Promenade

by Ocianne

Summary

"There are more things in Heaven and Earth..." and Kaito's on a trip through all of them. Can he deal with a broody black-cloaked stranger, a stubborn detective, and his world repeatedly turning upside down and still keep what's left of his sanity?

Notes

This story began in the wake of Kingdom Hearts II, and was finished the day before the release of 358/2 Days. A simple what-if image, it spawned into rather an epic, divided into two parts: Promenade, covering the events of Kingdom Hearts II, and sequel The Way Home, picking up immediately after to account for a change in focus. Promenade ends on a cliffhanger and The Way Home is in-progress, so if you only read finished stories, please be patient and come back again sometime. If you don't mind waiting for updates, please join me for the adventure.

Promenade

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The night had been a resounding success—a flawless heist, a merry police chase across several blocks as a spectacle for the crowd, and then vanishing unimpeded to the comforting anonymity of the night.

Kaitou Kid perched on the edge of one of Tokyo's numerous skyscrapers, absently tossing a round-cut amethyst upwards and then snatching it back out of the air. Not the right jewel, but one more possibility to cross off of his ever-growing list. What had an old American inventor once said?

*I've not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.*

"Just make it gems, and the quote would be accurate."

"Which quote would that be?"

At the unexpected voice, Kid fumbled and nearly lost his prize to gravity. Deftly recovering and pocketing the amethyst, he managed with some effort to retain his poker face, and stood. Turning as slowly as he dared to meet his undetected visitor, he casually crossed his arms in easy reach of his glider controls. Anyone who could sneak up on him was definitely dangerous, possibly an enemy, and he would be damned before he would let himself be trapped without an escape route.

When he saw the speaker, however, he raised a skeptical eyebrow. A zippered robe with a hood obscured almost all identifying features; the only thing he could be sure of was that his opponent was male.

"Interesting choice of costume. I doubt you're a friend of the miniature detective, so should I ask you to relay my fondest death wishes to Snake?"

He received a chuckle in response, dark and liquid and with a hint of danger, but strangely free of malice. "I don't know anyone around here, let alone snakes. I was doing some scouting when I saw you. I have to say, that's quite the shiny bauble you have there."

"You were just looking around, and you saw me," Kid repeated in a flat, disbelieving tone. "I'm over thirty stories up, and you don't look like you can fly. I'm curious as to how you got here in the first place."

"I have excellent night vision. As for how, well," the man waved a heavily cloaked arm, almost indistinguishable amidst the darkness. "You're a phantom thief. I have tricks of my own."

"Forgive me if I'm not reassured. What were you doing?"

"Scouting. You don't want to know any more than that."

"Oh, but I do." Even though he maintained a straight face, Kid's lips were thinning.

"With the line of work you're in, and the type of people you already know? Worry about the enemies you have, rather than seeking out more." A sigh. "It doesn't look like they've found this place, anyway, and if they haven't yet, they probably never will. It should be safe."

He turned and started walking away. After pausing for a moment to process the enigmatic statement, Kid started after him. "Oi, what do you mean, 'this place'?"
Back still turned—either he was extremely confident in his ability to sense danger, or he was an idiot—the man shook his head. "Some friendly advice… Don't spend too much time in the dark. It's tough to escape, and there are things in the light that are too precious to lose."

Kid stared at him, incredulous at both the accuracy of the statement and how skillfully it failed to actually answer his previous question.

What on earth was going on?

As he watched, the black-clad man raised a hand, outstretched like he was reaching toward the invisible horizon. A shadow blossomed in the air nearby, even darker than the surrounding night. Snaky tendrils rose and stretched into what vaguely resembled a doorway, if doorways smoked like they were edged by ebony flame.

"Go back to your jewels, kaitou-san. Forget tonight." He walked into the blackness, vanishing from sight.

Kid made his decision instantly and lunged forward, diving through the hole in space before it could dissipate.

*I still have tonight's amethyst. Hakuba-kun is going to kill me, if I ever make it back alive.*

A heartbeat later, he had crashed into the legs of his new acquaintance and was rolling to a stop. Nervous, but obstinately refusing to show it, he rose to his feet with practiced grace.

And paused.

The universe had suddenly become immune to the laws of physics. Shades of dark blue, purple and black intermingled in an almost psychedelic gyration for as far as the eye could see. Including, somehow, everywhere that lay below the invisible plane of ground he was currently standing on.

"You." The growl refocused his attention on the cloaked figure, who was brushing non-existent dust off of his sleeves. "Are an idiot."

"Certifiable," Kid agreed amiably, trying to repress the urge to giggle. It wouldn't do him any good, and was unlikely to impress the man who was probably his only way out. If given the choice again he would probably do the exact same thing, but that didn't mean he wasn't worried about his sanity for doing so. Or his breathing prospects.

"Why did you follow me?"

"Because I'm the kind of idiot who discovers that his dad was murdered, and then follows in his footsteps to try and find the killers."

Um. That didn't sound very good. Had he actually intended to admit that?

"You alluded to some pretty big happenings. Whatever it is that I'm doing, what you're involved in is much bigger. I want to know what it is that could have endangered me or—" he paused, struggling to find the right words, "or what is mine. *Who* are mine."

"…You're sure? You'd be better off forgetting."

"I'm occasionally an impulsive guy, but I plan on living to remember."

"You might not be able to ever return home."
"After all this is over, I'll find a way. Aoko'd kill me if I didn't come back, and Akako-san would magic me back and _then_ kill me."

His response elicited another chuckle, and the mysterious man pushed his hood back. Kid's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. Long silver hair, swept-back bangs that defied gravity even more than his own hair did, tanned skin, and golden eyes that regarded him with dark amusement.

"What's your name?"

He hesitated only for a moment. It seemed silly to withhold his name from someone he'd just followed through a hole in the air to somewhere that most definitely wasn't home. Especially since the man obviously didn't have the slightest interest in arresting him.

"Kuroba Kaito."

"This probably breaks all kinds of rules regarding world travel, but since you're already here, and the universe appears to have remained intact, your presence probably won't twist the fabric of reality any more than it already is."

"That's good?" Kid ventured weakly.

"Yes. And who am I to disbar a traveling companion? I watched you tonight, and some of the tricks up your sleeve might prove useful."

He began walking forward through the bizarre corridor, motioning for Kid to follow.

"But… what's going on?"

A wry smile twisted the older man's lips as he glanced over his shoulder. "Come on. Time is limited, and I can fill you in as we go. As for the short version, though: Saving the universe, of course. You expected anything less?"

Kid congratulated himself for showing very little on his face as he jogged to catch up with his new ally. Saving the world was a new one. Saving the _universe_, even more so.

…I really, really hope I don't regret this.
After the psychedelic corridor, the computer room felt refreshingly normal. The red-robed man with his face covered in bandages was a bit odd, but Kaito had met more strangely dressed people in his currently-on-hold occupation as a phantom thief.

He had listened attentively to the explanations of the bandaged man, DiZ, with added comments from the black-robed man he'd met first. Kaito still wasn't sure of his name. He had introduced himself as Ansem, and DiZ usually called him that, but once the other man had started to say another name, and stopped halfway through saying something like either "Ri-" or "Li-". It was intriguing, but there were more pressing matters at hand.

"So let me get this straight," Kaito began, fingers worrying a conjured rose. "Some very dumb men decided to throw away their light, er, humanity, in favor of pursuing darkness. A year ago someone named Sora-san was chosen by the light to be a champion against the dark, and wields what's called a keyblade. Sora-san fought and defeated the Evil Overlord wannabe—coincidentally also named Ansem—but a hitherto unknown organization with connections to the first guy is now making its move. Members of said organization all wear the same kind of cloaks as this Ansem, but you two are actually trying to help Sora behind the scenes while he tries to stop them."

"I think that sums it up, yes," DiZ affirmed.

Kaito paused, then glanced at Ansem. "Are you a member?"

Ansem smirked darkly. "Only if they can catch me."

"If they saw you, would they think you are?"

"Unlikely. There's few enough of them that they know each other on sight." Given how the material seemed sculpted to Ansem's upper torso, an ability to differentiate via body type made a certain amount of sense. And still failed to explain why this supposedly-different-Ansem was running around wearing one of their outfits. However, that was a comparatively minor concern.

Kaito vanished the now petal-less rose and leveled a carefully blank stare at both men. "There's a lot about this situation that you're not telling me. I want to know why."

Ansem shifted, folding his arms. "Most of it is… complicated." For a moment his voice seemed tinged with a higher timbre. "And personal."

"However, not knowing will not put you in any danger, rest assured," DiZ added.

