes it clear at Alcatraz how much he admires how hard Jounouchi's fighting and how he considers that the mark of a true duelist, not simply winning. Although I do think that Yami would recognize that there was a skill level difference between Jounouchi and himself of Kaiba, he would also recognize how strong Jounouchi's heart was. So I rewrote that section to make Yami's thoughts clearer: that he owed Jounouchi a duel as well as Kaiba and was worried that if he wasn't Jounouchi's opponent in the first round, Kaiba or Malik would beat him before they could have their
promised duel, and that he was afraid (especially when influenced by Yugi) that Jounouchi would
die, not because of a lack of courage, but because Malik's last two opponents were in a coma, as was
Rishid. So that chapter's been updated.

**Opening Narration Note:** I have to admit, there's something about "The Tragedy of Sleepy
Beauty" that's irresistible funny as a title.

**Review Note:** I reply to all signed reviews or reviews that have an email address directly. I reply to
all unsigned reviews and post a summary of all replies on my LJ. The link is the first one on my
Biopage. I generally post replies there when I update the next chapter.

I'm always conscious of the idea that I can never really know how my story looks to the person
reading it. So I'd really appreciate any comments.
First Steps out of the Realm of Chaos

Chapter Notes

*To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.*

**CHAPTER 24: THE FIRST STEPS OUT OF THE REALM OF CHAOS**

*Going home – or at least returning to a place of safety – is the goal of fairy tale duos from Frodo and Sam to Dorothy and Toto. Even when, like Frodo and Kaiba, you can no longer remember ever feeling safe… even when, like Frodo and Yami, you start to doubt whether the place you left will ever truly be your home again… still the impulse to click your heels together persists. Of course, as Dorothy found out, though the words may be easy to say, the process of finding your way home, even when you know where home is, is rarely that simple…*

**YAMI'S NARRATIVE**

It was strange to feel so content, with so much still unresolved. Yugi had told me to become my own person. I still didn't know what that meant. The only thing I had gleaned was that a sense of selfhood is not the inevitable consequence of walking the earth; it is not as natural as breathing. Kaiba, for one, seemed content to defer the whole question until Mokuba reached his majority.

Sometimes it seemed like the only thing standing between me and my future was myself. If I had remembered dying, would I now understand life better? It was the one memory left unaccounted for… I could not recall how I had come to be sealed in the puzzle in the first place. Nor could I remember the millennia that had passed until my puzzle had been found, until Yugi had freed me.

For how could memory exist outside of time? And yet that had been my first thought – that endless eons had passed; that I had been alone for years uncounted and unaccountable.

I had friends in this world; they had waited through all those ages for my return. Would I have been less lonely if I had known? And did I owe it to them to reward their faithfulness, by refusing to disappear again so soon after rejoining them?

And did that outweigh the ties of friendship and even love I felt for Yugi and Kaiba?

Maybe Yugi was wrong; maybe this was a puzzle I could have a lifetime to piece together, if I chose. We had a battle ahead of us. I thought of how often Kaiba was content to learn from his duels, to let them test his beliefs. If I dueled with my soul, how could my cards refuse to show me what was in
my heart?

For the first time I thought of returning with Yugi and Kaiba, not as a daydream, but as a possibility. Abruptly, I realized how deceptive my intimacy with Kaiba had been. I'd never had to guess what Yugi was thinking, what he was feeling. I'd known. I'd probably have known even without sharing his body.

What would it be like to be with someone, and yet not know their every thought? With Kaiba… I trusted to his loyalty, his determination, his intelligence. But whatever was going on behind his blue eyes was screened by more than his hair. And yet, these past weeks had proven what I should have guessed… how thin a veneer his impenetrability could be, how suddenly it could turn from slate to glass.

I thought of Alcatraz, of Kaiba trying to use his anger to defeat his hatred, so eager to destroy his past that he didn't even notice he was killing himself in the process. I saw him building the walls of his prison ever higher, convinced he was tearing them down, until I had diffused the dragon he mistakenly thought was the ultimate expression of his rage. We had talked through our cards. It had been enough, then. Now, I wanted more; I wanted to prove my friendship with words.

"I know what you saw at Alcatraz. You saw me telling you we were friends, then putting Jounouchi first," I said.

"I don't know why you keep harping on that," Kaiba said. "It's not like it…"

"For once in your life, just listen… please," I said, holding up my hand. To my surprise he fell silent, although I wasn't sure what to say, and I no longer assumed he'd understand. "I'm not apologizing for trying to save Jounouchi's life. I couldn't have done anything differently – but of course it matters. I just need for you to know… feeling like you owe two different people is hard. But that doesn't mean one of them doesn't count."

Kaiba tilted his head, considering the matter. "I wouldn't know. I never had that problem. Nobody ever mattered except Mokuba, before."

"I should have known Jounouchi would have had the strength to come through without my interference," I said thoughtfully. "I seem to keep learning the same lesson over and over. After all, I tried to protect Yugi by going to the after-life – and look at how well that turned out. Oh… that's right… you didn't hear what he said to me when we met. It was after you'd flown off."

Kaiba snorted at my way of describing his departure. I ignored him and said, "Yugi asked me if I was afraid that he wasn't strong enough to live his own life unless I was gone. He asked if I was afraid that Anzu would always prefer me."

"What did you tell him?" he asked, curiously.

"That I'd always known he was the stronger of us in all the ways that matter. But I'm not sure he believed me. I'd told him all that before I left. But then I left, and Yugi ended up wondering if I doubted his ability to stand on his own two feet." I shook my head. "And I was the one leaning on him the whole time."

Kaiba shrugged. "I don't know much about friendship – but Mokuba told me once, it wasn't that different from us… and isn't relying on each other what brothers do? I forgot that once. It's never let me down since."

I smiled. "And it never will," I said.
The rain started to fall then, a pure summer shower. Kaiba surprised me by stripping his shirt and duster and storing them inside his pack. As he opened it, I could see that the inside was waterproof.

"Are your cards safe?" he asked.

"Probably not safe enough," I answered, reaching into my own pack and handing him the oilskin packet that contained them.

Kaiba's head was down, his hair was screening his face, but I thought he was smiling. He stored them inside a plastic pouch in a rubber box, next to his own. Seeing them nestled next to Kaiba's, guarded by protections both ancient and modern, was comforting.

His task accomplished, Kaiba stood up, as the rain began to fall in earnest. He tilted his face to the sky; the torrents streamed down his face and torso. He pushed his hair back. The rain had darkened it, had drowned its highlights. With his head flung back, his hair fell between his shoulder blades like a sharpened knife. He smiled slightly as the drops ran off the side of his face. It was a simple gesture, but so uninhibited… as if he was in his shower, as if I was so familiar I was once again invisible.

"This feels good," he murmured.

I'd almost forgotten how grimy we were. Dust and sweat were washing off of Kaiba now, the rain creating trails down his body that merged and disappeared, leaving his skin glistening as though caressed by oil, not water. I'd forgotten how white it was. I shrugged out of the top of my garment, letting it blend with the skirt of my tunic.

I could feel the water pelting me, hard enough to sting; cleansing me, trailing down my legs in little rivulets. The rain had flattened my hair. I laughed as I shook it out of my eyes. I couldn't remember when it had last rained. Kaiba was right. This felt good.

"If I thought wishing would work," Kaiba said. "I'd wish for a lake right about now."

"Look!" I yelled. There was a glint on the horizon. We grabbed our packs and ran towards it, more convinced with each step that it was the gleam of sunlight on water.

It was.

It was also a swamp.

"It figures," Kaiba said sourly as the rain eased and ended.

We got dressed in silence as we stared at the swamp. It stretched as far as the eye could see to the east. It looked endless. If we went west, using Kaiba's telescope, we could see where it turned to solid land again, but if we went that way, we might come close to the third site, the one Kisara had surveyed before we started.

Kaiba pulled out his map. I was relieved to see the contents of his pack had remained dry.

"According to the last time this area was surveyed, this swamp wasn't here," he said, half to himself. "I wonder what changed?"

"It matters little to the decision before us," I reminded him. "Which do you think is the greater risk? Losing the time it would take to curve around to the east, or coming closer than we'd like to the outpost on the border of Set's domain?"

Kaiba looked at the swamp as though weighing the chances of just stomping through it, following the straightest line back to the settlement. At that moment, a geyser of boiling water shot up, its sulfur
fumes choking us.

"Kisara said the outpost was deserted," Kaiba said thoughtfully, looking west.

"She can't be sure," I cautioned. "Still, if we cross at night we should be safe. That site was right on
the edge of Set's territory. And once we win through to the borderlands we can call her without
arousing suspicion. We're very close to neutral territory now. It seems like an acceptable move."

"Suits me. It's time to get back," Kaiba said. He paused. "I didn't mean it like that – not like I
would've… before. It's just…" He paused again. "It's just that Mokuba's waiting."

"You left a dragon guarding him," I reminded him.

"I know. But… I'm not the one guarding him."

"Yes, you are," I contradicted. "You're just doing it from here. If there's one lesson I'm determined to
learn no matter how many times I have to repeat it, it's that sometimes you can protect the people you
love better when you let them find their own strength."

"Mokuba's strong," Kaiba said. "I know that. He managed fine the whole time I was in that coma. He protected Kaiba Corporation for me. I just…"

"Miss him," I finished. "I know." At his words, a longing swept through me for a face both alike and
different from my own, the face of my own partner.

**KAIBA'S NARRATIVE**

The swamp bothered me. It wasn't on my map and Kisara hadn't mentioned it. Of course, I'd seen
how abruptly and artificially the landscape could change, but this had an unpredictability to it that I
distrusted.

We finally reached the end of the swamp at sunset. We were within telescope range of the outpost, or
what was left of it. I surveyed the charred remains of tents, studied what looked like claw marks on
the burned out shells of their barracks.

"So that's why she was so sure the outpost would be deserted," I said, handing the telescope to
Yami. "And now we know why they set up a geyser in a damn swamp to try and knock anything
that flew overhead out of the sky. I just hope they didn't leave a guard behind to greet us."

We rested while we were still a safe distance away, and skirted the outpost by night, finally reaching
the borderlands as dawn was breaking. It looked like our gamble in going so close to that third site
had paid off. It wasn't until we were a couple of hours past it that I realized we were being followed.

They were good. I wasn't sure when they'd picked up our trail. Maybe Set's General had been smart
enough to have left someone on guard at the outpost in case another dragon decided to drop by for
target practice. Maybe it had nothing to do with the scorched ruins we'd passed. We'd run into a
patrol on our way into Set's territory. They probably paid more attentions to their borders than to the
vast interior.

Either way, I'd missed something. It didn't matter that they were good. That was no excuse for not
being better. I thought about how peaceful yesterday's trek with Yami had been, and briefly
wondered if that feeling of calm companionship had lulled me to sleep in more ways than one. But it
had been too novel to be restful, and whether we were fighting or lovers, being with Yami keyed me
up. And in a way I felt better able to focus, now that I wasn't battling Yami as well as our enemy. It
reminded me of what he had said at Alcatraz – that I had lost because I'd been fighting myself as well
as him. I wondered what would happen if we dueled again...

Even more briefly, I'd wondered if I'd been distracted because we were heading back, because I'd be seeing Mokuba soon. But thinking of Mokuba has always sharpened my senses, not dulled them.

I didn't glance back. I knew they were there. It was frustrating. We were on the same kind of barren savannah we'd trekked through so often on our way out; there was nowhere for us, or them, to hide. Luckily we were too far away to make each other out. They were just five dots in the distance. We had one slim advantage. We knew anyone behind us had to be an enemy. They couldn't be sure who or what we were. And since they hadn't popped in to join us or called for reinforcements, they probably didn't have a spellcaster. I looked up, half-expecting to see a flock of those Whiptail Crows but the sky was clear.

Yami and I saw the green blur on the horizon at the same time.

"It looks like a forest. Maybe we can lose them in there," he said.

Don't you mean maybe we can turn the tables on them?" I asked.

"Either would work," he answered with a grin.

I risked a backwards glance when we reached the edge of the forest. They'd managed to close some of the gap between us. I had to assume their endurance was at least the equal of ours, and I couldn't believe how fast they were out in the open and over distance. But there's a difference between quickness and speed – and I hoped when it came to the two or three steps needed for close in fighting, when it came to our reaction times, Yami and I would be faster off the mark. This would be a sprint, not a marathon.

Now that we'd made it to the cover of the trees I realized what a temporary solution it was. There was no fog. We couldn't stay hidden for long. And these woods wouldn't go on forever. Once we left them, from what I remembered of the borderlands, we couldn't count on finding shelter. I didn't know if our adversaries had any projectile weapons. I had my shuriken, but useful as they'd been for rabbits, they didn't have the range and power of a crossbow. If our enemies had one and caught us in the open, we'd be dead.

Nor could we risk waiting for darkness and trying to leave the forest with them still on our trail and unaccounted for. The last thing we could do was lead them back to the settlement – and Mokuba.

I considered our options and rechecked the map as we walked. We were in the borderlands. Once we made it to a clearing we could summon Kisara without too big a risk, especially since she'd obviously been here before. It would be funny to see the looks on their faces when they ran up against her.

I rejected the idea. I couldn't call her until we knew what we were up against. And I wasn't going to summon her to do my killing for me, like I was afraid of getting my own hands dirty. I thought back to the weapons I'd designed, to Gozaburo's suicide, to Death-T… it wasn't like my hands were exactly clean, anyway.

"We're going to have to make a stand here," I said grimly.

"I know," Yami answered, the grin gone. And then they were in the woods with us. Poison Mummies. At least there were no spellcasters to worry about in the party, and I didn't see any crossbows. I breathed a sigh of relief as I faced them.

We came together with a yell. There was no need for dancing around; I had no desire for foreplay.
At least the agenda was simple. We were each there to kill the other. They outnumbered us. They'd caught us. You could see the confidence in their dead eyes. It was up to us to prove them wrong and there are times when losing really will equal death.

They were armed with daggers. Given my longer reach, it seemed like a mismatch. But they didn't look worried – and given that they were Poison Mummies, I was betting their blades were toxic. Even a scratch would probably prove fatal. I needed quick strikes, needed to get in and out as fast as possible.

I circled, drawing the closest mummy off to one side. As I came closer, he used the long sleeves of his cloak as a defense, whipping them around to try and trap my blades, or at least distract me. It didn't work. I'd seen that tactic before. Gozaburo wouldn't have risked my life, but my kenjutsu instructors had never hesitated to take a slice out of my side if my attention wandered – especially if that lapse occurred as a result of such an obvious gambit. Life is a battle and Gozaburo had wanted me prepared for any encounter. He had trained me well.

I swung my dual kodachi as fast as I could from the outside, aiming for the veins and arteries on the sides of his neck. Luckily I'd been right – speed over distance didn't translate to quickness at close range. I got out before he could get his own dagger up to block or scratch my hand on the way in.

He shattered instantly.

Okay. If I could get to them quickly enough, they'd break and disappear before being able to return the favor.

I risked a glance at Yami. He nodded. Good. Message received.

Yami's opponent towered over him. The Poison Mummy was literally sticking his neck out, trying to tempt Yami into overreaching. I grinned. Yami was an arrogant, self-righteous bastard, but he wasn't stupid. He was staying within himself, like he always did, refusing to try for the unprotected neck of his taller opponent. Instead he swung his khopesh at the midsection of his enemy as the mummy arched above him, cutting almost to the backbone. It might not have worked on a human; the time it would have taken Yami to free his blade would have left him unprotected. But as soon as he struck home, the monster shattered and his khopesh swung free, leaving him ready to face the next foe.

I had an enemy of my own to worry about. I was parrying mechanically, trying to block him from getting in close enough to use his knife on my unprotected arms. This was a waiting game, and I wasn't going to be the one that got impatient enough to do something stupid first. Finally he tried to reach around me and swing in from the side. It was what I'd been waiting for. I'm tall, but I also know how to change levels fast. I ducked under his outstretched arm; brought my kodachi up in a quick strike to his now unprotected torso.

Yami must have finished off his other opponent, because there was only one Poison Mummy left in the woods with us, the one now facing me. I brought my blades back in, then crossed them and thrust them forward to block him, pushing back hard, knocking him off balance. He fell to the ground, his knife spinning out of his hand, and in an instant, my blade was at his throat. I drew back to deliver the coup d'grace. I felt Yami's hand on my arm.

"Kaiba! He's unarmed."

It was hard to hear Yami through the blood drumming in my ears. I didn't take my eyes off my prey, but I didn't thrust the blade home either.

"It is one thing to kill in the heat of battle, for survival. Another to do so when that need has passed,"
Yami added.

I looked at him incredulously, ready to shake his hand off.

"I know what you're going to say..." he continued, "that there's a risk he'll make it to Set's General in time to tell him we have discovered his headquarters; that we can be there within the week. But there are benefits to showing mercy."

Yami grinned.

I knew that look. I had seen it in countless duels. I lowered my kodachi. When Yami fought, mercy was just another tactic.

"Go," I ordered. "And don't look back."

The Poison Mummy was only too glad to obey my command. I turned to Yami. Hearing him advocate mercy in that tone of voice excited me, but I had questions I wanted answered.

"Explain," I said.

"What's to explain? He spoke. You listened. You are still as bound to him as I, though the binding is pleasanter." Seto said.

There are times when hearing voices in your head is inconvenient, and this was definitely one of them. I shook Seto off and faced Yami.

"Did you know that Exodia is the general for our side?" Yami asked.

"Not Mahaado? That figures. The man's a born flunky. And I should care, because?" I asked.

"How often have you seen Exodia around?" Yami continued.

"Can't say I've been looking. Is there a point to this boring game?"

"We need to defeat Set's General in a penalty game if we are to win. That means he needs to be at his headquarters when we arrive to challenge him. And what do you think will happen when that Poison Mummy reaches his home base?" Yami asked.

"They'll know we're aware of their first line of defense," I answered automatically. "They can't ignore the threat or assume we're bluffing. They'll get Set's General to their headquarters, even if he's away, so they can try and figure out how much we know, and what their next move is..." I looked at Yami.

"Precisely."

"So it's time for that last hunter to become the prey. This is turning the tables with a vengeance. If we follow that demon, we can arrive at his heels and summon all the help we need," I said.

"Patience, Kaiba. We need to give them time to call in Set's General. If he is not there, we will have tipped our hand for nothing."

That made sense. But I knew the way Yami's mind worked. Something was missing.

"Bullshit. You've given me the practical reason. What's your real one?" I challenged.

"Mahaado has dreamed of this fight for 3,000 years. He deserves the chance to carry out his battle
I looked for the last Poison Mummy. In the time we'd been arguing, he'd gotten lost among the trees. We couldn't follow him now even if we had wanted to. Annoyance sharpened my voice as I said, "You seem to have forgotten that even with Kisara, it'll take us a while to get back to the settlement, then turn around and get everyone to Set's Headquarters. We've just given his general a head start on transporting the whole base to a more secure location. And if he manages to do that, we'll have to start all over again -- and you can bet, he'll be looking for us this time. If the price of friendship is losing this game -- then it's too high."

"When have I ever been willing to lose?" Yami countered. "You have always seen time, seen anything that delays you in the pursuit of your goals, even for a moment, as your enemy. Yet you hold the means of changing that in your hands, and have ever since I have known you. Think, Kaiba. Do not let your thirst for victory cloud your judgment."

I'd heard that tone before, seen the same look in his eyes in every tag team duel we'd fought side by side. It was as irritating as ever, because it meant that Yami had caught something I'd missed -- and missing something is too much like losing for my taste.

I shook off my leftover anger from the battle we'd just fought, my frustration at not following the now out of sight Poison Mummy.

What was I overlooking now? What had always fallen most naturally within my grasp? I laughed to myself. Talk about your obvious questions. But, Yami was right. Everything we needed to erase Set's head start was, or could be, in our hands. That didn't mean I was going to refrain from scuffing Yami's self-righteous image, though.

"I would have thought lying was against your code of honor. You know damn well it's not going to take us a week to get there," I observed.

"Misdirection is a valid component of strategy. You never place trap cards face up," Yami said as pompously as usual when he was talking about dueling. Before I could shoot an answer back his way, he added, "You told me once to have faith in your deck... in our decks. I still do."

I grunted, surprised and a little perturbed at how swiftly he'd disarmed me.

"Even after 3,000 years, being part of a team is still not easy, is it, Kaiba? I am glad to see you avoid the trap I once fell into." Seto said quietly inside the privacy of my mind.

"What trap is that?" I asked.

"Needing not just victory for your cause, but to be the victor, yourself. And not wanting to accept that others also have a claim on the pharaoh's regard and attention and deserve a share in his triumphs."

"Oh, I intend to win all right. And I feel about Mahaado the same way I do about Yugi's loser brigade." But even as I answered Seto, I knew that I was missing something all over again. Seto didn't reply.

"Come on," I said to Yami. "let's get to the end of these woods so we can summon Kisara and head back to the settlement."

We walked in silence until we reached a clearing. "There's just one thing I want to know," I said. "We could have followed that Poison Mummy. He was right in front of us. It was the obvious, if not
the best, move. How did you know to look for a better one?"

"Because an answer that excludes friendship can not be right."

I was about to laugh in Yami's face. But then it struck me that Seto hadn't been talking about Mahaado at all. He'd been talking about Yugi. Because if we had headed straight to Set's Headquarters, no matter how many duel monsters we called in when we got there, Yami couldn't just summon Yugi from his deck. And I owed Yugi. I've never denied that. Not just for the past, either. I was sure, even though I hadn't asked him, that he'd kept an eye on Mokuba while I'd been gone. Even though his help wasn't needed or wanted, I knew he'd done it anyway – because for whatever incomprehensible reason that existed solely inside of his own head, Yugi considered me and Mokuba as his friends.

I wasn't sure I agreed with, or even understood his definitions. As I'd told Yami more than once, friendship seemed like a pretty abstract concept to me. But I would respect it nonetheless. Yugi had earned that. And leaving him flat, making him miss out on the duel we'd come to play wasn't (according to my limited understanding of the word) the kind of thing a friend did.

"You're right," I told Yami. "Not about Mahaado and whatever dumb-ass plan he's got… but we can't leave Yugi behind – not if there's a duel going down. It wouldn't be playing fair."

As soon as I'd choked the words out, I turned from Yami and looked at my deck. I didn't feel obligated to look at the triumph in his eyes. Strictly speaking, this wasn't his victory, but Yugi's.

Besides, I had a dragon to summon.

Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter through multiple revisions.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: This chapter was hard to write because Yami and Kaiba had to make some decisions, and it was important that those decisions be practical. For example, when they decide not to follow the Poison Mummy, but to go back to the settlement instead – it was important that that decision make sense for more than emotional reasons – it had to further their goals of defeating Set's forces.

But at the same time, I wanted more than practicality to be involved. Although emotional reasons couldn't be the only basis for their choices, I felt their choices had to make emotional sense as well, and carry forward the themes of friendship and trust that are so much a part of Yugioh.

At first it was hard merging these two things since they seemed in some ways to be opposites. It almost seemed like if they had practical reasons for their decisions, did the emotional ones matter?

But then (and I can't thank Bnomiko and Kagemihari for letting me almost literally bounce ideas off of them) I realized that my problem was that I was treating these two elements as though they were two separate and unmixable things – when one of the things I really like about Yugioh (and I am perfectly happy to debate the dubious reality level of this theme) is that inevitably the decisions that take friendship, loyalty and commitment into account are the best decisions. And searching for and acting out of your own core beliefs will lead you to the best strategy. That's when I stopped treating practicality and ideals as two separate things, and tried to come up with a way to blend them.

More on friendship: After Kaiba and Yami's battle at Alcatraz, Yami talks about the importance of friendship – and Kaiba asks what place an abstract concept like friendship has in his life. And later,
when Mokuba tells Kaiba that Yugi and his friends care about each other the same way that they do, the shocked look on his face says as much as his earlier comment to Yami about how little he understands friendship, and how alien a concept it is. And yet a little while later, when he's about to give the Devil's Sanctuary card to Yami he thinks, "If friendship is in the cards, my card has possibilities." From Battle City onwards, you can feel Kaiba try to puzzle this out, and try to make sense of friendship.

**Kenjutsu Note:** I used Kenjutsu as opposed to Kendo for the form of instruction Kaiba would have been most likely to undergo because Kendo is primary a sport, where Kenjutsu started as a martial or military training. In fact today, for obvious safety reasons, Kenjutsu relies more heavily on kata or practicing choreographed moves than on free sparring. However, I could see Gozaburo deciding to ignore the safety features built into the art today. The deciding factor though was that Kenjutsu can focus on double sword techniques – notably the use of dual kodachi.

**HAPPY HOLIDAYS** in advance to everyone.

There are some things I always notice – like which chapter ends up being the 13th, and whether chapters posted around holiday times match the holidays. Since I don't plan this stuff, it's always a surprise – like that the chapters in both "It's Déjà Vu all over again" and "The Newly Revised Book of the Dead" that had baseball in them both ended being posted around their respective Opening Days.

Anyway, despite some duel monsters violence, this felt like a hopeful chapter to me, making it seem oddly seasonally appropriate in tone.

I'd really love to hear from you, and know what you think.
To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.

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**TRANSLATION NOTE:** The word, "Yami" means darkness.

**CHAPTER 25: TEMPORAL RELATIONS**

So many fairy tales... so many heroes desperate for an escape. Think of all the pigherders and shepherds who run off in search of adventure. Given a choice, how many of them would rather return to their hovels instead of marrying the latest of a seeming endless supply of royal youngest daughters?

But fairy tales are contradictory creatures, collectively providing a moral for every taste. And so there is an equal but opposing number of tales for which, as Ursula LeGuin noted, to journey is to return. And as children heading off to school and baseball players rounding third base know, the trick is to always try your best, have fun, and come home safe.

But, as Bilbo Baggins discovered, the road to there and back again seldom forms a perfect circle. For if you tarry too long, you might find that while your starting point has kept its old coordinates, the people who make it "home" have subtly shifted. And even fairy tale heroes sometimes find that they need to recalibrate their internal compass before everything falls into place.

**YUGI'S NARRATIVE**

We knew Yami and Kaiba had completed their mission and were within our borders when Kisara disappeared in front of our eyes. Either that or they were in such desperate straits they had had to summon her. I looked at Mahaado, reassured he was still standing beside me. If a fight was going down, Yami would have called on him.

Kisara had disappeared in the blink of an eye – but she would have to fly back. We settled down to wait. And hope. Logic said that they were fine and this was routine, but there are things logic can't control, so I felt like cheering when we saw them return.

Kaiba jumped off Kisara first. What he did was so natural, but so unprecedented, that it startled me. Kaiba ran over to Mokuba and hugged him – then instead of breaking away abruptly, like he'd done every other time I'd seen him hug Mokuba, he grabbed his brother even tighter, and buried his face in Mokuba's black hair. If Kaiba said anything to Mokuba, none of us heard it and, for once, Mokuba
was equally silent. He just kept his head buried in his brother's chest. It was funny how the Kaiba brothers could make you feel like you were listening in on them – all without saying a word themselves.

For a moment Yami looked as startled as me, then he smiled. And finally, I was giving and getting a hug of my own. It was good to have Yami back.

"It's the first site we talked about. The one directly southeast."

I almost laughed. Kaiba had summed up a two week trip in two sentences.

Yami filled in the details, somehow making their trek through hostile territory seem calm and uneventful, even though he was describing a bunch of battles. When he reached the end of their fight with the Poison Mummies, he paused.

Mahaado must have assumed he was done too, because he said eagerly, "We are ready, pharaoh. When you have rested, and we have taken counsel, if you approve of our plans, Kisara can fly you and Yugi and Kaiba to Set's fortress… a pyramid? Fitting for the god of eternal night. As many dragons as you can spare from your decks will fly alongside with unaffiliated monsters. Along with the monsters you summon on your arrival, it should be enough to force a path into the fortress, so you can duel Set's General. I pray that he is there."

"Oh, I think he will be," Yami said.

"You might want to hurry though," Kaiba added with a laugh, looking up from his brother, although he still hadn't let go. "We released the last spy. By tomorrow at the latest, Set's General will know we were onto him and were heading back here with the information."

"It was the only way to ensure that his General was at his headquarters," Yami said.

"True, but it increases the possibility that Set's general will be well prepared – or that he will have relocated, leaving only ruins behind to mock us," Mahaado said, worry evident in his voice.

Yami grinned.

Kaiba answered for him. "Set's deck is frozen in time. I recognized the monsters at its core. But Pegasus, devious bastard that he is, didn't settle for recreating your ancient terrors. When he ran out of your stone monsters, he made up his own."

Kaiba pulled out a card with a flourish. It was a dragon, but for once, it wasn't his Blue Eyes White Dragon. He held up the Different Dimension Dragon instead.

"She does not reside here," Mahaado said, looking at the shimmering scales on Kaiba's card.

"Well, she is the Different Dimension Dragon." Kaiba smirked. "This card can move in and out of time. If you're as ready as you claim, we can be there now."

I'd forgotten all about her. Yami nodded as if he'd been waiting for Kaiba to pull a rabbit (or a dragon) out of his hat.

"I thought you remembered. I figured it was part of your plan," Kaiba said to him.

"It was. I know your deck as intimately as my own," Yami said in a low voice I'd never heard him use before. It was even more startling than the Different Dimension Dragon.
I remembered arguing with Kisara and telling her that Yami had been determined not to tell Kaiba his feelings, much less act on them. She’d snorted in amusement. I had to admit it looked like she was right. Maybe it really didn't pay to argue with a dragon.

"And I have the card to match it," Yami added, pulling out "Multiply." "Transportation is not a factor," he told Mahaado. "Duplicates of the Different Dimension Dragon can ferry as many troops as you have ready."

"It is almost sundown and the moon has begun its final phase. Set's power is greatest in darkness. We will leave at the first light," Mahaado announced. "The smaller dragons will start their journey as the fading moon wanes and meet us when they arrive, as a second wave."

Kaiba turned to Yami. "Your name means 'darkness' and your power is greater in the day? Who thought that one up?"

"We are blessed by the sun god. We will wait his hour," said Mahaado in a voice that cut off all arguments.

"More video-game bullshit," Kaiba muttered.

I laughed because his reaction was so predictable. Because he was alive to say it. Because Yami was here smirking at his comment with me.

"I keep telling you – where do you think the story lines in video games came from, besides from myths and legends?" I asked.

"I was wondering what you had actually said," Yami murmured, just loud enough to be overheard.

Kaiba glared at him. I realized, for once, Yami was having a private joke with someone besides myself. If Yami came back with us, I might have more to get used to than I had thought.

"How have you been, partner?" Yami asked me.

"Fine. Jounouchi and Anzu and the others are okay, too," I told him.

"How did you find out?" Yami asked.

"From the Flame Swordsman."

"You had the mutt's card with you?" Kaiba asked, incredulously.

"No. And his name's Jounouchi, not mutt. But that's what was weird. I was thinking about Jounouchi… about how much I missed him… and I was worried. I wanted to make sure he was all right."

"Weren't you listening when the Holy Elf said they wouldn't be aware any time had passed?" Kaiba asked.

"Of course I was. But Jounouchi's my friend. Anyway, I was thinking about Jounouchi, and how much the Flame Swordsman is like him… and then the Swordsman was here. I didn't know I could do that."

"If your connection to a card is strong enough… or your need is great enough, on rare occasions you can call forth a card, even if you are not holding it in your hands," Mahaado said. "If the card chooses to answer. It is best saved for extremes. It takes too much energy to do frivolously."
"Like anyone would ever need the bonkotsu or his crappy deck that badly," Kaiba snorted, as he headed off, with Mokuba in tow. I had to give him credit. It was a good exit line. Mahaado and the others went back to the palace, and me and Yami were alone for the first time since he'd left.

"I'm sorry," Yami said. "I didn't mean to put you in danger, again. You deserve a life free of all this."

"I don't mind. I've never minded facing danger at your side. At least this time, whatever happens, I won't have to wonder if it was my fault you're dead."

I hadn't meant to sound bitter.

"Yugi..." he said. I think he interrupted more to stop me than anything else, because he paused for a while before adding, "I didn't see anything but the road at my feet. But I should not have demanded my death of you – even if it was the only way to get here. But whatever I decide, whatever happens tomorrow, I was needed here. Even though I didn't know why, even though I got so many things wrong – I had to come. And you were the only one I could trust to do that for me. I didn't know how you felt."

"Neither did I," I answered. "Not until afterwards. I was so mad. But I figured something out... I can face whatever happens next, as long as we're dueling on the same side; as long as you're not here just because you lost a duel. This time if you decide to stay... I won't have to wonder if it was what you wanted. I'll know. You're my partner. I'll always be there for you – whatever you need. I'd just rather help you win."

"As long as we're together, that's a certainty," Yami said with all of his old confidence.

There was a pause, then I finally said, "So you and Kaiba, huh?"

Yami nodded. "Do you..." He stopped himself. "No. Finishing that question would not honor any of us. Whether wise or unwise, this was my decision – and his," he said firmly.

"Well, asking might be out of line, but friends – and that's what we are – talk about stuff. It's cool. You like him; you have for a while now."

I have to admit, I was relieved. In spite of the vibes I'd always gotten from Yami about Kaiba, in spite of what Kisara had said, part of me couldn't help wondering if he'd been into Anzu and had passed her up because of me – mainly because I still couldn't see why anyone who had a shot at Anzu would want Kaiba instead. I knew that wasn't how Yami felt, but I blurted out anyway, "You really don't love Anzu."

"Of course I do," he replied, obviously puzzled. "She is the truest, most loyal friend a man could have."

I grinned, glad for once that Yami had missed the point. But then he added, "I love Anzu. I do not desire her." He still looked puzzled. "But you know that – you were the one to teach me – or to help me remember – the many facets of love." He sighed. "Some are easier to master than others."

I knew I should probably say something about Kaiba in return, but except for "Is he really as crazy as he seems?" nothing was coming to mind. I mean what can you say about a recovering homicidal maniac? But Yami either already knew Kaiba was insane or was never going to.

The thing was, in spite of all that, I liked Kaiba. He wasn't a bad guy. And I really did respect how hard he'd worked to become the troubled, arrogant, aloof – but honorable – pain in the ass I'd come to know. It wasn't like I hadn't witnessed every painful step along the way, and I couldn't help cheering him on – even if I'd never quite mastered Yami's trick of rooting for him while dueling
against him.

Besides, if Yami seemed to have changed a little in the short time he'd been gone, so had Kaiba. He'd hugged Mokuba for one thing. He'd smiled.

"I like Kaiba," I finally told Yami, hoping he hadn't noticed my pause. "It's weird though. It's like with Kaiba, everything's right there on the surface – like the way he's crazy about winning, or his love for Mokuba – or it's buried so deep you can hardly see it's there."

"Yes," Yami said. "Thank you."

I hoped this meant that Yami had decided to come back with us, but I knew that he would have told me right off the bat if he had. I remembered what Kaiba had been like on the trip out to find Yami. I was afraid he'd take it just as hard if Yami stayed, in some ways harder than the rest of us, because I was used to the idea of letting Yami go – and like I said, Kaiba hated losing. But Yami probably knew this all better than me and I was betting it bugged him even more, so I kept my mouth shut. It was weird though, having all these things I suddenly knew not to say, when I was used to sharing everything. So I fell back on the one thing I could tell Yami: "I'm glad you're back. I missed you."

MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE

As soon as we were alone in my room at the palace, he threw the card to me. I caught it. It was the Black Magician Girl. I looked at him and nodded.


I didn't think she was bad either, if it came to that.

"Her name is Mana," I said.

"A bit of a follower," my brother said dispassionately. "She fights better with her family around her – or in defense of them."

"So do most of us," I pointed out.

Nisama nodded. "It's dangerous to overlook her – just when you write her off, she powers up and makes you pay."

I stifled a laugh. In some ways Nisama was totally predictable. He'd focused on her attributes as a duel monster, not a person.

And yet... he'd managed to describe her pretty well.

"It's fun being with her," I said. "I never thought girls were... you know... cool. Well, Anzu – but she doesn't count. I mean, Mana's different..." I stopped babbling and tried to think of something more grown-up to add.

"This isn't our world," Nisama said quietly.

"I know. It's a pretty amazing place, though!"

"We have to go back," he said.

"Yeah, I know. But I'm glad we came."

"Mokuba," he said a little desperately, "I don't want you eating your heart out for something you
"Like you?" I challenged.

He nodded. "I've always wanted better for you."

"Don't worry. I know that no matter how real this feels, it's not. And that when we say good-bye, it'll be forever. That's okay. It's worth it. I'd rather mope around for a while and miss her, than miss out on something this awesome."

"At first, I thought it'd be easier in a way, knowing there was an end-date," my brother said, talking more to himself than to me.

I stared at him. My brother's mind worked in a way that no one else's did, and sometimes even I couldn't follow his thoughts.

"When we started... I figured that if it's not going to last, then it doesn't matter what he knows, it doesn't matter that I..." He shrugged, and ran his hand through his hair.

I nodded so he wouldn't have to put his thoughts into words. He had just told me, as clearly as if he had shouted it, that him and Yami had gone a lot farther than me and Mana had even thought of. And I knew it wasn't the sex he was referring to, but the emotions that went with it.

"Are you going to be all right?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Even if Yami stays?" I asked hesitantly.

"Don't worry," he said dryly. "People leave, Mokuba. It's what they do." He turned away from me and began pacing. "Sometimes I wonder," he said more to himself than to me, "were they skid marks or acceleration ones?" He suddenly stopped moving, shook his head, and focused on me again. "But that doesn't matter. What matters is that I'm not like... I'm not going to crumble. I'm not going to fall apart and leave you to pick up the pieces."

I held my breath, not wanting to break the spell. I knew what he was talking about, of course. I'd read the police report of our father's accident in Nisama's locked desk drawer. It was dog-eared, like he'd thumbed through the thin folder a lot. But this was the closest Nisama had ever come to talking about our father, at least to me.

He interrupted my thoughts with a bitter laugh. "Or should I say, leave you to pick up the pieces again?"

"It's not like that Nisama. It's never been like that."

He turned away, again. I didn't say anything else. He was going into a battle tomorrow. He didn't want to talk; he thought showing his emotions, even to me, was a weakness. I didn't agree. Nisama was wrong sometimes; I knew that now. But there was going to be a horrible fight tomorrow, and he was going to be in the middle of it, just like always. So even if I didn't agree with his definitions of strength, tonight wasn't the night to challenge them, either. At least not directly.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

"No stories this time?" I asked when Mokuba was in bed at the palace. I figured it was easier to leave him where he was, than to return to Kisara's aerie. She was spending the night in the courtyard,
anyway. But it still felt odd. This was the longest I'd been indoors since we'd left for Set's territory.

"Of course I have a story!" Mokuba exclaimed with a grin. "This is fun isn’t it? Like when we'd lie
in bed at night and you'd describe the deck you were going to have one day… and the theme parks
we were going to build when we got old enough."

I nodded. I'd hated the orphanage where everything conspired to remind me that I was too damn
small to take my fate and Mokuba's into my own hands, where it belonged – but I'd loved those
nights, lying in bed talking to Mokuba until he fell asleep.

"And then you'd tell me what it'd be like to ride on a Blue Eyes White Dragon for real… and now
we have!" Mokuba said. "Who would have ever expected that to come true?"

I nodded again. Mokuba knew as well as I that life was unpredictable, although in my experience,
pleasant surprises were a rarity.

"Anyway, once upon a time…" Mokuba looked up quickly enough to catch me smiling, "… there
were these two brothers."

"Just two? I thought fairy tales had this odd fixation on the number three." I managed to keep my
voice casual, even as I pushed aside the thought that every family I'd known, from before Mokuba
was born, to life with my father and brother, to Gozaburo, had all been triads. Just like a damned
fairy tale.

"Their father was the king. And one day, he called them together and told them that he'd leave his
kingdom to whichever one passed the three tests he gave them."

Well, at least the number "three" had made an appearance. But this story bothered me. I didn't like it.

"He turned the brothers against each other?" I asked. "He made them into enemies? He sounds…"

"As crazy as our adoptive father?" Mokuba finished. "Yeah, he was."

"Did it work?" I tried to sound unconcerned.

"Of course not!" Mokuba said emphatically. "How could it? The brothers loved each other and
nothing could change that. They agreed that whatever happened, they'd share the kingdom. The king
was too stupid and crazy to suspect anything was up."

I looked at Mokuba suspiciously, but I couldn't help relaxing, even though I wondered how much of
this story Mokuba was changing for my benefit. Mokuba returned my stare with his most innocent
look. That settled it – he was making this up as he went along.

"The first task," Mokuba went on quickly, before I could decide whether I wanted to challenge him,
"was to find the finest cloth anywhere in the world. The elder brother let the younger brother take the
east road. His country had traded to the east, west and south, but no one had gone north before… so
that was the road he took. But the farther he went, the emptier the lands became. Soon he wasn't
worried about completing his task, but about finding shelter. He kept going anyway, even after he
ran out of food."

I snorted. "This has to be the definition of too stupid to live."

Mokuba grinned. "Yeah, he was too stubborn for his own good – or maybe he just never learned
how to turn back once he set his mind on a goal. Anyway he was phasing in and out of
consciousness when he fell off his horse right at the doorstep of this castle."
"Which appeared out of nowhere," I observed.

"Of course it did. It was a magic castle, Nisama. Anyway the next thing he knew he was in a soft bed. When he got up and went downstairs there was a table set for two – loaded with all his favorite foods. He was starting to wonder if he was dreaming or delirious. Then he saw a white cat sitting at the head of the table. She told him to sit down."

"If I was wondering if I was going crazy, a talking white cat would definitely clinch it for me," I couldn't resist saying.

"Luckily the prince was more open-minded," Mokuba said. "He rested for a week, figuring he needed to get his strength back before heading out again. Then he realized he liked it in the castle. And once he got over his host being a cat, she was pretty awesome. He even got used to the tons of cats hanging around – because she was the Queen of Cats, and with being waited on by invisible hands. But he knew he had to get going, so he told the cat about his mission. She told him to stay… that she'd help."

"'You're a cat. How can you help?' he asked."

"'Do you trust me?' she answered."

"He nodded and she called for spiders to spin silk thread into the softest, finest fabric ever seen. And when it was done, the ghostly hands packed it in a hollowed-out acorn shell. He said his goodbyes and went to meet his brother at the inn, like they'd planned.

"What happened? Weren't they rivals now?" I asked, frowning. The first and last time Mokuba and I had been rivals had been at Death-T.

"Nothing happened. They weren't rivals, not really, because they were brothers. They loved each other. Nothing could break that and they knew it. You should know it too," Mokuba added sternly. "They went back to the castle together and everyone marveled at the older brother's cloth. Even the King had to agree he'd accomplished the first task."

"But the crazy king only said that if he was going to retire he wanted a dog to keep him company. But not just any dog; he wanted the littlest, prettiest dog in the world."

Okay, I got it. Fairy tales were batshit crazy. So was this world and this battle we were about to fight, for that matter. But this was the fucking last straw.

"Why the hell would he want the world's smallest dog? What kind of fucking stupid quest is that, anyway?" I growled.

"Well… we agreed that the king was nuts, remember?" Mokuba answered in his most reasonable voice. "It doesn't matter what he was asking for. What matters is that it was impossible. And the brothers were setting out to do it anyway."

"So the brothers went their separate ways again, and the oldest son found himself heading back to the Queen of Cats. He told himself it was only fair to thank her. But as soon as he got there, told her all about his father and his latest challenge."

"'I can help,' said the cat again."

"'You're a cat. How can you help me?' the prince replied."

"'Do you trust me?' the cat asked. Then she sent for all the birds in her kingdom and asked them to
search the world and bring her the smallest, prettiest dog."

"True to her word, they flew back with a dog so small it could fit in a walnut shell. Just like before, the two brothers met at the inn and then rode to the castle together. And just like before, everyone agreed that the older prince had met his father's demand."

"But the King said, 'Before I can retire, I want to see my sons settled. I will leave my kingdom to whichever son brings home the best bride.'"

"The youngest son had been in love with the daughter of the king next door since they were kids. He was overjoyed to be able to marry her so quickly, and rode off before the king was finished speaking, pausing only to yell over his shoulder to his brother to meet him with his bride at the same inn."

"The oldest son rode straight back to the cat's kingdom and told her the story, saying, 'I don't think you can help me with this one... if only I could marry someone like you!'"

"'Then I will be your bride, if you wish it,' the cat answered."

"And the more the prince tried to convince himself it was impossible, that she was just a cat, the more he realized that he loved her anyway. So they were married the next day, with all the other cats as guests. The prince was ready to take her home to meet his father when she said, 'There is one thing you must do for me first.'"

"'Anything you ask of me,' the prince swore."

"'Take your sword, and cut off my head.'"

"The prince refused. He ranted at her and stormed off. When he came back, she simply asked, 'Do you trust me?'"

"So he did as she asked. And no sooner had he cut off her head, then the cat disappeared and in her place was a beautiful princess who said, 'Thank you for freeing me from my enchantment. I was doomed to stay a cat unless I met someone who loved and trusted me enough to do as I asked, even when I requested my death.'"

I looked at Mokuba blankly. The prince had kept his promise, but it had led him to kill his love. How could he do such a thing? No promise should be that binding. And yet, it turned out to be the winning move. Did that mean it had been the right thing to do? I had no ready answer, no quick moral for Mokuba. He had one for me.

"Sometimes, even in fairy tales, there is no right answer. All you can do is your best – and hope that it's enough," he said quietly.

"And if it's not?" I asked.

"Even then. All that's left is to forgive."

"Maybe there are some things that shouldn't be forgiven," I said. It was as close as I could come to asking Mokuba how in hell he could be so blind as to forgive me.

"Well, you forgave me," he said.
"What?" I asked, confused and bothered.

"Noa's World," he said. "I turned against you. I sided with Noa. That was a betrayal – wasn't it?"

"Never say that again!" I yelled. "You were brainwashed. I know that."

"By the time Death-T came around – so were you. It's not fair. You're not fair, Nisama. You forgave me as though it's the most natural thing in the world – but you won't really let me forgive you."

"It's just a word anyway. It doesn't change a thing," I muttered.

"Yes. It doesn't change a thing. It doesn't change the way I feel – the way I've always felt, all along. I've been thinking about it a lot. You're right. It's a stupid word. It doesn't mean anything. You know what happened in Noa's world – that I would never have turned against you if I could have stopped myself. I tried my best."

"I know, Mokuba. It's okay."

"Well, I know the exact same thing about you – and it was true all through the years with our adoptive father – it was even true at Death-T."

"You don't get it, Mokuba. I had to be strong. I had to control everything that came our way, or we weren't going to make it. I had to be smarter and faster and tougher than everyone else."

"You were. You are."

"I had to be perfect. And I wasn't. And we had no margin for error."

"Yes, we did. You made mistakes. We both did. And we came through just fine. We're here. We're together. You're always saying it's the result that matters. Then why doesn't it matter now? Tomorrow you're going into battle, just like you always do. It's time you knew that whatever the hell the word means, I forgive you."

I paused, thinking that over, and wondering how, despite what I'd just told Mokuba, something as formless as words could suddenly feel as solid as armor.

"Where'd you get all these old stories from, anyway?" I asked to change the subject.

"Remember all those times in the orphanage when you got sent to bed early because someone thought it'd be a punishment? Well I memorized every story you missed. I knew one day, you'd have the time to listen to them."

Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter, especially given the whole quotes within quotes thing!

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** Actually Yugi wasn't quite right. Kaiba and Yami were gone for 10 days, not 2 weeks; I just couldn't see Yugi as being that concerned with precision (Kaiba on the other hand would probably have listed the days, hours and minutes.) And I thought it would honestly have felt longer to Yugi, so I had him round up.

This is the first story where things like counting the days mattered, or the phases of the moon. When I started writing this the moon kept blinking in and out – sometimes it was full, then a day later it would be a new moon. Anyway before I posted, I sat down and figured out what the moon would be
doing. What I finally settled on was that it was a day short of a full moon on day one, which would mean by day ten, Mahaado is accurate when he says that the moon had begun it's final phase from Third Quarter to New Moon.

**Fairy Tale Note:** I knew I wanted Mokuba to tell this story. The only problem was, I hadn't heard it since I was a kid, and I couldn't remember the name or some of the plot. But I decided that Mokuba might very well make up parts of it to make the story more applicable. Except I couldn't, for the life of me, remember what the second task had been. Then Kagemihari came to the rescue, remembering the story and even providing a link. The second task – to find the world's smallest dog – was actually the first. I put it second because, like Kaiba, I think it's one of the most absurd tasks I've ever heard of, and I wanted to ease into it.

Kaiba was right by the way – there were originally three brothers – and the youngest, not the oldest is the one who has the adventure. . Ironically (although I had forgotten this) the brothers do remain friends, and the king really is crazy. And Bnomiko's comment on Kaiba's reaction to the idea of a talking cat was too good not to share: "he's objecting to a talking cat when he has a TALKING DRAGON in the courtyard?" Well, yeah… but it's his talking dragon. I guess to Kaiba, that would make a difference.

*All comments welcome. I'd love to hear from you.*

*Happy New Year!*
To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.

MANGA NOTE: Kaiba and Yami fight two penalty or shadow games early in the manga. In the first, Kaiba steals Sugoroku's BEWD from Yugi. Yami challenges him to a penalty game to get it back, telling him that the loser will "experience death." Kaiba loses when he summons the BEWD and it refuses to attack on his orders. The BEWD self-destructs instead, leaving Kaiba's life points unprotected. He loses the duel and Yami imposes this nightmare where Kaiba is trapped inside this Duel Monsters world, and gets killed by his own monsters.

This would stop most people, but Kaiba wants revenge. He creates a theme park of Death (Death-T) and coerces Yugi/Yami into participating. He intends to force Yami into a Death Simulation Chamber which will duplicate the nightmare he had. Mokuba insists on being one of the challengers. He's trying to help and prove himself to his brother, but Kaiba misreads this as a challenge, and when Mokuba loses, Kaiba imposes the sentence that awaited the loser. Yami rescues Mokuba and goes on to defeat Kaiba in the final phase of Death-T when he assembles all five pieces of Exodia. He shatters Kaiba's heart/Mind crushes him – which forces Kaiba to rebuild his soul if he can, without the darkness that led him to create Death-T.

CHAPTER 26: THE KNIGHT BEFORE THE BATTLE

Is there anything more moving than the night before the battle, than the endless vigil kept by 100 kings and princes and knights in 100 different tales? Each of them maintaining a solitary watch, each unaware that they are part of a fellowship, a band of brothers. Each of them newly discovering the thinness of the line separating past, present and future, separating the living from the dead. Each of them looking up at the sky as if they could read their fate in its lights.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

Mokuba hadn't asked where I'd be spending the night. Maybe he assumed I had a room in the palace. I didn't. The palace's walls were stifling. I waited until Mokuba was snoring to wander outside.

Mokuba knew there was going to be a battle tomorrow, as well as I. He'd been as keyed up all day. But Mokuba was younger… and more to the point, he wasn't me. He could put it all aside and go to sleep. I couldn't. I've always looked to the future, but that didn't mean I'd ever trusted in it.

Kisara was in the courtyard. Her head was resting on her claws. Her eyes had been closed, but one eye opened at my approach.
"Mokuba's asleep?" she asked.

I nodded.

"You have not joined him?" she continued.

"Whenever I could, I've always spent the night before a duel going over my deck. I don't plan on changing that now," I said.

"We will do our best for you tomorrow."

"I know. You always have. Our losses were my responsibility, not yours," I told her.

"Have you grown stronger from them?" Kisara asked.

"Always," I answered.

"Then I am content," she replied.

"I'm the one who let you down," I said, as much to myself as to her. "Winning isn't just a matter of strategy or the cards you hold in your hand. Anger, hatred... even determination can only take you so far. Even being willing to die isn't enough. You have to have something worth it... like we did at DOMA or the Grand Prix – or here." I paused, then added, "I'm sorry I didn't always lead you well."

"The struggle is what matters. And we have always been proud to be a part of it. The greater the battle, the more valor to the warrior and the sweeter the victory," she reminded me.

"How can there be a victory, when it's life itself that is the battle?" I asked.

"Tomorrow will not spell final victory or defeat for either side. The best struggles never truly end," she answered. "But that does not mean we should ignore the triumphs we have earned or refuse to savor them. Ultimately, we are all fighting ourselves, and those victories are the sweetest of all – and the best shared."

I shrugged, suddenly restless. "I wouldn't know," I said. I had walked away from her, but I could feel her eyes on my back. I turned around to face her. Force of habit, I guess.

"I would tell you to leave tomorrow's battles for tomorrow," she said gently. "But I wonder if it is the future you are seeing tonight, or the past."

I shrugged. "Mokuba said he forgives me... you know... for everything. Whatever the hell that means. Mokuba wasn't too sure either."

"Aaahhh," she breathed.

I dug my hands in my pockets, looking for a way to change the subject, even though I was the one who'd brought it up. "Damn... Mokuba never finished his story... I wonder how it ends," I said.

"Happily, I assume. Isn't that how all stories end?" Kisara asked.

"All of Mokuba's at any rate – or at least all the ones he tells me."

She snorted quietly.

I looked at her. She wasn't showing it, but today's flight had to have taken something out of her, and she'd be in the thick of things tomorrow.
"Go back to sleep," I said. "Weren't you the one who just said to save tomorrow's battles for tomorrow?"

"I see you have learned how to throw my words back in my face," she retorted, but she obediently dropped her head back onto her claws. Pretty soon I could hear her even breathing whistling through the courtyard like the wind. It made sense to sleep, but it was still the night before a duel, and except for Death-T it was something I'd never been able to manage. I sat down a little ways from her, under the flickering light of a torch.

I had to admit, I liked this world. The battle lines were cleanly drawn, with none of the ambiguities that plagued my decisions back home. And I had nothing to atone for here. I hadn't been looking for a clean slate, but after trying to destroy my past for years, it was disconcerting coming to a place where it simply didn't exist.

Not that it mattered. Enticing as this world was, there was nothing for me here. Mokuba wasn't going to begin the next semester as a ghost-in-training. Of course this world was seductive... death always is. But I'd rejected its call before. I wasn't going to succumb now.

It was, as Mahaado had predicted, a dark night, with clouds covering the waning crescent moon. I leaned against the palace wall, taking advantage of the torchlight in their sconces. I pulled out my deck and started to go through it.

"I remember creating Saggi," Seto said. He was sitting next to me as I drew the dark clown from my deck.

I'd known that Pegasus had taken Saggi from those ancient stone tablets. I'd never thought to ask who he belonged to. It made sense that Seto and I had shared more than my dragon. I wondered what debt he'd used Saggi to pay off back then.

"Why?" I asked.

"I fought Bakura, with all my power, with all my conviction – and still, I lost." He grimaced. "I decided the edge Bakura had was in the depth of his hate."

"Bakura?" I asked. The name sounded familiar. There'd been a Bakura at Battle City. It probably wasn't a coincidence.

"He was the most degraded of thieves," Seto said. "A tomb robber."

I decided not to pursue the matter.

"I thought to fight Bakura with his own weapons. But it did not work. Saggi was a weak monster," Seto said. "The pharaoh had been right. I should not have tried to build a monster using anger and hate as my foundation."

I grunted. Even if I had come to agree, the advice was still irritatingly familiar.

"Even Bakura had more than that as his base. My father had destroyed his village, sacrificed his family to create the Millennium Items. His anger was fueled by his love. Devotion is a sweet emotion. But it mixes poorly with pain."

"I thought Bakura was your enemy," I commented.

Seto nodded, sadly. "He was my enemy, and my pharaoh's. But I have had time to think... and his rage and desperation... those things feel akin."
I grunted again. They sounded familiar to me, too.

Seto shook his head. "I have sometimes wondered what Bakura would have made of his life if the fates had been kinder, or if he had been granted a second chance."

"There was a Bakura in Domino," I said. "If he was granted a second chance, he didn't take advantage of it."

"I am sorry," Seto said simply. "I thought him my greatest enemy, the chief danger to my pharaoh. But he turned out to be just another piece on the game board, as easily discarded by his master as if he never existed. That is the true darkness we must fight."

I thought about how Gozaburo had treated people like they were pawns, how I had done the same. How I had, in the end, refused to be anyone's pawn but my own. Perhaps that was why, despite how little I understood Yugi, we had ended up on the same side.

Unlike Bakura, I knew how to make the most of second chances.

But as Seto faded back into the night, I couldn't help wondering what ghosts I'd be facing tomorrow.

I thought of Hamlet meeting the ghost of his father, although I had no impulse to say, "Angels and ministers of grace defend us." I planned to do whatever defending was necessary on my own. Hamlet was an indecisive wimp anyway. If I had to pick a character I liked, it'd be Cassius. After all, even if he had paid for it with his life – he'd taken down a Caesar.

I approved.

I'd read my way through most of Shakespeare's plays – the tragedies and the histories, anyway. Gozaburo had insisted that I memorize the most commonly used quotations. He thought sprinkling them through my conversation would make me appear well rounded. It was the same reason I'd learned to play the piano with a certain technical proficiency, although any real feeling for, or appreciation of, the music I was playing with rote efficiency had always eluded me.

Once the quotes were stuck in my head however, I'd spent the little time I could hoard for myself reading the plays they were stolen from. It made the knowledge mine somehow, not his. It had been a victory of sorts – and even small triumphs are worth savoring.

Oddly enough, until tonight, I hadn't thought of Gozaburo much. But now that there was a battle on the horizon, his was the phantom that came to mind.

Maybe it was the quiet of the night, or hearing Kisara's breath as she, like Mokuba, slept – but it wasn't the big splashy moments like his jumping from the window, or his stealing my designs to create his weapons that came to mind, but a quieter one… the night I first realized war's requirements.

"Why did you bring the little mouse along?" Gozaburo had asked casually – except there were no casual questions anymore.

I took a moment to answer. I had left the orphanage with the only two things in the world that mattered to me – Mokuba and our suitcase full of games. Gozaburo had stolen and destroyed the games before dinner was over.

I smiled coldly. "Maybe I just wanted a spectator for my triumph."

"So you think you've won?"
"I know it." I grinned up at him. In the months I'd been here I'd learned never to show anything less than total confidence.

His hand bunched around the material of my collar. He turned his wrist inward, tightening his hold. There was a precision to his movements. It was uncomfortable, but not quite enough to get me to gasp for air – not when I didn't have a clue what this latest game was.

His wrist curled in a little further and he brought his forearm into his biceps, lifting me slightly from the ground. My feet dangled in the air, like a rag doll's. I tried to ignore how much bigger he was than me, how much stronger… how he was watching me as if I was the prey, not him.

I knew if I gasped or swallowed or showed any sign of fear, beyond the racing heartbeat I couldn't control, the game would be over here and now.

"I didn't expect you to act like an ordinary bully," I said.

"Didn't you?" He grinned and tightened his hold again. I clenched my fists to keep from clawing ineffectually at his hand. Whatever this new game was, I would win. "Your mistake, then," he continued. "Violence is a tool like anything else. If I were you, I'd learn quickly."

"If I don't, you wasted your money. Either way, it's your loss." I said around the hand at my throat.

This was a game, just like everything else. I'd see how far I could goad him before his control snapped. I knew this mood. I was coming out of this night with bruises, that was the only way this could end, but if I played my cards right, I'd leave him with the knowledge that I'd been the one in control, the one determining when it happened, and that would hurt him worse.

And even small victories are worth savoring.

"I could throw you back in the gutter like the stray dog you are," Gozaburo snarled.

"You could, but I don't think you will."

"You think you have all the answers, don't you, brat?"

I smirked. "I just think you find playing with yourself… unsatisfying."

"At any rate it's more fun than playing with a computer," he snarled, suddenly angry.

He flung me from him. It had happened too fast for me to get my hands up to protect myself. I hit the wall, hard, and slid to the floor. I stayed there a moment. His back was to me, but if I moved too precipitously, he'd notice.

That was the second time it'd happened. He'd made some remark comparing me to a computer – and then he'd lost control. I didn't know what it meant… yet. But he had revealed a weakness, and it was worth the taste of blood in my mouth to see it.

I swallowed, tasting remembered salt and copper. Life is a battle. Nothing I'd seen since had convinced me otherwise. There was going to be another one tomorrow, where losing might very well equal death, once again. Did that mean that Gozaburo had been right all along? His voice… Seto's… Kisara talking of different battlefields… the Holy Elf speaking of sacrifice… all began to merge in my head.

And when we faced Set's general tomorrow, once again it'd be worth the taste of blood in my mouth to discover a weakness.
I was surprised to see a figure leave the palace and come towards the courtyard. It was too tall to be Mokuba or Yami. Mahaado, then. I got up and joined him.

"You never could sleep the night before a battle," he commented.

I grunted.

"The pharaoh will leave here. I can feel it. Is it you or your world that has proven the lure?" Mahaado asked.

"If you think I've tried to influence him, if you think I've begged..." I growled.

"I am quite sure you have not. But by your presence you have tied him to you, nonetheless. I do not think he will leave you a third time."

"I would rather be separated from him for all eternity than become an obligation," I said.

"Now you are being foolish. What do men like us value more than our obligations?"

I shrugged in place of an answer.

"You are not the only fool," Mahaado said. "I do not feel the passing of the years as you do, yet I can not deny to myself that I have spent 3,000 years waiting for an illusion."

"You have spent 3,000 years protecting your world and mine."

"I vowed to serve my pharaoh to the grave and beyond."

"You have."

"I believed it was my destiny – our destiny – to be reunited here. I suppose that seems laughable to you."

I shrugged. I'd never believed in fate. I still didn't. "I don't know shit about destiny," I told him, "but I know all about responsibility. You have a child in your charge. Isn't that enough of a commitment for any lifetime, even an eternal one?"

"Do not lecture me! I will discharge that duty as conscientiously as all others. But my duty to my pharaoh must be paramount. Your former self would agree."

"He didn't know Mokuba."

"For all that Seto is at your core, you do not know our ways," Mahaado said. "How can our past mean so little, when you were named for a god?"

I ignored the fact that I had no idea how my parents had come up with the name "Seto." They were dead. There was no one to ask. I was never going to know. It didn't matter. However I'd gotten it, it was mine.

"I wasn't named for anything," I said.

Mahaado gestured at the dark surrounding us. "And yet you feel comfortable in his hour."

"I don't know why we're sitting around like idiots just because it's night, instead of attacking, if that's what you mean," I observed.
"The new moon is Set's time. Not ours."

"That's because all you see is the coming darkness," I said.

"And you… when you look up at the night sky and watch the moon slowly erasing itself… what do you see?" he asked.


Mahaado grimaced. "The future comes for us all, even here. It is best to be rested and ready to meet it," he said as he returned to the palace.

"And what of destiny?" Yami asked, as he stepped out of the shadows. His timing was too perfect to be coincidental. The only question was how much he'd heard.

"Destiny is a file waiting to be over-written," I responded automatically.

Yami smiled and shook his head in mock amazement. "Hasn't all that's happened made you doubt your rejection of fate?"

"I refuse to be caught up in someone else's agenda – even a god's. What about you? I figured you're staying. Mahaado's convinced you're returning with us. Which of us has it right?"

"Neither. Both. I have been so focused on which world I would choose, I forgot that tomorrow I might leave both of them. This is not the first time you or I have faced death in the same campaign."

"Five times," I answered. "And yet, it was Alcatraz that was the hardest."

"Alcatraz? You faced no danger there!" You couldn't have thought I would impose a penalty game on you!" Yami exclaimed.

"I know. That's why it was worse," I answered. "Losing equals death. At that first penalty game we played, those were the stakes. They were the same as in all my duels with Gozaburo – only this time it was out in the open. I wasn't surprised to experience death. I was surprised to survive. Next came Death-T. Afterwards…it was peaceful. It was over. You were right. I didn't have anything to return to. I'd thrown away the only thing that had ever mattered to me. I was dead inside anyway. It seemed fitting for my body to follow."

"But…" Yami said.

"But I was sitting in darkness with nothing to do, and I've always liked solving puzzles, even the one of my heart. Besides, I was wrong. I did have something to come back for. Mokuba needed me. Next came Pegasus… if that was death, then death is truly a trap. I was helpless, yet I couldn't stop struggling. I had finally found something worth fighting for. And then suddenly I was free. Noa's world… DOMA… those were just par for the course."

"Why was Alcatraz harder than that?"

"Because I had nothing to fight against. I'd lost – and for the first time there was no penalty game, no punishment, except for whatever I chose to inflict upon myself. I was the one who would have to decide whether to carry out the sentence Gozaburo had branded into my soul, or whether to live with my loss, my failure – and find a new challenge. The rules I had lived by were clear. I would have to renounce them, enter into what was truly uncharted territory. That was my true future."

"Are we willing to enter uncharted territory? That seems to be the question that follows us, even to
"the after-life," Yami said. He shook his head. "Along with meeting Yugi, being with you has been the greatest joy of my life. And yet, tomorrow I would wish you both elsewhere."

"What we are trying to save is worth the risk." I said.

"That does not make it easier to contemplate," Yami answered.

"You challenged me at Alcatraz to live beyond my despair. Never protect me from it again," I told him, not sure if I was talking of tomorrow’s duel or tomorrow’s decisions.

"I can't promise that, anymore than I can promise not to care. Why do I feel like more than tomorrow's battle is weighing on you tonight?" Yami asked.

There was a pause. I couldn't think of anything to say, except that Mokuba had said he'd forgiven me, which was the last thing I planned to say.

"Mokuba forgives me. He told me," I mumbled anyway.

"I'm glad he said it, glad you heard it. Yugi did the same for me."

I stared at him.

"For making him the instrument of my… of my coming here," he explained. "I'm glad he understands – or maybe I'm just glad he's still my friend."

I nodded, somberly.

Yami looked at me. "You don't seem elated," he observed.

"I am," I said, but even I could hear the heaviness in my voice.

"But you refuse to let go of the guilt he has forgiven?" Yami asked.

"Maybe I'm right," I said quietly, letting my words fall into the night. I hadn't said that to Kisara. She would have argued. I wasn't sure what Yami would do.

"Nothing is inherently good or unredeemably evil. No world, not even this one, is so black and white. It is not just the decisions you have made in the past, but the ones you continue to make that define you," Yami stated.

I didn't answer.

He shook his head. "Sometimes I think you are the only man more stubborn than I," he said.

"Probably."

"You're even more stubborn than what I remember of my high priest."

"Force of habit," I answered.

"And what habit is that?" he asked.

"Survival," I said. I looked away, not from Yami, but from the conversation. He moved so that he was once again in my line of sight, and held out his hand.

"Come with me," he said.
I followed him to a grotto behind the palace. A waterfall flowed from Kisara's mountain. It ended in a pool. The scene looked too perfect to be natural, and besides, although there was nowhere for the water to drain, it wasn't overflowing.

"Mana's doing," Yami said. "She likes to practice here."

"It's beautiful," I said, stepping forward until the spray hit me. It was cool enough to be refreshing and warm enough to be enticing.

"Remember that rain storm?" Yami asked, his voice husky.

I nodded and looked at him.

"We didn't have the time then, but I wanted to do this…" Yami reached up to slide the duster off my shoulders. The rest of our clothes followed. Without asking, without answering, we walked into the pool until we were under the waterfall, until it was washing over us, splashing around us. It caressed us like a living thing, like another pair of hands, sometimes fierce and insistent, sometimes gentle and teasing, as we swayed in and out of its cascade.

I looked at Yami. The downpour had flattened those stubborn stalks of golden hair; they framed his face. The water had given him the look of a drowning man, at once desperate and at peace.

It was strange to see my own nebulous emotions reflected back to me on Yami's face, as if he was wearing them instead of the clothing we had just discarded. It was odd, this feeling of being understood, this wordless accord. In spite of the fact we'd returned to what passed for civilization in this world, in spite of the fact that Kisara was in the courtyard behind me and that Mokuba was asleep in the palace, we were alone in our own world.

It was as if no time had elapsed since the rain had greeted us as we left Set's lands, since the last time we'd been like this using a stone tomb for a bed. It felt like the continuation of every time since the first. Maybe that was a retreat from the coming battle, from the choices that lay ahead.

Or maybe it was just that I was tired of thinking. I wanted to feel.

I wanted to feel Yami's mouth on mine, Yami's body pressed so tightly against mine that it denied the water entrance. I wanted to feel the steel, the passion that was so much a part of Yami. I wanted to answer it with my own. I wanted to stand under a waterfall and burn.

Yami moved in closer still, until it seemed like our embrace was a promise of the joining to come. His teeth found my neck; my moans sighed above the rush of the water.

"There is so much I want to promise you," he murmured against my skin, "but I can't promise anything on the eve of a battle. Do you think that for just one more night we could pretend that the present is enough?"

"There's no need for pretense," I answered, as his hands replaced the water's searching fingers, as my own held him to me. "Tonight, the present is everything."

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Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter, and for, well, everything…

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** One thing I really like about the anime/manga is the moment where Kaiba pauses before leaving Alcatraz, and it seems like he's deciding whether to go down in flames with
the island. Then he thinks about how hard he's fought his stepfather - to the grave and beyond - and how he's still fighting to rid himself of Gozaburo's influences on his life and heart. Then he thinks how that too, was a shadow game. In a sense his refusal to give in, his decision to find a better challenge to live up to was his first true victory.

On a side note, I've always been a sucker for those night-before-the-battle moments, although I'm in total agreement with Pippin's observation that as bad as being in a battle is, waiting at the edge of one you can't escape is worse. Anyway, I had a good time writing a night before the battle scene of my own. I hope you enjoyed it.

*Since it's still January, I guess I can still say: Happy New Year!*
Chapter Notes

To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.

CHAPTER 27: IT'S TIME TO DUEL

Why do the battles always take place out of earshot? Even in the individual contests so beloved by fairytales, we never hear the wind rushing past the giant's ears as he plummets from his beanstalk to splatter across Jack's backyard. We skip from Gretel shoving the witch into the oven to her and her brother happily heading home, bypassing the crone's agonized screams. I guess it's not too surprising that unless carnage is on the agenda, we jump past these moments as if they never existed... as if all we needed was the final roll call of the living and the dead.