"I'll stay skeptical on that front," Kaito retorted. "What you don't know can kill you. And if what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, what does kill you leaves you dead."

He paused, and sighed. "But it's not like I can force information from you. I'm grateful you're willing to let me tag along on this. So what do you guys actually do, beyond cryptic messages or hide-and-seek?"

DiZ entered a string of commands on the keyboard, his typing fingers almost a blur. "We go to the places the boy cannot go, to ensure that those worlds remain untouched. Yours was one such place."

A few final keystrokes and images appeared on the computer bank's irregularly shaped monitors, screens flipping between hundreds of scenes as if looking for a specific view.
When the first screen settled, Kaito found himself staring at a very familiar face. "Mom!" He started forward, hand extending unconsciously, then collected his wits and settled for staring. A very small part of his mind wondered how he could possibly see her like this, but it fell silent in the face of other concerns.

A haunted look marred his mother's usually cheerful face as she sat in his room, on his bed, wrapped in his blankets. Kaito realized with horror that in his hurry, he'd left nothing to tell her where he was, or even if he was alive. He'd always suspected that she knew of his nighttime escapades, but it was easy to feign mutual ignorance when he'd always come home before daybreak. Now pretending was impossible—and Dad had already died doing this…

His stomach clenched.

Another screen stabilized, and he watched Aoko smile politely at a classmate's joke, then dart a glance at his empty seat. A third, and Hakuba appeared beside the Inspector, feverishly examining what looked like Kid's police casefiles. Another, and Conan furrowed his brow at a newspaper headline that decried Kid for having vanished so completely, and without returning the jewel first!

"What—how—" he clamped his mouth shut, glowering at the screens.

"How did I find them? My computers are very specialized, my young friend. I searched for the people connected to Kuroba Kaito and the Kaitou Kid. These people are the ones that I found most closely linked to you."

The matter-of-fact way DiZ described such a disturbingly comprehensive investigation of his relationships unnerved Kaito more than a little. That he'd discovered so much in so little time didn't help, nor did the knowledge that when he wanted, DiZ could apparently monitor anyone on Kaito's… world. Or any other, if he cared to try. Kaito was still adjusting to the concept, but this casual demonstration of a feat that computers as he knew them were simply not capable of made very persuasive evidence. Whole worlds upon worlds of people, separated from each other by a darkness that was apparently more than mere absence of light...

As he watched the screens, Kaito realized that something was off. If his internal clock was right, he still had several hours before he violated Kid's standard practice of returning the stolen property within 24 hours of a heist.

"How long have I been gone?" he demanded.

"Time works differently in the corridors of darkness, I'm afraid. It… bunches, and stretches, somewhat arbitrarily. Though you haven't slept yet, on your world it's been over two days since you disappeared."

Kaito froze, mind rebelling.

"However," DiZ continued, "after you explained your presence here with us I took a few liberties, which should be taking effect…"

As Kaito watched, his mother lifted her head and hurried to the door; a couriered letter smoothed the hints of panic from her face, and she almost smiled. Another person entered his classroom, and after the teacher relayed the message Aoko shook her head in fond exasperation. His personal terriers each received envelopes of their own: Nakamori's eyes bugged dangerously, Hakuba pinched the bridge of his nose in a frustrated resignation, and Conan smirked in his insufferably knowing way.

"What did you do?"
"Arranged for several messages, as you can see. Your mother has learned that you are safe but circumstances necessitate your absence, which I'm sure she understands. Your school believes you have been invited to perform magic on a tour of unknown duration with several others of your craft. The leave of absence has your mother's approval, of course. As for your pursuers, they received notices expressing your appreciation for good craftsmanship and a desire to admire your stone for a while before returning to business as usual."

"That's—" Kaito bit down on the word "absurd", and considered for a thoughtful moment. "Rather impressive, actually."

"And, in essence, true. Once this crisis is over, of course, you must return to your world permanently."

He couldn't prevent a hint of sarcasm from creeping into his voice. "Oh, good. If I ask how, will I be told?"

**Poker Face, Poker Face; No matter how far out of your depth you get...**

DiZ appeared oblivious. "One of us or the boy Sora will provide you with a path."

"We're wasting time," Ansem interrupted with an impatient gesture. "Sora only reaches a handful of worlds, the ones the Organization are openly acting in. It's our job to made sure there are no more covert operations on the side." Under his breath, almost too quiet for Kaito to hear, he added, "Like that friggin' puppet."

**Interesting**, Kaito thought as his mental notes expanded. The man's voice had gained an underlying growl, but his vocal patterns kept shifting too — not the cracking pitch of an adolescent, but like a man with two "normal" voices to choose between and unable to settle on which to use.

**Worse than Conan-kun with his bowtie. At least I have conscious control over my vocal range.**

"Very well," DiZ acquiesced, entering several commands. The computer bank emitted several worrying noises, and a moment later the screens changed to display an unfamiliar group of people. Kaito instinctively searched for sources of natural authority among the faces, and found two candidates: An innocently smiling boy with multicolored spikes that probably required several bottles of glue to maintain their shape, and a brown-haired young man with a blue glare which looked capable of demolishing stone.

"Great events have been happening around this group. Darkness is attracted to power, regardless of whether it lies in light, shadows, or more darkness. Anything we would be concerned about on this world would almost certainly involve these people in some fashion."

Kaito scrutinized the images, memorizing faces and stances. If nothing else, he would get some new disguise ideas out of this. After a moment, a question occurred to him. "How will we find them? I would assume these worlds can be as large as my own."

DiZ opened his mouth to begin another explanation, but Ansem cut him off. "There aren't very many people on a world who have power like that. I'll be able to sense them."

Kaito stopped cold. "Like you were able to sense me?" He demanded, eyes narrowing.

DiZ chuckled. "Oh, yes. Do forgive me, but I thought you had already realized. You wrap yourself in shadows like other people wear a cloak. Shadows are the place of concealment and disguise, but do not worry," he added. "Though I only determined the distinction recently, shadows are of a different nature than darkness. In fact, it seems as though they cannot exist unless light is already
Power and shadows. Oh, no.

"You came looking to see if they had found me, back in my world," he murmured unevenly at Ansem.

"Yes. Among others. Power is very distinctive."

"Ah."

Kaito could think of nothing to else to say. In the silence, Ansem raised his hand and formed another smoking portal.

"…Do I want to know why you can open a very black door into what, if I recall correctly, DiZ-san previously identified as a corridor of darkness?"

There was a very brief, weighty pause.

"No."

Ansem turned and vanished through the doorway.

"I believe it's best to leave private matters like that for when you know him rather better," DiZ offered, not unkindly. "Think of him as a person of the shadows like you; it's accurate enough. And I would hurry, you never know how much time is passing for him…"

Kaito gave the man an acknowledging nod and entered the corridor, falling in step beside Ansem without saying a word. Given how much his new allies had been forced to reveal about themselves, unless things changed between the two of them, whatever privacy Ansem could safely keep was likely to be jealously preserved.

And while he couldn't quite say why, though this Sora person probably figured into it, Kaito was pretty certain that Ansem would react poorly to the term "friend".
"Don't expect to visit DiZ-san again anytime soon."

Since he'd expected to walk in silence, the statement caught Kaito off guard. "You don't work together?"

"Our paths coincided for a while, but he has his own agenda that I'm not about to help him with. I took you to him so you could understand what you were getting into, not for marching orders."

"But what about the computer, and—"

"For your sanity. I can easily direct a corridor to a world I haven't visited before. Now that you know what to expect, we'll travel directly between worlds. I don't have a ho—a base, and I'm not about to start using his."

"I see."

Hardly a step further into the dark pathway, Kaito pulled up short as a group of white monsters emerged from the ground. He'd never have thought that faceless, elastic things could seem intimidating, but these managed. Maybe it was the rhythmic, boneless way in which they moved, weaving while standing still. Ansem dropped into a defensive posture, drawing the oddest-looking sword Kaito had ever seen from what had to be either a hidden sheath or thin air.

"I'm going to assume that these are those minions you guys told me about," Kaito volunteered.

"Yes. Now's your chance to see how good your bag of tricks is. I can handle this many without you, if necessary."

"You're on. Watch your back!"

Riding the adrenaline rush as he dodged through the small mob of creatures—Aoko and her mop were faster, but these had numbers on their side—Kaito tried to figure out what could possibly harm them. He spared a glance at Ansem, surprised to see the man's blade effortlessly cutting through the ranks.

*Sharp edges, there's an idea…*

Whipping out his card gun, he took aim and fired a straight flush into the undulating mass of white. The ten and king exploded on impact, and the rest sliced straight through their targets, stopping all five in their tracks. He blew away an imaginary curl of smoke, until the next loaded card caught his eye.