Yugi was lucky enough to live in a time and place where the only battles he knew were the ones on his video screen; where his life was his family and friends; where a duel meant a card game and not a desperate struggle. But he was just as determined to preserve his world as the most battle hardened warrior, for all that his weapons were different.

YUGI'S NARRATIVE

Yami came by at daybreak. He nodded to me as he entered my room. "Yugi," he said, as if my name had changed since yesterday. I looked at his intent face and grinned.

"C'mon," I said, slapping him on the shoulder. "It's time to duel."

Yami raised an eyebrow at that and flashed his trademark cocky grin. Despite his robes and jewelry, he didn't look like a pharaoh. He looked like my friend.

We walked to the training field. Mokuba and Kaiba were already there, next to Kisara. An army of duel monsters were waiting in formation behind them. Mokuba's arms were around Kaiba's waist. If they were talking, we were too far away to hear. As we approached Mokuba let go of his brother. I got a look at Kaiba's outfit and almost laughed. I was in a sleeveless T-shirt, jeans and my school jacket, as usual. Yami was in linen, the only new addition a bronze breastplate. In contrast, Kaiba was wearing a button-down black shirt and pants. His long blue jacket flared slightly in the breeze as usual. He looked like he was going to a business meeting, not a battle.

Mahaado and Mana joined us. Mahaado bowed to Yami and nodded to the rest of us.

"Your cards are near at hand?" Mahaado asked.
Kaiba rolled his eyes. Yami and I nodded. I looked at Mahaado's forces again. I felt bad sending them into battle like this, even if they had agreed, even if it was what they were waiting for. And most of the troops in the first wave weren't even my monsters; they had come out of Kaiba's briefcase. They would be the ones clearing the way through Set's troops so that Yami, Kaiba and me could get into the pyramid and confront Set's General.

I looked at Kaiba. He looked unafraid, eager even. Maybe because Duel Monsters had never been a game to him.

It wasn't a game, and maybe it hadn't been one for a while… but I never wanted to play Duel Monsters for real stakes again. Maybe I was fighting for my own future too, in more ways than one. And it was comforting knowing my deck was coming with me. I knew I'd need my friends when we faced Set's General, whoever he was.

Kaiba pulled out his deck and swept the top card from it. He held it up with his usual flourish. His Different Dimension Dragon shimmered to life. It was hard to look at her without blinking; the sun had turned the blue scales on her body into hundreds of separate prisms. She was more delicate than Kisara, didn't have the same air of power. Kisara was majestic; the Different Dimension Dragon was beautiful.

"Some things are necessary," Kaiba said to her. He didn't add the words, "I'm sorry," but we all knew that's what he meant. His Different Dimension Dragon inclined her head gracefully but didn't speak. I wondered if she was mute.

Kaiba was holding a pair of Duel Monsters cards in his hand. As he stepped towards her I saw that he'd threaded a thin string through their corners. He placed his makeshift necklace around her neck. She looked eerily like she was wearing his and Mokuba's lockets. As soon as the cards hit her chest, Shrink's little green ogre and the Twin Swords of Lightning appeared. I hadn't noticed before, but the crossed blades reminded me of Kaiba's double kodachi. Only the hilts were different; they looked a little like golden dragons. The shadowy forms of Kaiba's cards hovered in the air around his Different Dimension Dragon like guardian – or avenging – spirits.

Kaiba stepped back. He looked grim. It was, as he'd said, necessary; it was only temporary; it was what he'd planned; he'd strung the necklace himself. But you could tell that lowering her attack points hurt. He nodded to Yami.

Yami drew out Multiply in answer, and the energy demon bounded out of the card in front of us. Kaiba had reduced the Different Dimension Dragon's attack points low enough for Multiply to do his job.

I'd always wondered if there was a limit to the number of duplicates Multiply could create. There was, but it was a breathtaking sight all the same. Dozens of blindingly bright blue dragons filled the field.

"Wow! This is awesome! I bet you two must feel like idiots wasting all that time fighting each other instead of working together," Mana blurted out.

"No," Kaiba said – but he was talking to Yami, not Mana. "It was not a waste. And we will always be rivals." He gave Yami his usual smirk, but he also was looking at him like the answer mattered a lot.

"Yes. We will always be rivals. We will always challenge each other. Whatever happens, some things will remain constant," Yami confirmed.
While they'd been talking, Mahaado's troops scrambled onto the Different Dimension Dragons' identical backs. They must have practiced this all night. It looked that smooth. With a start, I realized that it was almost time for us to leave.

"Take care to stay alive," Kisara said to Kaiba. "It you die, your cards will cease to answer your will." She turned to Yami. "It would be unpleasant if your Multiply suddenly failed."

"We'll do our best," Yami said.

Kaiba ignored her warning. "Stay here with Mokuba until I summon you," he said.

"But, I'm coming with you!" Mokuba screamed.


"No!" Mokuba repeated. "Kisara – don't listen to him!"

"Like your brother, I will hold to my promises – all of them," Kisara replied, staring at the younger boy.

Mokuba shut up at that. I guess he recognized a defeat when he saw one.

I knew she was, as Kaiba had said, the Different Dimension Dragon, but some things have to be experienced to be believed, and even then you can't describe them. I must have blinked when I climbed on in back of Kaiba and Yami, although I didn't remember closing my eyes, because when I opened them (although I didn't remember doing that either) we were on a dune above Set's Headquarters. I could see the pyramid, large as life, right below us.

We'd caught them by surprise, just as Mahaado had planned. Set's forces weren't in formation – or anything even remotely resembling a fighting unit, much less an army. It didn't take them long to react to our presence, though. Alarm bells rang, troops came running, seemingly from everywhere all at once. Our monsters raced down the dune to meet them.

Mahaado's forces, even without him there, knew what to do. Centaurs and Mystic Horsemen were running amok on the field, trampling any enemy in their way. Mammoth Graveyard, that unbelievably big ancestor of the elephant, was living up to his name, roaring in triumph as he stomped Set's soldiers flat. I was glad they shattered like holograms, without bleeding. Hearing them scream was bad enough.

The Different Dimension Dragons were blinking in and out, ferrying a fresh load of troops on their backs with each phase. They were so effective, Yami, Kaiba and I hadn't needed to summon any additions. The Different Dimension Dragons were moving faster than we could draw cards.

The smaller dragons had arrived as well. They were adding to the chaos, swooping up Necros Soldiers and Armed Ninjas in their talons, then ripping their enemies limb from limb, as they soared above us. A dark rain of shards from their shattered victims fell on the battlefield.

Each second seemed to crawl by uncomfortably. It took forever for a Rabid Horseman to thrust his lance through a Necros Soldier's chest, for an Armed Ninja to cut through the tendons on an M-Warrior's neck. It took forever for them to crumble and fall, for them to shatter. And it happened so quickly, and each kept death repeating itself endlessly, mirrored everywhere I looked, as if the battlefield had played a Multiply card of its own.

Maybe that's what all battles are like. I was glad my country hadn't been at war since before I was
born.

We were hidden, watching the duel monsters fight, kill, and die all around us. We weren't soldiers – we were cargo, a package to be delivered directly to Set's General. We were the only ones that could stop this, but right now we were helpless. I couldn't even hate our opponents; I couldn't see them as anything other than the duel monsters I'd always liked and admired – even when they were being held in someone else's hands.

Set's forces kept pouring out of the pyramid, trying to form a defensive perimeter around it. That had been part of Mahaado's plan, to empty the citadel of defenders so Yami, Kaiba and me would have a clear shot at Set's General. Even Mahaado couldn't tell us who or what to expect. It made the whole thing even more unnerving.

Yami put his arm around my shoulder. I hugged him in return. Yami looked serious, like he was at a funeral, but I could see he accepted this battle as part of his world. I guess he was used to it, now that he remembered his past. Kaiba was on Yami's other side, almost, but not quite touching. A lot of the monsters were his, even if they'd spent their lives in his briefcase, not his deck. Whatever he was feeling as he looked at the fighting was, as usual, impossible to tell. It was easier looking at my friends than at the battle.

I remembered Mahaado saying that the duel monsters that died in this kind of fight couldn't come back to this world. Like Mahaado, I hoped they'd find a place where they could live in the peace they deserved.

"There's no blood, but I keep seeing it anyway in my mind," I muttered.

"Blood's just for show. This is about death," Kaiba replied.

"No," said Yami. "This is about saving the things they're dying for."

"If losing equals death, what does it mean for the fallen, if we win?" Kaiba asked.

"I know you need an answer, but I don't have one," Yami said. "I can only do my part to help grasp victory – for all of us."

Mahaado's core of soldiers had managed to form a triangle. It was our cue. Yami, Kaiba and I ran to the middle of the formation and marched in place as we started towards the pyramid's steps.

I was glad I was short. I couldn't see much. Hearing it was bad enough: the constant roar of voices, the dull thud of hooves stomping over – or on top of – the bodies that lay on the ground, the clash of metal on steel, or worse, the booming sound as a sword or lance struck home followed by a hastily cut off wail as another duel monster shattered.

Then we were inside the pyramid. We were alone. It was quiet. The stone door had slammed shut behind us, muffling the roar of the battle to a static-y sounding background noise. After the bright sunlight outside, it took a moment for our eyes to adjust. We were in a long hallway; torches in their wall sconces showed the way to a door at the other end. A carved golden eye, like the eye on the puzzle I'd worn, faced us from its center. We raced down the hallway. The door opened easily onto a wider room. Another golden eyed door was at the far end. A sphinx was blocking our way. I looked at the great stone gray body with its golden wings, at the mane of magenta hair, at the chains that lay shattered at her feet. She was a lot more familiar than anything in my history book.

The Sphinx Teleia.

We came to a stop in front of her, wondering what to do next.
Kaiba snorted.

"If you ask me, 'what goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening,' I'm going to puke," Kaiba informed her conversationally.

The Sphinx Teleia growled and flexed her claws. They were as long and as sharp as daggers. I wondered if Kaiba had forgotten that he no longer had a dragon at his back, ready to protect him.

"Insignificant human," she growled.

I almost laughed. She reminded me of Kaiba. Maybe she had the same weaknesses…

"We are ignorant of your world. But we're eager to learn. Even in my far away time, we have heard tales of the logic of the Sphinx," I said.

"They are all true," she said smugly.

"I've heard that you have a wondrous device for multiplying large numbers," I continued.

Her self-satisfied smirk matched Kaiba at his worst. "A calculating table. I invented it," she said as it shimmered to solidity in front of her. There was a large flat stone resting on a wooden table. Its surface was covered with sand. We got close enough to see that there were lines drawn in the sand, instead of the string I was used to seeing, and it used pebbles, not beads. But Kaiba was right. It looked like an abacus.

I spoke up quickly, before Kaiba could call her a liar and start talking about how it was invented in China and Babylon, not Egypt, again. "Since the time of the Sphinx, we have developed new ways to calculate," I told her.

I pulled Last Will out of my deck and concentrated. I needed paper and a pen.

"It is foolish to try to improve on the gifts of the gods," she answered.

Kaiba snorted and muttered, "Idiot."

For once I agreed with him although I wasn't sure if he was talking about the Sphinx or me. "But people were born to take foolish risks," I said. "It is how the gods have made us. And I would be honored to test my way against yours."

"You are foolish, indeed," she murmured.

I pointed to Kaiba. "He will set the numbers and the operations. Whoever reaches the answer first, wins."

Kaiba was staring at me, eyes wide with shock. "You're challenging her to a pop quiz on multiplication?" he asked incredulously. "Are you even dumber than I thought? Did you notice what's going on outside?"

"The Sphinx's challenge has always been a mental one. It's about solving puzzles, not war," I said.

"Life is a battle," Kaiba said flatly.

"But it doesn't have to be about killing and dying. If I can move us forward without doing either, I will."

"But multiplication?" Kaiba asked, as though fighting a losing battle.
"What's the matter? Not dramatic enough for you?"

"It's efficient," he conceded. "What made it come to mind?"

"I remembered what you said back when we were first looking for this place. It was the first time I've ever heard you tell a story, and you assumed I wasn't listening?" I asked.

"You think that no penalty will attach to this game? You would make my contests meaningless? This is an insult!" the Sphinx Teleia screamed.

"You're the Sphinx. I thought you had to accept all challenges," I said.

The Sphinx Teleia snorted.

"I don't think she agrees with you," Kaiba said.

"Are you mocking my challenges? Or do you truly think life is a game played without consequences? Then you are a child, or worse, a weak fool who clings to his ideals rather than face the harshness of life – in whatever world you reside."

"You're right," I told her. "I'm going to cling to my ideals as hard as I can. Because it's not a weakness. Friendship is more than strength – it's the reason to be strong in the first place. You could be the most powerful man on earth, and that won't mean anything, if you're not helping anyone with it."

"Are you naïve enough to believe that the world – any world – will honor your creed?"

"It doesn't matter. All I've ever wanted was to have friends, all I've ever asked of myself was to be the kind of person who deserved them, who lived up to their trust." I turned to Yami and Kaiba. "I wanted to be strong enough to offer friendship even when I was scared, even when I was sure it was going to be thrown right back in my face. Now that I've come this far I'm not backing down and I'm not giving up." I turned back to the Sphinx. "Yeah, I'm challenging you to a pop quiz on multiplication that any kid back home could ace without a second thought. And I'm not going to demand your blood when I win. So the only question is: are you game?"

"Do you think I will be as merciful?"

"I can't control your actions," I said. "Only my own. We can play a friendly game for the right to go on to the next challenge. You can do what you want, but I've made my choice. Even if I lose, I'm not going to hurt you."

"You are the true King of Games. It is a joy to see you come into your own kingdom in your own way," Yami said. I smiled at him, blinking hard. This was no time to cry.

"I accept," the Sphinx said. "And when you lose you will see just how deadly your simple test can be."

"Maybe I should do the math," Kaiba said.

For once, I was the one smirking. "I may not be a genius, but I know how to multiply. I'm not playing for just one round – and you seem to have forgotten I was part of the team that beat you all those times."

"I'm look forward to dueling you again – both of you," he said to me and Yami. "But we're not finished here," he said.
"Of course we're not," I said. "Look, there's three of us. What do you want to bet there's going to be three challenges in all?"

"I'm getting damn sick of the number three turning up like it was the only one in existence," Kaiba muttered.

I laughed. "How many Blue Eyes White Dragons do you have, again?"

Kaiba ignored me and turned to the Sphinx. "You ready?" he asked.

She inclined her head. "Of course."

"594,455 times 505."

I wondered if Kaiba didn't think I knew the 7x and 8x tables by heart. Luckily the Sphinx accepted.

I worked slowly, even knowing what was riding on this. But a wrong answer was as bad as a late one. I didn't look up from my paper. I ignored the clicking of pebbles on her calculating table.

Kaiba had been right. It wasn't a contest. I even had time to double check my answer. I held up my page with the number on it before she'd had time to finish. The hardest part was translating it into her number system so she could see I'd gotten the right answer.

As I had hoped, she was no more ready than Kaiba to accept defeat.

"That was an aberration!" she screamed.

"Maybe we've learned some stuff over the years. There's only one way to find out for sure," I said. "My friend will write 100 number pairs. We'll do them one at a time. The first one to solve 51 first, wins."

I turned to Yami and Kaiba.

"Well, you're past the first level. She's so pissed off, she wouldn't notice if we'd brought Mammoth Graveyard in here with us. Once we start, you can head past her to the next level."

Kaiba had already begun writing numbers, each pair on a separate page.

"You can use 6, 7 and 8," I couldn't resist saying.

He nodded, but didn't answer.

Yami said, "It seems I am fated to go through another door without you."

"This is just like Swords of Revealing Light – it's a stalling move, and all it's going to do is put me on standby for a little while," I told Yami. "When you need me, I'll be there."

Yami relaxed at the reminder that this was a game. "I know," he said. "Come as quickly as you can. We have a duel to finish together."

We hugged.

As I turned the first page over, they started for the door at the other end of the room. I was right. The Sphinx Teleia didn't even notice.
Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter and listening to all the pro and con arguments for just about every card that could reduce attack points.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: I'm sorry for the delay. Real life, partly in the form of a nasty cold bug intervened.

I want each challenge faced to say something about the characters themselves. So as almost comic-relief as it seems to have Yugi challenge the Sphinx Teleia to, as Kaiba calls it, a pop-quiz on multiplication, wanted him to take a stand, not only against Set's forces, but against being on any side that believes that losing equals death. There really were abacus vs. multiplication contests, as described in 'Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea' by Charles Seife.

Please review. I'd really like to hear from you…
To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.

CHAPTER 28: SHADOW GAMES

Where would fairy tales be without an endless supply of dragons and ogres to fight? The Billy Goats Gruff had a troll to overthrow; Hansel and Gretel a witch to cook. Even Sleeping Beauty's nameless prince had a forest of thorns to cross and Rapuzel's equally anonymous swain an impossible tower to scale. And yet… whether goat or prince, whether troll or tower, how can you face your nemesis without facing yourself?

Fast forward now, to a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away… where a young Jedi knight-in-training (we hadn't learned to call them padawans, yet) enters the Gnarlree woods of Dagobah, walking into the cave where the dark side is at its strongest. Could there be any doubt who he'd meet; whose mechanically enhanced breath would rasp in his ears? The answer seems obvious, predestined even… right up to the moment when, with a swing of his light saber he kills his enemy – only to see his own sightless face staring up at him from the forest floor.

When he'd still been part of Yugi, had Yami ever spent a rainy Saturday afternoon watching Star Wars on Jichan's television… with Jounouchi's cheers and the sound of munching popcorn as an accompaniment to the carefully orchestrated score? Or was it something older, something wiser, that prompted him to say to Kaiba at Alcatraz that the demons they brought into battle were not all contained in their decks…

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

For someone who seemed so negligible at first glance, it was surprising how often Yugi was right. Except I was no longer surprised. At first I'd thought that Yami's respect for his partner was due to his outmoded ideas of courtesy to his host – and to his sense of his very real obligation to Yugi for his life. This trip had taught me that I'd been too narrow in my outlook. The debt was there, and so was the gratitude – but Yami's respect was based on much more – and like most things he did, it was well founded.

It didn't take us long to make it through the door to the second room. I sighed. Another room, another Sphinx Teleia. This was getting old real fast.

"I wish I could just take a chisel to her and be done with it," I muttered to myself.
"If it was that easy, you would not have been needed," Seto answered in my mind.

He had a point. Yugi had managed to confound the last sphinx with something as simple as the multiplication table – and for all their reputation as gamers, I could come up with better designs in my sleep than anything I'd seen here. I studied the stone tiles beneath my feet. The pattern of light and dark squares looked vaguely like a chess board. The Egyptians were fond of gambling – a pastime I've always found superfluous. (For what is life if not the ultimate gamble?) And as with all weaknesses, it was time to make the Egyptians' count against them.

I smirked, betting it would antagonize the Sphinx Teleia. "I want to go forward, you want to stop me. Care to make a game of it?"

"You consider yourself a gamesmaster?" she asked disdainfully.

"The best," I answered, keeping the smirk firmly in place since it seemed to be working.

"Arrogant fool! What are your games but pale imitations of ours?"

"Try me," I said.

"I can beat you at any game you devise. And when I win, you will pay the ultimate price," she answered.

"Sucker," I muttered under my breath. "It sounds like we have a deal," I added aloud.

I looked at the empty room, not sure what to do next. The Sphinx laughed at me. "Are you already at an impasse? Have you lost before the first move has even been made? I remember when you were his High Priest," she said, nodding towards Yami. "This room will shape itself into anything you require of it. You were once adept at this craft. For all your boasts, have you really forgotten something so simple?"

"What is she talking about?" I asked Seto, hoping he wouldn't waste energy by appearing in front of me.

He didn't. "Priests and spellcasters have the power to rearrange the elements of this world. It's similar to the way you have been able to concentrate and summon monsters from cards in your time here."

I nodded, remembering how the Holy Elf had made a forest appear, how the settlement where we'd been staying seemed to change every time I turned around, how Mana had created a waterfall…

"I don't know how. I need you," I said to Seto. Even though, technically speaking, I was talking to myself, it felt weird to be asking for help.

"We are a team. I can open the channel you need to shape this room to your requirements. What do you wish to do?" he answered.

I looked at the room, considering its size. I turned to the Sphinx. "This battle has been 3,000 years in the making… roughly 1,095,000 days. We will play across those days."

"If you think you can shape this room… let that be your first test," the Sphinx Teleia said.

"Can you help me put a band of darkness at one end of the room, and a band of light at the other?" I asked Seto.
"Which side will you be on?" he asked ironically.

I smirked at that, as the opposing bands appeared. I thought quickly. A grid would be better… or a chessboard.

"Can we make it into a grid?" I asked, concentrating on the image in my mind.

"Done," he said as it appeared. It was perfect. It was oddly natural working together like this, channeling a power I'd never believed existed. It was illogical as hell, but I could figure it out later.

I looked at the grid. It was enormous – 1752 tiles long and 625 wide. For the first time I had a sense of just how long 3,000 years was… of just how long the Sphinx Teleia had been waiting for this game. The game board should have been too vast to fit in the room, but it did. The Sphinx Teleia should have been too far away for me to see her clearly, but I could. More video game bullshit. I was going to use it. That didn't mean I had to like it.

"Kaiba, what are you doing?" Yami asked, his voice low and urgent.

"What I do best. She wants a game." I shrugged. "I'm giving her one."

"Be careful," Yami warned.

"I'm always careful." I said, ignoring Yami's answering snort. "It all comes down to a simple question: do you trust me?"

Yami nodded.

"Sucker," I mumbled under my breath again. I considered the blank tiles in front of me.

"We need a number line," I told Seto. "Just remember where it starts."

I frowned as it appeared: one number per tile, from zero to nine, repeating endlessly in order. "It's too predictable," I muttered. We worked to scramble the numbers until they looked deceptively haphazard.

The Sphinx Teleia frowned, looking at the board. "The numbers no longer run in sequence."

"Life is random," I countered.

"Then it is meaningless," she said.

"The meaning is in what we bring to the game. Consider it my puzzle to you," I answered.

She threw back her head and roared. Her magenta hair flew out around her face. I thought she was going to leap off her dais. "You dare to think you can puzzle me? I should crush you where you stand. You are fortunate Set finds your insolence amusing."

"Each square represents a day you've been waiting for this game," I said. "But I used my numbers to set the board – unless you admit your mastery of them is incomplete?"

"I am aware of how you tricked my sister. Do not think it will work again. I can wield this new magic… this multiplication as well as you. Do not boast to me, foolish mortal – this match will end with your death."

I grinned. If she was trying to frighten me be telling me that losing equals death, she'd missed the boat. I'd been taught that, I'd believed it for years – I'd never been able to let it go. I thought of
something, suddenly. Everyone I cared for, everyone who cared for me, held the opposite view. Did I really want to stand against Mokuba and Yami, keeping company with Gozaburo instead? Did I share the beliefs of the people I loved or those I hated? Which was stronger?

I shook my head… more questions I'd have to let the battle decide.

"What are your rules, gamesmaster?" she said with a sneer.

Yugi had called up the Flame Swordsman just by thinking about him. Now it was my turn. I couldn't believe it. I did want the mutt – or rather his crappy gambling deck. I could have pictured Angel's Dice, but that didn't feel natural. I focused on Devil's Dice instead. Even here, even now – I wanted no blessings. I could do this on my own.

The imp appeared with a smirk that matched my own. "You're lucky I bothered to show up," he said. "Just remember this the next time you call me a small fry."

I didn't waste time answering. I didn't want him, I wanted the die he was carrying. He could say whatever he wanted as long as I got it. He dropped his die as he flew overhead. As I caught them, he vanished. When he reappeared, I motioned for him to offer the new die in his hand to the Sphinx Teleia.

"The rules are simple enough – even for someone who has stone for brains," I said.

She hissed threateningly and flexed her talons.

Good. I wanted her distracted.

"You have a die in front of you. Each square has a number on it. We will each pick a representative, a knight if you will," I told her. "He will toss the die. You can move your champion the same number of squares as the roll of the die times the number on the square he is standing on. We will place monsters on some of the squares – if your champion lands on the same square, the defending monster will shatter – provided his defense points are lower. You have a choice: you can make it across the board – advancing through time to capture my base," I said, pointing to the raised dais behind me. "Or you can destroy my monsters. The first one to do either, wins."

"Simple indeed."

"If you want, we can add or trap and magic cards, face down on the board – unless you think that too challenging?" I said.

"Three times three of each type," she said.

This was turning into a negotiation. It was familiar, as if I was bargaining for Mokuba and my future all over again.

"You're a funny boy, daring to challenge me."

My eyes widened in shock. Gozaburo had been dead for years. Why was I hearing him now?

"Do you accept? Or are you afraid?" My own sneering voice, younger, higher-pitched, came to me, as if from a distance. It didn't feel like a simple memory, although there's nothing simple about memories. It sounded like it was coming from the Sphinx's side of the board. I tried to see through the haze that seemed to have settled there.

"I accept your terms. But don't think this means you'll become my heir just by winning a chess
game." Once again I heard Gozaburo's bark of a laugh. "You'll have to earn that privilege."

I still couldn't see who or what was talking, but I remembered how I'd nodded in agreement. How I'd sealed the deal.

"Please," I heard Mokuba whisper again, just as he'd done on that day.

I still had no idea what he'd been pleading for. At the time, I'd assumed it was for a home… that he'd been speaking to Gozaburo, although he'd been talking too quietly to be heard by anyone but me.

This wasn't real, I thought angrily. Gozaburo was dead. Why didn't he ever just stay dead?

"Because it's a shadow game." Seto's voice was faint, as if it was taking all his energy just to whisper. "You tapped into your past, into me, to create this game. Having invited it in, you can not now dismiss it so easily."

"Then how come I'm not seeing a lot of crap from ancient Egypt?"

"Three days or 3,000 years – the past is the past. Your memories are the ones fueling this game, not mine."

I looked at the Sphinx's side of the board. It was harder to make her out through deepening haze.

"I invited those shadows in, too. They're darker. If my memories are fueling this game, what's fueling them?" I asked.

"What do shadows always feed on?" Seto asked. I could hear the wolfish grin in his voice.

"Us," I answered with a grin of my own. I guess it was fitting. I'd fought this battle before and lost. I'd fought this battle before and won. Sometimes it seemed like I would never be any freer of it than I was of Gozaburo. I looked at the board again. Shadows and all, it was perfect. It was mine. "Thank you," I said.

The Sphinx recalled my attention. The negotiation wasn't over. "Any card that falls here, you can not play again, even if you survive to face the next challenge," she warned. "When you were younger and even more rash than you are now, you had a deck with 25 monsters. We will place that many on the board, as a reminder of the foolishness of mortals."

I nodded. "It's time to see if I've learned anything since then."

I selected monsters to fill some of the squares. Four star monsters or lower, mostly. They were just pawns. Well, most of them, anyway. I'd never been able to think of my Battle Ox that way. But I was setting a trap now, and I needed the right bait. The Sphinx matched my moves.

"Now all that is left is to choose our champion who will move across the board," she added, as the Dark Ruler Ha Des appeared, grinning at me across the board.

"The game will only be truly joined, if our champions have equal attack and defense points – unless you feel you need an advantage to win," I said.

"Conniving mortal. Do you think I can not see through your transparent ploys? But I can be magnanimous. It will make my victory all the sweeter. Choose your champion as you will. I will grant him the same attack strength as mine."

There was just one thing left I needed to confirm. I said, "And what happens to our monsters and our
champions? Are you going to delegate them to suffer your risks in your place? After having my ears worn numb with all this talk of the honor and valor of the ancient world, it would be satisfying to force you to admit that it's just as treacherous and cowardly as the modern one."

"Ha Des is the agent of my will, as are all my monsters," the Sphinx said proudly. "Did I say that they would suffer in my place? I alone accept all consequences from our game. Whichever one of us loses will disappear. Our pawns from greatest to least will all be released with one or the other of our deaths."

"Good," I answered. "Take your place on the board, Yami."

"What?" Yami yelled.

"Either way, you're guaranteed to make it to Set's General," I said.

I almost laughed watching his face. At first he had been outraged at my insults of the age he had been born to. Then he had smirked when the Sphinx took the bait. Now, his eyes widened, then narrowed as he realized I had just played him as much as the Sphinx.

I wasn't surprised he was just a bit slower on the uptake. Yami always tried to deny that the stakes in the games we play are always for life and death. That made me a hair quicker to see the risks that had to be run, to make the moves that had to be made, regardless of consequences. It was the one advantage I'd always had.

"Take your place on the board, Yami," I repeated. "I may never have won a duel against you, but which one of us knows more about designing video games?"

"This is not a virtual world, Kaiba."

"Oh yeah?" I grinned. "What's it look like to you? Unless your problem is you don't think I can win?"

That got him to move to the starting square.

"You know that I do," he said. "But next time you will not act so unilaterally."

"I'm touched by your faith that there'll be a next time." I smirked.

"Now that the board is set, take your place little mortal, if you dare," the Sphinx taunted.

I nodded, feeling the familiar rush of adrenaline that always signaled the start of a match. I looked at the board in front of me. I'd memorized the placement of the numbers. I was betting my life that for all her boasting the Sphinx did not understand the terrain on which we were about to fight.

There was a raised platform, identical to the one the Sphinx rested on, on my side of the room. It was now swathed in light. I stepped onto it and placed my hand on the railing. Instantly, a tendril of darkness, whipcord tough, twined itself around my legs holding me in place. Another crept up to trap my left arm, leaving only my right one free.

If there's one thing I hate, it's feeling trapped – but if the Sphinx thought that would affect the quality of my play, someone hadn't done their homework.

I yawned. "A rather obvious gambit, wouldn't you say?"

"Did I forget to mention that for each monster I destroy, a piece of your body will be consumed by
darkness until there's nothing left? That is how I will win this game – by having you rejoin the darkness you pretend to reject."

I threw the die to Yami before turning to say to the Sphinx. "Any time you're ready to lose…"

"So you think you have won before the game has even begun?" she yelled.

"I know it." If there was one thing I'd learned, it was never to show anything less than total confidence in front of an enemy.

Ha Des strode forward. The opulence of his purple and blue robes couldn't hide the horrified, frozen faces trapped in its weave. He carried the souls of his victims with him.

As do we all.

I shut my eyes as he rolled his die, wondering how heavy my own coat would be if it carried the weight of all the people who had died from the weapons I'd designed. Ha Des moved easily. Maybe it didn't bother him, or worse, he gloried in his prize. I would never share his twisted pride, but I had my own, at least in this. I didn't have Yami and Mokuba's faith that it was the choices I made – not Gozaburo, not even my own past – that would determine who I was and what I could become. But, nevertheless, I would wear my own monstrous coat, and I would walk forward.

The opening moves were routine, almost boring, in the way opening moves all too often are. We were simply trying to cover as much ground as possible. There wasn't much strategy involved, it was simply a matter of picking the square with the highest number. I waited patiently. I had set up the board, but that was only half the battle. It was time to see if I had predicted the Sphinx's moves correctly.

The numbers closest to her were high, mostly sevens and eights. It gave her the illusion of speed. Yami glanced at me as she made it a quarter of the way across before we'd gotten out of the starting blocks. I grinned. I wanted her confident.

Ha Des had moved straight across the board, straight towards his goal… straight towards me. Now, for the first time he had a choice… or a distraction. The square under his feet had a large "8" on it. He had rolled a six. He could have continued his undeviating march, or if he veered a little to the right, he could take out my Hitosame Giant; he could go after a more satisfying victory.

I wondered if the Sphinx was remembering how many times I had opened a match with the Hitosame Giant, was remembering how much I'd want him back if I made it to Set's General. I was counting on it. Cruelty is a drug; the need not just to win but to crush anyone who dares to challenge you; to drink in their humiliation. I'd taken in that drug until I'd overdosed on it, until I'd shattered like a duel monster, until I'd pieced myself back together.

I didn't kid myself. I wasn't free of its call. After all, right now, right here, I was ready to use the darkness we shared against the Sphinx Teleia.

I had to win. And maybe I had to prove to myself, once more, before I could walk into my own future, that the Sphinx's brand of unbridled cruelty, of pure hatred was no longer the answer… was no longer my answer. In her place I would have left her monsters unharmed; I would have headed straight for my opponent. I still needed to win; I no longer had to destroy.

Ha Des, or rather the Sphinx Teleia guiding his moves, made a choice.

It wasn't even close.
Ha Des ran to the square holding my giant, sweeping out his scimitar as he leapt. In one smooth move he separated the Hitosame Giant's head from his shoulders. My monster's body fell to his knees, then crumpled on the floor as his head, with its now sightless, Cyclops's eye still staring, rolled towards me. As I watched, both vanished, leaving the space empty as if he'd never existed.

Their laughter rang out; the Sphinx's piersingly gleeful cries mixing with Ha Des's deeper rumble. I braced myself. This was a penalty game. It was time to pay the first installment. The Sphinx hadn't lied. It hurt. I couldn't keep a gasp from escaping. My left hand was turning into shadow before my eyes, but it still felt painfully alive, as if it was being devoured by sharp toothed animals. I'd known from the moment those chains had shackled me, something like this was coming. I exhaled in relief. Mere pain was never going to make me buckle. The time for that was long past, if it had ever existed in the first place.

"Kaiba! Are you alright?" Yami yelled.

Yami could yap on about how friendship was a strength until he was blue in the face, but I never wanted anyone, especially him, to see me when I was down. His yell steadied me. I wasn't weak; this was a tactical move.

I wasn't weak. But having Yami witness me standing there like a cripple…

"Kaiba?" he asked again, looking like he was ready to run over.

"Keep your ass on that square. This game isn't over by a long shot," I said.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I didn't bother answering. Of course I was sure. The pain in my hand had faded to a dull, throbbing ache. By her lights, the Sphinx Teleia had played fair. If I was going to let myself get distracted so easily, I didn't deserve to win. My hand was still there, at least in shadow form – and that's when I realized: the game wasn't about pain. It never was. This was even more familiar, and like the last time, pain was merely the accompaniment.

I was turning into darkness again; I was letting it consume me.

Then, I heard the noise. At first it was faint… the sound of someone choking, the sound of someone gasping for air, the sound of someone giving up. After it was over, the words came.

"They were depending on me. I let them down."

I didn't bother trying to see through the darkness. There was no point. My mind could conjure up his face instantly, as if this was a new shadow game. I could see the ligature marks around his middle-aged neck, red against the oxygen starved, blue tinged skin.

"It was a family owned business. It had been part of my family for generations."

It had also been the first company I'd leveraged, which was a polite way of saying destroyed, on my triumphant march towards taking over Kaiba Corporation.

"I am ashamed of my failure. I have nothing to offer the people who lost their livelihood because of me, except this…"

Was he here, somehow? Or was it just that I knew his suicide note by heart?

His family had never realized that the smiling pseudo-child they'd invited into their house had
destroyed its head. I'd needed his company. It was that simple. It was the opening gambit in my play to make sure Gozaburo couldn't kill any more people with my designs. Instead I'd added another name to the list. He'd gone more quietly than Gozaburo, but in the end, he'd agreed with my adoptive father that losing equals death.

I thought of his body, suspended like a spider from his office ceiling. Had he been a victim of my darkness or his own?