Well. That was different.

There was a silver energy flickering along the edge of the card. Warily keeping half an eye on the monsters, he poked tentatively at the faint glow. His finger connected with a small spark, but it didn't hurt.

"Any explanations for why my cards have turned magical on me?" He moved to stand back-to-back
"Depending on the world, different methods of channeling power can be easier than others. A person of the light carries their magic with them between worlds, but DiZ-san thinks the shadows work differently. Your unconscious mind has always governed your power—from what I observed of you, probably as innate talent at whatever you did, an exceptional memory, maybe a few mistakes that miraculously worked out, the ability to be whoever you wanted to be. Here the easiest channel is raw energy. Other worlds, it would be anyone's guess. I'm not sure how your magic will respond."

"Good enough." Forced to acknowledge the accuracy of Ansem's assumptions, Kaito tried to focus on the matter at hand, postponing further consideration until he had the luxury to ponder the implications and how to turn them to his advantage.

"Let's experiment, shall we?" Kaito pulled a flash bomb out of a hidden pocket of his costume. "Don't turn around," he warned, a moment before the area filled with a blinding flash of light. When his vision returned, he smiled in satisfaction.

"Such a beautiful sight. Emptiness."

Ansem destroyed one last monster on his side, and his sword promptly vanished between one motion and the next. "About a dozen. Not bad."

"Hey, what's this?" Kaito stooped and picked up what looked like a crystal shard. "It's shiny." He held it up in a gloved hand to the nonexistent light source illuminating this place, grinning as it gleamed in his eyes.

"On rare occasions, a piece of a Nobody will crystallize rather than disintegrate completely. That's what's left."

"Fascinating." He tossed the shard in Ansem's direction, unsurprised when the black-robed man snatched it out of the air.

"Let's go."

Kaito squinted his eyes against the bright sunlight as he and Ansem emerged from the corridor onto a convenient roof. Automatically, he started looking around and making mental notes on his surroundings. Tall buildings, narrow streets, a bus going by, and loads of pedestrians…

"This city reminds me of home," he began. "Except for all the naturally unnatural hairstyles."

*Insane lengths, spikes, and curls, multi-colorations that don't look possible, and that was a white-haired teenager that just ducked into an alley, there.*

"Some worlds are more similar than others," Ansem agreed.

"So, given that we might run into more of those what-do-you-call-em's, Nobodies, how's a guy supposed to earn some cash around here? I need to replenish my stock of cards. And find some less noticeable clothing."

Unfazed, Ansem reached into his robe and tossed over a small pouch. Pulling out one of the crystals inside, Kaito beamed. "Ooh, the shinies."

"I'm sure you can find a jeweler around here somewhere. Sell one or two and buy your supplies."
"Ah-ah-ah," Kaito admonished, wagging a finger. "You stick out like a black eye. Learn to blend." He pointed to where a pedestrian with equally silver hair was crossing the street below. "Your appearance isn't going to be particularly conspicuous in a place like this; you get a new wardrobe too."

"I wear these clothes for a reason."

"I'm sure you do. But you go down there right now, and you'll look like you're either a role-playing geek or you belong to a cult. People like that rarely get the answers they want."

A silence, and then a long-suffering sigh. "Fine. You lead."

**Aaaaaand, chalk up another success for the cheerfully overbearing personality.**

He grinned. "I hope you have good taste. I'm usually surrounded by fashion Neanderthals."

"Says the man dressed in a white suit with a blue shirt and red tie. You look like a flag."

**Huh. For someone who tries to act taciturn, he falls into banter patterns really easily.**

"Oi! Let's go. Just… try and look unobtrusive for a while, ne?"

He spent an hour selling one of the higher quality crystals, and another hour finding decent outfits for both of them while Ansem waited safely out of sight. Ansem had insisted on all black, but to Kaito's satisfaction he had traded his robe for a more normal-looking long overcoat without a hood.

Now, dressed in conveniently anonymous fashion (Kaito was particularly happy with his new black sweater), they had agreed to split up. Ansem left to seek information, and Kaito to restock his bag of tricks while keeping an ear tuned for the local gossip.

The individually harmless ingredients for his flash bombs where acquired easily enough, leaving him with only high-quality cards left to find. After drifting through the city for a while Kaito found a game shop with—of all things—a turtle on the sign. He entered, causing a bell to jingle, and browsed his way through the empty store towards the cashier's counter.

"Can I help you, young man?"

Make that mostly empty. A door to a back room swung closed behind the newcomer as he stepped behind the counter.

**Tiny, old, and spiked grey hair you could cut yourself on, but definitely not stupid, Kaito noted. Probably beats a lot of people who don't look past his height to see the card shark lurking behind his eyes.** And he moved without a sound; he could've been a butler in a past life.

"Good afternoon, grandfather, I'm looking for some cards."

"Oh! You mean Duel Monsters?"

"Er… no." Kaito eyed the man's sudden enthusiasm apprehensively, not caring if it showed on his face. When free of the costume, the Kid's poker face became optional. "Just solitaire cards. High quality."

"Hrm, pity. Those there are our best normal cards," he said, waving at a display, "but if you're looking for high quality, we specialize in Duel Monsters."
"I've never heard of it," Kaito admitted.

"What? Never heard of it? What rock have you been under these past months? Come now, we'll have to educate you. Pull up that stool there, and pay attention."

Bemused, and with nothing better to do, Kaito listened as the old man pulled out a deck of oddly decorated cards and launched into a detailed explanation full of monsters, life points, spells, traps, and what sounded like extremely complicated strategies. He thought he was starting to get a grasp of the rules when the bell jingled again.

"Grandpa, I'm home!"

Kaito glanced up. And blinked.

Innocent purple eyes watched him through familiar tri-colored spikes. Even odder was how for a moment he seemed to silently assess Kaito, hand moving unconsciously to rest on a large gold pendant shaped like an inverted pyramid, before he approached with a congenial smile. Despite the black leather shirt and buckles accessorizing his school uniform, the boy looked even younger in person than on DiZ's screen, failing to stand even as tall as Kaito's shoulders.

*I guess power really is attracted to similar power,* Kaito thought grimly behind a reciprocating smile. *I refuse to believe in coincidences this big.*

"Ah, Yugi! I was just introducing this young man to Duel Monsters. Why don't you come show him your deck?"

Ansem had said he'd find him again in a few hours, something about Kaito standing out from the rest of the world. He'd refrained from asking what made his traveling companion's senses so unique. Grasping at any excuse to stay in the vicinity of the game shop, he bowed in a friendly greeting.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Kuroba Kaito. This game looks pretty interesting. Maybe you can help me assemble my own deck, too."

He could have used a pseudonym, but on a world where he technically didn't exist it would provide no extra security. Better to allow himself and Ansem some consistency and just stick with the truth. It was easier to remember.

"Sure!" The boy eagerly perched on a third stool and pulled out a deck from a case on his belt. "I'm Moto Yugi, by the way, and that's my grandfather, Solomon. Let's get you some cards, and I can give you tips for some good combinations. We could even have a duel if you want. The best way to learn is to play."

"Well, I'll leave you to it," the old man chuckled. "There are still stock accounts to look over."

"Okay, I'll watch the store."

Solomon disappeared into the back room, and the next hour became a whirlwind of Duel cards, deck strategies, and a friendly duel. Kaito was impressed by Yugi's gaming abilities; the boy possessed an unusual combination of strong instincts, amazing luck, and a master tactician's ability to anticipate and react to situations. He also enjoyed talking about himself and his friends, and soon the two were swapping stories as well as turns, laughing over Hakuba's obsession with time and Joey's shameless ego while they dueled.

Yugi had just managed to destroy Kaito's current favorite card, the White Magical Hat, when Ansem ducked through the doorway. He raised an eyebrow at the game, but made no comment on it.
"Hey, Ansem-san, this is Yugi-kun. Yugi-kun, Ansem-san."

Ansem gave a perfunctory nod. "There's a crowd growing outside a place called Kaibaland. Something's peculiar about the atmosphere there."

"Kaiba-kun's game park?" Yugi's expression grew worried. "Why?"

Ansem shrugged.

"I need to see if Kaiba-kun and Mokuba-kun are okay!" He paused, glancing back down at the cards. "Um, sorry about the game. This is really important."

Making an executive decision, Kaito swept both sets of cards into neat piles, pocketing his extra cards and deck and handing over the other. "You know the owner, and someone whom I'm assuming is a relative? I'll go with you. You could probably use some brute force to get through a crowd."

"I'm not that short…"

"You look like you're twelve."

"I'm sixteen! Mokuba-kun's the twelve-year-old." Yugi paused, head cocked as if listening to someone out of sight. "Thanks for the offer, though. I guess it's fine. Grandpa!" he called at the closed door. "I have to go out again for a while, I'll be back soon!"

He led the way out of the shop, breaking into a run once he hit the sidewalk. Kaito jogged easily alongside, and Ansem followed at a brisk walk. The unmistakable skyscraper was no more than a mile away, and the trio quickly reached the scene. Ansem strode confidently into the small crowd, shouldering the people in their way aside with ease; Kaito and Yugi followed in his wake until they reached the front.

"Mokuba-kun!" Yugi cried in dismay, taking an extra step forward. Ansem immediately grabbed his shoulder and yanked him back into the crowd.

"Anonymity is safety. You do not draw individual attention to yourself," he snarled. Something in Yugi's eyes flared momentarily, then he gulped and nodded. Kaito ignored them both, staring at the scene playing out before them. They stood on the left side of the plaza, and had a perfect view of the unfolding tableau.

The front plaza of the building was dominated by a giant statue of a rearing Blue Eyes White Dragon, the very image of the taped-together card Solomon had shown Kaito while saying something about cards with heart. Behind it, a masked man held a boy with long black hair pinned against his chest, a pistol—probably a modified Airsoft gun—at the boy's temple. Closer to the crowd, two bodyguards in black suits lay unmoving on the ground.

"Kaiba! I'm waiting for you! I know you can hear me; if you're not down here in two minutes, I swear I'll break an arm!"

"Nii-sama!" Mokuba squirmed, only to be cuffed heavily by the butt of the man's gun. Immediately, Yugi's stance changed.

"That's it. Crowd or no crowd… let's play a game."

Kaito shivered, feeling invisible power gathering to charge the air. Shadows swirled around Yugi's form and he ducked under Ansem's arm, striding confidently across the plaza. Neither Ansem nor
Kaito was able to grab him, but the gunman didn't seem to notice the younger teen's approach. Before Yugi reached the statue, however, the front doors of Kaibaland opened.

"Don't bother, Yugi. I have first claim."

*White trench coat, clipped movements and speech, grace that looks potentially deadly, and a glare that could freeze nitrogen. Hellooo, powerhouse #2.*

Kaiba stopped at the top of the steps leading to the entrance. "Speak quickly. You're a dead man."

"You bastard! You and your damn business made me lose everything that ever mattered. I want you to feel that same pain, and then die," the man finished with a hiss.

Kaito had already started running, desperately dredging up that extra edge of speed he usually only called on to escape Akako or the Task Force before his smoke screens dissipated. There wasn't time for sneaking. The already-summoned shadows—he didn't have time to think about how Yugi had somehow called them—danced along his limbs and torso as he raced toward the statue, and he could only hope they were concealing him from notice the way they had apparently done for Yugi.

As the man stopped speaking, three things happened simultaneously: the gunman shifted in preparation to fire, Yugi and Kaiba both lifted cards into the air, and Kaito reached the statue.

"Swords of Revealing Light!"

"Blue Eyes White Dragon!"

"Oof! Run, kid!"

Mokuba didn't need to be told twice, sneakers squeaking on marble as he darted to the safety of his brother's side. Kaito sprawled on top of the startled gunman, winded from impact. He grabbed the Airsoft gun—frozen mid-trigger, which he didn't want to think too closely about—from where he'd knocked the man's hand skyward, switched the safety on and kicked it towards the steps.

"White lightning."

He barely heard the soft command, steel-edged thought it was, but the gun vaporized in a burst of light that left the smell of ozone in its wake.

:A wise decision, young master.: 

The words seemed to enter Kaito's brain without bothering to consult his ears along the way. He raised his gaze from the bottom of the steps, where a scorch mark now outlined the shape of a gun, and his eyes widened. A full-color twin of the dragon statue gazed down at him unblinkingly, a mountain of silvery scales looming on the steps between him and the brothers.

*I think we found how this world channels power*, Kaito thought groggily. His head was still spinning from trying to reach Mokuba in time.

"Don't move if you want to keep your skin intact," he murmured to the gunman, who wisely seemed to be playing dead. Or maybe he had passed out.

Yugi stepped into his field of vision. "Hold back your dragon, Kaiba. The danger has passed." He watched Kaito for several moments, purple eyes holding a flash of red in them as he narrowed them contemplatively. "Why?"
"Why bother?" Kaito heard the unsaid word, and it sounded strange coming from Yugi. Everything about Yugi felt a little off, in fact. Yugi had never looked so careful and deliberate in his movements, never talked so formally. Kaito coughed, sitting up and brushing dirt off his sweater.

"No one gets hurt," he managed.

A draconic chuckle, like the brush of scales against scales, filled Kaito's mind.

:Only when they take a rope and hang themselves, shadows' child. We seek to protect, not destroy, but while yours is an admirable sentiment, we will use any means necessary to keep our charges safe.: Kaito gazed up at unfathomable sapphire eyes and tried to think up a coherent response, but he couldn't get past that first tenet of his personal philosophy before they were interrupted by enthusiastic applause, and he became sharply aware of their audience. Snatches of exclamations reached his ear, about the realism of both the gunman and the dragon—what amazing acting and holograms—and the details—just look at the burn mark—but wasn't using his little brother a bit much for a publicity stunt?

He looked up at Yugi, if he in fact was Yugi and not someone—something? That was a dragon over there—else, with an expression he hoped conveyed his utter disbelief and contempt for humanity's tendency to rationalize the inexplicable into the realm of 'normal'.

"They think this was a stunt?" he demanded.

"Kaiba's corporation is famous for it's realistic holograms of Duel Monsters," maybe-Yugi began.

"Hologram, nothing!" Kaito insisted, voice rising an octave, though the crowd still almost drowned it out. "I heard it call someone young master! And then it talked to me!"

"You heard—"

Ansem finally reappeared on the scene, interrupting the teen's response with a hand on his shoulder and giving Kaito a thoroughly disapproving look. "This is no place for a conversation. The crowd may realize that this was not, in fact, a stunt, and that's probably not something Kaiba-san wants publicly known."

Maybe-Yugi nodded. As Kaito watched the odd pendant gleamed, his pose changed again, and the teen bowed quickly to them before running up the steps towards where Kaiba was calmly issuing commands into a cell phone. A handful of black suits swiftly exited the lobby, cleared the two bodyguards and unconscious gunman from the plaza, and dispersed the crowd to their previous activities. Meanwhile the brothers and the white dragon (inexplicably now only a fraction of its initial size) disappeared into the building, the dragon still required to stoop to fit through the entryway, and Yugi followed, beckoning for them to follow as well.

Kaito and Ansem entered and approached the strange quartet standing beyond the game park's entryway in time to hear Yugi say, "No, I only met him today, but Kaiba-kun, he heard your dragon before it even addressed him, and then again while no one else in the crowd did!"

:Of course he did,: the dragon said, as if it were perfectly natural to be included in a conversation. :His is a heart born of the shadows and hidden places. He could learn our ways, if he cares to be taught.: Kaito eeped quietly as a silver-white head lowered to eye level. :Hello, young one. My name is Kochi.: "Kaito… Um, what exactly are you?" He extended a tentative hand, which the dragon's nose
nudged gently. Deciding that one more impossible thing wasn't so hard to accept in the face of the past 18 hours—or was it 12? 24? How long had it been, and when had he last slept?—he offered a smile and began scratching along the smooth snout, earning a pleased rumble.

:I am what some call a Monster, from the Shadow Realm.: Kaito could practically hear the capitals drop into place. :Those with the power and will can summon us here for a time.:

"We call the magic that bridges our world, and our decks, with the Shadow Realm, the Heart of the Cards," Yugi added. "All the good duelists can sense that connection through their cards, even if they're not strong enough to call the cards into reality."

:You have some potential,: Kochi continued. :Among your gifts, should you call to our kind, one would answer. :

"What sort of other things?" Mokuba piped up suddenly, fiddling with the blue bandanna around his neck. Kaito was relieved to see that except for dirtied jeans and a rip in his striped shirtsleeve, the boy looked no worse for wear.

:It is not my place to say,: the dragon demurred.

Acutely aware that Yugi and Kaiba were watching his actions from within their mutual silence, Kaito stepped closer and pulled out his new duel deck.

"I don't know about shadows, but I can do this..." He began a sleight-of-hand routine, gratified when Mokuba laughed as cards and roses appeared and disappeared in patterns faster than the average eye could follow.