"Please…" Mokuba's voice broke into my thoughts or whatever they were. I still didn't know what he was begging for, but he was right. I had to concentrate. I stared at the board again.

My monsters had been placed as carefully as a trail of breadcrumbs in one of Mokuba's stories. Ha Des guided by the Sphinx, went through the board, mowing down monster after monster; each illusory victory moving them a little farther to the sidelines, a little farther off course, a little farther from my end of the board, until they were committed to wiping out my monsters. They had gone too far to back down. As had I.

If I'd wanted more proof that my monsters were a part of me, I had it now. A part of me dissolved as Ha Des claimed each one. A piece of my body or a piece of my soul? I was more shadow than substance now, but I wasn't disappearing. Instead, darkness was covering me like a living shroud, burying me alive within its grasp – just like the Sphinx had promised.

"We are waiting," the shadows seemed to whisper. "We have been waiting for 3,000 years."

"Then you should be used to it by now," I answered.

I could have asked what it meant by the whole 3,000 year remark, but I wasn't sure I cared.

"I destroyed the souls of my victims to power our monsters. I did it to protect the pharaoh." Seto's voice was faint, fainter than the darkness. "They were criminals, condemned men, justly sentenced… but now I wonder – did none of them deserve a second chance? In the final irony, I was given a chance to be reborn, given the opportunity to redeem myself that I had denied my enemies. It took the wisdom of a pharaoh to see that everyone is worthy of this."

"Or a kid with weird hair," I answered. "But who's to say they're right? I turned around and made the same mistakes as you all over again."

"You learned without needing to die. I am content."

I wasn't. I still had a duel to win. Doubt was the true weakness, and it was a penalty that could only be imposed by myself. As much as I could feel the shadows whispering around me, they were not a part of me, they were not mine. I just had to remember that. Their company was simply the price I'd agreed to pay for victory.

I'd once told Yami that my life points only existed to further my aims. That hadn't changed. There's always a price for winning. I've always been willing to pay it. That hadn't changed either – maybe it would never change, but still, it was different. Now, I was fighting for the things that mattered to me – for Mokuba's safety, for Yami's right to choose his own path.

I thought of Orpheus. Mokuba had been right. I hadn't looked back since I'd awoken from Death-T. I wasn't going to start now.

"Yet you feel us waiting for you to rejoin us." The shadows had regained their voice. They were louder now.
"Never," I answered.

Laughter surrounded me, as thick as the gloom before my eyes. "Don't try to pretend we aren't a part of you. You will come back to us. You've never really left."

I've never denied you were part of my past. But nothing is inevitable, not even this. The future is mine," I snarled.

"It's too late for that." I recognized Amelda's disembodied voice. "You were part of a corporation that made its living by killing children. Do you think you can just close a door on what you've done and the past will docilely go away, like a child being sent to its room?"

"No, but that doesn't mean I have to perpetuate it," I said. "It doesn't mean I'm going to give in."

I didn't expect to win this argument. When I had first dueled Amelda, when our contest had been to determine whether I could redeem myself, whether as Mokuba and Yami claimed, my future could outweigh my past, although I hadn't lost… I hadn't been able to win either. It was only when the stakes had shifted to protecting Mokuba, that I'd prevailed.

"Some battles must be endlessly fought and re-fought," Kisara reminded me.

I hadn't summoned her, any more than I had summoned Amelda or Gozaburo. I peered across the gameboard as if her light could pierce the darkness, but all I could see was the game board, my allies and opponents – and the shadows.

"Are you really here?" I asked.

"In a manner of speaking I have always been here. I'm glad you have finally learned to listen."

"You're still on my side?" I thought back to that first shadow game with Yami, to the way she had vanished in my hands. "Look at me. I thought you could only serve creatures of light."

"I am. The harsher the battle, the sweeter the victory, the more valor to the warrior."

"Then I guess it's time to get moving, because this is just a tune-up match," I said.

Yami was staring at me, frowning. I almost asked him how much he had heard, but I knew he hadn't heard Amelda or Kisara or any of them. This was my battle.

The Sphinx had set spell cards near my monsters. Ha Des had added Axe of Despair and Kunai with Chains to his arsenal. Mask of Brutality covered his face. Unfortunately it didn't muffle his laughter. "I have 4,950 attack points. Now I am truly invincible. Even if you were fool enough to have put an Ultimate Dragon on the board, you could not stop me."

Ha Des looked at the XYZ Dragon Cannon, now within his reach. He could take out one of my more powerful cards. I tried to look unconcerned.

The Sphinx grinned at me. "It is amusing to catch a mortal in the trap of his own arrogance. You must think me a fool, to hope I would not recognize the zero that lies in wait under the feet of your mightiest warrior on the field. If I land on his square I won't be able to move further. It will be my pleasure to kill him last, to destroy the two of you together as my final move. And your Battle Ox is within reach – and unprotected. Your oldest card deserves better from you, but I am not surprised."

I nodded. My Battle Ox deserved better indeed. I just couldn't give it to him.
"You are wrong," my Battle Ox told me as Ha Des reached him, his voice, as usual, surprisingly soft. "I am honored to be the card you depend on."

Then Ha Des slaughtered him as he stood so steadfastly on his square. It was what I'd planned. But losing my Battle Ox hurt.

"After taking your Battle Ox, it's fitting I claim your heart, isn't it?" the Sphinx asked.

A hand seemed to shape itself out of the shadows surrounding me. It reached into my chest. My heart was still there, because it hurt with every beat. And I was still standing. But I felt hollow inside, as hollow as I'd felt after Death-T. She'd done a good job of ripping it out in a non-literal way.

"So what?" I sneered at her. "I've lived without a heart before."

"Losing equals death," she crooned. I heard the sound of breaking glass, the screech of the wind pushing through Kaiba Tower's broken windows to slap me in the face.

I wanted to say they were wrong, that Gozaburo was wrong – but here I was defying them and yet playing by their rules, all at the same time, all over again.

"Wasn't it easier before… with nothing to weigh you down? Didn't you feel stronger with us at your side?" The darkness was all around me now; its voice was softer, caressing my ears.

I didn't answer. There was nothing to say. I had felt stronger then, and we both knew it. "It hadn't been real. It hadn't been enough," I whispered, reminding myself.

"But power is everything! You told me that! I thought you were going to teach me to be strong, Nisama!"

"I tried. I didn't always succeed," I told Mokuba.

For an instant I saw him, as if the darkness – or my memory – had given him shape. He was smaller, younger, the way he'd been at Death-T… wearing my fur collared sweater, wearing my cold grin. I shut my eyes, and when I opened them, he was gone. All that remained was his voice, whispering, "Please…"

"Kaiba! What's going on?" Yami called, reclaiming my attention.

I didn't answer.

"Kaiba, even you can't keep doing this," he said.

"Watch me," I snarled. The last thing I wanted to hear was Yami's doubts. He should have known me better.

"I will. Kaiba…" He repeated my name for a third time. "I need you to know – as hard as this is to watch – I trust you."

I nodded, warmed and abashed at the same time. Yami hadn't doubted me. I'd been the one lacking faith in the friendship that was still too new to take comfort in or even understand. In amends, I was finally ready to accept that the concern in his voice wasn't an insult. It wasn't that hard a struggle. Yami sounded like Mokuba… like despite all appearances, against all odds, he had faith in me. I wondered if Mokuba had worn the same worried but trusting expression I now saw on Yami's face every time he'd watched me duel, every time I'd played for our lives. He was my little brother. He meant the world to me. I'd never turned around to look.
"Don't worry, Yami," I said. "I've got something far stronger than destiny on my side."

"What can be stronger than fate?" the Sphinx interrupted.

I grinned. "The laws of probability."

I faced Ha Des and the Sphinx at the other end of the board, my head held high. I wasn't going to need more than two of my face down cards. The real trap hadn't been the zero lurking under the XYZ Dragon Cannon's feet - that had been the decoy. The real trap had been the numbers running throughout the board itself. In her eagerness to destroy my monsters, the Sphinx Teleia was about to hit a swamp more treacherous than the one that had confronted Yami and I back in Set's territory. All around her, the lower numbers outweighed the higher ones. Twos and threes were everywhere. I had only put one monster on a zero; I'd figured she'd notice that and understand enough to know it would stop her cold. But all the remaining monsters stood on a "1". She didn't realize it, but her triumphant advance was about to sputter like a car running out of gas.

"It feels good, doesn't it? Have you forgotten?" the shadows seemed to whisper in my ear.

"I remember surrendering," I said through gritted teeth. "I remember winning."

The voice changed. "Memory is a trap. It's meaningless."

I stared into the gloom as if I could see him his small form, his blue-green hair, almost pure cyan – 00ffff in hexadecimal code. I couldn't see him of course; he wasn't really there.

I nodded anyway. Hologram or hallucination, Noa had a point.

"It's a weakness. A human frailty I've outgrown," he boasted.

I was about to agree, when Mokuba's face flashed into my mind. Again, I heard his whispered, "Please…"

What had he been pleading for?

"Not all memories," I told Noa. "Some are a strength. Anyway, whatever the hell this is, it isn't a memory. We've never had this conversation before."

"So clever..." he taunted. "Still so cocky, boy?"

"Don't bother trying to imitate Gozaburo," I sneered back. You don't have the history or the balls for it."

"And you do? Doesn't seem that way to me. Look at you - you're more shadow than flesh. Are you sure you're not coming to join me?"

"Everyone does, sooner or later. But it'll be on my terms - and it's not going to be now."

"Losing equals death," he said.

I smirked. "I haven't lost."

"Yet," he said, with a malicious grin. "What do you think I'm waiting for, if not my chance to gloat at your comeuppance?"

"Get used to disappointment. It wouldn't change anything, anyway. You'd still be dead. You lost that game long before I came on the scene."
"You think you're better because you're alive? How many times have you tried to die? How many times have you wanted to?"

"Every time I failed. Every time I lost," I answered.

"And you're still going to stand there and tell me that life is such a prize?"

"Without it, there's nothing to sacrifice," I said. "You don't get it. You still have the same weaknesses as the last time we dueled. You were given the Kaiba name. I paid for it."

"So?"

"Some sacrifices have to be paid in blood. Unless you're willing to do that, you can't win," I said.

"You didn't beat me! Not without help!" he screamed.

It still stung, needing Yugi and Yami like that, but it always comes down to what you can live with.

Mokuba had surprised me by pitying Noa back then. Yugi had insisted he was just a kid. I didn't see what difference that made. Now as the darkness started gathering shape, even though I couldn't make out any details, for the first time I realized Noa was Mokuba's height.

"We both know you're not really here. You're just some stray electrical impulse misfiring in my brain." I told him. "There's nothing left to feel sorry for," I mumbled to myself.

"You think you have all the answers, don't you? Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm not Noa. Tell me this, then: who am I? What form has always attracted darkness like rats to a corpse?"

"Kaiba!" Yami yelled, breaking the spell. I wondered how much I'd said aloud.

"Don't worry," I told Yami. "It's over. Just some long finished business I forgot to discard."

"Are you so sure it's finished?" As predicted, the shape the darkness had chosen was familiar. The voice was mine... slightly younger, slightly colder.

I ignored him and called out to Yami, "Go ahead, roll the die."

My younger self was still there. I'd expected him to be wearing my long outgrown white uniform, but I wasn't surprised to see Ha Des' purple and blue robes instead. I couldn't make out the details; he was too far away and too insubstantial. But I knew the trapped faces in his coat belonged to the children that Kaiba Corporation's... that my weapons had killed.

"They turned to ash years ago, but the weight of their small bodies bothers you, doesn't it?" He laughed. "How can you possibly hope to outdistance me, with a conscience to slow down your every step?"

He was right. Sometimes it felt like I'd never be free again.

Mokuba's whispered "Please..." broke into the conversation, like a stone sinking through a layer of ice.

"Is the brat begging for mercy?" He laughed again.

"No," I answered. "He's reminding me of my promises. I have a duel to win, a brother to protect, and a future to claim. And nothing -- not you, not even the darkness that's behind you, that's inside of me -- is going get in my way."
I looked at the die on the floor in front of Yami. Perfect. Sixteen steps should do it. I turned away to call to Yami, "Go down towards the Sphinx for 14 squares, then right two. Head for the square with two of my trap cards on it." I watched Yami move. "You won once," I told my younger self, even though he had vanished. "You're never beating me again."

I was alone again. I thought of Kisara vanishing in my hands in that first shadow game; of Yami shattering my heart at our second. Despite appearances, had she always been on my side? Had Yami?

"Yes," Yami answered, and I wondered again how much I'd said aloud, how much he'd heard. "I have always wanted to see you triumph, I have always had faith."

Yami stepped on the square. I grinned wildly, crazily. I was home, wherever the hell that was. I nodded and the first trap card flipped over. I threw my head back and laughed at the startled look on Yami's face. The card was Yu-Jyo Friendship. A duplicate Yami and Jounouchi were now crowded onto the square with him.

Yami was still looking dumbstruck, which was funny. Then he looked amused, which wasn't. "What are you, of all people, doing with that card?" he asked.

"Siegfried sent it to me in the Grand Prix, along with a derisive note informing me that Pegasus hadn't bothered to put my image on a card."

"Why did you bring it along?"

I shrugged. "In case I needed a spare." I turned to the fake Yami and Jounouchi. "I only need one of you. And it's not going to be the mediocre duelist."

Yami and his double shot equally annoyed glares my way. Jounouchi turned red. "You just keep telling yourself that, asshole," he said as he faded. I laughed again. I couldn't believe it. The mutt had finally gotten in the last word – and he wasn't around to see it.

I looked at the two Yamis in front of me. The real one was in his pharaoh get-up. The other was in Yugi's clothes, Yugi's uniform jacket slung over his shoulders like a cape. Even without that, it was easy to tell them apart. The fake Yami didn't look quite solid, like a hologram you can't quite convince yourself is real.

Even though my trap had worked perfectly, even though I was about to win, I looked at them soberly. Yami had always felt so vibrantly alive to me, but was this how he had felt the whole time he'd been in Domino – like he wasn't quite real? Had he turned to the grave because he'd felt too much like a ghost to join the living?

I shook off my dark thoughts. "He's going to take your place for the rest of the game," I told Yami, nodding to his avatar. I was a bit pissed I wasn't going to be the one who reached Set's General first, but I had a job to finish here. It was just the way the cards had fallen.

"What?" shrieked the Sphinx.

"My representative is Yami. He's still on the field. You didn't say which Yami I had to have." I smirked at her.

I gestured again and the second card turned over. Doppelganger's cartoon cat bounced up and down on the square, almost knocking both Yamis over.

"Doppelganger? Why on earth do you have one of Pegasus' cards?" Yami asked.
"Losing was hideous enough. The least I could do was learn from it."

"You already have a double of the pharaoh. What monster are you planning to duplicate?" the Sphinx asked.

I grinned. "I'm not copying a monster. I'm copying my die."

I could move twice as quickly now, and I had set up a path of high numbers that led straight to the Sphinx. I wasn't going to bother with her monsters. I was going straight for her heart.

"Go straight forward," I told Yami. "Don't look back. The next door leads to Set's General – and you have an appointment to keep. I'll finish up here and join you for the Battle Royal."

Yami still looked worried. "Be careful," he said.

"Take that concerned expression off your face. I'm about to win. I'm going to have fun."

"Will you enjoy it?" he asked, seriously.

I refused to look away from his gaze; my shrug was inward. Yugi had devised a challenge, simple as it was, based on his ideals, his hopes. I was about to win by channeling my own worst impulses to defeat an opponent who had matched me every step of the way. Did it matter that for me, it had been a necessity, and no longer – unlike the Sphinx – a pleasure? I suppose in the end we use what is most deeply inside of us; I had made use of the Sphinx's cruelty. Did it make a difference that I had not embraced it?

"I promised Mokuba to move beyond my hate and anger," I told Yami. "I promised myself to move beyond my past. – and I ended up using every trick I'd learned there. How can I pretend that darkness isn't in my very nature, when I used it so well, when it's the first card in my deck? I did what I had to. I always do. That's acceptable, I suppose. Victory always is. But you tell me, Yami – does it really matter why I did it… what I intended, what I feel?"

"At last – a question I can answer," Yami said. "Yes, of course it matters."

As an exit line, it was a winner. But Yami wasn't quite done. Even though we were in the middle of a duel, even though I was tied up and half shrouded by shadows, he walked the length of the room and climbed on the platform with me. I bent my head towards him and he kissed me on the lips.

"I'll be waiting for you. I know you'll win. I know you'll join me," he said, as he pivoted and left without looking back. I licked my lips, then turned back to the board.

I had a duel to win and a victory, ambiguous as it was, to claim.

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Thanks to Bnomiko for checking cards and singular forms of dice and for saving me from sounding like an idiot when talking about computer colors and hexadecimal code.

Thanks to Bahen and Dragonwrangler for checking (and correcting)my Star Wars facts.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I'm sorry for the delay. A combination of real life and that this was just one of those chapters you have to wrestle with, intervened. When I wrote this chapter, I was so worried about my ability to create a game that made sense and used both numbers and duel monsters in the way that I wanted, that it wasn't until I had designed the entire game that I stopped to think about
what it all meant. I wanted this game to also involve numbers and to use them to show a difference
between the two time periods, so that Kaiba was using modern concepts of how numbers work to
trap the Sphinx.

But once I thought about what the game might mean beyond that, I also wanted it to say something
about who Kaiba is, where he's at in this story and what his challenges are. I hope that came across.

Gameboard Note: The gameboard had to be big enough that going after Kaiba's monsters was a
reasonable strategy, although the Sphinx's impatience and desire to rub Kaiba's face in his loss before
destroying him was the main motivation. It also had to allow for enough turns for the action to take
place. I also thought that it would be nice if the number of squares tied into something to do with
time, like days or weeks or months. Using days gave the gameboard 1,095,000 squares, forming a
rectangle 1,752 x 625. Assuming an average roll of 3.5 (the median point between 1 – 6) and an
average square value of 4.5 (the median point between 0 – 9) it would take approximately 110 turns
to cross the board lengthwise. This would, for Kaiba, be cut in half when he added a second die.

Card Note: Most decks have about 22 monsters in a 40 card deck. The rest will be spell and trap
cards. Kaiba's initial deck was known as a powerful monster deck, and his style was basically to
slam anything in his way, so I figured a higher number of monsters would be appropriate. A deck
however with too high a percentage of monsters has a flaw in it – it has to have fewer spell and trap
cards to enhance and protect the monsters. This is the kind of reckless, overconfident mistake I can
see a younger Kaiba making. At Death-T he could have wiped Yugi out before he had time to
assemble Exodia, except he decided that he wanted his dragons to have that honor, instead of making
sure of his victory. But I also wanted to show that as he has grown and changed during the course of
the series, so did his deck, which is, after all, a reflection of him.

Dice Note: Given the context of the game in this chapter, even though the singular form of "dice" is
"die" it still felt weird to use it all over the story. I went with the Japanese card names here, not only
for consistency, but also because I thought Angel's Dice and Devil's Dice were more appropriate that
the English names of Graceful and Skull Dice.

Please review, I'd really like to hear from you…
Hand of Fate

Chapter Notes

To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.

CHAPTER 29: HAND OF FATE

It's a rare fairy tale prince who knows his name. Even when they have one, like Cinderella's groom-to-be, you end up muttering to yourself, "Who names their kid 'Charming,' anyway?" And Prince Charming's one of the lucky ones. Snow White's beau doesn't even rate a name, as if he exists only to kiss her back to life.

Orpheus' wife has a name as well. It's Eurydice. But it gets forgotten so often, it might as well never have existed in the first place. But her name should matter. She should matter. She should be more than the object of Orpheus' quest. And yet, it is his story that has been handed down through the millennia, not hers… until her thoughts and feelings and dreams have become even more lost to us than her name.

Had she made peace with her death by the time Orpheus barged in to bargain for her life? Was she torn between her old life and her new, until drinking from the river of forgetfulness seemed like the only way out? Was that why Orpheus looked back – because he wasn't sure which path she had chosen, because he wasn't sure she wanted the gift he had struggled so hard to give?

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

I had reached the center of the pyramid. The ceiling came to a conical point, high above me. The slits in the roof let in the sunlight, striping the floor with narrow, rectangular beams. It didn't lift the gloom that seemed to have made its home here at the heart of Set's domain, but it allowed me to see his General clearly.

I should have expected the demon facing me as I entered the room. It was Exodia. But not my Exodia, the demon who had healed Yugi's grandfather, the demon who had given Kaiba his second chance at life. This was Exodia Necross, his darker incarnation. He was surrounded by a dark flame that hid more than it illuminated.

"You realize our fates are tied to this game. The loser will shatter and die. If you lose, you will leave this world," Exodia Necross cautioned as I entered the room.

"And if you are the one to be defeated?"

"The same. I will disappear, as will all my forces."
"And what of your master?"

My lord Set, is eternal. He is not subject to death. But the loss of his minions and his bulwark in this world would be a sizeable blow to his power and his ambitions. Within the limits of mortal experience, you could truly say that you have saved both worlds – if you are prepared to hazard your own."

"My own?"

"What is a man's world, if not his life?"

"So, Set does intend to play fairly," I said. "But before we begin, there is one thing I would know – if everything had stayed as it was, even your opposite general, Exodia, conceded that you would have eventually claimed victory. So why did Set allow Yugi and Kaiba entrance to this world?"

"He is a god. It is his nature. They call my lord the God of Destruction. But he is more properly named, the God of Change. The game was becoming static. And life… even here… was never meant to stagnate." Exodia Necross gave what might have been, in a less august being, a shrug. "My Lord Set could not resist throwing a couple of wild cards into play – especially when one came bearing his name."

"Was he foolish enough to labor under the delusion that Kaiba would betray us and serve his cause?" I asked, angrily.

"Your lover is an agent of change. As such, he serves our cause, whatever side he chooses. Even if he helps defeat Set's forces today, he is still carrying out my lord's design."

"You say your lord is not evil," I said. "But what would you call destruction for the sheer joy of the chaos it brings?"

"What does a god know of mortal rights or wrongs?"

I smiled. "Then it is time to teach him."

"And what of you, pharaoh-in-name-only?" Exodia Necross asked. "You have asked only of your partner and of your lover's arrival here. Do you think your own entrance into this world beyond remark?"

"I came here because I thought that this was my place," I said, for the first time, confused. "I would have expected you, as an agent of the gods, to agree."

"Is it? A half-life lived among the people you can no longer quite remember? After having tasted life so briefly, is your place truly among the dead? Then for you, Set, in his darkest incarnation, has triumphed. For the Exodia holding dominion in your heart is not the creature made of life whom you profess to serve… but myself, the creature of the grave."

Exodia (my Exodia) had said that the modern world that Yugi and Kaiba and Mokuba carried within them, might be a match for Set's more familiar chaos.

I had wondered in which world I truly belonged. It was strange to receive my answer from an enemy. But at Exodia Necross' words I knew beyond doubt, beyond certainty, where I belonged.

I had walked through a door to the after-life, and had found everything I'd thought I'd wanted: a ready-to-wear identity and a host of people eager to confirm it if I doubted. But maybe I had had to regain my memories to understand their limitations. They could not tell me who I was, much less
what to do next with my life.

Nor could Yugi. He was the wisest person I knew. But he wasn't right – at least not for me. Yugi knew, somewhere deep in his core, who he was, who he was meant to be. I didn't... not anymore. I had lost that certainty when I had lost my life 3,000 years ago. If I went back with Yugi and Kaiba, I might spend an entire lifetime searching without ever rediscovering the sense of surety I heard in Mahaado's voice every time he said the word, "Pharaoh." But if my title, if even my name, "Atemu," no longer felt like my own, I had discovered something nonetheless... a journey.

Once upon a time, I'd had a lifetime, short as it was, where I'd known exactly who I was and where my place lay. That was no longer enough. There was a world beyond certainty that I ached to explore.

I didn't have to know who I was to know where I belonged. For all my talk of responsibilities, in the end it came down to friendship and love – the two things I had managed to hold on to through 3,000 years and two lifetimes. I thought of Yugi and Kaiba, of Sugoroku, Jounouchi and Anzu. I wanted them in my future; I wanted to be part of theirs. And then I knew: my world wasn't a place. My world was the people I loved, and my place was with them. My world was my journey, and it was meaningless unless shared.

Any of us may be called upon to sacrifice all we are or hope to become. But none of us should ever do so casually or prematurely. I had been blessed with a second chance, and I would not renounce my friends... my world... for a second time. I had told Kaiba that it is not our talents but our choices that define us.

"I accept your challenge," I said to Exodia Necross. "I come not in service, but to thwart you – as will my partner and my lover. You can delay but not forestall their arrival. For there is another thing that is a man's life – his friends."

"I will grant you the blessings of friendship. If your friends meet their own challenges and enter this room, they may come to your aid, they may fight beside you, assume the same risks, and add their monsters to yours."

"And what do you claim in return?" I asked.

"I will add half again their number to my total count of monsters for each combatant who comes to join you. Your deck has 20 monsters?"

I nodded.

"Then I will add ten to my count for each addition, as well as a complimentary core of trap and spell cards. I also claim the right you will have to renounce to live in the world outside, again – the gift of pre-determination. The moment your friends join this fight, I will choose my cards in the order that seems best to me."

"And if the cards fall as easily into my hands as they have always done – will that be destiny or the happenstance of random chance?" I asked. "Either way, I will trust to a certainty beyond fate – my friends and my deck."

"We will not fight for anything as artificial as life points, but to destroy each other's corps of monsters," Exodia Necross said.

"And if I draw no monsters?"

I shivered at Exodia Necross' smile. "Then you will be unprotected."
"It will take more than one attack to bring me down."

"True. Each of us will be able to withstand one direct attack for each millennia between the dawn of this game and its end, but three attacks in a row, uninterrupted by confrontations between our monsters, will spell death for either of us."

"Then, all that's left is for me to defeat you," I said.

Stone tablets appeared in front of Exodia Necross. He looked at the cards in my hand… a modern duel monsters deck.

"It seems you have chosen your course," Exodia Necross said. "I can be a gracious host," he added a stone podium appeared in front of me. It looked like the one from Kaiba's earlier dueling platforms, except it was carved from stone. I placed my deck on it and drew my first five cards. As soon as my fingers touched the deck, despite the stone tablets, despite the monster facing me, despite the setting, despite the stakes, this suddenly became something familiar. It was a duel. I had done this before.

I had done this before and lost.

The space that separated Exodia Necross and I suddenly seemed immense. The air was stifling. I drew in a breath, trying to fill my lungs. I shook my head, and thought of Jounouchi and Kaiba, of how the true measure of a duelist was whether he could get up again after a defeat and battle on. I thought of Jounouchi's eagerness, of Kaiba's determination to resume the fight. It was time to match their courage. It was time to live out my beliefs. That was the true victory.

"What is in the hearts of men can surpass even the gods." Kaiba had said the words atop his Battle Ship, but now I believed them. It wasn't a modern way to resolve matters – but like an ancient warrior, I was ready to prove my beliefs with my body. For if Kaiba was right that the world had moved on, he had forgotten, once again, that we can not outrun history. Kaiba believed in the laws of probability. They had served him well. I would trust to friendship.

Ever since I'd arrived in this world, I'd been holding my deck at arm's length, instead of close in my hands where they belonged. I looked at my cards, seeing them with a new clarity. Now that I had made my decision, I was in tune with them one more. I was free to love them, to wonder at their faithfulness on my behalf without feeling burdened by what I could not offer in return.

It was indeed time to duel.

I set my first card. I wondered if it was an omen that I had drawn the Feral Imp, a monster that seemed to bounce with life as he bounded onto the field, ready to play.

"Life is an adventure," he said with a high pitched laugh. Exodia Necross winced at the sound.

"You know?" I asked him.

"We are your deck. How could we not know what's in your heart?"

"But… Mahaado…" I started.

"When you call him you will see that all of your deck, from least to greatest, wish you well. I'm happy you have finally joined us."

"But… I'm leaving you all," I said, confused.

"Are you?" The Feral Imp grinned at me. "Did you not summon me with joy?"
I smiled back. "In both worlds, I am blessed with friends beyond any man's deserving."

He laughed again. "Then why look so solemn, when there's a game in front of us just itching to be played?"

Exodia Necross had five tablets in front of him, their backs facing us. He waved a hand and one moved, until it lay, face down on the floor. Another tablet appeared to complete the group of five in front of him.

The Feral Imp looked at the empty space in front of him and pouted – disappointed by the lack of a foe – or a playmate.

"I get to attack you directly now," I said, and nodded to my Imp. It was a symbolic attack. The Imp grinned even wider than before and launched himself at Exodia Necross. He landed on the august monster's shoulders and wrapped his feet around his head, giggling madly, now. He smacked the top of Exodia Necross' head, his hands beating in time as if it was a drum. Before I could make out the tune, if there was one, Exodia Necross shook him off. The Feral Imp landed lightly back in place on the field.

"You did not need to encourage that buffoon to attack me. I would have conceded that you had landed the first direct strike."

"Who needed encouragement? It was fun," the Feral Imp interjected.

"On the third strike, you'll shatter like your weakest monster," I reminded him.

"If you succeed," he answered calmly. "One is far from three."

"It's closer than you think," I countered as I summoned the Celtic Guardian.

It was a calculated risk. I had only 20 monsters. I had just put my second into play. It was too easy, and I knew it... but if I could end this now, so simply, before Yugi and Kaiba entered the fray... I smiled, imagining Kaiba's indignant reaction if he burst in here, once again a step too late... but at least they'd be safe...

The Celtic Guardian smiled in greeting as he appeared at my side before turning to face Exodia Necross, waiting for me to order the attack.

"Do you really expect to win so easily?" Exodia asked.

"No. But I could not ignore the possibility simply because it seemed too good to be true."

"You know better, yet you persist in hope," he said, turning over Block Attack. He had effectively forestalled the threat – only one of my monsters could attack this turn.

I was tempted to let my Feral Imp jump on him again, if only to see his reaction, but I nodded to my Celtic Guardian. He stepped forward and executed a ceremonial strike, his blade swinging harmlessly through Exodia Necross' torso. He stepped back and bowed.

"The next round could end this game," I said. "For the next attack will be real, instead of symbolic."

"Then it is well that I have a monster at hand," he said, placing a Zombie Warrior on the field. It was weaker than either the Celtic Guardian or the Feral Imp.

"Look at that skeleton. He's not even skin and bones. Breathing on him the wrong way will probably
do the trick," the Imp said.

"Well, he is a Zombie Warrior," the Celtic Guardian said patiently.

I looked at my Celtic Guardian. He nodded towards the Feral Imp. "Let him enjoy himself," he said.

If the Feral Imp's attack of Exodia Necross had been comical, this was all business. He swung his claws as if they were three daggers that acted in unison. It had cost Exodia Necross a monster – he was down to 19 now – but he had accomplished his aim. He had reset the count. He could withstand two more direct attacks while trying to assemble the monsters he wanted.

"You play a waiting game well," I said.

"Even if it's the most boring game there is," the Imp added.

"You will be gone by the next turn," Exodia Necros said to the Imp, as a stone tablet rose and a Goblin Zombie appeared. Before we could take in his grotesque bug-like features, he vanished as another tablet reared up, and Sillva, Warlord of the Dark World, took his place. Lightning crackled around him, briefly lighting the room, throwing his bone white skull, his bone white sword into sharp relief. His powerful, pale wings were folded at his back, giving him the look of an unholy angel. He strode across the dueling field in his pride and power, his heavy footsteps echoing on the marble floor.

The Celtic Guardian squared his shoulders and stood taller, ready to face his more powerful foe. The Feral Imp took in his opponent's haughty glare and laughed. "No time for chit-chat?" he asked Sillva.

"Die, Imp," Sillva answered.

"At least I got to play, first," he replied.

"We'll be back at the next duel; we'll have been part of winning this one. Will you be able to say the same?" the Celtic Guardian asked.

I drew my next card, unsurprised that the cards were falling as they had always done; unsurprised that the Black Magician was here in my hand, ready to protect his people as he had always done. But I needed a sacrifice to call him forward. It meant sending one of the two monsters before me to the graveyard… and yet… I stared across at Sillva, Warlord of the Dark World… that was inevitable.

Why does it seem like we can't go through a door, even in our thoughts, without it catching on our heels? I realized that the next time I saw my Feral Imp, the glint in his eye would be a trick of holographic light… and he'd be silent.

The Feral Imp grinned at me. "I know that look – it's my cue that my time here is over until the next game."

"But it's a game that should always be played with joy," I said. "Thank you for reminding me."

The Black Magician appeared in the Feral Imp's place. I looked at the purple robes, the pale face, the icy blue eyes. I turned over a trap card and the Ring of Magnetism appeared on his finger; a spell card and the Black Pendant was hidden in the folds of his robes, restoring the attack points the Ring of Magnetism had stripped from him.

"My old friend..." I said.

"My liege," he answered.
Our words were different; the tone – and the meaning – was the same.

He looked at Exodia Necross.

"Of course," he sighed. "I should have guessed. How like Set to make a mockery, even in the choice of his own general."

"So… if I attack, my target must be your mighty Black Magician, rather than your humble Celtic Guardian," Exodia Necross said. "And if I decline, you will simply sweep him off the board in turn." Exodia Necross waved his hand. We caught the shocked look on Sillva's face in the instant before he shattered. "Either way, I am one more monster down.

"He deserved better from you," Mahaado said sternly. "He deserved to meet his end in battle."

"He was of no more use to me." Exodia Necross' next words were aimed in my direction. "Your affection for your pawns… excuse me, for your friends… your delusion that their lives matter, even as you order them to the graveyard over and over… that is your greatest weakness."

"Another belief I will be happy to disprove," I answered. "There is no greater strength than unity."

"How can you prate of unity when you plan to abandon this world if you prevail?" he sneered.

"Because unity comes from the heart you deny," the Celtic Guardian surprised me by answering. "We will always be part of his deck, we will always duel together. Do not fall into his snare," he added, turning to me. "Do not doubt that you have earned this choice. You sacrificed your life for us, twice over. It would be wrong if you were never destined to live it."

I nodded, and faced Exodia Necross, ready for his next move. The game went on. It was, as I had realized, a waiting game. Exodia Necross was willing to spend monsters when he had to, to assemble the right cards. I could only hope to match him. I wasn't surprised though, to see him play De-Spell, destroying the Ring of Magnetism, leaving my Celtic Guardian unprotected. Black Scorpion barely crawled from his stone tablet, stinger held high, before he disappeared in a cloud of smoke. There was a flash of lightening and Dreadscythe Harvester stood in his place. A long handled scythe was clenched in his fists. His six bug-like legs clicked on the stone floor as his helmeted head swiveled from side to side, surveying us.

"The cards fall as they will. I am honored to have duelled by your side. Fight with joy. And accept your victory as gladly," the Celtic Guardian said. Then he fell to Dreadscythe Harvester's weapon as simply as he lived each day, as straightforwardly as he fought each battle.

"It is the natural order of things. His place is to open the game before being sent to the graveyard," Mahaado said.

"I know," I answered.

"To deny him his place, is to deny the meaning in his life," Mahaado said. "Knowing his role is enough for him. But, that is no longer true for you, is it? Perhaps it never was. I remember how you would hurl yourself on your horse and ride at breakneck speeds until you were too tired to dismount. Were you trying to outrun the boundaries of your world even then?"

"Back then… back when I was Atemu… back when I was your pharaoh… I didn't know that I could become more than I was born."

"What is more than a pharaoh?"
"A man. I never knew my place was something I could determine, that the road to becoming lay within my compass. And now, I can't pretend that knowledge doesn't exist, that it hasn't changed me, hasn't taken me far beyond this place and time."

"And yet, some things – some places – are eternal. Mine will always be by your side, whether as your vassal or as your Black Magician."

"Some things are eternal," I agreed. "You will always be my friend."

"Very touching…” Exodia Necross sneered. "As if this game was merely about your friendship."

"It is," Mahaado answered. "It is about the world we would preserve."

"How tiresomely noble of you. It makes me glad I have finally drawn the card that rids me of your presence," Exodia Necross said to Mahaado.

I smirked. "When you removed the Ring of Magnetism from my Black Magician's finger, he regained 500 attack points.

"It is well that I have a supply of insects just waiting to be tributed to increase Dreadscythe Harvester's strength. Or, I could simply do this," he said as he gave his monster the Elemental Sword and an additional 800 attack points.

I drew a card. For the first time in this duel, my deck failed me. I could only wait out my turn, helplessly. And as simply as that, the Black Magician… Mahaado was gone, having sacrificed his life, as if it was a law of nature. I remembered seeing him sent to the graveyard in my final duel with Yugi, and wondered if I was destined to lose this duel too.

I drew my next card, and stared at it.

Monster Reborn.

The last time I had played it, or tried to, it had sealed me in this tomb I had taken for my destiny. Would it give me a different answer today?

I hesitated.

I heard Kaiba's maniacal laugh before I saw him. "Play it!" he ordered as he entered the room, deck already in hand. "I thought you were afraid of nothing, not even fate."

I nodded. Whatever answer this battle held, I would meet it. The Black Magician returned.

"He looks a little lonely," Kaiba said, drawing out his Lord of Dragons with a flourish.

"Now we will see which is stronger: friendship or fate. If you join this game, you assume its risks," Exodia Necross warned Kaiba.

"And losing equals death. I assure you that it's a familiar equation," Kaiba said blandly. He seemed to focus inwardly for a moment, then grinned as a duel disk appeared on his arm. He drew a second card and slapped them both in the disc. The Flute of Summoning Dragon appeared in his monster's hands, and the Lord of Dragons started to play…

Not to be outdone in dramatic entrances, Kisara crashed through the pyramid's roof. Exodia Necross screamed in rage at the destruction.

"You wanted chaos," Kaiba reminded him with a smirk. "Now deal with it."
But, as Kisara landed on the floor, I realized she was not alone. Mana and Mokuba were on her back.

"I thought I told you to watch over him!" Kaiba snarled at her.

"You did. You didn't tell me where to keep watch," Kisara replied.

"You know what I meant! Is this how you keep your promises?" Kaiba said furiously.

"Yes," Kisara answered calmly. "I promised your brother that when you faced Set's General, you would do so together and share the same fate."

"You're my dragon," Kaiba hissed.

"And Mokuba is your heart," Kisara replied. "You can not be so foolish as to think you can go into battle and leave half your heart behind."

I could feel the words, 'I don't need him,' trembling on Kaiba's lips. He pressed them tightly together, as though to keep that falsehood from escaping.

"I want him safe," Kaiba said instead.

Kisara grinned. "Then win."

Kaiba's lips were still pressed in a thin line. He said to Mokuba through clenched teeth, "You can watch." Then he turned to face Exodia Necross, turned to continue the duel. "At least Mokuba doesn't have a deck… he'll be just a spectator. That should be safe enough," Kaiba muttered.

But Kaiba's back was to Mokuba. He didn't see his younger brother's smile.

To be continued…

Thanks to Bnomiko for betaing this chapter, and going through the duel with me to make sure it (hopefully) makes sense.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: It's funny, but all along what was important to me wasn't so much what Yami decided to do as far as staying or returning, but that his decision fits his character as it evolves through the story; that it makes some kind of emotional sense. I hope I've done that.

The one thing I'm curious about is whether Mokuba's entrance was a surprise. I'd actually tried to foreshadow it in Chapter 10 when Kisara promises Mokuba that when Seto faces Set's General, they'll do it together, and later right before they fly off, she reminds Mokuba that she keeps her promises. But of course that happened almost 20 chapters ago, so I was hoping people had forgotten it. In a way that makes it the kind of surprise where, if it works, I kind of get to say with an innocent face, "But I played fair…"

I also realized, possibly fairly late in the game, metaphorically speaking, that except for Mahaado and Mana, I hadn't really shown any of Yami's monsters. That's partly because I can see Yami not feeling totally comfortable with them, seeing them as a reminder of the decision he has to make, and possibly feeling guilty in their presence or considering leaving. But I think that making that decision (although obviously Exodia Necross will have some say in that) freed him to see his monsters — and love them — without reservation.
**Duel Note:** I couldn't see this coming down to something as stylized as a formal duel with life points. And I remembered in the earlier parts of the Ancient Egypt arc in the manga, they seemed to just be having their monsters whack away at each other. So I tried for a duel that had that flavor to it. In the manga and anime, the rules for sacrificing are different in each arc. I settled on a one monster sacrifice for higher level monsters here.

Please review, I'd really like to hear from you…
To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.

DUELING NOTE: In an interview, someone once asked Mr. Takahashi why the cards did different things in the manga than in the game, why sometimes he made up cards, and why he changed the rules. He said that he had never intended to invent a card game. He set out to tell a story and the cards did whatever was necessary to tell that story. What can I say, that feels like absolution to me. Anyway, as I said earlier, in the manga and anime, the rules for sacrificing are different in each arc. I settled on a one monster sacrifice for higher level monsters here. Duelists are also able to put down a monster and sacrifice it immediately. I made up a couple of key cards that I list at the end of the chapter. What I tried to do is to keep to the emotional themes of the duel, which is to me what makes a Yugioh duel more than a bunch of people throwing cards at each other.

CHAPTER 30: HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME

Scientistsally speaking, it isn't really always the darkest before the dawn. It depends on the phases of the moon, the weather, the season, the angle of the sun to the horizon, and how far before dawn we're speaking of. And yet people continue to tell each other the same untrue proverb... because what feels true is real in a way beyond accuracy's measure.

Think yet again, of fairy tales. They begin once upon a time and usually end happily ever after, and in the middle, bad things happen. Think of Hansel trapped in his cage, or Gretel waiting for her brother to become a witch's dinner. Think of the rebels on the run from Darth Vader's imperial storm troopers, fleeing their ice planet sanctuary, of Han Solo frozen in carbonite. If the beginning of a story is about optimism and the end is about closure – what happens in between is about not just courage but endurance, not just endurance but faith.

For the characters have no way of knowing the nature of the story they've fallen into. Even Hamlet's lone survivor, Horatio can't be certain of his fate. No matter how many times he's reached the final curtain before, vaulting like a champion hurdler over the doom that ensnares his friends and enemies alike, he can never be sure that tonight a post-modern director won't decree his death. The past is no guarantee of the future.

And therein lies the rub. Like the characters themselves, we want guarantees. Maybe that's why we feel a moment of fellowship when their uncertainty mirrors ours, when we gasp along with them, from Han Solo to Horatio, from Hansel to Hamlet, as we wait for the sun to rise. Because as Pippin discovered while standing behind the walls of Minas Tirith as Sauron's Army bayed in the field below... it's darkest of all when you have no surety that the dawn will ever arrive.
Kisara's entrance had shattered a hole in the roof. Sunlight streamed in, filling the room. Exodia Necross looked slightly smaller, slightly less fearsome in the light, as if in banishing the shadows surrounding him like a ghostly entourage, we had dispelled some of his mystery and power.

"Now that your dragon has destroyed my roof, are you finally ready to end your turn?" Exodia Necross asked sarcastically.

Kaiba smirked. "Are you kidding? I'm just getting started. Watch and learn."

The last time I'd seen Kaiba he'd been bound and half engulfed in shadow. My breath caught at the memory. He'd been yelling at phantoms, he'd been uncharacteristically subdued by his impending victory. As though to confound me as well as Exodia Necross, not a trace of that battle showed on his features now. He looked as eager as the Feral Imp to face his newest opponent. His slightly insane laugh rang out again. Whether it was bravado or courage, it was infectious.

For the first time in millennia, I had a life of my own, a life to risk, a life to claim with my victory. For the first time in millennia, I was fighting for my life. I threw back my head and my own laugh was as loud as Kaiba's, as gleeful as the Feral Imp's.

As if in answer to our mood, Kaiba's Lord of Dragons blew another triumphant blast on his Flute of Summoning Dragon. Kisara seemed to blur, then turned into two identical dragons. Kaiba slapped Pot of Greed into his duel disk and drew two more cards. "I need you as the tribute to call the last dragon to the field," he said to his monster.

The Lord of Dragons bowed and disappeared as the last Blue Eyes White Dragon was called to the dueling area. A tornado swept down from the hole in the roof as Kaiba's Polymerization card was activated, fusing his three Blue Eyes White Dragons into their ultimate form. Each of Kisara's three heads were flung back; roars of triumph bellowed from three fanged mouths.

"You interrupted my turn as well," I said. "But it was well timed." I looked at Mahaado. "Are you ready to transform into the Black Luster Soldier?" I asked as I discarded LaLa-Li-Oon. His two stars were needed to initiate the change. Before he left, lightning soared upwards from his thundercloud body to strike Exodia Necross' roof yet again.

"I am always honored to fight at your command, whatever guise I take," Mahaado said gravely.

I nodded as I placed the Black Luster Ritual in front of me. Instantly its twin cauldrons appeared in the center of the room. Twin pillars of fire rose towards the ceiling. Black and silver smoke billowed into the room and hid Mahaado from our sight. A clean breeze came through, clearing it and revealing the Black Luster Soldier. Mahaado's ice blue eyes stared back at me, almost hidden by his black and purple helm. I placed my own Polymerization card face up on the podium and again, a tornado swept down from the damaged ceiling. A brick crashed to the floor as the Black Luster Soldier merged with Kaiba's Blue Eyes Ultimate Dragon to form the Dragon Master Knight.

"Your move," I said to Exodia Necross.

Exodia Necross studied his stone tablets, raising and lowering them at will. The exaggerated way he flipped through them was a taunt. He looked at Kaiba and laughed. "It's delightfully ironic that it is your entrance that allows me to choose my monsters by design rather than having to rely on the vagrancies of random chance. Is there anything you value above the illusion of control? It will be amusing to defeat you with the real thing."
"So you can stack the deck. Big deal," said Kaiba, obviously unimpressed. "Life's always played against a stacked deck. It just makes winning that much sweeter."

"The outcome of any duel is as gloriously uncertain as life itself," I said. "You're a fool if you think you can control our fates. I have come too far to surrender it to so paltry an opponent. But I thought Set valued change above all else. So why would you, his minion, gloat about being able to arrange the deck to your will?"

"Contradictions are for mortals. Set loves the game, but he prizes winning above all else."

I snorted, thinking that Seto Kaiba had been well named after all.

"It's a belief you should understand, Pharaoh – since you share it," Exodia Necross added.


Before I'd known my name, before I'd even realized I existed, I'd known how to win. When I first emerged from the puzzle it had been my only identity. I thought of the day on Pegasus' tower when I'd been ready to kill Kaiba to win a duel, of the time I'd played the Seal of Orichalcos against Raphael, ignoring Yugi's warning. I smiled suddenly, remembering Yugi telling me he trusted me, remembering Kaiba saying that protecting the things crucial to us makes us stronger. I faced Exodia Necross. Like Yugi I was going to have faith. Like Kaiba, I wasn't going to backtrack.

"Thanks to my friends, I've learned to grow beyond that. If Set is ignorant of the blessings of friendship, then god or not, I pity him."

"You dared to tell me to watch and learn – as if a pair of insignificant fools could have anything to teach me?" Exodia Necross said as he raised a tablet. Acid Crawler appeared in front of us. As before, we barely had time to register its arrival before it disappeared, sacrificed for Jirai Gumo. Seen up close, he was more than a spider; he was a nightmare in spider form. He oozed from the web where he made his home, his six pincher legs clicking on the marble floor. Venom dripped from his fanged mouth. Exodia Necross pointed to the center of the room and Polymerization's whirlwind took shape, sparing his ceiling, as it combined Jirai Gumo and Deathscythe Harvester to form Deathscream Scorpion. He armed it with the Sword of Deep-Seated. Exodia Necross had created a monster even more powerful than our Dragon Master Knight.

"You think you're so tough!" Mokuba burst out. "But my brother will find a way to beat you."

One look at Kaiba's face as he drew his next card however, made it clear he had no way of stopping Exodia Necross from attacking on his next turn, or of changing the outcome.

I had stumbled through a door to the afterlife. I had regained my footing; I had set my course homeward. Now I could only trust in the future I'd chosen to join. I took a breath. If I ever needed to find a friend in my deck, the time was now. But before my fingers touched the cards in front of me, Yugi dashed into the room...

"I should have known. The duel feels complete now," I said.

"It took me longer than I expected," Yugi said. He looked at Kaiba. "The room you were in was completely trashed."

Kaiba smirked. "Must have happened after I left. My opponent was in the process of self-destructing and I had better things to do than to hang around and watch her take the place down with her. How'd you make out with your own Sphinx? Could you convince her that living with defeat beat dying?"

His words were sarcastic, but he sounded serious; there was a faint, unfamiliar note of hope in his
Yugi looked down. His eyes had darkened or maybe it was a trick of the light. "I tried to convince her that she didn't have to..." He shook his head. "I couldn't."

Kaiba nodded curtly. His lips were pressed so firmly together, I was surprised he could get the words out. "There's your answer, then."

"Not my answer. Hers."

"You can't blame yourself for her decision," I said, knowing I wasn't speaking only of the Sphinx Teleia.

"I know. But I would have blamed myself if I hadn't tried. If I'd just stood there and done nothing, again. I'm glad I came." He smiled and gave me a thumbs-up sign.

Kaiba had come to challenge me, as he always did. Yugi was ready to back up whatever decision I'd made. It felt so natural and so right, I almost laughed. But first we had a duel to finish.

Yugi looked at the monster in front of us. "It looks like I got here at just the right time with just the right card," he said, pulling the Time Wizard from the top of his deck and placing him on the podium next to my cards.

Kaiba looked at the monster in front of us. "It looks like I got here at just the right time with just the right card," he said, pulling the Time Wizard from the top of his deck and placing him on the podium next to my cards.

Kaiba looked at the Time Wizard's clock face as the monster appeared in front of us and asked, "Where'd you get that? I thought it was the mutt's card."

"His name's Jounouchi," Yugi reminded Kaiba again. "I gave it to him way back before Duelists' Kingdom so he'd have a high powered card to use in the tournament. I'm not sure why he returned it."

Kaiba was still looking thoughtfully at the Time Wizard. He transferred his gaze to Yugi. "In all our meetings, I've never really dueled you. When this is over, you owe me one."

Yugi grinned. "Only if you promise to duel for fun."

"Are you afraid to put your title on the line?" Kaiba asked, a residual sneer in his voice.

"Do you really believe that?"

"No. Do you really believe I'm going to duel just for the hell of it?"

"Maybe someday."

"Then I guess the road to our future battles will just have to wait for us to catch up to it. Besides," Kaiba added with his feral grin. "To me, this is fun."

"Your Black Luster Soldier will be protected by the Black Magician within. He can survive the winds of time," Exodia Necross said. "But I look forward to seeing your dragon crumble at my feet. It will more than compensate for the loss of my Deathscream Scorpion."

Ever since I'd walked through that door, I'd been plagued by doubts, by my own indecision, by the pathless nature of the world I ached to rejoin. I'd forgotten that the one thing stronger than uncertainty was faith. Kaiba believed in himself, his determination and his deck. Yugi believed in his friends, trusted that what should be, would happen. I would rely on both. Now the time for doubt had passed.
I smiled as I drew a card that had lain dormant in my deck, a card that would insure that our monster could survive the winds of time unharmed: Safe Passage. I'd never drawn it before, never needed it so badly, never believed in it so strongly. I'd been searching for my heart. Had it been in my deck the whole time, waiting for me to call it forth?

"Sometimes if we are lucky – or so destined – the gods will allow us to traverse the ages in safety," I said as I placed Safe Passage face up on the podium. An iridescent sphere, fragile as the soap bubble it resembled, encircled the Dragon Master Knight, protecting him from the winds to come.

The clock hands on the Time Wizard's face began to spin. They picked up speed until they were creating their own hurricane. It reached the Dragon Master Knight, still protected by Safe Passage, first. He survived their buffeting, but with a difference: the Black Robed Mage now sat atop the Blue Eyes Ultimate Dragon in the Black Luster Soldier's place.

"How?" I asked, mystified.

"Safe Passage ensures that we may travel through the ages in safety. But few of us do so unchanged. It has taken me 3,000 years to see that this is true," the Black Robed Sage said in Mahaado's voice, speaking over the roar of the wind.

I nodded. "I know, my old friend."

A piercing scream filled the room, rising above the shriek of the winds. The hurricane had reached Deathscream Scorpion, had knocked him onto his back. He struggled futilely to right himself, pinchers snapping open and shut as his legs twitched, as if that would undo Time Wizard's effect. It didn't. His legs continued their frenzied movements even as cracks appeared in his exoskeleton, then widened, running lengthwise down the body that was rotting, disintegrating from the inside. Finally, mercifully, Deathscream Scorpion's body split into countless pieces that crumbled to dust and blew away. Only the Sword of Deep-Seated remained unharmed. The wind carried it to land at Exodia Necross' feet.

"That was so gross!" Mana exclaimed.

"Yeah, I know! It was the coolest thing ever!" Mokuba yelled back, apparently under the illusion that Mana shared his feelings.

Mana shook her head. Yugi laughed. "Did she mutter 'stupid boys'? She sounded just like Anzu."

Exodia Necross shrugged at the loss of his scorpion. "I'll have to choose my monsters more carefully next time."

"Yeah, it's a shame for you he wasn't a cockroach," Kaiba said. "I hear that they're going to inherit the earth."

"Now that that bug's gone, are you still going to leave me on the sidelines?" Mana whined.

Exodia Necross was staring at the Black Robed Sage who now formed our Dragon Master Knight. "Is this the price of unity?" he sneered. "The Black Robed Sage has only 100 attack points. His presence as part of your fusion monster robs your Dragon Master Knight of his power. He is now weaker than your Ultimate Dragon, far weaker than my scorpion was. You disappoint me. Kaiba. You are a naive child after all. You have spent your life searching for power, only to throw that away, only to shackle your monster for your allies' benefit. Can you really afford to shoulder their burden? Have you forgotten your self assumed responsibility?"

Kaiba was standing next to me. I could see a muscle jump in his cheek. His shoulders tensed with the
effort of not turning to look at Mokuba, but he stood his ground.

"No," he answered. "I forget nothing. I have a responsibility to him beyond mere protection – to be a brother he can not just love as an obligation of blood, but respect as well. My allies, as you term them, have proven themselves to me and mine, repeatedly. It would be faithless of me to doubt, now. You're too late. I will not fall for the same trap card twice."

"So be it. You have made this disappointingly easy." Exodia Necross played Pot of Greed, added two more tablets to the ones in front of him. He played Mausoleum of the Emperor, but before its wall had risen, it faded, leaving the Puppet King in his place. The empty crown that took the place of a head swiveled from side to side, sightlessly. His blade had been replaced by Sword of the Deep-Seated. With 3,300 attack points, his monster was stronger than our Dragon Master Knight.

"For someone who has lived 3,000 years, you have learned little," I said. "Yes, the Dragon Master Knight's attack points have dropped to 3,050. But there is power beyond that found at the point of a sword." I looked at Yugi. "Wisdom has its own power as well, and that is not measured by the number of years we have lived, but by how we have spent them and what lessons we have learned." I drew on the Black Robed Sage's special power to draw any spell card from my deck to call forth Mist Body. A fog, resembling the concealing mists of Set's domain, hid the Dragon Master Knight from Exodia Necross' monster.

"A temporary setback. And as consolation, I get to destroy this weakling," he said as with a clash of metal on metal, the Puppet King's sword cut the Time Wizard in half. Springs tumbled from his broken body and scattered across the floor.

"He was strong enough to destroy your Deathscream Scorpion," I reminded him.

"But a pawn nonetheless. And so he has met the fate of all pawns."

"No. He wasn't a weakling or a pawn," Yugi interrupted. "He was here for the only reason any of us should be– he wanted to help his friends. Just because you think that's worthless, doesn't mean it is."

As Mist Body faded, I outfitted the Dragon Master Knight with Gravity Axe, raising his attack points. But just as quickly, Exodia Necross raised De-Spell. I looked at Kaiba. He drew a card and shook his head, lips pressed tightly together, as he ended his turn. He faced his dragon and raised his fingers to his forehead in salute or farewell.

"Everything that lives, can lose," Kisara told him gently. "When I was bound to your anger, I could rot from the inside, chained not to the Mammoth Graveyard that day at Pegasus' castle, but to the rage that was eating you from within. I could be turned against you, made into a caricature of myself by Pegasus' toon cards, just as all that seemed left of you was your bitterness and hate. But now that you have found your strength, I can only be beaten, but never broken. Remember that."

Exodia Necross played Pot of Greed again, drawing two more tablets to his side of the field. "If you've said your farewells…"

"No!" Mokuba yelled, jumping forward to stand with Yugi and I – and Kaiba. As we stared at him, he reached into his pocket. Exodia Necross laughed, breaking the sudden silence.

"Mokuba…" Kaiba growled. "I told you to stay on the sidelines. Don't defy me. Not in this."

Mokuba bit his lip. He didn't say anything. The deck in his hand was answer enough. He drew five cards. He looked around hesitantly for a place to put them, then knelt down and placed one card face up on the floor in front of him.
The chubby knight from Ready for Intercepting sprang to life in front of us, blinking in the sunlight. He stared around owlishly, surprised to find himself in the middle of a duel. He looked as untried and awkward as Mokuba himself.

"There seems to be a new player in the game," Exodia Necross observed blandly. "Since my latest challenger seems to be half grown, I will add but five monsters to my total. Do not thank me for my magnanimity. It's an evaluation of his useful – or rather, his uselessness."

Mokuba opened his mouth to protest, then shut it as quickly. He wasn't going to turn down an advantage – no matter how insultingly it was offered.

Mana giggled. "You look like a fish taking a gulp of air instead of water," she said.

"He is not a challenger!" Kaiba yelled.

"Set was right." Exodia Necross laughed. "You have added spice to the game."

"Mokuba is your heart," Kisara reminded Kaiba. "How can he be anything less than a duelist?"

Kaiba glared at her, then transferred the look to Exodia Necross.

"You will have to go through me – through all of us – to get to him. As long as we have monsters in our hands, you will not finish him off," Kaiba ordered.

"If I do not agree, how do you propose to stop me?" Exodia Necross asked.

"My monsters will protect him," Kaiba stated confidently.

"Even if it leaves you vulnerable?"

Kaiba grinned. "If you think I'm vulnerable, you haven't studied me as well as you think."

"You dare to propose a bargain? You seek to control a game that even the gods have decreed must play out as it will?

"I don't give a shit about you or your beliefs. I duel on my own terms."

"You're fortunate that Set finds hubris amusing. Very well. I will not seek to destroy the cub until I have eliminated the wolves. And it will be my pleasure to destroy you first."

"Better monsters than you have tried. I'm still standing," Kaiba said.

"But such protected status comes at a price," Exodia Necross warned. "I will add a full count of ten monsters to my total with an equal number of spell and trap cards, not the five I had proposed. You speak of unity, yet I notice you did not consult your allies," he said to Kaiba, "or even do them the courtesy of pretending to ask for their consent. You must rate your… skills… higher than I. Or do you trust them that far?"

I was pleased that Kaiba didn't turn around to check. He swallowed, but again, he stood his ground and gave Exodia Necross a curt nod.

"Of course we agree!" Yugi and I told Exodia Necross. I added to Kaiba in a low voice, "I'm glad you had the sense to know that."

Kaiba turned to face us at that. For once he looked uncertain. In other circumstances I would have savored that slightly vulnerable look in his eyes. "Yami… Yugi…" he started.
"You knew we would understand and agree. That means a lot. Don't ruin it by thanking us." I said.

"I can't believe you guys!" Mana burst out. "Mokuba gets to play, and I'm still sitting here?"

Mokuba stuck out his tongue at her. Yugi turned away to hide his smile. "Look!" Yugi said, pointing at Ready for Intercepting's chubby knight. "He's happy!"

It was true. The knight was standing proudly behind his shield, no longer crouching. He was going to the graveyard after this turn, but he was honored to finally be allowed to play his part. He flung back his golden hair. His gleeful laugh rang out as he swung his shield upward with a flourish, deflecting the Puppet King's attack. Exodia Necross' turn had ended. We had survived.

The knight bowed to Mokuba. "Thank you," he said before vanishing.

"What's done is done," I said to Kaiba.

He shot me the same glare he'd leveled at Exodia Necross, all signs of vulnerability gone. I nodded to myself, satisfied. He looked ready to duel.

"Do you think to stall your way into victory?" Exodia Necross taunted.

Yugi put a monster card face down on the podium. Then he smiled as he placed Swords of Revealing Light, face up.

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," he said as a circle of light surrounded the Puppet King, binding him, holding him a prisoner of time for three turns. It felt like three millennia. I had played this card many times, but suddenly I found myself sharing Kaiba's distaste for it, as if it held me as much a captive as the Puppet King. My life had been on hold for so long. And yet it was Yugi's card; it was not my enemy.

"Sometimes we all need a little extra time to figure out our next move," Yugi said softly.

"You have less time than you think. Death is the fate of all mortals. No matter how many millennia you run through, it will overtake you," Exodia Necross said.

"As long as it does not do so today, I will count each day as a victory," I said.

Exodia Necross played Pot of Greed yet again, and set Command Knight at the side of his Puppet King. We stared at her as she stood proudly in her eagle-feathered outfit; her fair hair was flying in the breeze that had come with her arrival. Yugi and Mokuba were gazing at her, open-mouthed. Kaiba was probably adding attack points in his head. With her arrival, the Puppet King's count had reached 4,000. I stared at Exodia Necross, eyes narrowed in concentration. Why had he set a monster when Swords of Reveling Light would prevent him from attacking for two more turns?

"Are you all struck dumb by the thought that any creature so beautiful would grace my side of the board?" Exodia Necross asked sarcastically.

"She's not so hot," Mokuba muttered, glancing back at Mana.

"No," Yugi said. "There are some things – like friendship – that I hope will stay the same forever. But Set represents change, doesn't he? Well, sometimes things have to change… it's how you learn who you are, what you can do. There's something good in every deck… and in every opponent."

"Then why are you facing me trying your best to destroy me?"
"Because you don't care about those who get hurt along the way – even when it's your own monsters," I said.

"I can't believe this! You think I give a shit what she looks like?" Kaiba burst out. "She looks like a 1,200 attack point monster with a kick-ass effect. The cards in our deck – Summon Skull… Sword Stalker… they're powerful monsters. Their strength makes them beautiful."

"My Puppet King is stronger than either of them."

"Yeah, but he's still a puppet. You've stolen his strength, and until he finds it in within himself, he'll always be weak, no matter how many attack points he has." Kaiba broke off abruptly, and turned to look at Yugi and I. He had just realized that in our own separate ways, we had all said the same thing. "Not that it matters," he mumbled.

Since her summoning, Command Knight had stood silent and unmoving as a statue. But at Kaiba's words, she bit her lip, then glanced over her shoulder at Exodia Necross. I couldn't see her face, couldn't tell if she was seeking reassurance or reassessing the duel monster who owned her loyalty.

"That's not true. I don't believe him," she told Exodia Necross.

"Oh, yes you do. You just don't want to," Mokuba said.

The arrogance returned to her face. "You know nothing."

"I know what you're trying to do. It doesn't matter to you that you're probably only going to last a turn or two. You just want to help. But wanting to do something for a good reason isn't enough. You're still wrong."

"I have a mission," she said softly.

"I know. That doesn't change anything I said. Your mission is to help him," Mokuba said, nodding towards Exodia Necross' towering figure. "But his mission is evil. And you're not helping him, you're just making things worse. You can't pretend that everything he does is right, when it's not – not even for someone you love."

"I am here to serve… to lend strength to the strong."

"No. You're here because you're afraid he's hollow inside. You think I don't know what that's like? You're afraid if you tell him he's wrong he's going to shatter and you'll have no one left. I thought that too. But I was wrong. I should have known he was stronger than that."

"Don't listen to him!" screamed Exodia Necross.

Command Knight looked hesitantly from Mokuba to her master and back, and for the first time since her entrance, she seemed not merely pretty, but as beautiful as Exodia Necross had described her.

"You just got to trust that he can become the person you know he is, no matter what it looks like now." Mokuba paused. "We're going to win. We have to. I'm sorry you're going to die without getting the chance to learn that."

He looked away from her and faced his Nisama. His expression was a mixture of apology and determination. Kaiba met his gaze and held it. I hoped Mokuba was too far away to see the drop of blood staining his brother's lower lip.

Kaiba was my lover. I wanted to go to him, to hold him. I didn't. This was his battle, not mine. I
could have told him I loved him, that I trusted him, that he had changed. Mokuba had just said the same. Kaiba had probably memorized every word, was replaying them in his head. But would he listen? Or would he only hear his own guilt? I knew he had not left all his ghosts in the ruined room that housed the remains of the Sphinx Teleia. But he had risen above them before. Mokuba was right. I would trust to his strength. I would trust to the future.

"Nisama..." Mokuba said, and now his expression held only concern.

Kaiba managed a slight smile and a brief nod, before dropping his eyes to the face down card at Mokuba's feet, as though searching for reassurance in his brother's deck.

"You've been waiting to see what happens next, haven't you?" Exodia Necross said matter-of-factly, breaking the mood. Both brothers turned their attention back to the duel.

I nodded.

"Since this is your last lesson, I'll do my best to make it an entertaining one." Exodia Necross raised two more tablets and Jinzo appeared on the field. The tall, robed android surveyed us majestically. His breath rasped, artificially enhanced like the villain on one of the movies Yugi and Jounouchi watched on Saturday nights. Jinzo would negate any trap cards we played, but it couldn't affect Yugi's spell card, Swords of Revealing Light, and the Puppet King remained bound within its golden circle.

I didn't relax. Exodia Necross had also called Amplifier to the field. Jinzo was wearing it like a helmet. It allowed Exodia Necross alone to play trap cards, immune to Jinzo's affect. I knew what was coming next, even before Exodia Necross raised a third tablet and Imperial Order's stern judge appeared, shutting down all our spell cards.

The chain of light binding the Puppet King burst into pieces. The Sword of Deep-Seated vanished as well, but the Puppet King still was more powerful than our Dragon Master Knight, thanks to the help of Command Knight at his side. The Puppet King had regained his original sword. He pointed it at us in challenge.

"The only question left is, which target to pick?" Exodia Necross asked theatrically. "I'm guessing," he said to Yugi, "that your Silent Magician is hiding in your face down card, gaining strength with each card his opponent draws – as long as he remains overlooked. Did you assume that since you're such a runt, even your cards would escape my notice until it was too late? Did you hope to see this turn into a replay of your duel with the pharaoh?"

"Nope. Not a replay. This time Yami and me are on the same side," said Yugi.

"This time we're both going to win," I added.

"No. You're both going to die," Exodia Necross said, signaling for the Puppet King to make good on his threat, destroying one of Yugi's most powerful cards before it got into the game.

Mokuba folded his arms across his chest and smiled, looking eerily like his older brother. He knelt and turned over Swarm of Scarabs.

In his haste to protect himself from our spell and trap cards, Exodia Necross had forgotten about Mokuba's face down monster. Jounouchi would have known better. But Exodia Necross had never been poisoned by Mokuba; possibly he had been mislead by the mop of hair and the wide eyed stare, into forgetting that the youngest member of our team had just as strong a claim on the Kaiba name.

Both brothers stood there grinning, as the beetles Mokuba had set loose lived up to their name,
swarming over Jinzo, dragging him to the ground with the force of their weight, half burying him beneath their writing mass. They crawled in behind his eye sockets, slipped into his body through the cracks in his joints, devouring his circuitry or whatever was inside as they went. Then as quickly as the beetles had appeared, they vanished, leaving behind an empty metal shell. Whatever had animated Jinzo was gone.

"I really hate bugs," Mana said.

Kaiba barely waited for Jinzo's protection to die before flipping over Dust Tornado. The whirlwind that followed swept Imperial Order's judge up through the hole in the ceiling, dislodging another brick that landed at Exodia Necross' feet.

"You set that card before your brother let loose his monsters!" Exodia Necross hissed at Kaiba. "I thought you didn't even know your brother had a deck, much less what was in it – or was that a lie?"

"I wouldn't bother to lie, not that I owe you any truth," Kaiba said.

"How did you know what card he'd play? I heard what the brat said – and he was talking about you!" Exodia Necross screamed.

Kaiba smirked. He had dented Exodia Necross' assured façade. "You really need to get out more," he said.

"Yeah," agreed Mokuba, just as smugly. "Because if you'd ever read 'Jack in the Beanstalk' you'd know…"

"That I didn't need to see his deck to know he'd be standing right behind me, ready to hand me an axe when I needed one," Kaiba finished.

"Does this mean you're glad I came?" Mokuba asked his brother hopefully.

"No," Kaiba answered.

Yugi gasped at the stricken look on Mokuba's face. Kaiba ignored him. He walked over to Mokuba and knelt down so they were at eye level. He rested his arms on Mokuba's shoulders. It was almost, but not quite, an embrace.

"I wish you were anywhere but in the middle of a duel where losing could indeed mean death," he told Mokuba. "But I'm very proud of you for being here, for not backing down, even to me."

"Does that mean I get a duel disk too?" Mokuba asked with a grin.

"No."

Mokuba stared at his brother's forearm as if seeing the duel disk on it for the first time. "Where'd that come from anyway?"

Kaiba ignored Mokuba's question. I wasn't sure he'd heard it. He was staring at the cards at his brother's feet, frowning. He shifted his gaze to the ones in his brother's hand. "Mokuba," he asked in a low voice, so his words wouldn't carry across the field. "I took all the powerful monsters with me."

Mokuba smiled angelically. "I don't need them. Your demons will protect me. They always have."

"What's in that damn deck?" Kaiba asked in a strangled voice.

"All the magic and trap cards, all the effect monsters you buy but never play. All the cards that can
protect your monsters. They've always been out in front, guarding me. My deck is here now to be your shield. I was at your side when you challenged Gozaburo. I was at your side, whether you understood it or not, at Death-T. I'm not leaving now."

Kaiba didn't agree, but he stopped arguing. Mokuba looked perfectly willing to accept a tie – at least in this.

"As touching as this moment is, you do realize that my Puppet King is still more than a match for your Dragon Master Knight, don't you?" Exodia Necross asked.