_Poor kid probably wants any kind of distraction he can get_, Kaito though with sympathy. _The shock hasn't hit yet, but once it's just him and Kaiba-san, I really hope his brother can be more than ice and steel._

The feel of cards in his fingers was soothing, and he added a few extra flourishes to extend the performance a little longer than normal. In the end, however, he was forced to bow, cards fanned perfectly in both hands, and vanish them into his pockets for the last time.

"So you fool the eye," Kaiba said coolly, face betraying nothing. "How much is speed, and how much is something more?"

"It's all speed," Kaito said proudly. "Anyone could do it, if they bothered to try. But," he added in what he thought was Kaiba's baritone sans the usual frost, "I've been told my vocal range is unusually diverse."

Between the wide-eyed looks on Yugi and Mokuba's faces, and the lowering temperature of Kaiba's glare, he decided he was probably better off not tempting fate any more. He turned to Yugi.

"My turn. Who's the other sharing your head?"

Silence. Then:

"You saw him?" Yugi asked meekly. "No one else has noticed until they recognized the behavior differences first, and that takes a while, if ever."

"Most people still can't, at least not very well," Mokuba added.

:Such is his talent,: Kochi rumbled.
"It's complicated." Yugi rubbed a coat sleeve against his pendant, organizing his thoughts. "The simple version starts three thousand years ago, in Egypt, when Shadow Games were played for wealth, power, and protection against darkness. Some terrible things happened, and a pharaoh sacrificed himself to seal away the great darkness and the need for the games. We don't know any details. He gave up his name, and with it his chance for the afterlife; his memory; and half his soul. He's my other self, and I'm his other self. We're just… not a single consciousness right now."

"Um… wow. Thanks." Kaito scratched the back of his neck. After another short silence, he continued: "So now what?"

"Do what you want," Kaiba sneered. "Just keep in mind if you're tempted to call a news station that I can, and I will, find you. And Yugi…” he exhaled slowly, the faintest of acknowledgments to frustration. "I owe you one, again. Don't make a habit of it. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a business to run and a security force to gut and rebuild."

He swept away to what Kaito assumed was an elevator leading to Kaiba's office, Kochi blurring into nothingness with a flash of silver wings. Mokuba hung back, scuffing a shoe against tile.

"I don't know if you could tell, but Nii-sama really is grateful," he offered. "He's just got a lot on his mind right now."

"Don't worry, I could," Kaito assured him. "Anyone could see how protective he is, and how much he cares for you."

It was the right thing to say. He received a brilliant smile in return, and the boy gave him a quick, impulsive hug. "Thanks for everything."

Mokuba gave Yugi a hug as well and ran after his brother, leaving the three standing in the otherwise empty building. By unspoken agreement, they walked in silence back to the game shop, pausing in from of the turtle sign.

Kaito glanced sidelong at Yugi. "Any other advice for us?"

Yugi looked thoughtful. "Kochi said you had some ability, but I wouldn't try summoning anything for a while. If you get to really know your deck, when you can feel the flow of the game before you even draw, that's when I would start thinking about calling on the shadows for real. Just keep in mind that it takes a lot from you, especially when you're not used to it." He turned to Ansem then, determined curiosity making an appearance—as well as what might have been a flash of red in his eyes. "I know you had to have been in the building the whole time, but I don't think Kaiba-kun and Mokuba-kun even noticed you. How?"

Ansem hesitated, then sighed. "When you've walked through darkness, it's easier to fade into the deep shadows. You need not fear for your friends' safety, however." A grim chuckle at Yugi's sudden and fiercely protective expression. "There are precious few who are able to hide that way, and I bear none of your group ill-will. Protect Kaiba-san from himself, instead."

Yugi smiled, somewhat sadly. "We're trying. He… hurts. But I won't give up on him, even if it takes us the rest of his life."

To Kaito's amazement, Ansem's dark face bore a similar smile, but with a bitter edge. "You remind me of someone else I know. He traveled through the darkness in search of a friend who was overtaken and lost within it, and still never lost hold of his own light."

"What happened to them?" Yugi asked, voice slightly awed.
Ansem looked away from Yugi's wide-eyed innocence. "He saved his friend, but they got separated again. He's still looking, but I don't know how their story will end."

"I hope they find each other! I'd hate to lose any of my friends, and it'd be even worse to not know what happened to them…"

Ansem grunted. "Anything is possible. But we should be going."

"Well, will I see you again? It was nice meeting you, and I still owe you a game, Kaito-kun, don't forget." Yugi brightened at the thought.

Kaito observed Ansem's body language and reluctantly shrugged. "I'm not sure. I'd like to play another game, but we're doing a lot of traveling. We might not be able to come back for a while."

"Well, that's okay. Here, so that you remember us while you're traveling." Yugi shyly held out a card: the emerald Luster Dragon. "Maybe next time I can introduce you to my other friends, too."

"Hey, this looks useful. Thanks. And yeah, maybe next time." Kaito grinned. "Here's something in return." A pon! and a puff of smoke left Yugi holding a pair of lockpicks, startled and confused. "For when Kaiba-san locks himself in his office, and needs someone to drag him into the real world," Kaito explained with a wink. "Take care until then."

Yugi smiled back happily. "You too!" He entered to the shop, waving goodbye through the glass door.

Kaito waved back and hurried to catch up with Ansem, who had immediately turned and started walking away, shoulders hunched in a moody posture.

"You shouldn't have said you'd come back."

"I liked the guy! I meant it when I said I'd have fun playing another game."

"But we have no reason to return here."

"No enemies, but good people. I'll figure out a way to make it back, with or without you. Just you watch."

A disbelieving bark of laughter. "Suit yourself. But next world try and avoid contact. It's easier to simply observe and be gone, if nothing is happening."

"I wasn't trying this time, either!"

In the privacy if his own head, he continued: Besides, you're the one who made contact with me. I think you're unconsciously desperate for someone to talk to, or just be around.

And don't think I didn't notice how much that person you mentioned sounded like Sora-san. Why do you know so much about him? Why do you try to help him? And that friend of his you mentioned…

Who are you?

Still silent, Kaito followed Ansem to a nearby alley. Together, they ducked through the dark portal.

Here we go again…
Nii-sama: Older brother (respectful)

Kaito meshes really well with the Shadow Realm, so it was fun to play with both at once. Kochi the BEWD belongs to Ellen Brand, as does this permutation of the YGO universe. These events could take place in the few days between her fics Ankoku Wa Osore Nai and The Only Constant.

The white-haired teenager ducking into the alley might have been Bakura, but he declined to reveal what he was up to down there.
Kaito blinked in surprise at their new surroundings. Though he still had little experience in traveling the worlds, he certainly hadn't been expecting to step into an old forest. Trees towered above them, filtering the late afternoon light into a dappled pattern as it fell upon the ground.

An almost subliminal presence he'd been gradually starting to be aware of since he had started traveling with Ansem seemed strangely absent here. On a hunch, he pulled out his card gun and inspected his ammo. Sure enough, that extra glimmering, shadowy edge on his cards appeared to be gone. He wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but suspected that this world probably had almost no raw ambient magic, just like home.

So, not likely to have giant monsters pop up again. Maybe we're back to magic expressing itself through levels of talent. That would be refreshingly normal.

He took a few tentative steps forward, and couldn't resist a grin when leaves crunched underfoot. Looking around with a speculative gleam, he performed some quick mental calculations about size, tone, and pitch, then proceeded to beat out a complicated musical tattoo from the surrounding dead foliage, humming the *Ride of the Valkyries*.

His instincts for being observed kicked in after a moment, but he continued until he heard an amused snort from Ansem.

"You're very easily entertained, aren't you?"

Bringing his leaping dance to a flourishing finale, he finished with a crackling stomp and grinned. "Yep."

*And the more harmless to you I seem, the sooner you're likely to talk to me. It would be an added bonus if I could get you to crack a genuinely happy smile, because I don't think I've seen you anything but serious, grim, sarcastic, or for a change of pace, grimly amused, since I met you... however long ago."

*I wish I had a watch.*

*Note to self: Buy a watch with a day-tracker, in order to have good reason to force Ansem to sleep. And eat. I think I've been up for over 48 hours straight, can't remember when or what I last ate, and he's probably been going for longer. Transportation provider having psychotic episodes due to not taking care of himself equals bad.*

"It helps that I'm running on nothing but adrenaline right now," Kaito hinted. "Everything becomes hilarious after a while."

"Unlike before, when the whole world was simply there for mild amusement?"

Ansem stared at the trees for a moment, then started walking in what looked to Kaito like a completely arbitrary direction.

*If he doesn't have wilderness survival training, we're screwed. Downtown Tokyo is not conducive to learning how to navigate under tree cover that blocks most of the sky.*
Realizing he was about to lose sight of his guide, Kaito hurried after Ansem and settled into keeping pace beside him. The ground was hilly and uneven, with a slight grade suggesting that overall they were walking downhill.

"So where are we? Do you sense anything weird going on? More importantly, does this place have signs of civilization?"

"You're being annoyingly talkative."

"I'm a city boy. Maybe I like having a certain level of ambient noise."

"A forest is hardly silent. Besides, I saw you at your night job. You're perfectly capable of prolonged silence when you feel like it. You probably only chatter when you feel like winding people up."

"Touché." He wasn't about to mention he talked to cover being uncomfortable, too. "This is a good time for me to feel quiet, then?"

"Yes."

"Ah."

_I've been saying that a lot. I need to come up with some better lines, before I become monosyllabic whenever I'm confronted with paradigm-shifting information or not-so-subtle ultimatums. Ultimatum? Ultimatumum?_

...**Definitely** need sleep soon.

Resigned to the fact that Ansem wasn't going to explain why they were walking through a forest yet, Kaito took the opportunity to appreciate his surrounding as they walked, both visually and aurally. Ansem was right about one thing—once he started listening, there were sounds everywhere. Birdsongs, rustlings, the crunch of leaves and more all combined into an amateurish concert of nature.

So intent was he on following the music, he took several moments to process that Ansem had finally stopped and nearly walked into him. A last-second dodge saved him from impact, and he leaned against the trunk of a nearby tree instead as he studied the new landscape. A pond spread across a clearing in the forest a few yards ahead, and on the other side a dock and a comfortable-looking cabin sat backed nearly up to the water's edge. A rear deck held a few pieces of metal furniture, and pale light glowed through the blinds covering one of the windows.

"I'm not familiar with this world, but the technology level here seems similar to rural parts of your world. I'd rather avoid people altogether, but we're not equipped for camping. If we're lucky, whoever lives here won't object to some unexpected company until I can figure out whether or not this world is free from interference."

Kaito glanced at his companion. While Kaito was still wearing the black sweater and blue jeans he had picked up in Yugi's world, Ansem had donned his hooded black cloak the moment they had left. He seemed disinclined to doff it again anytime soon, though he'd been leaving the hood down lately.

"Well, let me do the talking? If this world is anything like the last few you've been in, you're more likely to scare people off than look harmless."

"Knock yourself out."

_Hmm, maybe you are relaxing just a little bit around me. Your speech patterns are getting a lot less_
They skirted the pond and approached the cabin, Ansem hanging back a ways while Kaito advanced on the front door. Kaito knocked, hoping that if they weren't somewhere that spoke Japanese, then they would be lucky and it would be English. His accent might not be perfect (he knew his /l/ still sounded more like /r/ if he wasn't careful), but he at least felt confident in his fluency. His smattering of other languages was getting rusty.

The door opened to reveal a tall, middle-aged man with heavily salted hair, a small scar on one eyebrow, and an expression somewhere between bored and wary. Brown eyes instantly darted to Ansem's position before looking back to Kaito, jaw setting in a manner that clearly indicated an utter lack of tolerance for any potential trouble.

*Please, I don't want to look like an idiot.*

"Can I help you kids?"

*Yes!*

"Hi!" Kaito chirped in his best 'Trust-me-I'm-harmless' voice. "My friend and I ran into some car trouble down by the main road, and my auto insurance can't send someone out here until tomorrow. We saw the dirt road leading this way, hoped maybe someone would be here. Could we possibly impose on you for an evening?"

The man blinked, processing that rush of words, before his expression passed from blank to vaguely irritated, and then resigned.

"So much for a night of fishing before the gang shows up," he muttered under his breath, then raised his voice. "There's no way you can walk back to the main road before it gets dark, so you might as well come in. Even summer nights get can hit freezing this far up in the mountains, and I'm not completely heartless."

Ansem twitched at the man's last word, Kaito noticed, and he recalled DiZ's explanation of the black creatures with the same name. *Those things really must have done a number on his life from before.*

He quickly smiled at the man. "Thanks! My name is Kur—Kaito. Kaito Kuroba."

He got a raised eyebrow at that. "Jack O'Neill. Who's your friend?"

Ansem stepped forward into a shaft of sunlight from the slowly sinking sun. The response was immediate, though not quite what Kaito expected.

"God!" The man—O'Neill—jerked a few inches back, hand automatically reaching to where, Kaito realized, a shoulder-holstered gun would normally hang.

*Okay, cop or military? Bearing says military. Time to panic? No, not yet, first find out why Ansem-san is freaking out what's probably an experienced military man.*

O'Neill visibly pulled himself together, relaxing his hand and straightening from his half-defensive stance. "Sorry," he said, not sounding very apologetic. "I don't meet a lot of people with golden eyes, especially if they look like they're glowing."

Ansem shrugged. "It's the sunset."

"Yeah, sure, you betcha," came the skeptical reply. "You have a name?"
"Ansem."

"Canny. Not from ancient mythology, is it?"

"Not unless I've unknowingly had divinity thrust upon me, no."

A faint snort. "Nice. Fine. Come on in. You guys can fight over who sleeps on the couch and who get an air mattress." They stepped inside, trailing behind O'Neill as he headed to the kitchen.

*Interesting. Ansem-san disturbs him, but he's confident enough in his own abilities that he'll still let him in the house. But what was with the questions?*

"Either of you a decent cook?"

"Only if you count making tea," Ansem replied. "Though at least I don't burn water, like someone else I know."

Kaito snickered. "I'm decent enough, if you've got the ingredients."

"Great. I've had some steaks marinating, and we can grill them tonight. When my team comes up tomorrow they'll just have to grab supplies on the way."

"If you're making the main dish, I can raid your fridge for some sides."

"Sweet. Just ask if you can't find anything."

They fell into some semi-awkward small talk as they began dinner preparation, mostly Kaito fabricating a back-story for why he and Ansem were so far out in the middle of nowhere—Minnesota, America, apparently—in the first place. He settled for the idea that Ansem, a friend of his parents, was thinking about buying land out this way and he had come along for the ride, providing transportation from his family's home in California.

Thankfully, O'Neill was intelligent enough to see their reticence towards sharing much, and didn't seem to think it worth asking too many probing questions. Kaito still breathed a sigh of relief when the older man finally went outside to start grilling, and glared at Ansem from over the cutting board.

"How long do you need to evaluate this world?" he murmured, mindful of the open windows even though O'Neill probably couldn't hear a thing over the cantankerously noisy grill. "I'm a good obfuscator, but this guy is sharp. If I give him enough information he'll spot the inconsistencies, and I don't want to still be here if he figures us out."

Ansem calmly filched a carrot slice from the salad ingredients on the cutting board.

"A world like this is too big to evaluate from just one place when I don't already know where all the powerful hearts are. He's one, but there are likely others. Since you both seem admirably occupied at the moment, I'll go now. It's easier to direct the dark corridors across space when I'm by myself, so I won't be long."

"And what do I say if he comes inside before you get back?"

"Make something up. You've already said you're good at that, right?" Before Kaito could retort, Ansem vanished into a dark portal.

He sighed, and went to investigate the pantry for potatoes. Luckily, O'Neill decided to keep the steaks company outside, and Kaito fell into the familiar rhythm of cooking, letting himself relax for
the first time in what was probably days. He'd learned to cook after his father had died and his mom had started working again, leaving her with less time and energy to spend in the kitchen. After a while he went from assisting to making whole meals, and started using the familiar routine as a way to unwind.

As a result, Kaito was yawning when Ansem returned, just in time for O'Neill to yell an inquiry on the state of affairs inside the kitchen.

"Nearly done!" Kaito called back. He shot Ansem an inquiring look, and received a nod.

"They seem safe enough," he said quietly. "We'll stay the night, and leave in the morning."

Kaito grinned. "Arm-wrestle you for the couch?"

"I could defeat you with both hands tied behind my back."

"Only because I'm dead on my feet, you cheater. You must sleep with your eyes open, or there's no way you'd still be awake and sane."

"You just have low endurance," Ansem retorted, rummaging through drawers in search of eating utensils. "Hm, no chopsticks."

"For steak, salad, and baked potatoes? And I work nights and go to school during the day, plus drama club and homework. When do you think I ever have time to sleep?"

"I like chopsticks. Even if I'm using a steak knife with them. The fact that you regularly get no sleep means that you have no reserves to draw on if you need them."

Kaito carefully balanced the food dishes in his arms and headed for the patio. "And you do?" He stopped, realizing too late his path was barred by the closed back door.