"Not for long," I said, looking at the card I had just drawn, the Magician of Faith. I was overjoyed to see her, but I felt a moment's unease. She was Anzu's favorite card. When Yugi had made himself a new deck… why hadn't he asked for her return? I glanced at Yugi, feeling awkward for the first time, as I placed the Magician of Faith face down on the podium. Yugi looked at me.

"Is everything okay, Yami?" he asked.

Exodia Necross' laugh saved me from answering. "After the last two occasions, do you think me stupid enough to leave your face down card on the field, unchallenged before taking on your Dragon Master Knight?" he asked as he signaled for his Puppet King's attack.

"Thank you for summoning me," the Magician of Faith said to Exodia Necross as she shimmered to life in front of us, slender and lithe as a dancer.

"Oh…" said Yugi.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"She's your friend, too." Yugi answered. "If Anzu was here, she'd be proud to see her favorite card helping out."

I nodded. "But when this is over, I'll return her. She belongs in your deck, not mine."

"That's right… talk about me like I'm not even here!" the Magician of Faith broke in. "And pharaoh or not – where do you get off telling me where I belong?"

"She's right," Yugi surprised me by saying.

"But I thought you wanted…" I began to say.

"Of course I do," Yugi interrupted. He turned to the Magician of Faith, who was still glaring at me, her hands on her hips, her legs planted slightly apart. "You can't force Yami to keep you in his deck. But he can't make your decisions for you either. You're the only one who knows if you want to be with me or not." Yugi's voice trailed off. He blushed as he reached the end of his sentence.

Kaiba muttered, "This conversation is ridiculous, even by your group's standards." Given Exodia Necross' snort it seemed they had found a rare moment of fellowship.

The Magician of Faith ignored them both. "Thank you," she said to Yugi. "I would be honored to join you."

"Do you think Anzu…" Yugi asked quietly.

"I speak only for myself. I would rather be in the deck of someone who will treasure me, who will delight in seeing me every time he calls me to the field, than in anyone else's hands – even a
pharaoh's. Does Anzu feel the same? I will do all I can to help you get back to your world so you can ask her yourself."

She turned to me. "Nobody likes being rejected – especially not right after they've been summoned to battle. But I approve of your reason for calling me here. It's good that you've learned to look at the child you know and see the adult within."

"Thank you. It will be strange to see you on the opposite side of a dueling field when next we meet, but fitting as well." I looked at Exodia Necross. "I agree with your master, Set, at least in this – the game was never meant to stagnate – nor were our decks."

"And I'll do my best to teach you, that even though you have the best of intentions, you can't always order everything as you see fit," the Magician of Faith said.

"Ha!" Kaiba muttered. "You clearly don't know him as well as you think if you expect that that's ever going to change."

"Now that you've gotten all of your weighty personal matters resolved, would it be too much to ask for you to continue the duel so that I may complete your destruction?" asked Exodia Necross with an exaggerated sigh. "Although I'm sure you'll be comforted by the knowledge you'll go to your communal grave together."

"Does this mean I'm finally going to get into the duel?" Mana asked.

"But…" Mokuba interrupted.

"Don't you dare try to stop me, Mokuba Kaiba! I've been in lots more duels than you and you're getting to play!"

Mokuba grinned sheepishly. "Now would I do anything that stupid? Or that likely to make you mad at me?"

The Magician of Faith waited until they quieted down, then flicked her wrist to call a spell card back from the grave. The Black Luster Ritual appeared in her palm. She offered it to me, but she was smiling at Yugi. As I took it she faded away.

I placed the Black Magician Girl's card on the podium. "Are you ready to transform to the Black Luster Girl?"

She raced to the center of the dueling field. The Black Robed Sage dismounted as she approached. "It's your turn, now. I know you will make me proud." He paused awkwardly, but before he found whatever words he wanted to tell her, he was engulfed in smoke from the Black Luster Ritual. When it cleared only the Black Luster Girl remained.

She was slighter than the Black Luster Soldier had been and brighter, her armor titanium edged with gold. She shone in the light that streamed through the broken roof – the emblem of a new kind of strength. As she mounted the Blue Eyes Ultimate Dragon, Kisara threw back her heads and roared in greeting. They fused once again, and a younger, more feminine, but no less deadly Dragon Master Knight took the field. Even Kisara seemed sharper, more honed, as if you could cut yourself on each hard edged scale. The new Dragon Knight Master once again had 5,000 attack points, plus the additional 600 Mana brought as a her dowry from the Black Magic Girl, a gift from the Black Magician and the Black Robed Sage who had gone to the graveyard.

She had a silver and gold lance in her right hand. In one fluid motion she drew back her right arm and launched it at the Puppet King. Its course was as true as an arrow's. As it crossed the midpoint of
the field, Kisara sent a neutron blast to chase it down. It caught up to Mana's lance, igniting it as it plunged, burning, into the Puppet King's heart. We were blinded by a flash of pure white light.

When our sight cleared only the Dragon Master Knight remained.

Mana turned to face us, all traces of power and maturity gone in the flicker of a smile.

"I'm glad some people realize I'm all grown up!" she said proudly.

…

To be continued…

Thanks to Bnomiko not just for betaing the chapter, but her encouragement.

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** My flash drive crashed last month, taking an earlier draft of this chapter with it which accounts for the delay on posting. I'd like to thank everyone who commented for being so supportive. I can't say enough about how much I appreciate it or how encouraging it was.

**DUEL NOTE:** I've had a couple of people ask about picking the cards used and what they mean, and since I love talking about card and duels and writing…

I have to admit I'm always a little nervous writing duels, partly because they're tricky and partly because I always wonder if anyone but me actually likes duels. But I love the way the decks highlight the personalities of their owners, and how that in turn means that the duels reflect the issues facing the characters themselves and become another way to tell the main story. To me, the key to writing a duel is maintaining a balance between the characters emotions and conflicts and the cards and the duel itself, otherwise the chapter can feel flat as if you're listening to the play by play announcer at a baseball game instead of reading a story about people you care for.

In terms of structuring the duel, there were certain cards I knew had to be played because they related directly to the choices facing the characters. The thing that really hit me in the ceremonial duel was the way Yugi stopped Yami from playing Monster Reborn; that sent such a sharp message to me that Yami was meant to die. So I wanted Yami to have to be faced with that same circumstance and to have to play Monster Reborn to get his Black Magician back. I wanted him to have to face that reminder and overcome that moment of doubt. All throughout the duel there are key cards like that, ones that I've known for two years now would have to be played (and it's exciting to finally get to see them in action.)

So I started from there and then tried to figure out what kind of cards would be needed to make those key exchanges work. Picking the cards for a duel is kind of a double bind, because the cards have to work in dueling terms, even though I've simplified a lot of the dueling rules, but just as importantly, they have to reflect the players and their journeys. Earlier in the story Kaiba uses Twin Swords of Flashing Light to lower the attack points of his Different Dimension Dragon. Now both the Mask of Weakness and the Twin Swords will lower attack points. But Mask of Weakness feels like adding insult to injury. It forces the duel monster to wear this hideous mask; even its name sounds like a taunt. In contrast, Twin Swords of Flashing Light, with its graceful blades, has an iconic, almost sacrificial look. So while what both cards do is similar, what they say is very different. This involves a lot of randomly flipping through cards on this amazing wikia (I know ffnet is going to strip out the link, so I put it on my Biopage) looking for cards.

Sometimes I come up with surprises along the way. I tried for the most part to have Exodia Necross' deck have a video game monster/old fashioned horror movie monster feel to it. I wanted the monsters
to feel non-human, sort of disturbingly alien, and I think Sillva, the insect cards, the Puppet King and Jinzo all convey that. When I needed an effect monster to power up the Puppet King, I was planning to look for a creepily subservient looking monster, but then when I saw Command Knight it occurred to me that just as there are positive sides to Set, there should be positive aspects to Exodia Necross’ deck.

Along the way I also made up three monsters in this chapter, because among the hundreds of cards, I couldn’t find ones that had exactly the right look, feel, or meaning. *Deathscream Scorpion* is made up, as I wanted an insect monster strong enough to threaten the Dragon Knight Master. Similarly, *Safe Passage* is made up. Kaiba actually has a card, Interdimensional Matter Transporter, that could protect the Dragon Master Knight from the Time Wizard, but it would leave the Dragon Knight Master unchanged, and I wanted to show that Yami was not the same as when he had been the pharaoh, that being reborn from the puzzle into Yugi’s world and living there had changed him. And I wanted Yami to be the one to play the card, since it was his lesson, not Kaiba. Anyway Safe Passage was my solution.

I was surprised when I looked up the cards that the Black Luster Soldier, isn’t a version of the Black Magician. They look very similar and in the anime I’d gotten the sense, mostly visual, that they were connected. So I went with that here, which was why, like the Black Magician, the Black Luster Soldier turned into the Black Robed Sage (Dark Sage.) On the card he has 2800 attack points, but in the anime he has 100, and I went with that because I wanted to lower the points of the resulting Dragon Master Knight to make the point that every choice has its price and its benefits, and also that wisdom is its own power. Similarly, there is no *Black Luster Girl*, but I think there should be, and that Mana would make an adorable and slightly scary one!

*Please review, I’d love to hear from you…*
To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.

DUELING NOTE: In an interview, someone once asked Mr. Takahashi why the cards did different things in the manga than in the game, why sometimes he made up cards, and why he changed the rules. He said that he had never intended to invent a card game. He set out to tell a story and the cards did whatever was necessary to tell that story. What can I say, that feels like absolution to me. Anyway, as I said earlier, in the manga and anime, the rules for sacrificing are different in each arc. I settled on a one monster sacrifice for higher level monsters here. Duelists are also able to put down a monster and sacrifice it immediately. I made up a couple of key cards that I list at the end of the chapter. What I tried to do is to keep to the emotional themes of the duel, which is to me what makes a Yugioh duel more than a bunch of people throwing cards at each other.

CHAPTER 31: THE HEART OF THE CARDS

From Beauty's nameless prince, earning a beast's claws and pelt through his own arrogance and ungraciousness, to Icarus, daring to challenge the sun only to fall from the sky and drown beneath the earth's waters – is there any vice the gods punish so severely and so enthusiastically as pride? But is it hubris or courage to defy one's fate? Think of all the shepherds who've outwitted or outfought not just ogres and dragons, but destiny itself, and ask – is there any vice the gods reward as readily?

Perhaps the gods punish arrogance so often because so many fairy tale characters, heroes and villains alike, have it in such generous supply. Is it that the gods rate meekness a virtue – or simply that so few are unassuming enough to truly merit the word? Perhaps divine intervention isn't needed when the dangers you face are a reflection of who you are…

YAMI'S NARRATIVE

Our Dragon Master Knight had destroyed Exodia Necross' Puppet King. Yugi and I stared at the empty space in the middle of the field, marveling at how quickly the momentum had shifted. Then I noticed Kaiba. Unlike us, he wasn't looking at the empty tiles where the Puppet King had threatened us seconds before. His gaze was fixed on Command Knight, who now stood alone on Exodia Necross' side of the field.

"There's still a monster opposing us," he said quietly to Yugi.

Yugi nodded. He looked at his hand, then at the cards on the podium. He seemed slightly smaller,
slightly huddled into himself. He started to reach for his cards, then hesitated.

"After this, it'll just be a game again. It'll all be for fun," he mumbled to himself. It was almost a chant. I bit my lip in remorse. I had been his protector. I should have known what this would cost him. Yugi had always tried to save everyone. Jounouchi… Kaiba… Malik… Leon… enemy or friend, it didn't matter. Now he was faced with an opponent he couldn't rescue. I hugged him.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I should be the one doing this, not you."

"Why?" Yugi asked. "That's not fair either. Even when you know you have to, it's hard to hurt someone else, isn't it? And it shouldn't always have all been on your shoulders. It's more than time for that to change."

"It wasn't as hard to destroy as it should have been," I confessed. "Not until I met you, not until I learned to see through your eyes. I owe you everything, Yugi."

"Except what you owe yourself."

"I know. You taught me that, too," I said.

"I wish there was another way, but sometimes there isn't, and it's my turn now," Yugi said. He straightened up to his full height and called his Silent Swordsman to the field. At the same time he saddled Command Knight with Burden of the Mighty, stripping her of 400 attack points. Yugi had drawn the one card that would deprive Command Knight of the same number of attack points she misguidedly gave to her comrades in Exodia Necross' service. Kaiba would have unhesitatingly named that a coincidence. But coincidence or fate, it was a sobering reminder of the cost of power misused.

"I'm sorry," Yugi said to Command Knight.

"Do you think I want your pity? Don't insult me!" she snapped. Kaiba nodded in unconscious approval. She turned to Exodia Necross, but if she was expecting a savior, or even a farewell, she was destined to be disappointed.

Exodia Necross shrugged. "The price of failure is death. Without my Puppet King, you're dead weight, and dead weight belongs in the graveyard."

Mokuba shook his head in disgust. Command Knight caught his movement and turned to him. "Would you have gone to your death for your leader, flawed though he was?" she asked.

Mokuba nodded.

"Then do not be surprised that I am willing to do the same. Or are you going to call me a weak fool because you were luckier in your choices?"

"No."

The word fell into the room. I turned, surprised. Kaiba's remark had forestalled whatever comment Mokuba would have made.

"You believed in him. You trusted him. He doesn't deserve either, but that dishonor is his, not yours," Kaiba added.

"But, maybe if I… but what if your brother was right? What if by supporting my master, I became the one who kept him from changing?" she asked, her voice rising to a near wail.
"Mokuba isn't right. There's nothing you could have done that would have deterred Exodia Necross from his course. You kept your promise to protect him. You will die without breaking it. I will never be able to say as much. Go to your grave in peace."

Grim as Kaiba's words were, Command Knight smiled to hear them. I shivered. It was as if time had shifted for Kaiba since her arrival and I was seeing a younger, even more reckless incarnation.

It was over quickly. She shattered with one swing of the Silent Swordsman's blade, leaving a brief shimmer in the air. Mana bowed her head; Kisara gave a low keening cry in tribute.

"It's your move. You have no monsters left on the field," I told Exodia Necross, sickened by his presence.

He set Spike Rhinoceros. Mana and Kisara swept him from the field along with the Armored Lizard and Kabazauls dinosaurs that followed. As the Dragon Master Knight, they seemed unbeatable. Exodia Necross couldn't assemble a monster strong enough to stand against them, but he was forced to spend a monster with each turn just to stay alive.

I shook off a moment of foreboding; surely it couldn't be this easy? Or was I still looking for destiny where none existed, assuming that because the cause was dire the duel must be difficult to match? I shook my head. No. Exodia Necross was a skilled opponent, no matter the straits he currently found himself in. It was not wrong to learn from experience.

Exodia Necross tried a more direct route to destroying our Dragon Master Knight, playing Mirror Force and Smashing Ground and even a Swarm of Scarabs of his own, but Mokuba produced Remove Trap and Spell Shield Type-8 and Divine Wrath in equally quick succession to block him. Meanwhile Yugi's Silent Swordsman was getting stronger with each turn. Soon he'd have even more attack points than our Dragon Master Knight.

Kaiba was already starting to gloat.

"It's more fun to watch him do that when he's on our side," Yugi said.

I nodded.

"This game grows boring," Exodia Necross said.

"No. You're not bored, you're angry." Yugi glanced up at Kaiba. "I've seen it enough to be able to tell the difference."

Yugi was right. Exodia Necross was furious. He had planned to present our defeat as a tribute to his god. We had introduced the messiness and confusion of life into his perfect game, spoiling his flawless offering. It was ironic; we were using the chaos his god championed to defeat him. I had learned to embrace uncertainty; it was partly why I found the prospect of returning so attractive… and here the duel was, confirming my choices.

Exodia Necross placed two cards face down. "You've played three cards that destroyed my trap and spell cards and my effects monster. I'm betting you don't have a fourth card that can stop me at hand," he said, turning over Raigeki – the card that could destroy all our monsters on the field.

Mokuba grinned and turned over Mystical Space Typhoon.

"And even if you do, I'd wager you don't have a fifth," he said as he turned over Curse of Royal, destroying Mokuba's card before it could take effect.
"Did you think I would allow you free reign to destroy my strategy at will?" Exodia Necross said, in command again. "It was a child's mistake, and your comrades will pay for it."

Mokuba looked stricken. "There's nothing I can do, Mana," he whispered.

Mana blew him a kiss. "You're not bad for a beginner. It's fine. Going to the graveyard is just another part of the game. You'll win and I'll be back in time to see your victory."

"But…" Mokuba started to say.

She grinned mischievously. "Why the sad face? You usually cheer when I have to leave."

"That's different."

"But you're the same. Are you telling me a Kaiba is afraid of losing?"

Mana and Kisara disappeared in a lightning strike so sudden and powerful it left a crack in the pyramid floor. Nobody spoke. Kaiba stared blankly at the charred spot where Kisara had died. He looked up to the ceiling with its dragon-sized hole in the roof.

"Nisama," Mokuba said, "I'm so…"

"No!" Kaiba interrupted. "Don't apologize. Not to me. Never to me."

"I was supposed to protect your monsters. I made my deck to do just that. And after everything, I failed you. I failed everybody," Mokuba insisted.

"It's just one round, Mokuba," Yugi said. "You heard Mana – you're doing your best, and I'm glad you're on our team."

"That doesn't…"

"Make it any better?" Kaiba finished for him. Mokuba nodded. "I know. It doesn't."

"So what do we do now, Nisama?" Mokuba asked, staring, like his brother, at the spot where Mana had sat so confidently on Kisara a moment ago.

"You know what we do next. What we've always done. We fight back."

"We have to win. All the deaths... it all becomes real if we don't. I mean… if we lose, they won't come back, will they? And neither will we…" Mokuba said.

Kaiba nodded.

"So does losing really equal death?" Mokuba asked.

"For them... for us... for today... yes, losing means death," Kaiba answered.

"Does that mean Gozaburo was right?" Mokuba whispered.

"It's not the only answer. I refuse to believe that," Kaiba hissed fiercely. "The past can't be changed – but it's the future that matters."

Mokuba nodded and said, as confidently as his brother, "And the road to our future begins here."

The duel resumed. Kaiba kept flinging his cards on to the field as recklessly as ever, but somehow
Mokuba pulled trap card after spell card from his deck, keeping his Nisama safe.

"They make an awesome team!" Yugi said.

I nodded. "Kaiba hasn't exactly kept it a secret that he wants to duel each of us separately – but I'd rather propose a counter-offer. How do you think we'd fare if we took on the Kaiba brothers as a team?"

Yugi grinned. "Do you have to ask? But you'd have to come back for us to find out for sure." He glanced back at the field. "But I can't wait until it's fun again… until going to the graveyard is just an expression."

I thought suddenly of the leaf duels I had played with Kaiba on our journey to find this pyramid. That had been fun. It had been unexpected. Was that what it would be like, to just play as if we had all the time in the world?

But we were still mired in the duel at hand… the one where we were fighting for our lives… the one where the stakes were real. Neither side could get an advantage. Exodia Necross played Swords of Revealing Light, holding us at bay for three turns.

In that pause, I realized the nature of the trap that Exodia Necross had set. Combined, Yugi, Kaiba, Mokuba and I had more monsters. But Exodia Necross could arrange his at will, could use his cards to separate us, to attack us one at a time, making a mockery of our boasts of unity. Even with Mokuba's help, Kaiba was losing monsters at an alarming rate. Exodia Necross clearly intended to live up to his promise to destroy my lover first.

I wondered if my partners shared my fears. I looked at Yugi, standing next to me. His face was calm, focused on the play of the cards. I realized suddenly… I had never believed in the future, Kaiba had never trusted in it. Yugi did both. I'd been obsessed with learning my past; Kaiba had been equally desperate to find his future… of all of us, Yugi had been the one to live in the present. I smiled. I might not have been his protector any longer, but Yugi was still my anchor.

I turned to my left to look at Kaiba. He drew a card and smiled. I could not look away from his darkly triumphant expression. I had believed that Kaiba had learned, as had I, to grope towards his future. But Mokuba's arrival had changed that. His brother had become his shield. No one who knew Kaiba could expect him to long accept that.

And the grin on Kaiba's face was hauntingly familiar. I'd seen it the night we'd first dueled, when I'd told him that the loser would experience death. I was sure he'd worn the same grin as he'd challenged his soon-to-be adoptive father to a chess match. Two imperatives faced me: to defeat Exodia Necross, and to do it before Kaiba launched whatever self-destructive plan had just entered his head.

Kaiba played Reckless Greed. It allowed him to draw two cards this turn, but only at the cost of skipping his next two draw phases. It was rash, even for Kaiba, unless…

"Perfect," Kaiba said with satisfaction, looking at the hand he'd drawn.

…Unless Kaiba figured he wouldn't get to use those two turns, anyway. Unless I'd run out of time.

"I have everything I need. The game ends, starting now." Kaiba looked down. "The last bitter card indeed. And here you are in my hand."

I didn't need to see his cards to know he could only be talking to Saggi.

"If you play me," the dark clown said calmly as he appeared in front of us, "I will survive to be
wielded by other, lesser duelists. You will not."

"I know what I'm doing," Kaiba said with equal calmness, placing a second card face down.

"Do you? Who will claim me when you're gone? Your brother? Will I be your legacy to him?"

"Never! His deck will have no place for a creature like you."

Kaiba turned to Exodia Necros. "What are you waiting for? My monster is on the field. If you don't
attack, I'll just use him against you as soon as it's my turn again."

"Do you really think I am ignorant of the deadly virus carried by your Dark Clown? Do you think
that just because your horror is a modern one it is unfamiliar, as if no plagues existed outside of your
laboratories? But it seems that I can eliminate at least one opponent this turn." Exodia Necros
laughed. "Do you know how ignorant you sound bleating of free choice, when you are simply
following the path of your life to its end?"

"It's the path I chose. Hell, it's the path I built."

"And it binds you just as surely as the notions of destiny you reject."

"Grow up," Kaiba sneered. "No one gets to live without constraints. But I'm the only one who gets
to chose what bindings I will accept. If you can't understand that critical difference, maybe you need
another 3,000 years to figure it out."

"We are not as static as you believe. Underestimating your enemies is your greatest weakness. I too,
have learned from Pegasus. I have had his Doppelganger carved in stone. Whatever doom you have
planned for me will be yours as well."

"Words are cheap," Kaiba sneered. "If you want to see what I've got planned, just order your attack
– if you have the balls for it under those skirts."

I had seen it before. Exodia Necros was almost angry enough to attack just to be rid of Kaiba, but
he hesitated. Mokuba gasped and wrapped his arms around his brother's arm, burying his face in the
sleeve of Kaiba's coat. Exodia Necros smiled as he studied our horrified faces. We had delayed his
triumph, ruined the game he had played in his mind for 3,000 years, torn a hole through it as surely
as we had damaged the building that was the symbol of his power. He wanted not just to defeat us,
but to hurt us, just as the Sphinx Teleia had. Our expressions of grief were genuine, but as I glimpsed
Kaiba's savagely triumphant face I realized he had known how we'd react, and had factored it into
his plan.

"You have a choice," Exodia Necros told Kaiba. "If you use your Crush Card to infect my deck,
Doppelganger will insure that you can not attempt to engineer my destruction without sealing your
own fate. We both know your monsters will all fall victim to your own virus, sending you to your
grave with them. Are you really willing to pay with your life for the unlikely chance your partners
can defeat me? What good is a victory you will not live to see? I call your bluff," Exodia Necros
said, ordering his attack.

"It's not a bluff," Kaiba said with a smile as the deck destruction virus started ravaging their decks.

"That should finish him off. The Holy Elf was right all along," Kaiba muttered. "I'm sacrificing
something of equal value to insure you can return, after all."

"The Holy Elf didn't mention the word, 'sacrifice,'" Yugi said.
I looked at his smoking duel disk and my anger flamed to life to match it. "And when does necessity become an excuse, coward? Isn't that what you came all this way to scream at me? You boasted that throwing away your life was the one mistake you'd never made – though not for lack of trying. What would you call this? Are we to spend the rest of our lives pretending that they're meaningless? You're leaping at the chance to sacrifice yourself as though rushing to a lover's embrace!" I yelled, throwing his words back in his face as though the sheer volume of my voice would make him stop and listen.

"No. That's not what I'm doing." The confusion in his eyes was as startling as it was fleeting. "If there was another way to guarantee Mokuba's safety, your future – believe me, I'd take it. There's so many things I have to live for – but those are precisely the things I would die for as well." He straightened up, all signs of hesitancy gone. "Friendship is a support, but it can never be a crutch. As I told you once, some sacrifices demand blood."

"Nisama!"

"It's okay, Mokuba." Kaiba shrugged. "It's just the way the cards fell. Gozaburo told us that losing means death. But that doesn't mean that every death is a defeat. This is the only way I can see for us to win, and that's worth every life point I have."

"Not to me. You just said it's the future that matters," Mokuba screamed.

"It does. Your future. I promised to be your father. I didn't always know what that meant. I insulted him," Kaiba said, nodding towards Exodia Necross, "but I was no better. I can only hope death cancels out all my debts."

I shook my head, thinking back to the duel I'd watched him fight against the Sphinx Teleia, to all the duels I'd watched him fight. Which voice was louder in his head right now, Gozaburo's or his own? Could he even see the differences that were so apparent to the rest of us?

"Just accept I know what I'm doing," Kaiba pleaded. "I saw a chance to protect you and I took it. It's what I do… it's what I should have done all along."

"No!" Mokuba yelled, turning over a card. It was the Band of Brothers.

It was a rare card. It could merge two decks only if one had lost all its monsters; it could fuse two duelists into a single unit. I hadn't known Kaiba had it. I wondered if he had bought it because of the picture on its face. It showed two brothers in army fatigues. The black-haired younger brother was supporting the elder, leading him to safety. The wounded soldier had Kaiba's pallor. His chestnut bangs shielded his eyes on the card, but as the pair moved past us, I could see that they were blue. After releasing the Kaiba brothers' souls, Pegasus had trapped their images on a card.

"No!" Kaiba yelled. "You don't get it, Mokuba. Your deck will be infected too – and you don't have many monsters to begin with. And now that we're linked, Exodia Necross is free to attack you. I'm going down, Mokuba – and this ties your life to mine."

"Our lives have always been tied together. And you know as well as I do," Mokuba said, a touch of mischief seeping in to taint his angelic smile, "once you make a move, there's no taking it back."

"Mokuba, you can't do this. Everything I've ever done, I've done to keep you safe, to give you a better life."

"I know. I'm sorry. But how could you raise me and then expect me to stand aside when someone I
love is in danger? You taught me better than that." Mokuba paused, searching for a way to explain. "Do you remember how we walked into the mansion that first time, with me clutching the back of your shirt?" he asked.

Kaiba nodded.

"Well, you're never doing that again. You're never walking into a bad situation first – staying just enough ahead so that whatever jumps out gets you first. I didn't come all this way to have this world turn into a repeat of ours. I'm not just your kid brother, Nisama – I'm your partner – and you know it."

Kaiba shifted his gaze to Yugi. Kaiba had never begged for anything in his life, and he didn't now – except with his eyes. He knew Yugi's deck well enough to know that my partner still had cards that could break the bond Mokuba's Band of Brothers had created. If Yugi drew the right card, he could protect Mokuba's life – at the expense of Kaiba's own.

"Yugi, for once in your life use your brains," Kaiba said urgently. "There's three of us. Three lives. You know as well as I that in any video game worth its selling price you need to discard at least one life to win. You could see where this match was headed. Now I've destroyed at least half of his monsters." Kaiba gestured to the stones crumbling to dust at Exodia Necross' feet. "You can win. Don't throw that away."

"I don't think that someone who's fought so hard for his future is ready to let go of it so easily," Yugi said.

"Damn you – do you think I'm afraid of dying? I've been prepared for this moment since I was ten. Ever since I challenged Gozaburo to that chess game, every day has been a rehearsal for this one."

"I know you're willing to die, but… are you really that eager to say good-bye to Mokuba so soon? You were right, I should never have let Yami go without at least telling him what was in my heart, without trying to get him to look into his own." Yugi turned to me. "In our last duel, you looked to the cards to tell you what to do. But the cards don't reveal the future – they show what's going on right now – that's the true 'heart of the cards' – and I'm ready to look into mine. Are you both game?"

He drew his next card and set it without even glancing at it. The Ties of Friendship shimmered to life in front of us.

I looked at the card. The angel on the front winked at me as she stepped out of her frame.

"Yugi," I said, "Where did you get this?"

"Rebecca gave it to me after the Grand Prix. She said that since we were friends we should share it. She gave it to me to hold until we met again." Yugi flushed slightly and looked down. "I couldn't turn her down," he said uncomfortably. "Not when I know what it's like… I mean, even if I'm not interested in her… I wanted to show her I meant it when I said we were friends. Besides," he continued with a grin, "Anzu was watching. She was looking at me."

"There's no writing on it. You're playing a blank card?" Mokuba asked, puzzled.

"It's not blank. It just wasn't ready to be read until now," Yugi answered confidently.

"Damn you, I made my decision," Kaiba snarled.

"And I made mine," Yugi answered.
"You can always look for another answer, choose another road – if you have the courage," I said, throwing Kaiba's words to me back in his face.

"We're stronger when we're together. I'm not going to pretend it doesn't matter to me if you live or die," Yugi said.

"Your monsters will become infected too. Your chances are better alone. You know I'm right." Kaiba said.

"An answer that excludes friendship can not be right," I said. "No one can stand alone. Not even you."

"We started this together and we're going to end it the same way," Yugi added. "I'm not losing another friend – not if I can stop it."

The Ties of Friendship's golden haired angel stood patiently, waiting for us to finish. I'd always thought of her as a child. Now I could see that her eyes were ancient, as if her pupils had recorded the passing ages.

"They have," she said quietly. She looked at Yugi. "Friendship is the most ancient of virtues." She shifted her gaze to Kaiba. "And yet, when you first encounter it, doesn't it seem surprisingly new?"

"Is that why your card face held no words? Have you been waiting for us all this time for us to be able to see it?" I asked.

She smiled and nodded.

"We're ready," Yugi said confidently.

She glanced at Kaiba. "Your hearts must all be in this, or my effect will not work."

Kaiba had been all too willing to give up his life to save us, but that didn't mean he was wrong in holding that the things that gave his life meaning were more important to him than life itself. And Yugi had been right as well: that didn't mean Kaiba held his life card cheaply... not any more.

"Do not look for words," I said to her. "Just accept he will meet this challenge as he has all others. As will we all."

She smiled. "You are indeed ready to play."

At her words, the virus started moving through our decks, killing our monsters as it went. The cards in my hand were smoking; I could see the ones on the podium turning to ash. It was what I'd expected, but there was no real way to guard against the sense of loss I felt. I'd just reclaimed the connection I'd felt to my deck with the start of this duel, and now the monsters I'd never gotten to play were disappearing. It felt like I was walking through that door all over again. It felt like every decision I made was causing me to leave a piece of myself behind.

I looked at the remaining monsters on the podium. It must have been a trick of the light, but I would have sworn I saw Don Zaloog wink his one good eye at me from his card. I nodded back. He was right. I would hold on to my friends.

Yugi and my cards suddenly appeared hanging in the air in front of us, like the cards in Noa's world. Before I could blink in surprise, they were joined by Mokuba's and Kaiba's as well. "I'm ready," I whispered. "Whatever happens, I will not falter again."
Mokuba looked suspiciously at the display. He ran behind the cards. "Oh, good," he said in relief. "All you can see from here is the back of the cards. Exodia Necross can't tell what we've got."

"Of course," the angel said.

"So what happens next?" Mokuba asked.

"You must discover what the ties of friendship mean within yourself."

"Let's road test this…" Kaiba said. He reached out to touch Don Zaloog. He appeared in front of us, sharpening his knives. I reached across Kaiba to summon Yugi's Winged Dragon, Guardian of the Fortress, who instantly assumed his place hovering above my monster, as though they were still in the same deck.

"Freaky!" Mokuba said.

We could each play each others' cards as if they were our own. It was an advantage to equal Exodia Necross' in being able to pick his cards at will. Now our decks were truly fused… and I hoped, unstoppable. Yugi and I still had an impressive cadre of monsters, most of them just under the Crush Card's limit. Kaiba's monsters were gone, but he still had some of the most vicious trap and spell cards in the game, and Mokuba's cards were watching all our backs.

But Exodia Necross had prepared for Kaiba's Crush Card. He had stacked his deck with monsters just under the 1,500 attack point threshold that would have insured their destruction and had held them in reserve. We were playing a waiting game of a different sort, trading monsters, wondering who would run out first. Surely he could not have an endless supply of monsters with 1,400 attack points?

He set the Obnoxious Celtic Guardian against us now. I knew now how Kaiba had felt, facing Pegasus' Toon Dragon. The Obnoxious Celtic Guardian looked like my monster, but he radiated pure malevolence. My Celtic Guardian was earnest and caring. It hurt to see this twisted version, to look into his eyes and see nothing familiar, to see nothing but hate and venom staring back at me.

But we had no monsters left that could match the Obnoxious Celtic Guardian's attack strength. One hundred or two hundred points sounds like so little, but the difference enabled him to slaughter our monsters at will, laughing gleefully with each one he killed.

"So, after abandoning one world, you might lose your grasp on both, as easily as your monsters are laying down their lives in a pathetic attempt to save you," he said scornfully.

"Choosing one does not mean abandoning the other. There will always be room in my heart for both," I said.

"That will hardly matter when you are dead."

I could not answer his second taunt so easily. Had we come this far just to fail in the end? As Exodia Necross had said, it would be cold comfort to discover how much I wanted to live only to go to our communal grave together.

So much of my life with Yugi had been spent on the struggle to regain my memories, as if remembering who I'd been then could tell me who I was today. Now, finally, everything familiar… my most trusted monsters, my most powerful spell and trap cards, were gone. All that remained was a future I might not live to see. All that remained were my friends. I looked at them. Yugi's face was still calm, Kaiba's was still determined.
All that remained were my friends. It was enough. It had to be.

And yet…

I looked at Yugi. "We could lose," I whispered, expecting him to contradict me.

"I know," he answered. All of a sudden his serene front seemed to waver and dissolve. His lip trembled slightly, his eyes were bright with unshed tears. "I just couldn't stand seeing another friend die… It hurt too much. We can't fail… we can't… maybe I just wasn't good enough…"

We all gasped as suddenly, the holograms disappeared.

"Hey guys, what just happened?" Mokuba asked.

"My effect only works if you believe in your cards… and in yourselves," the Ties of Friendship angel said sadly.

"I believe in all of you!" Yugi protested.

"That obviously isn't enough," Kaiba said. "I told you once that after you set your cards, there's nothing left but to play them out without doubt or hesitation. I'm prepared to do just that. I chose to trust you and Yami. Are you telling me that I was wrong?" he asked, genuinely outraged.

Yugi gave a choking laugh, even as the holograms flickered to dim life again as if Kaiba's determination would revive them. I reached out to touch one. Nothing happened; my hand went through its surface as if it was an illusion.

"No," I said. "I will not accept that. Friendship, the things it has led me to learn, the ways it has changed me – are not an illusion."