Should have remembered that before I had my arms full.

"I slept the entire day before I met you, and I have practice being awake for long stretches of time. I'll pay for it later, but there's no time to waste right now."

Ansem smirked at Kaito's predicament, purposefully slowing his collection of condiments and other necessities.

"Jerk." Kaito rolled his eyes, then raised his voice to be audible through the window. "Hey, Mr. O'Neill! Can you open the door?"

Only the fact that he didn't feel like acting the child amongst two adults kept Kaito from sticking his tongue out at Ansem when the door opened. Ansem followed behind, and food was quickly distributed between plates. Relative silence reigned for a while as all three men attacked their dinners with a will, broken only by the occasional smack marking the death of a blood-sucking mosquito.

After they finished devouring dinner, O'Neill raided the fridge for a beer, offering Ansem one and Kaito a choice of milk and water. Kaito wasn't surprised when Ansem declined—he could think of three reasons off the top of his head why drinking a beer on a journey like theirs would be a bad idea—but it struck him as odd when the man opted for milk instead. It seemed so… chronologically out of place with his appearance.

Not my place to judge his drinking habits. It's probably more surprising that, this being a bachelor pad, the milk is still good.
They chatted a while over their drinks, Ansem deciding to play his part and ask O'Neill about what living in the area was like. From the way O'Neill spoke, Kaito would have though the place was paradise if he hadn't already seen it. Probably full of lots of fond memories.

Kaito held back his exhaustion as long as he could, but eventually succumbed and released a massive yawn. That effectively broke up the discussion, and they returned inside. By a two-to-one vote, Ansem was given dish-duty while O'Neill grabbed the sleeping bags and air mattress from the attic and Kaito moved the coffee table in the living room off to the side.

Mumbling apologies to O'Neill for being rude, he took a sleeping bag and, with a sleepily triumphant grin at Ansem, stretched out on the couch. He didn't even remember his head hitting the pillow.

Kaito awoke to being lightly shaken.

"Five more minutes," he mumbled automatically in Japanese, rolling over and pulling the sleeping bag over his head.

"Kaito-san." The deadly serious note was back in Ansem's voice, and Kaito snapped awake.

Back on adrenaline already. Or maybe I'm suppressing dopamine… Ugh. Focus.

"What is it?" he asked.

"O'Neill-san's friends are almost here. They're going to know that there are no cars between here and wherever the closest town is."

"Oh." So much for our cover.

"And we didn't even get breakfast," he muttered half-heartedly.

"It's after noon. I woke up an hour ago, but thankfully O'Neill-san has been outside fishing rather than trying to play the not-so-gracious host, or asking why we're not in a hurry to get back to our supposed auto, and I managed to grab some lunch. You're a thief; steal something to eat on the way, but make it quick. I don't want to stick around any more than you do."

Kaito quickly raided the fridge, watching from the corner of his eye as Ansem rolled up his sleeping bag and straightened up the room. The man was either extremely neat, very polite, or both.

"Kaito! Ansem! Come on out for a minute!"

Kaito gulped down the last of a bagel and cream cheese, secreted a few more portable foodstuffs about his person, and exchanged glances with Ansem. "Disappear now, or in a minute?"

Ansem shuddered. "Those are some powerful hearts out there, but I can smell a residue of darkness with them and it's strong. They may not have Heartless here, but I want to know what it is before we pull our vanishing act."

"You lead, oh superior in age and wisdom."

Ansem muttered under his breath what Kaito thought was "If only," and headed for the door. Kaito followed, shielding his eyes against the daytime glare.

Three new people stood in the gravel driveway with O'Neill: a tall, powerfully built black man with a knitted cap that looked slightly ridiculous pulled low on his forehead, a shorter man with glasses who smiled politely at them, and a beautiful blonde woman with striking blue eyes and a perfect poise that bespoke military experience.
"Kaito, Ansem, meet the gang: Murray, Daniel, and Sam," he pointed to them in turn. "Kids, meet our gatecrashers. Kaito is on the right, and Ansem is the one on the left with the glowy golden eyes."

Sam raised her eyebrows in a Significant Expression at the statement, then smiled brightly and stepped forward, hand outstretched. "Nice to meet you guys."

Kaito shook hands, unsure of just where the test lay hidden, but decently sure that the test was for Ansem, not him, and had to do with O'Neill's unusual reaction the night before. An almost imperceptible gesture flashed from her free hand just before she let go of Ansem's, and O'Neill seemed to relax a bit. Kaito wondered if Ansem noticed too, but decided to make no comment.

Daniel hurried forward after a moment's pause as well, though Murray stayed put and merely offered a respectful half-bow. Kaito instinctively bowed in return, which caught the attention of Daniel.

"Are you Japanese?" the man asked in Kaito's native tongue, with a flawless accent.

Kaito stared for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Nice to meet you," he added politely, also in Japanese.

"I figured as much," O'Neill offered, walking closer. "Daniel, why don't you drive these two back to their car? I'm sure you'd love the chance talk nice with some friendly foreigners. They said it broke down somewhere near the turnoff for here."

"What?" Daniel replied, looking somewhat distracted. "Jack, there was nothing to see on the way up here but trees. Lots of trees. I don't know why you complain about seeing trees so much off— at work, when they surround you every time you take a vacation."

"Nothing?" O'Neill's voice hardened, and he turned on them with a definite aura of looming. Kaito took a step back, closer to Ansem.

"Sorry to have caused you any trouble, Mr. O'Neill," Ansem declared. "No hard feelings?"

Behind him a dark portal flared to life, and he grabbed Kaito by the shoulder, dragging him through before anyone else could move.

Inside the corridor, Kaito rubbed his shoulder from Ansem's vice-like grip.

"Did you figure out what the darkness was?"

"It came from Murray-san, and seemed like the remains of something foreign that hasn't faded away completely yet. He seemed like he would be okay—all four of those people had some darkness lurking in their hearts, but together they should keep one another in the light."

"They seemed like an interesting bunch," Kaito commented as they walked quickly through the corridor towards their next destination. "I wonder what the deal with the eyes was, though?"

"Carter, you're sure he wasn't, I don't know, some minor goa'uld trying to hide on earth?"

"Positive, sir. I didn't sense even a trace of Naquadah."

"Peachy. Daniel, are there some aliens with beaming technology that we don't know about yet?"

"If we don't know about them, how could I tell you? I'll have to do some research to see if ancient mythology ever talks about a dark portal like that. But still, that Kaito kid looked like your average Japanese teenager."
"For crying out loud—don't tell me we have alien kidnappers running around earth now. I thought we were done saving the world, already!"

"Indeed. I have anticipated resting after this long battle for some time."

"Maybe we can let the world take care of itself for once, Jack. He didn't seem hostile, at least, and the kid seemed comfortable traveling with him."

"It's never that easy, Danny… never that easy."

"It'll keep for a few days, sir."

"I give command 12 hours before calling one of us in for a 'crisis.'"

A considering pause.

"No bet, sir."

"Hah!"

Chapter End Notes

This is the result of Stargate SG-1 and Kingdom Hearts simultaneously staging a coup on my higher brain functions. Stargate is set at the very end of season 8, for the people who like timeframes. Kingdom Hearts is still very close to when Sora woke up and started traveling. Ansem is starting to loosen up a little—exhaustion and the need for a comrade are beginning to lower his defenses.
Kaito stared in awe. Some world's version of Tokyo Tower stood connected by thick cables to a fleet of surrounding helicopters. In agonizingly slow unison, the helicopters began to rise higher, trying to take the national monument with them. Countless pedestrians paused in the streets, all watching the extremely odd spectacle. A cloud of dust rose, quickly obscuring from view all but a single helicopter hovering to the side. Kaito caught a flash of red from just beneath it.

Binoculars, binoculars, I know I had a pair in my suit when I last left home…

A handful of precious seconds later, he raised the field glasses to his eyes and focused on the anomalous helicopter. A figure dressed from head to toe in the brightest red Kaito had even seen dangled nonchalantly from the rope ladder whipping about in the downdraft. Slight build and long, dark hair suggested that interestingly, the person was female.

I'm not afraid of heights, but that's pushing it, even for me… No glider, no parachute; the only thing between her and going 'splat' is the strength of her grip.

Focused on the distracting supervisor, it took Kaito a moment to realize the dust was clearing. The whir of helicopters had decreased significantly, as well. He shifted his binoculars to the left, and abruptly pulled them away from his eyes.

Tokyo Tower, the dust, and the helicopters had all vanished into thin air.