The time for doubt had passed. It wasn't sudden; there'd been no glorious epiphany of understanding. Instead, throughout the duel, I'd kept facing and re-facing my uncertainties as though they were a many-headed water demon, until I'd won through to the other side, as though I'd fought my way through a door of my own… one that existed solely in my own heart. Uncertainty and indecision are two very different things. In choosing one, I had thrown off the other. In embracing uncertainty, I'd embraced my fate.

Now I was free to see my friends, to help them as they had me. So much had changed, but I had come full circle to find that as Yugi's friend, not his avenging angel, I could still protect him, even from his own doubts.

"Yugi," I said urgently, "More than any of us you've always been right. You were right when you forced me to spare Kaiba's life of Pegasus' tower, when you took my place on the pier to save Jounouchi's life. The only time I ignored you, I lived to regret it. Because the world I want to save is the world you see every day, the one you shared with me. You told me to have faith in myself. If there's one thing I've learned on this journey, it's that sometimes you have to take your own advice."

"All I ever wanted was to be a good friend," he said.

"You are."

"You helped me to do so much more… to accept who I was, to learn that I really was strong. I won't let you down by forgetting that now," Yugi said.

"Just remember you're not alone. Sometimes, your friends are happy to be the ones being strong for
you. You got us this far. It's our turn to carry you the rest of the way."

He smiled. "Then it's time to duel. Look..." he said in wonder, pointing to our cards. "We're already there."

I stared at the now-shining wall of cards in front of us. They were lighting the way home. Yugi's Monster Reborn and Masaki the Legendary Swordsman were there in front of me. My Flame Manipulator was jumping up and down and waving, trying to attract my attention. Combined with Kaiba and Mokuba's cards there was only one thing missing – and it was sitting in Yugi's deck.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Yugi said.

I nodded.

Kaiba saw my Flame Manipulator banging on the surface of the card as though he could escape his confines and rolled his eyes. "You're not thinking of..."

Yugi smiled. "I promised a friend... and it's the perfect solution."

Kaiba groaned. "Then you're going to need this," he said, reaching for his Different Dimension Sanctuary. As he touched it, my fingers landed on Yugi's Monster Reborn and his Masaki the Legendary Swordsman. Yugi tapped my Flame Manipulator at the same time. I used Monster Reborn to summon the Black Robed Sage. He looked at the still smoking remains of our decks, the pair of monsters in front of him, then at Kaiba's sanctuary, which was lying in readiness.

"A lot has happened in my absence," he said, as he pulled Yugi's Polymerization card from his deck.

"What's going on?" Mokuba asked.

Kaiba groaned again. "We need a monster with 1,400 attack points. We don't have one."

Mokuba looked at the monsters and laughed. "I can't wait 'til we get home. Here..." he said as he touched Yugi's Polymerization. "You're going to need my Reverse Sword to lower his attack points when you merge them... right, Nisama?"

Kaiba nodded. "As well as your Curse of Aging to weaken the Obnoxious Celtic Guardian," he added.

"Boy, is 'obnoxious' the right word to describe him!" Mokuba muttered.

Polymerization's whirlwind swept down yet again, to the now familiar accompaniment of a brick or two crashing to the ground as it fused my Flame Manipulator and Yugi's Masaki into the Flame Swordsman. The Crush Card's virus should have destroyed him as it had our other powerful monsters, but Kaiba's Different Dimension Sanctuary protected the Flame Swordsman long enough for us to equip him with Mokuba's Reverse Sword.

The Flame Swordsman, now at 1400 attack points, looked at us and grinned as he emerged from the Different Dimension Sanctuary.

"The battle can't end without you," Yugi said.

The Obnoxious Celtic Guardian, under the spell of Curse of Aging was no match for him. We waited, holding our breath. There were other monsters that could match our Flame Swordsman. We were out of tricks, if Exodia Necross had more of them at hand.
We let out a scream of relief when the Crass Clown took to the field with his 1,350 attack points. We had broken Exodia Necross' deck. Yugi and I pounded each other's backs, for once yelling before the official end of the match. Mokuba buried his head in his brother's chest, sobbing. It was hard to tell if Kaiba was hugging his brother or holding him up. Kaiba's expression betrayed only arrogant triumph, but his face was ashen.

We turned back to the game, excitement and relief making my hands tremble as I ordered the Flame Swordsman's next attack. Now time, as it always had been if we'd been able to see it, was on our side. Finally only one monster remained in Exodia Necross' deck. He called Big Eye to the field. It was an insignificant monster, almost unsuited to be the one securing our victory. The Flame Swordsman saluted him and prepared to attack.

"This can not be the end of all my planning. You are nothing! I am the faithful servant of the gods you do not even acknowledge. I should have been the one chosen," Exodia Necross screamed.

I shook my head. "Victory, like fate, is not inevitable. Sometimes we make our own."

"You are fools if you think you have won because you have defeated me. Set will regroup. No matter how long it takes – he will triumph."

Kaiba's snort was answer enough. "I'm not going to lose sleep worrying about it. I have a brother to raise and a company to run. Unlike you, I have a life."

"It is easy to speak so bravely today. What of tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," Yugi said, "we head home. That's what matters, what we were fighting for. We have a home to go back to."

The Flame Swordsman swung his fire-coated blade one more time. As it hit home, as the duel ended, Kaiba reached for his Branch card, to call back his Blue Eyes White Dragon. Mokuba reached for his Monster Reborn at the same time, summoning Mana back from the graveyard.

I shook my head, amazed at how Kaiba's hope for the future always tempered his own most self-destructive impulses. He had put the Crush Card in his deck, had used it in a way that would have condemned him and his monsters to death – but the whole time, he'd carried the card that could call his dragon back to life.

I was glad I would have a lifetime to live with his contradictions, to remember how, despite his past, almost despite his nature, hope always bubbled to the surface in the most unexpected ways. I had thought of life as being pathless, almost formless… but it held the charm of surprise. I looked at Yugi and smiled… at the reminder that some things are eternal.

The Flame Swordsman had taken down Big Eye with a single swing. I stared at Exodia Necross in shock as the same slash appeared on his side. I was vaguely surprised to see his blood was red. Black and red flames appeared along its edges, cauterizing the wound and evaporating the blood before it could flow. Multiple burning sword marks crisscrossed his garments, echoing the strikes the Flame Swordsman had landed against his other monsters. A thin red line, thin as the blade that had slit his Armageddon Knight's throat, encircled Exodia Necross' own neck, the three parallel gashes from the Winged Dragon's talons that had doomed his Chaosrider Gustaph now exposed his own ribs.

Exodia Necross' face took on the look of hurt and resolve that reminded me of Command Knight. I was relieved when it turned to a blank stare that could only have belonged to the Puppet King.

Exodia Necross did not fall, did not shatter, did not die.
Mana and Kisara arrived just as he was engulfed in a shadowy army of beetles. He screamed as if being eaten alive, his howls muffled by the swarm that was devouring him. Mana's face was white. She gulped and swallowed hard. Exodia Necross was a skeleton by the time the scarabs vanished, but his eyes were alive in his skull as he glared at us.

"It seems I am as much a pawn as my monsters. At least I have brought change… if not the chaos and destruction I'd hoped for," Exodia Necross gasped.

"You have," Mahaado confirmed, freed from the Black Robed Sage's garments, one more sign that this duel was over. "May your god be merciful."

"You dare to comfort me? Do you think we are honorable enemies? I care nothing for your ideals. I am glad I won't have long to endure them," Exodia Necross hissed defiantly.

Kaiba snorted. "Yeah, I always thought deathbed repentances and reconciliations sucked, myself."

The wind had risen as Exodia Necross had begun speaking. I hoped its rising whine had drowned out Kaiba's comment. Now the winds smacked into Exodia Necross, finally knocking him to the ground as it had his scorpion. We heard a faint hiss from behind his armor, as if he was crumbling from within, like his monster. His breath was labored now; he could no longer talk. As he looked at us, his eyes dulled, then glazed with pain. They finally widened in shock as he shattered, just as Sillva the Warlord had to start the duel.

It was over.

We had won.

I stared at the spot where Exodia Necross had just self-destructed. It would probably take the rest of the life I'd just won to untangle what had just happened – and why. Yugi's Ties of Friendship had sealed our victory. But it had been Kaiba's suicidal charge that had broken the back of Exodia Necross' deck; that had made Yugi's winning move possible.

I didn't have long to brood. Kaiba and I had been standing next to each other. Now, oblivious to Yugi and Mokuba's presence, oblivious to the watching cadre of duel monsters, he moved in closer still, until we were barely a breath apart. The noise from the explosion was still echoing in our ears. Kaiba yelled above its roar.

"So you're faced with the same question as when we started this nonsense. Are you willing to live even if the world can manage to turn without your help? There are no excuses, no missions left. Only choices lie before you… and I've run out of patience waiting for an answer."

"You're a fine one to talk," I scoffed. "When have you ever lived for anything but your promises and challenges? You were the one who decided to pack a lifetime of unexpressed thoughts and feelings into a few short weeks. Are you prepared to live with the consequences?"

"I'm always prepared to live with the consequences of my actions." He paused. "But without you, it would be a chore, and not a challenge."

"Indeed." I threw back my head and laughed. "It seems I am game for anything – even the challenge of a future with you."

I reached up, pulled his head down to mine and kissed him as though we had lost, as though we had only moments left to live. Had it been less than a day since we had made love under the waterfall at the palace? Now, I explored his mouth as if I had been deprived of the taste of him for the entirety of the lifetime that now lay ahead of us. I drank him in as if his kiss was sweeter than the water that had
flowed over us the night before.

We finally broke apart, although my hand was still resting on the top of Kaiba's waistband, although I was still leaning into him, although I could not quite let him go. I felt lighter, freer, than I ever had before. I had made my decision, but I couldn't resist looking at Yugi and saying, "Do you approve?"

Yugi laughed. "I said all I wanted was for you to follow your heart – but I lied. I was hoping all the time that it would lead you back to us."

"It's settled then," I said.

I looked at Mahaado, and the smile faded from my lips. I let go of Kaiba then, and walked over to him. "I'm sorry," I said softly. "The pharaoh you served died 3,000 years ago. I'm grateful to him, but I haven't been him for a very long time. Part of me wishes I could become him for you, for all of you… but I can't. I can only try to be myself. I can only try to find out who that is."

Mahaado shook his head. "No apology is necessary. You have given us back our world and more, even if you can not grace it. It has been my honor to see you, to serve by your side once again."

"I will miss you, my old friend," I said.

I looked back at Yugi, Kaiba and Mokuba. They were standing side by side. Kaiba's arm was resting on Mokuba's shoulders. "I was once called Yami by default," I said as I walked back to join them. "It was the name I carried while waiting to learn my own. And yet, it has become more real to me than the name I was given at my birth 3,000 years ago. I'm ready to go home. If I am no longer Atemu, it is past time to find out who Yami is."

A rumbling noise greeted my words. We looked up at the cracks opening and widening in the ceiling. Kisara's entrance had weakened it, as had the duel and finally Exodia Necross' demise. Kaiba could probably have listed all the structural reasons for the roof to pick that moment to begin to collapse…

"We better get out of here, fast!" Yugi yelled. We clambered onto Kisara's back. Her wings heaved with the extra weight, but she managed to get aloft. She labored towards the hole she'd made in the roof with her entrance. It was starting to fall as we flew through it.

Outside, everything had changed. The town had vanished, as had Set's army. All that remained were our own monsters, or those that had survived, looking dazed at the sudden lack of foes.

Kisara flew to the top of a dune and settled into the sand.

"Well, this scene looks familiar," Kaiba said as we watched the pyramid sink into the sand. "For someone who boasts of being the god of change, Set sure repeats himself pretty often."

I laughed. "The ultimate indictment – you find Set boring."

Mahaado and the others were growing shadowy as we spoke. I looked at them worriedly.

"We were summoned to battle. It was only by the grace of the gods we were allowed to witness its end. But now that it is over, it is time for us to return. We will see you at the settlement."

Kaiba pulled out the Different Dimension Dragon once again. "Let's see who gets back first," he said.
Thanks to Bnomiko for double-checking every card listed, in addition to making sure the chapter made sense and offering a deck-load of encouragement. And of course for laughing at the title.

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** It's the end of the duel, but not the end of the story…

From the moment I started writing this, I knew that Kaiba was going to play Saggi – because although I think both he and Yami are characters with a tremendous capacity for growth and change, I also think that sometimes his story is about its limits as well. And I wanted everything that went into these four characters – their doubts and flaws as well as their strengths and skills to lead to the resolution.

**Card and Duel Note:** I made up both *Band of Brothers* and *Different Dimension Sanctuary* for this duel. *Band of Brothers* probably wouldn't be all that useful to Kaiba in general because ordinarily he's more the I-duel-alone type, but I liked the idea of a card for the Kaiba brothers matching the *Yu-Jyo* card that features Yami and Jounouchi, and I liked the idea that both damage and saving each other through brotherhood would be the theme for it.

Although *Different Dimension Sanctuary* doesn't exist, Kaiba has a couple of different dimension cards, like *Different Dimension Dragon* and *Interdimensional Matter Transporter* which involve sending monsters to different dimensions, so this is an extension of that idea.

I didn't make up Ties of Friendship – Pegasus gives it to Yugi after Duelists' Kingdom and he later gives it to Rebecca. The card however is blank, and I added meaning to it, one I hope that matches the spirit of the card and of my story.

*Please review. I'd love to know what you think…*
Before the Ending

Chapter Notes

To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.

CORRECTION: Splintered Star pointed out that when Kaiba plays Saggi, it would have been the perfect time for Yami to throw Kaiba's words back in his face and ask, "And when does necessity become an excuse, coward?" She's absolutely right, and I added that line to the scene in chapter 31.

CHAPTER 32: BEFORE THE ENDING

It takes Snow White, conservatively speaking, 36 hours to find a safe haven with the dwarves. But it takes only a sentence for her to travel the distance from true love's kiss to the story's end. A wave to the faithful, if diminutive, companions who guarded her not-quite eternal slumber, a lift onto her prince's inevitably white horse, and she disappears into her happily ever after ending.

It takes Cinderella's Prince Charming days to sift through his soon to be inherited kingdom to find her. And the reunion scene itself, depending on the version, has everything from severed toes to SWAT team mice. But once their lips meet, the wedding happens in the nanosecond pause between one animation cell and the next.

But what of the characters themselves? Doesn't Snow White need a moment to catch her breath? To realize she's alive? Cinderella has her shoes, but shouldn't she at least stop to grab a jacket, not to mention saying good-bye to her faithful rodent commando unit? At some point between the kiss and the wedding, wouldn't Sleeping Beauty need to know that 100 years have passed?

Sometimes it seems like everything after the story's climax but before its end happens off screen and out of sight. I understand the impulse. Having come so far, it's irresistibly tempting to finally, mercifully, hammer on the words "The End." But having an impulse is one thing, giving in to temptation, another…

MOKUBA'S NARRATIVE

I'd been to parties before – big KC promos, after-tournament celebrations, cozy schoolroom birthdays. This was like some whacked out video game version of all of the above mixed together. Someone had made one wall of the palace's main room vanish, so it mixed with the field outside and created this amazingly large indoor/outdoor room. It was a good thing, because there was no way all those dragons were going to fit inside.

Two of my brothers' grimmest and most intense monsters, Kaiser Seahorse and Lord of Dragons,
surprised me by being the main party animals – even outdoing the actual animals. They were playing some game that seemed to involve lots of wrestling and even more drinking. Occasionally they crashed into other partygoers who either moved away or shoved right back depending on their relative size and temper. Every now and then they'd stop and bear-hug each other, hanging on for balance. At least, they'd had the sense to stay away from the Battle Ox and Vors Raider who were holding a head-butting contest of their own. It was kind of fun to watch it all.

Until I saw Mana.

She was back in a sort of regular dress. It had a lot of gold in it. It matched her hair. I was glad she didn't look like a duel monster.

"I told you we'd celebrate tonight!" she yelled.

I didn't answer, mainly because Heavy Metal King and Musician King had just struck up some loud dance song. Chorus of Sanctuary's little angel was floating above them, singing. Sonic Maid came over, and soon everyone that had an instrument was mixing in. It was the oddest combo of guitars and harps and stuff I couldn't even recognize, much less name.

I'd never danced with a girl before without someone expecting me to. I wouldn't have minded if it had stayed a one-on-one deal a while longer, but everyone kept joining in, and in less than no time a whole group of girls had dragged Mana off, giggling.

I looked around. My brother had vanished as well. He wouldn't have left the party for good though, not without telling me, and when I took a second look I realized I didn't see his monsters either. I didn't have to go far to find them. I walked outside, and wandered around to the front.

Nisama was in the courtyard. He was being shoved and sometimes tossed from monster to monster, pinballing from the Hitosame Giant to Vors Raider to the Battle Ox, who promptly head-butted him. My brother was taller than all the humans and a lot of the monsters here – but next to his deck, he looked slight, almost defenseless – which was a word I'd never applied to my brother before, except when he'd been in that coma.

I got scared, watching his monsters bat him around. It looked like that nightmare he'd told me about, the one where they'd ripped him apart while he was still alive. Then I sighed with relief. It had been a long day. I was being stupid. Brutal as it looked, they were hugging him; he was the center of their celebration.

Kaiser Seahorse came up behind him, and dumped what looked like a pitcher of beer on his head. His hair was dripping. As far as I knew, Nisama hadn't touched alcohol since our adoptive father's business parties – and that had just been for show. His tongue darted out and tasted the beer as it trickled down his cheek. He made a face.

"What's the matter? Afraid the pharaoh doesn't like beer?" Kaiser Seahorse laughed, as my brother shook his head, spraying everyone nearby. Nisama glared at him.

"Sorry," Kaiser Seahorse mumbled, looking like a kid who'd just gotten yelled at by his teacher… or by his dad, I guess. Lord of Dragons pointed at Kaiser Seahorse's face and laughed. Before I knew it, they'd gone back to their shoving contest.

I backed away before anyone noticed me. It's not like they wouldn't have welcomed me – just the opposite. But Nisama would have stopped licking beer off his face; he would have straightened up and started acting more Nisama-ish. They all would have insisted I join the party – Nisama watching like a hawk the whole time to make sure I didn't get hurt, to make sure I got treated with respect. And
his monsters would have played along, and somewhere along the way everything would have been less about him and more about me.

It was the way he was. He was probably never going to change; it was certain he didn't see a need to. But I didn't want to interrupt.

I'd told Kisara that I loved my brother for who he was. I hadn't lied, but I wished that one day he'd look in the mirror and find the person I saw. I'd told Mana that no one would ever look at him and see my Nisama instead of the person they were so sure they knew all about. I'd been honest, but I'd been wrong too.

There'd been that kiss…

I wasn't sure what Yami'd meant at the end of the duel when he'd gone on and on about finding out who he was. Except for being a little less crazy than when we'd met, he looked the same to me, so I wasn't sure what he'd been searching for.

But that wasn't important.

He wanted to be with my brother.

He'd kissed him in front of everybody. I laughed, thinking of Jounouchi and Honda's reaction back home when they caught on to that little bit of news. Maybe Yami had always cared about Nisama, he'd just had had a crazy way of showing it. Which made sense, given that he wasn't exactly what I'd call sane. Here, in the dark, I could admit, neither was my brother.

I left Nisama to enjoy himself. It was the second time today he'd had fun without me. I smiled to myself. It wasn't just me… my brother was growing up too.

I thought I'd gotten away clean; that no one had noticed me. I'd been wrong again. I shouldn't have been surprised that Saggi was the one monster not enjoying himself with the rest of the gang, but he was the last monster I wanted to see, much less bump into, not when I was in a good mood.

"Why'd you come over to me?" I asked. I wasn't going to pretend I liked him.

"You were willing to do whatever it took to stop him from playing me. You were willing to give up your life for his. Again." His lips twisted. Just like with my brother it was hard to tell if he was smiling or grimacing. "You're going back to your world tomorrow. You'll never have another chance to yell at me."

I opened my mouth. This opportunity was too good to miss. But I couldn't. The strategy had been my brother's all the way. Saggi had even tried to warn him.

I shook my head. "It's okay. Go back to the party."

He gave me that twisted grin again. "I have no place there. They are celebrating their survival. I am the monster who would have doomed them."

"I don't think that matters to them. You're part of my brother's deck."

"And you have wished me gone, many times."

I nodded. Saggi was right and we both knew it. But I thought again of Kisara asking me if I loved my brother faults and all. I did, but I also wanted him to be happier, to reach that true future he'd talk about late at night while I was falling asleep to the sound of his voice.
"I think you should join the others anyway," I said.

"I came here to give you a chance to revile me. Why are you standing my friend, instead?"

"Nisama's really changing." It came out a question. Saggi nodded in answer.

"Maybe I should give you the same chance. Because I don't think either of you are going anywhere unless you do it together."

He looked at me in surprise, then bowed as he headed off in the direction I'd last seen Nisama. I couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief as the night swallowed him up.

I headed over to the fountain. There was only one duel monster I felt like seeing tonight.

She was sitting by the fountain as if it was still a duel and I'd summoned her. There was practically no moon, but the fountain had lights shining at the bottom. She looked good.

"I was so scared," I said, glad it was dark and quiet enough to talk.

"I knew you'd win," Mana said softly.

"Well… I had some help." I tried to look modest before I realized she'd been talking about all of us, not just me.

She giggled. "Silly."

I grinned back. She leaned in and kissed me.

"I'm going to miss you so much," I said.

"Me too."

"It'll be okay, though. I mean, if Yugi was sitting here, I bet he'd say that we have our whole…" I'd started to say "our whole lives," then substituted, "everything ahead of us."

"Yugi's an idiot!" she said.

"I hope he's right, though."

"Me too. But he's still an idiot. It's easy for him to talk. I bet he's never felt anything like this," Mana said indignantly.

"I don't know… him and Yami kept talking about Anzu. She's the coolest girl I know – except for you."

"She can't even duel!" She stared at the water thoughtfully. "Hmmnn… I'll have to check her out. Hey, you won't be mad at me, the next time I help beat your brother?"

"What makes you so sure you're going to win? Nisama's pretty awesome, and it's not like Yami's never lost a duel. Besides, every winning streak – even one like Yugi's – has to end sometime. Nisama'll beat them both before he's through. But, I won't be mad. I'll be happy to see you." I grinned. "Will you be mad when I root against you?"

Mana stuck out her tongue. But she shook her head at the same time.

I thought of my brother saying he didn't want me eating my heart out for something I couldn't have.
He was right, but as horribly mean as it sounded he didn't have to worry. Mana was awesome. I kind of, sort of loved her… but she wasn't my world and I wasn't hers. As for what was going to happen… there's a difference between hurting and being in pain.

"I'm really going to miss you," I said.

"Me too."

"Friends?"

"Forever," she promised.

I was glad there wasn't anything more to say. I wasn't good at talking about stuff. I kissed her again. I was going to miss having someone to not talk to.

YUGI'S NARRATIVE

So many things had happened here that were going to be impossible to describe back home. This party was no exception. It was a little like being on the set of Star Wars at the end of "The Return of the Jedi" except that this was really happening.

Yami was moving through the celebration, stopping to speak to or hug each monster in his path. I didn't go over to him. He looked busy. And he'd been right. He wasn't another me, we didn't need to be part of each other to be friends, as if we still shared a body. It was fun watching him and just knowing that.

I wandered over to where my monsters had gathered for the moment. I'd just formed my deck; we were just getting to know each other; I'd played Yami's cards more often than my own. And yet they were my friends; I loved them. We had come through for each other, big time.

The Magician of Faith was sitting between the Silent Swordsman and the Silent Magician.

"Here I am as promised," she said.

I knew she couldn't speak for Anzu, and I still didn't know if there really was such a thing as destiny, but I couldn't help hoping she was an omen.

Musician King and Heavy Metal King started playing. We drifted over to dance. Well, I doubt Anzu would have called it dancing; it was more like a group hug set to music. We were all in a clump, swaying and bobbing up and down, sort of in time to the music. It was incredible. But then I saw the Ties of Friendship angel standing on the sidelines. I went to join her. She looked a little sad.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Seeing you has brought to mind the man who drew me," she said.

I nodded, suddenly remembering that Pegasus had supposedly drawn her in the image of his dead fiancée.

"In a way, I sort of wish he came with us," I said. "I don't think he'd go back though, if he saw you. You're what he was looking for the whole time."

"But I'm not his fiancée… I'm the Ties of Friendship angel. I bear her face but nothing more. Even Pegasus could not give me her soul. Some things are irreplaceable." She sighed. "Perhaps the fates were merciful to spare him our meeting. Many threads went into weaving today's victory. It's fitting
to remember the darker ones as well as the strands that stand out brightly against their backdrop."

"Wow! Talk about a mouthful! Couldn't you just say, 'Congratulations, Yugi?'" the Flame Swordsman teased as he joined us. He threw an arm around her shoulder, shaking her almost off her feet. Even the Ties of Friendship angel had to laugh.

Kaiba's monsters rolled past us, oblivious to whoever they were bumping into along the way. As Kaiba drew even with me, he said, "That's twice now you've saved the life card I would have left on the table."

I nodded.

"It wasn't like Duelists' Kingdom," he insisted, acting as though I'd been arguing with him – or maybe he was arguing with himself and I just happened to be there. "I wasn't holding my life card too loosely. I was just prepared to play it if I had to."

"I know," I said.

"You asked me once," Kaiba continued, more calmly now, more like he was talking to me and not himself, "if offering help was good, how could accepting it be bad? I told you that the coming battle would provide an answer."

"Did it?"

"Many answers," he replied. "Now I have to figure out what they mean."

"Me too. You told me stuff too – like that once you set your cards all that remains is to play them without doubt or hesitation."

One corner of Kaiba's mouth quirked upwards. "Taken together..." he said.

"They sound like a winning combination," I finished.

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

I wondered if I'd ever been part of a celebration before. I'd attended functions of almost every shape and description, of course. I'd stood at Gozaburo's side at all the affairs that greeted each announcement of whatever new and better way we'd discovered of killing people without giving them a chance to fight back honorably. I'd been there, a living promise that Kaiba's Corporation's reign as the chief murderer of the charnel house would continue undisturbed – all the while inwardly plotting my own much more personal, much more satisfying war.

I'd attended tournament parties, when I hadn't been busy throwing them myself. It was what was expected of me; it was business.

I couldn't remember celebrating with Yugi and his idiot brigade after DOMA. We'd saved the world, then gone our separate ways.

Tonight was different.

"It is indeed," Seto said inside my head.

He'd been quiet throughout that final duel. He'd sighed and said, "Some mistakes take centuries to undo," when I'd played Saggi. He'd cheered when we won.

"Why aren't you taking shape, even if it's shadowy and you can't hold it long? Some of these
monsters were yours first – and you haven't seen them in years," I said.

"I am saving my energy. And this is not the right time or place," he answered.

I grunted. He was part of my consciousness now, but that didn't mean I saw any reason to pry.

"My soul, if you will, was reborn to aid the pharaoh. Then you came here. I got to see the purpose I had given up everything to accomplish come to a triumphant conclusion, to be part of it. I got to see my love for the pharaoh expressed... to see what might have been had we been born to a different world... to learn beyond doubting that the barriers that had kept us apart had been of time and place, not of the heart. Every goal I was reborn to reach, every desire I had never dared to acknowledge, came to fruition."

I could sense him shaking his head in puzzlement. I waited, although I wasn't sure what more there was to say.

"There is an expression for this feeling, but I have never applied it to myself, have never applied it to others except in scorn. I feel at peace with the world."

"Is that good or bad?" I asked dubiously.

He laughed. "I don't know. It's unexpected."

So was the party. We had moved outside. My monsters had been willing to die on my orders. Now we were celebrating our survival. I'd spent years denying they were anything more than the cards in my deck. I'd lied. They were so much a part of me, they'd accepted my brush-offs and evasions; they'd known the moment I'd come back from Death-T that things had changed. We'd been in each other's blood all along, but I'd never felt it as strongly as I did tonight, now, here in their midst, bouncing off each other as quickly as water molecules turning to steam. I was glad no one expected me to talk.

Almost no one.

As usual Saggi had waited until the others had drifted back indoors, those that could fit, anyway.

"Are you going to keep me in your deck?" Saggi asked.

"Which course are you advocating?" I parried.

"No monster wants to be removed from play. But I don't think your friends will allow you to continue to employ your traditional strategy." He shrugged awkwardly, his hunched shoulder in evidence. "Decks evolve. It might be wiser."

"To avoid temptation like a drunk who's afraid to walk into a bar with his co-workers to order a ginger ale for fear of winding up face down in the gutter? As I said to Yami, as he threw back at me – I can't promise I'll never use necessity as an excuse again. But as long as I duel, you'll remain in my deck. It's up to me to use you well."

"Am I to be a test of your resolve? You would change the meaning you placed upon my shoulders?"

"It's a challenge," I agreed. "You are the last, bitter card in my hand. I can't erase that or deny that I may summon you again, too hastily, in anger and desperation."

"If the outcome were certain, there'd be no point in playing the game. That's as true for you as for the gods."
I shook my head. "Damn. I never said anything like this, even to Mokuba, even to Yami, even when I thought he was staying. And here I am talking to you."

"Some things are easier to say to me, who knows your weaknesses so well, than to Mokuba who you need to believe in your strength."

I nodded.

"Or even to Yami. Would admitting your vulnerabilities to him be a sign of weakness or strength for you? A challenge to be met or avoided?"

As had become usual since coming here, I had no ready answer for Saggi. As he melted into the darkness, I wondered: for how long had Saggi been daring me to look past him?

I was pretty sure Mokuba would be at the fountain. I was glad I didn't have company for the walk. I wondered if when I got back, staring down some competitor who thought he was a big threat was going to feel tame after facing… everything here… even myself.

I doubted it. I'd be busy.

It's funny how once you finish one battle you can see the next so clearly. As soon as I'd beaten Gozaburo, as soon as I'd won, as soon as Mokuba was safe, I'd handed my victory right back; I'd tried to kill the one person I'd sworn to give my life to protect. I'd paid with the shattered fragments of my heart; I tried ever since to atone for the unforgivable. Even after those brutal lessons, I'd wasted years fighting a dead man, trying to free myself from my past by grinding it under my heel.

Gozaburo had once stood behind me with a riding crop while I studied, as if I needed a threat to concentrate. Or maybe he was just trying to see if I could be rattled. Either way, he'd missed the boat. I'd been quick to learn every destructive lesson anyone or anything had cared to teach. I wasn't going to trash that quickness now. It had kept me and Mokuba alive and together; it had allowed us to thrive. In an odd way, it had led me here.

At the same time, it felt like all the duels I'd fought, all the times I'd battled Yami and Yugi or dueled by their side… all the matches we'd watched each other struggle through… had led to the one we'd fought yesterday. They'd all been slowly teaching other lessons, until I'd been ready to listen.

I'd come here to taunt Yami for being a coward, to yell at him for leaving. I'd stayed to make love with him. In a way it'd been easy here. I could talk to Yami; I could tell myself it was okay – he'd be staying, anyway. I could tell myself none of it mattered.

Except it did.

And I wanted it to.

We'd found a place where rivals and friends were one. Now it was up to us to recreate that space in our own world, to build something strong and enduring out of the flaws and doubts that had driven us here and accompanied us on this journey; to build a home on the rubble of our misguided plans and unwanted attempts to sacrifice our lives.

And then there was Mokuba…

I had no idea how I was going to be all the things Mokuba saw in me, all the things he wanted me to be. Except he'd made it clear. All he wanted was for me to be alive. I wondered if I could do that. The one opponent I'd never been able to master wasn't Gozaburo or even Yami, but myself.
It was time to try.

I wandered out to the fountain. It was a simple obsidian circle today, with a single spray of water shooting up from and then cascading back down to the center. Water lilies floated on its surface. The fountain's lip was wide enough to sit or lay on.

Mokuba and Mana were asleep, laying head to head, their feet in opposite directions. They looked like they'd nodded off while watching the stars and talking – inadvertently leaving me with a problem. When I'd walked out here, I figured I'd be carrying a sleeping Mokuba back. I doubted I could manage both him and Mana, but I was equally sure Mokuba wouldn't want me to just leave her there. I flipped through my deck in my mind, trying to remember who might be sober enough to carry Mana back. It was a safe bet neither Lord of Dragons or Kaiser Seahorse would be able to manage it without dropping her at least once, and the Battle Ox hadn't look much better.

"It seems we are fated to meet under the stars," Mahaado said as he joined me.

"We both have kids that need carrying. I still don't get where fate comes into it. Look at today. It was your battle plan that got us to Exodia Necross, not any god's. And it worked perfectly."

"I don't mind sharing the credit," he said mildly, as he walked over to Mana. He grunted as he lifted her. "They get heavier as they get older," he observed.

I shrugged in place of an answer. I wouldn't know. As Mokuba had gotten bigger, so had I; the ratio between our relative sizes had remained constant.

We headed off to the palace together. "Whenever I do this even now, I remember carrying her as a child," Mahaado said.

"I know. It's like he's still three," I agreed.

"It is comforting that some things remain the same."

Of course, after carrying Mokuba all the way back to the palace, as soon as I put him in bed, he turned over and opened his eyes.

"Nisama…" he mumbled.

"Shhhh… it's okay. You and Mana fell asleep. Mahaado took her, and I carried you back here. It's okay. Go back to sleep."

"Just like Band of Brothers," he said sleepily, closing his eyes. Before I could move, they snapped open again.

"I hated it… what you did," he said, wide awake now.

Oh shit.

I knew what was coming and cursed myself for a coward for wishing he'd stayed asleep. I didn't need Mokuba to tell me that if things had worked out the way I'd planned, I would have been the one walking through a door and leaving him and Yami behind. I couldn't even say I wouldn't do it again, not if their lives were on the line.

"It was awful… just waiting for you to try and throw yourself under a bus. Every time I played a card that could destroy trap cards against Exodia Necross, I wondered if I'd need it to use against you… in case you tried to pull a stunt like that."
I sat down on the bed.

"It wasn't a stunt," I said.

"I know. That's what makes it worse. It was hard letting you go off with Yami," Mokuba said. "But I hoped if you spent a couple of weeks yelling at him for giving up on his life too soon, maybe you'd listen to some of the stuff you were screaming."

"I was the one who brought you here. You were in danger. And… I almost killed you that time, Mokuba."

"Stop living in the past!" he yelled. "Are you going to die trying to make it up to me? Listen to me for once. I want you to stop before you kill yourself."

"I wasn't trying to kill myself. But the cards were all there in front of me. It was all I could see. No..." I said. "It was more than that. It was seeing them… Exodia Necross and Command Knight… I was like him, Mokuba. You said so yourself." I paused and looked down. "I'd rather die than be anything like him again."

Mokuba looked at me. His mouth opened in shock, then snapped shut.

"You're not. Don't you know that, Nisama?" he asked.

I stared at him, unsure of how to answer. Yami had said something similar but I'd shrugged it aside. That I'd tried to kill my brother never left the back of my mind, except when it was elbowing its way to the front. They didn't understand why I couldn't let go: I had to remember the person I'd been, because I'd sworn never to become him again. But I'd been fighting my phantoms so hard and for so long, it had never occurred to me before to stop and ask myself if I'd succeeded, if I was safe, whatever that meant. Some of my confusion must have slipped onto my face, because Mokuba came into my lap.

"You're not," he said, hugging me. "You won't. I know it. That's a promise."

He looked up, mischievous grin back in place.

"Some kiss," he said.

I stifled a laugh. As a way of redirecting the conversation, it was masterly. I looked away. I hadn't really thought about it, but I suppose being with Yami meant occasionally kissing him in front of Mokuba. It was an odd idea. I wasn't sure how to reply, though. Mokuba didn't seem to mind and I guess that's all that mattered.

"Thanks," I said awkwardly.

Mokuba laughed. "You're welcome." He paused, then added, "What's it like Nisama?"

"What?"

"Liking someone so much you'd barge into their after-life to tell them they were wrong."

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. I never thought about it before. It's unexpected. No, that's not quite true… it feels like a victory you're not quite sure you can hang on to."

"Of course you can," he said, hugging me again. "I love you, Nisama."

I nodded my head against his. "Me too, Mokuba. Always."
As Mokuba lay back down and closed his eyes, it hit me: Yami was taking everything I'd told him, everything we'd shared, right back to our world. When we stepped through that door, he'd be part of my life.

YAMI'S NARRATIVE:

The party passed in a blur, a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes and sounds. I moved through the room, making sure to offer my respects to every monster, to wish them well, to thank them for their loyalty and service. I was performing a pharaoh's duty for the first and last time in 3,000 years. Now that I was saying good-bye, I felt a sense of belonging for the first and last time.

I reached Mahaado by an open window. By accident or design, the other monsters left us alone, were out of earshot.

I thought of Kaiba saying that uncertainty was worse than loss. If I could not spare Mahaado the latter, I could at least try to alleviate the former.

"I can't stay. But I will miss you. There are regrets I'll carry with me as I leave this place, and the loss of your company is chief among them," I told him.

"I would wish your heart undivided, my liege," he replied.

"I wouldn't. This is one ache I will welcome. I can't be the person you lost, but with everything I am, with everything I've become, I love you, my old friend."

He did not name me "friend" in return, but he smiled and let me embrace him.

I'd said my farewells. The party was winding down. I was ready for tomorrow. Yugi and I walked back towards our rooms.

"I'm looking forward to tomorrow," Yugi said as we headed down the hallway. "I can't wait to see the looks on everyone's faces. I can't wait to see Jounouchi's mouth drop open – or for Honda to tell him to shut it before he catches flies. And I can't wait to see Anzu."

"She's a good friend," I said.

"I hope she wants to be more. Do you think…" Yugi asked.

I wanted with all my heart to say, "Yes." But I couldn't protect Yugi from being hurt if Anzu didn't want him. I could only protect him from the knowledge I'd been tempted to lie to make him feel better.

"I don't know, partner. I hope so."

"Yeah, me too," Yugi said. He squared his shoulders. "Well, we'll find out tomorrow. It's funny… this is what I've been waiting for the whole time we've been here – the day when we'd go home. But now… damn, I'm nervous."

I laughed. "You faced Exodia Necross without flinching."

"Asking Anzu out is scarier."

I said good night to Yugi and entered my bedroom. I assumed Kaiba was seeing Mokuba safely asleep. I wondered if today had made him revisit his conclusions, had made him realize he wasn't alone. I wasn't sure. As we head towards our future we carry the past with us every step of the way.
Although I could barely remember him, I'd had a father to guide me. I'd had counselors and a guard eager to sacrifice themselves to protect me. Later, I'd had Yugi. I'd always had someone I could draw strength from.

Kaiba had always stood alone. He'd had a charge, but never a protector, never someone whose main concern was his welfare.

I loved him, but I couldn't change his past. Time does not flow backwards.

But, as always, Kaiba seemed to exist to prove and re-prove that if life is unpredictable, the human spirit is the most incalculable of all. I'd expected him to come in, still flush with our victory, but he looked thoughtful.

"I figured you'd be mad," he said.

"I was," I assured him. "When I saw you so ready to die, to leave us all… It took me until the end of the duel to remember – I'd done the same to you."

I'm not going to promise I wouldn't do it again. I can't."

"And I'll get just as furious with you every time. There's one thing I wonder, though… did you make that move because you needed to be hit over the head until you figured out we aren't going to let you throw your life away no matter what? Was part of you willing to risk death to learn that your life isn't a meaningless chip –that no matter how careless you were, we weren't going to let it slip through your fingers; we weren't going to let you fall? Have you been asking this question, been looking for this answer, ever since that day when you stood on the ledge of Pegasus' tower?"

"I don't know. Friendship… trust… I get why you and Yugi harp on them all the time. But they just seem like such fragile things to hang your hopes on." He shrugged. "They never worked out well for me."

"When?"

He shrugged again. I waited a moment, but he didn't answer. Maybe he didn't need to. We both knew what he was referring to. "Did they ever offer friendship? Did you ever truly trust them?" I asked, careful to keep my voice neutral.

He snorted at that. "No, of course not. Only a fool would have trusted my relatives or Gozaburo."
His lips twitched suddenly in a fleeting smile. "I hate it when you do that."

"Do what?" I asked, careful not to show any sign of my own amusement.

"Make me feel like a blind fool while barely saying a word yourself. Very efficient. You're right – it was only common sense not to trust people who were so obviously untrustworthy. And I concede, it may be equally short-sighted to refuse to trust people who have proven again and again they know what loyalty means."

He came over, put his hands on my shoulders. "I never loved anyone but Mokuba. I never expected that to change. And as much as I want this, I'm not going to pretend it feels natural." He released me and walked away. "After Gozaburo jumped through that window… I let everything I'd fought for slip right through my fingers. I let that bastard win."

"If you're telling me you're not up to this challenge, I won't believe you."

"No, I'm saying I'm never going to let anything defeat me again. Not like that. Not on something this
crucial. Not without a fight. It's just that…" He stopped pacing, turned around and shrugged. "It's just like Alcatraz…" His voice trailed off.

"Why?" I asked cautiously, as if keeping him talking was a new game.

"Mokuba told me to let my hatred and bitterness sink into the ocean with my Duel Tower." He paused again, then said, half-defiantly. "I've never lied to Mokuba. I didn't know if I could do that. I still don't."

"What did Mokuba tell you?"

"That I could do anything. That he was with me. That we'd do it together."

"And what do you think I'll say, now?"

His lips twitched again. "The same. You're very predictable."

"Then why are you always surprised? So, it seems we will be both be heading into uncharted territory. Perhaps we were fated to do so together."

"I don't believe in fate," he said.

Does destiny reside in the inexorable flow of events, or in the free will of each individual player? Neither Kaiba nor I would ever truly know. Unlike Kaiba, I was content that there were some things that would remain outside of my understanding.

I smiled and reached for him again.

"There's one thing I'm sure of," I said, before my lips met his. "You taste like the future."

For the first time my kiss was a promise. For the first time he flinched, lifted his head up like a horse shying from a rope. Then he dropped his head to mine and claimed my lips. "No," he said when he finally ended his kiss. "I refuse to be a coward. This is stupid. We won. I'm not handing it back."

"Sometimes victory can feel like it's set you adrift. That's how I felt after defeating Zork, after winning a past for my people and a future for Yugi. It was like being in a windswept dessert, where the horizon seemed endless. It was almost as if my own sense of who I was and where I belonged was lost in its vastness. I turned my back on that expanse and came here. I promise, I will not do so again, although I do not know the way forward any more than you. I've always had titles, not names… pharaoh… King of Games… Now, I seem to have ceded them all. This is a new vista for me as well. And there is no one I'd rather explore it with."

"Well," Kaiba said, "we won today, and winning's always good. Besides, a dragon told me that it makes sense to celebrate the triumphs that come your way. And I definitely know how I want to celebrate this one."

Kaiba looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. He threw back his head and laughed, "So you mean we're finally going to screw in a bed?"

I stared at him, wondering if I would ever get used to his mercurial changes of mood, as unpredictable as the life I had chosen.

"Well, it is the first time we're indoors…" I said.

"The mausoleum was indoors, too."
"How can someone be right about so many things, and yet continually miss the point?" I asked with only partly feigned exasperation.

"And what point is that?" Kaiba smirked.

"This one..." I said as I pulled his head down and kissed him again.

I pushed off his coat, remembering the way it pooled around our feet in the field the first time we'd made love; I stripped off his shirt. I'd once said that we had to come into our future as naked as when we were born.

And yet, there was nothing innocent about the look in Kaiba's eyes.

But something of that elusive quality remained in the way he followed me to the bed, in his pliancy, alien in such an unyielding person.

The bed was surprising in its softness, the cool feel of the linen sheets, exotic.

We were clean.

It was all the things we were going to take for granted back home, but here they felt new. And yet, I couldn't wait for this to become routine, for it to simply be a part of our lives, for us to shut the bedroom door behind us each night, and race to see whose clothes hit the floor first.

I looked at Kaiba, naked now, lying beneath me as I straddled him... his breath rasping as my hand moved over his torso, pausing to play with his nipples, to trace the outline of the bites and marks I'd left on his neck, his chest.

I wanted it all. I wanted to take him, to prove to my rival what I was made of; I wanted to drive him out of that harsh, combative shell, only to engender a new fierceness, one that ached for a partner. I wanted to claim him as if he was my treasure, to make love to him, to guard him as if he was my own. I wanted to lie in his arms, spent, as if the lifetime that was beckoning me was happening all at once.

I was hungry... for Kaiba... for us... I was giddy... intoxicated with the future... with the man lying with such suspicious pliancy beneath me.

I leaned down, flicking out my tongue to taste him; letting it alight where it would, collecting moans as if they were trophies, until Kaiba yanked me up and kissed me, his hands now as insistent as my own. Although we weren't yet joined, our bodies were moving in unconscious unison, rubbing against each other... a hint, a promise, an expectation.

"Tell me love," I said, not noticing until later how the endearment slipped out, "tell me what you want."

"You... Everything."

He was my rival. The one person who'd always been able to dish out all I could throw. Nothing could change that. The feel of him beneath me, arching up to meet me, the feel of moving over him, of straining against him, of thrusting into him, of my hand sheathing him in turn...

Even if I hadn't been on the edge, the sight of him would have driven me over it... his blue eyes drifting shut only to have his lids flicker open, unfocused, almost blank with pleasure. Then we were both gasping, unable to scream except silently, even though the need for stealth had passed, as we came.
Afterwards, I fell forward on top of him, our legs still tangled together. I could hear his heart beating as I lay on his chest. I reached out to trace the veins in his arm, to lock my fingers through his. It would be nice, I thought, to stay like this all night; to fall asleep entwined.

Not surprisingly, Kaiba was the first to come down to earth.

"As fun as that was, it doesn't change a thing. I'm going to suck at this, you know," Kaiba announced.

I nodded against his chest and laughed to myself. Kaiba was right. There were probably going to be days when it would be all I could do to hold onto my temper, when I'd have to bite my lip to keep from screaming at him that I wished Yugi had drawn any card but the Ties of Friendship. There might even be days where I'd fail. But just like Kaiba came to find me, just like he had always come to find me, to challenge me to keep going, I'd do the same for him.

I considered his words and laughed, again. Then it struck me, that for all his typical in-your-face abrasiveness, Kaiba had done something unique.

"Have you ever admitted to anything less than perfection before?" I asked.

"No. And I don't plan on making a habit of it, now either." Kaiba paused. I lifted my head and looked at him as he added, each word slow and deliberate, "I couldn't admit to any doubts before. Besides Mokuba, I never had anyone I trusted before, someone who would look at my flaws and use that knowledge not to attack me, but to learn what to defend."

I nodded, unsure of what to say, and dropped my head back to rest on his body.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Kaiba said after a companionable pause.

"What?" I asked, enjoying the feel of his arms around me, of his hand lazily stroking my back.

"We started out saying this was all a moment out of time, something to do to say we'd done and say goodbye, like we were two planes going in opposite directions, like what we were feeling was a virus racing through a computer system before it gets wiped out. And now, we've left all that bullshit behind… all that's left is us… our lives."

"Wonderfully weird," I agreed. "Do you remember giving me your Devil's Sanctuary card in my duel against Malik? I could feel our souls crossing with the exchange. It may have taken me a while, but I'm finally here to claim it, now that I can do so honestly."

"And I told you, I only believe in what I can hold," he said, tightening his grip.

"Then it seems like we have reached an accord," I said, as I kissed him again.

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Thanks to Bnomiko for immense amounts of patience and encouragement, not to mention taking the time to catch all the times my semi-broken "N" key skipped!

Thanks to Bahen for pointing out that Mokuba might have a few things he'd like to say (or as it turned out, NOT say) to Saggi.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: As you can see, this isn't quite the end. The last chapter finishes the story, though. I think I'm already starting to feel nostalgic…
I usually plan things out far in advance, starting with the end of the story (for some reason I have to know where I'm going to figure out how to get there.) Then, as I was finishing the duel it occurred to me just how many cans of worms had gotten opened I the course of all the duels of the past few chapters, and I realized that the characters needed more time to sort things out. For that reason, I wanted to have all four narrators and to have them all start at the same place, but see everything through different eyes, and have different experiences. I hope it didn't feel repetitive.

I particularly wanted to give Kaiba and Mokuba a chance to talk (even more than I wanted to give Kaiba and Yami a chance to screw in a bed!) One thing I like about fanfiction is that it lets you explore things that were only hinted at in the manga/anime. In the early manga, Mokuba simply follows Kaiba blindly. After Death-T you see him realize that his brother needs a different kind of help. He tries to provide this, like by trying to get his brother to understand friendship and trust, to realize that he can depend on Mokuba, but since this is new to Mokuba too and a change in the way they relate to each other, you can feel him sort of fumbling his way through it. Like I sometimes think his rooting for his brother to win almost puts an additional burden on Kaiba, to fulfill his brother's expectations. Ironically I think Mokuba cheers so hard, not because he cares if Kaiba wins or not, but because he loves him and wants him to be happy – and can't help but to have come to the conclusion that winning makes Kaiba happy.

During the course of Yugioh, from Death-T onwards, you can see their relationship evolving as Mokuba tries to take care of his formidable older brother. And I wanted in the story, as Mokuba gets older, to have him learn to stand up to and not simply for his brother.

Sometimes when I write stuff just comes into my head and feels natural – but it surprises me nonetheless. So I have to admit I was both surprised and amused that Kaiba's monsters turned out to be the loudest, most obnoxious, and drunkest in the bunch. But also, I guess they were the ones that came the closest to being removed from play permanently, so maybe they had the most steam to blow off. Although I didn't consciously set out to create a contrast, Yugi's are more like a gang at a high school prom.

Please review. It's almost the end of the story and I'd love to know what you think…
To paraphrase Louise Rosenblatt, "a story's just ink on a page until a reader comes along to give it life." This in my way of saying, I'd really like to know what you think, and appreciate all reviews.

CHAPTER 33: HOME AGAIN, HOME AGAIN

KAIBA'S NARRATIVE

I awoke slightly before dawn. Yami and I had actually spent a night in a bed. It was comfortable, lying here next to him. It was another first – the first time we'd both been asleep at the same time. I supposed I could get used to it.

Once, I'd asked for a dog, I'd asked for a home for Mokuba and myself. I was wary of asking for anything that mattered.

And here Yami was, without my asking for a damn thing.

It was ironic. I'd longed for Yami to come back with us, to come back with me, with an intensity that had seemed to insure it would never happen. But it was only now, thinking of him as a person and not as another loss, that I realized that I… liked him. If I was going to have to deal with another person in my life, I was glad it was him.

Mokuba was oxygen, as necessary to life as the air I breathed. Yami was incense – dizzying, intoxicating. He left me light-headed. He was a matter of choice, not requirement. It was a curious, subtle distinction. I'd never wanted anyone before.

It was unexpected.

Yami had known my hesitation and doubts. He hadn't cut me any slack. If I had believed in omens this would have been a good one.

I'd reached the steel that lay at his core, the steel that was seemingly belied by his bewildering flashes of gentleness. I'd once believed that to be a reflection of Yugi, like a cheap plating over a truer metal. I'd been wrong. It was a veneer, but it was bonded with the metal that existed at Yami's core. I'd grown accustomed to his alien kindness, but the steel I understood.

It was familiar.

I walked to the window. The sky was already turning a lighter shade of gray. It would be dawn soon. I got dressed and headed for the door. I looked at Yami. I hoped he'd understand when he
woke up alone. Yami and I had the future. I couldn't watch this last sunrise with anyone but Kisara.

I found her, as expected, in the courtyard. I sat down, leaning against her as usual. "Now comes the hard part," I said. "I wanted Yami to come back more than I've ever wanted anything but Mokuba's safety."

"But…" Kisara said, a question in her voice.

"How in hell am I going to manage to do this? To… care for someone besides Mokuba… to trust him? Even though he's the most trustworthy person I know." I shook my head in frustration. "But I'm not losing this game, now that I've won."

"Maybe you should try telling Yami that."

I smirked. "I'm ahead of you on that score."

"You have always been ahead of me, just slightly out of reach."

I stroked her side, enjoying the cool, smooth feel of her scales. "You know… sometimes I'd pull your card out, just to stare at it."

"I know."

"It's not even like I said anything."

"I heard every word."

"Soon you'll just be a card in my hand again," I said. "I'll miss you, miss sitting here like this. I wish I could take you back with me."

"That would be a sight to see, little one." She tried to give her chuckle; it came out sounding almost like a sigh. "But you can never truly lose me. I promise, if you listen, you'll always hear my voice. Am I not your faithful servant? Your pride and soul?"

"You're all that and more."

Yami came out of the palace. He nodded when he saw me. I suddenly realized – he'd come to find me. He'd known where I'd be. I shook my head and managed to keep from grinning.

It was so damn, fucking new.

"Yugi's getting Mokuba," he said.

"Thanks."

He looked from me to Kisara. "You're going to miss it here?" It was somewhere between a question and a statement, but I answered it anyway.

"Some things," I admitted, grinding out the words. I refused to look away, even when I saw the expected sympathy sneak onto his face.

"I know," he said. "This isn't my home any more, but I'll miss the people who have made it theirs."

He walked up to me and kissed me lightly on the lips; one of those bewildering kisses that felt more affectionate than sexual. In some ways having made a friend was even odder than having acquired a lover – even when they were both the same person.
"It can't replace the comrades you're leaving, but I'm glad we're going home together," he said.

"As am I," Kisara said decisively. "It seems some things can be delayed, but not truly defeated. Is this a victory for destiny or a celebration of its defeat?"

I opened my mouth to weigh in on that count, but she snorted and added, "It was a rhetorical question."

Mokuba emerged from the palace, accompanied not just by Yugi, but by Ready for Intercepting's knight and the Nobleman of Crossout. They bowed to me, but couldn't stop hugging him. Judgment of Anubis' weird dog was wagging its dark green tail and butting its head against Mokuba's leg.

The courtyard was filling up quickly. The combined monsters of our deck had turned up to see us off. It made for an impressive gathering. Even Exodia was there.

I couldn't help but notice most of my deck looked worse for wear this morning. Lord of Dragons and Kaiser Seahorse seemed to be holding each other up; the Hitosame Giant's one eye was blood-shot; my Battle Ox was groaning softly, as if he'd just noticed that he'd spent most of the night before running into things (and other monsters) head-first. Even Spear Dragon's beige underbelly had taken on a greenish tinge.

I had a feeling that from now on, whenever I summoned them, I'd see them like this.

Exodia didn't do anything as obvious as clear his throat, but he got everyone's attention.

"You may remain here if you wish," Exodia said to us, inclining his head slightly. "You have all earned that right."

I'd already figured that out. It didn't matter. Like I'd told Exodia Necross, I had a brother to raise, a company to run and, unexpectedly, a life to live – and none of it was happening here.

"And as you have seen, this world will conform to your wishes," he continued.

I grinned at Exodia. "Don't worry. By the time I get through with it, so will the world on the other side of this door."

"Then all that remains is our farewells," Exodia said, leading the way to the edge of the settlement. I frowned, considering the logistics. It had taken us days to walk here. Even on dragon-back, it'd take us hours to get back to that door. Or rather, it should have. But when we reached the edge of the settlement, there was the door. As an added touch, my briefcase and Yugi's obelisk were still right beside it.

"What gives?" I asked. "That door was kilometers away when we arrived."

Mahaado raised an eyebrow. "Things change," he said blandly.

I took a step towards the door, expecting Yami to follow, but he had other ideas. He turned to Mahaado. Yami looked like he was trying to think of something to say.

"Thank you," was what he finally came up with.

"No thanks are necessary. You are my liege," Mahaado answered.

"Loyalty might be a pharaoh's due, but not friendship or acceptance. You have given me both in full measure, and it is for these gifts that I thank you. Keep this realm well."
"This place will always be here, should you return to grace it."

Yami paused, then asked hesitantly, "Do you think we may meet again?"

"As an old rival and comrade was fond of saying, even fortunetellers can not see all ends. The gods may once again choose to be kind. So I will hope, and hope is another thing that is eternal."

Mokuba waved at Mana, but he stayed at my side. I put my hand on his shoulder. He reached up to give it a small squeeze. He'd sounded all right last night. In some ways he has more sense than me. You could see Mana'd been crying. But she managed a smile. As a practice girlfriend, she hadn't been a bad choice.

"I guess it's time for both of us to be where we belong again," she said. "And I don't even remember your world anymore. I can't imagine being in a place where I couldn't change the seasons or the color of my hair."

Suddenly the desert became a glade, complete with improbably big flowers and stupid long eared rabbits hopping through it. Her blonde hair had turned an even brighter shade of yellow. Like the meadow, it was a little overdone.

"If you plan to persist in this extravagance, I suppose it is time to train you properly," Mahaado said with a sigh.

Yugi gestured towards the door and asked, "No time's passed out there?"

"None worth mentioning," Exodia answered. "Jounouchi has started to yell; the tears have begun forming in Anzu's eyes."

"Anzu's crying?" Yugi screamed with totally unnecessary alarm.

"Not yet. But that is her intent."

The door was still shut. I wondered what was going to happen next. It was starting to get annoying, just standing here. I walked to my briefcase, as if in claiming it, I could reclaim my life, but I should have known I wasn't getting out of here without one last piece of video game bullshit. As soon as my fingers touched the handle, I felt an electric shock run through me, knocking me flying. I struggled to my feet, trying not to gasp for breath. It wasn't just the shock. I felt different.

I didn't really notice him, not most of the time, so it was surprising how quickly I noticed he was gone. Or not gone, exactly… just gone from my mind. Seto was standing in front of me instead, shadowy as ever. I could hear Yami and Mokuba gasp behind me. I guess everyone could see him now.

"You mind telling me what's going on?" I hissed.

"Have you forgotten the Holy Elf's words, after parroting them for weeks? 'Of the many things you may find, you can bring back only one,'" Seto quoted softly. "Sometimes the most obvious answer is the hardest to find."

"What the fuck…" I turned around ready to strangle Exodia for playing such a cheap trick, but Yami got in first. Only he was yelling at Seto.

"No! I can't let you do this," Yami screamed.

"You must," Seto replied. "Because of your sacrifice, I lived to raise a family, to see our nation grow
strong under my care. All I wished for you, graced my life instead. And yet, despite each day's joys, not a day went by that I did not miss you, did not mourn your absence. Despite all I lived to see and do, each day was one I was living it in your stead. After 3,000 years, you can not deny me the chance to repay that debt. It is all I have dreamed of for millennia, though 18 years of disembodied waiting. Live well, my friend and prince. The gods are merciful, but they do not give infinite chances. Do not miss life for a second time."

Yami didn't like it. I could see it in his face. But he didn't refuse Seto.

Seto turned to me. "You understand necessity as well as I. But it is not always an excuse – sometimes it is an opportunity. I had a life outside. I lived it completely. I can't pass the door again. My unfinished business lies on this side; my second chance is here. For the first time in two lifetimes I am unfettered by obligation."

Seto was, as he'd said last night, at peace with the world. We'd probably never been farther apart. I knew that when I went through that door, I was never going to feel this safe, this much at home again. I was going to miss him and Kisara. I was going to miss this feeling. Brief as it was, I'd gotten used to it. I understood now what the Holy Elf had meant by saying we could take only one thing back with us. But if Seto was giving up a chance that had never really existed and that he didn't want anyway, and I was giving up a feeling of belonging that I'd never really had, how could that be a sacrifice?

I must have mumbled that aloud, because the Holy Elf answered, "I said 'offering' not 'sacrifice.' You have offered many things: yourself, your trust, your life…even your odd magic of the numbers. Your companions have offered their friendship and their love. Are these things not of value?"

"The gods do not give gifts without exacting their price," Seto said, much more gently than I've ever said anything in my life – even to Mokuba. "But only you can determine how high that price will be. It's not everyone who can best Exodia – or the gods for whom he speaks – in a bargain. Kisara and I can not follow you. But the lessons you learned here are yours… and you are the only one who can decide whether to discard them or add them to your hand. Understanding, as always, knows no boundaries."

"Seeking and finding are two different things," the Holy Elf reminded me.

I nodded. In the end, I'd found more than Yami. Although he'd been my goal, I'd found that I could walk away from obsession, that I had friends if I chose to accept them, that I had a future if I could meet its challenges, could learn not just to fight, but to win on this new battlefield.

And no one could take that from me.

No one but myself. And I wasn't backing down to anything, not even to my own worst impulses. I hadn't listened to them while fighting the Sphinx Teleia, and I wasn't going to start now.

"As long as I have the confidence to play this hand to its fullest, despite my doubts and hesitations. As long as I don't cling to my own anger and distrust because it's familiar. As long as I don't turn back," I said to Seto, finally understanding the Orpheus myth I had been forced to memorize. I almost smiled. It wasn't the kind of challenge I was used to, but it was a challenge nonetheless. I remembered Kisara saying, "The harsher the battle, the sweeter the victory." It was time to see if she was right.

"Life is uncertainty," I added. "I can't ask Yami to accept that and refuse for myself."

My head hurt. Yami put his hand on my shoulder. His touch reminded me, we'd have the rest of our
lives to figure it out on our own.

"Loyalty survives. So does friendship. So does love," Kisara said. "Some virtues are eternal. They will not keep you safe, but they are a comfort in the night."

I looked at Yugi and Mokuba. "I'll try to remember," I said.

"And when you forget, don't worry – we'll be glad to remind you," Mokuba laughed.

Seto gave me my most arrogant grin before turning it on Mahaado, "For all their air of mystery, even spellcasters can not see the future clearly. I do not pretend to have gleaned what it will bring, wherever it alights. If life offers no guarantees, death grants even fewer. But I believe we will be reunited one day."

Seto turned to Kisara. "It is good to speak to you without an intermediary."

She snorted. "So… you did not truly disappear. I had no hint any part of you had survived."

"It took 18 years to come this far, to be able to shape my being even if only into this shadow-form." Seto smiled. "It seems whatever the age, I can not resist fighting fate."

"And winning," Kisara said proudly.

"Not entirely," Seto responded, gesturing to his already fading body. "It has taken me 3,000 years, but I have learned to appreciate the concept of a partial victory." He paused. "I have missed you."

"And yet you did not deign to enter my consciousness; you did not chose to make me the host and home for what remains of your spirit," Kisara observed, "for all that you named me your pride and soul."

"I did not think it was fitting. Dragons are not made to be beasts of burden."

"Carrying your spirit within my soul would be no burden. I too, have learned to appreciate partial victories," Kisara said.

"I've often wondered what it would be like to be part of a dragon; to soar above the world, to feel it rush past me, as inconsequential as the wind." Seto gave a ghost of a smile. "Perhaps it is time that I learned to fly."

He faded away until I couldn't even pretend to see his outline any more.

Kisara smiled and murmured, "Rest for now, little one. We have all the time in the world."

For the first time, she wasn't talking to me. I wanted to listen, to see if I could still hear his voice, then I decided to accept that his voice was my own.

It was time to go home. But I wasn't surprised Yugi was the one who found the words first.

"Come on guys," he said. "Our lives are waiting for us on the other side."

He was right. It was strange though… I'd been fighting all my life only to wind up on a battlefield that had no enemy. It would make for an interesting victory.

I turned to Yami and grinned. "When we go through that door, the real duel starts."

Yami smiled back. "Yes. The road to our future battle lies ahead. It's been a long wait, but it's finally
time to go home."

You could say that this adventure had reached its end – but what are endings for if not to make new beginnings of?

As they turned towards it, the door swung open. Kaiba felt the weight of his responsibilities settle, donned as unconsciously as his trench coat. He squared his shoulders, ready to add the challenge of including Yami onto an agenda that was suddenly less controlled, less knowable.

Yami looked at the door, at the scarcely imagined future that lay behind. It was ironic he thought, that he had retraced his steps in order to move forward.

And Mokuba wore the expression of a child returning home from summer camp – after having just said goodbye to his first girlfriend. You could say it was only puppy love, a child-sized version of the real thing, but puppy love is real enough – if you're one of the puppies in question.

Kaiba and Mokuba and Yugi had found what they sought, and more than they had expected, but there is in every ending, even the happiest, a kernel of sadness; a faint air, as shadowy and intangible as Seto's form, of what might have been.

And yet, for all his faults, Kaiba was right in holding that it is the future that matters. He saluted Kisara and strode towards the door, as he had promised, not looking back, seeing only the goal line ahead of him.

And so they stepped through the now opened door, returned to the sounds of Jounouchi's incoherent shouts and Anzu's cries of relief... were greeted by the sight of Isis' raised eyebrows and Honda's open-mouthed stare.

For all his eagerness to step into his future, Yami – like Orpheus – could not resist a backwards glance. But the gods were merciful – or perhaps they were still too busy replaying their game and celebrating their victory to notice his lapse. He was granted a last look at Mahaado, as his councilor put his arm around Mana's shoulders, as she cried against his chest. He was given a final glimpse of the pride and sadness in Kisara's eyes as she watched Kaiba heading, as always, towards his future.

Then Yami was through the door with the rest, and was too busy being slapped on the back by Jounouchi and Honda, was too wrapped up in being lifted off the ground with the force of their hugs to see anything else. Anzu gulped out the name he had given up and sobbed as she hugged him, only to end up on Yugi's shoulder as he mumbled "Anzu..." over and over, his head smashed against her chest; her breasts not quite hiding the blissful smile on his face.

Yami reached out to Kaiba, who had walked through the crowd untouched, as if his duster was made of Teflon. He held on to the taller duelist's arm as if he was the one who had come all this distance to find Kaiba and bring him home, not – as Kaiba was only too ready to point out later – the other way around. Or maybe Yami simply reached out to pull Kaiba into his life and hold him there, safe and secure.

Then as naturally as one second follows the next, his other arm pulled Yugi close. Mokuba followed like a satellite, somehow ending up wedged in next to Kaiba. Then everyone was in a clump, jumping and hugging and pounding each other's backs, until Yugi couldn't help but notice it was just like the dance the night before, except there was no music but their shouts and laughter.

Unnoticed, behind them, a door closed and disappeared.

It's time to write the traditional ending line, but I have come too far to tell so large a lie. Because as
Yugi and even Kaiba had known, as Yami had recently relearned, there is no "happily ever after." For eternity belongs to a far colder domain than ours.

There is only, if we are lucky, life – with all its complexities and contradictions and uncertainties.

And that is enough. It is everything.

It is enough to say:

"And so they lived…”

__Thanks to Bnomiko__ for not just for betaing this story, but for listening to me obsess about which would be the best duel monster to fight or have a beer with, and encouraging me whenever it seemed we'd never make it to the finish line. She not only made the story better, she made the process more fun.

__Thanks to Kagemihari__ for telling me to begin…

**AUTHOR’S NOTES:** Not surprisingly, I guess I'm in a summing up mood… It's easy to blame Gozaburo for Kaiba's truck-load of baggage. But one thing I really admire about Kazuki Takahashi's creation of Kaiba is that his character shows how the effect of repeated loses and abandonments have helped to create the angry, bitter, arrogant, hyper-competitive, driven, emotional idiot we all know and love. And since many of his most self destructive beliefs – like that you can't trust people and that having and revealing, emotion is a weakness – actually pre-dates Seto's adoption, I wanted to look at that earlier period in his life. Besides, from _The Outsiders_ and _Tex_ to _Yugioh_, I've always had a soft spot for fictional brothers who are trying to raise each other (insert smiley face here). And of course, really loving the cards and what they say about the characters, it was an unexpected pleasure to be able to bring them to life.

It's funny, with Yami, one of the things I've always found interesting is that he's this incredibly powerful and commanding person, who's also a total amnesiac, and really has to feel his way through who he is. But once he's done that, once he's figured out who he is, I wondered how his memories of his previous life would fit in with the person he's grown to become. He's also totally decisive when on familiar ground – like saving the world or winning a duel, but seem adrift when just asked to _be_, instead of being asked to _do_. I thought that led to his decision to go to the afterlife, but I also think it's one of the main conflicts in his character and wanted to explore it.

The moment when I end a story is such an odd one. Then again, writing stories sometimes seems like such a strange thing. Sometimes I try to figure out why I write. The short answer is because I love these guys and want to give them new adventures. The flippant answer is because Seto Kaiba clearly needs my dubious help in sorting out his life. The long answer is that contradictory as it seems, sometimes the only way to say some things directly is through the absurdly roundabout method of making a story of it. It's as if the characters and even the story itself are the only way to say things I could never find the words for on my own.

It's probably not a secret by now that I thought the end of the manga/anime left a lot unexplored. This story was my chance to do that – or rather to let Kaiba and Mokuba and Yami and Yugi do that for themselves, because in the end, it's up to the four of them to decide what meaning they will give to their lives. It was a long road, from their world to Mahaado's and back. I felt like I was discovering and recording it all at the same time.

For me, the downside to writing has always been, besides the general scarcity of time, that it can feel isolating. And yet, the act of posting, the act of _telling_ a story feels so communal. I can't begin to say
how much I appreciated the people who responded and reviewed and offered support, asked questions, and made suggestions. It really made a difference to me, not just because you made the story stronger by asking questions about things I'd never considered, by getting me to think about things in a new light, and by correcting my (hopefully few) dumb mistakes (I still can't believe I put the wrong army in the Trojan Horse) but most of all by making me feel like we were all sitting around the cyber equivalent of a camp fire. And a story just doesn't feel like a story to me until it's been told. Thank you for listening. And, of course, if you've made it this far, please review. I'd love to hear from you.

Possibly because I never seem to want to let go of a story when it's done, I usually end each story with a description of what I expect to be working on next, and I'm a sucker for tradition, even self-created ones, so…

Upcoming story ideas:

**Story #1:** It's hard to talk about this one since it's very short (3 or 4 chapters), hopefully funny, and actually has plot twists, so let's just say that Yami tests out the idea that his heart really isn't measured by his size, and Kaiba learns that inconsequential sex can have consequences.

**Story #2:** This story takes place after Alcatraz and goes off in its own direction. Kaiba takes Yami's suggestion to defeat his inner demons a little too literally, and designs a VR game where the players own fears determine the setting. Then he decides that a toned down version with proper safeties might be commercially viable. Except, nothing ever gets deleted in cyberspace, so some old enemies find new allies to try and turn his game into reality.

If you've enjoyed "The Newly Revised Book of the Dead" I hope you check them out when I post.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!