No, that's not right…

Kaito squinted through the binoculars at a patch of sky that looked unusual. With his full concentration focused solely upon it, he could barely see a shimmer rippling along a strange veil to his senses. A shape vaguely similar to his quarry blurred into view for a few seconds, then disappeared and left a headache in its wake.

"She has quite a talent at projection," Ansem murmured from beside Kaito on the skyscraper's roof.

"Urgh. You're telling me." Kaito massaged his temples, looking back at the remaining helicopter. The woman in red seemed to have wrapped her target in a blanket of illusion, and more powerfully than he could see through, at that. He wasn't used to hidden things staying hidden around him. It was annoying.

As they watched, the woman tugged her hat — a fedora, Kaito was pretty sure — further down on her head and sashayed up the rope ladder into the helicopter. A moment later, it whirred away in the direction of the near-invisible monument.

"Now that is a shadow thief."

A sidelong glance from Ansem. "Not a phantom one?"

"Well, she does seem to treat what she does like a game, and no one was hurt. I'll even give her points for style." Lots and lots of points for style. "But kaitous give back what we steal. Her game seems to be a challenge to find or catch her."
"Mm."

"Still…" Kaito shook his head regretfully. "She'd be a heck of a woman to understudy."

"I'll take your word for it. The police are lucky she's a thief of the shadows, and not of the dark."

Kaito paused, thinking of what he knew about the differences between the two. If a lady could cause this much trouble just flirting with the shadows…

"Agreed."

Chapter End Notes

Credit to ytak for thinking of the crossover first.
After dispatching the last of the latest enemy attack, Kaito knelt on the unreal ground, trying to catch his breath. Something was wrong with these corridors. He had been fine at first, but now it was difficult to breathe on the short walks between worlds, let alone defeat creatures who fought by dodging, weaving, dancing, and flailing. (He was increasingly tempted to liken the things to air-breathing ysquid.)

He was agile, but agility required oxygen.

"Damn it." Curious. Inflection implied a sense of remembrance, as if Ansem was only just now recalling relevant information and very, very aggravated for having forgotten something so important in the first place. Footsteps sounded behind him, but he made no move to look up. Too much effort involved.

*How are you not winded? Close combat requires more movement than long-range, and you've been traveling like this a lot longer than I have.*

A gloved hand gripped his shoulder.

"Get up. You need to get out of here." If he didn't know better, he'd say that the urgency of Ansem's tone also held an underlying hint of worry.

"No, really," Kaito drawled as well as his lungs would allow. In his ears, it sounded more like a wheeze. Ansem hauled him upright and half-carried, half-dragged him towards their apparent exit from the corridor.

*So tired ... why is it getting hard to keep my eyes open? Ooh, look at the pretty black spots. Isn't that a sign of something important? Something that could be bad? Mom's a nurse, so she would know...*

The world went dark.

Ansem trudged through a rustic countryside of hillocks, rocky ground and fields. Mountains loomed in the distance in one direction, and a forest stretched away in another. Kaito draped over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, still unconscious. Kaito was lucky Ansem stood well over six feet tall and had stamina to spare, or he would never have been able to carry so much dead weight.

As it was, he felt himself tiring and growing increasingly annoyed. He could see a small settlement not too far off, hopefully with some people capable of helping Kaito because there was literally no other civilization around for miles. He had already been walking for almost an hour, and likely had that far to walk again before they arrived. Shortening the distance with a corridor would be both a waste of power and potentially dangerous to Kaito.

Maybe a traveling companion wasn't such a good idea after all, especially one who couldn't even travel the dark corridors on his own. Letting Kaito tag along in the first place had been against all common sense, given Ansem's current state and occupation.

But he had been so tired, and the desire to hold a conversation with a decent, human-shaped being felt so overwhelming that night, he hadn't been able to keep from responding to Kaito's spoken-aloud
thoughts. Then the thief had followed of his own free will, and the prospect of someone to keep him grounded had been irresistible. Someone else who walked that fine line between light and darkness, and seemingly with more success.

He sighed. Kaito did more than make him grounded; he had, occasionally, made him feel almost normal for a few moments. He didn't know if that was a good thing. Not only could it be potentially dangerous, but when he temporarily let whom he used to be come to the forefront of his personality, remembering how abnormal he was in truth hurt the more for having pretended otherwise.

Was it worth it?

The possibility of returning Kaito to his home world stretched out before his imagination. Back to traveling and fighting alone almost 24 hours a day on minimal food, water and sleep, avoiding human contact whenever possible so that it would hurt less to leave them behind, stuck exclusively in his own head with the thoughts that whirled and accused and attacked and would never be quiet unless someone else was filling the silence…

A shudder rippled through his tall frame. Not again. Please, not again. For now he couldn't return to face the friends he had once known and cast aside, not the way he was, but he loathed the thought of going back to being alone in the dark. He needed no one—never need, never depend, never be able to let someone else down—but the benefits of having Kaito around outweighed the possible inconveniences.

*Keep telling yourself that it's a matter of advantageous use of resources,* a sardonic voice in the back of his mind declared. *Maybe eventually you'll believe it.*

Ansem very deliberately made no visible response to the traitorous thought. Talking to air was not generally considered sane behavior, and he had just reached the edges of the village. A trio of young children paused in their game of tag and gawked at him.

"Hey, Uncle, are you a youkai?" The question earned the youngest boy an immediate thwack on the head from the older boy, and caused the older girl to put a protective arm around his shoulders.

"I'm sorry, sir, he didn't mean that," she said hastily, "We're always trying to teach him better manners—"

Ansem cut her off with a gesture. "Who can help me with my—" *not quite friend, not yet, especially not if he's going home,* "—companion?"

The children's eyes widened at Kaito's limp form. As one, they turned and scampered through dusty streets towards a small hut on the opposite side of the village. "Kaede-obaasan! Kaede-obaasan!"

Bemused, Ansem followed in their wake, aware that he garnered not a few stares from open doorways and various villagers outside their houses. Maybe Kaito had been right about him sticking out like a sore thumb. Of course, in this place Kaito's clothing stuck out as much as he did. They weren't going to be anywhere long enough for assimilating to be worth the effort. He still wasn't sure how Kaito had convinced him to do so even that one time.

An old, hunched, gray-haired woman with wrinkles and an eye-patch exited the hut and met the calling children, a worried frown on her face. "What is it, what's wrong?"

Wordlessly, the children pointed at Ansem. She looked up, scrutinizing him with wary curiosity. Her eye narrowed when it met his, but she made no comment. Apparently satisfied that he posed no immediate threat, she allowed her attention to pass to what she could see of Kaito, and abruptly
moved the children out of the doorway.

"Hurry, bring him inside. That level of taint could potentially be dangerous." She turned to the oldest boy. "Thank you, Maro-kun. Go on and play, now. I have things that need tending to."

Ansem followed her inside, laying Kaito on a bed made mostly of straw under Kaede's direction. She ran a hand over Kaito's face, brow knitting. He twitched slightly under her ministrations, but remained asleep. Their travel pace must have been harder on Kaito than Ansem had thought, if bone-deep exhaustion still held him in sway.

"I have done a little for him, but he should have Kagome-chan's help." She looked up at him, eye glinting in a way he wasn't sure he liked. "The faster she can be fetched here, the better. Now, I don't know who you are, or what you are, but if you're a youkai you obviously care more about helping your friend than killing or eating humans. And your friend is most certainly human."

Ansem wondered briefly what exactly she was referring to, but let it pass. There were more important things to consider than the possibility of more non-human sentients beyond those he had already met.

Kaede continued: "That's enough for my help, but Inuyasha doesn't think much of strangers. Do you think you can play transport for an old woman?"

Ansem closed his eyes for a moment. This was not a part of his job description. Fight enemies? Yes. Work behind the scenes in support of Sora? Absolutely. Act as a human courier? No. Many times, No.

He looked back at Kaede.

The trip wasn't too hard—the old lady was at least a head shorter than Kaito, and nowhere near as heavy. All he had to do was stay balanced. Ansem navigated his way around the forest to a massive tree, where he set Kaede down. She strode into the nearby clearing without looking to see if he would follow.

"Inuyasha!"

A crouching red bundle on the edge of a box-like wooden structure uncurled into the form and features of a teenage boy. Ansem raised an eyebrow as he found himself staring into molten-gold eyes outside of a mirror. He raised the other eyebrow when he realized that dog's ears poked through the white hair on top of the boys head, nearly flattened in wary disgust.

"Who the hell is that with you, old crone?" Inuyasha growled. "He reeks of something damn close to Naraku's miasma, even if he doesn't have Naraku's scent. And what are you doing here, anyway?"

Kaede ignored the questions. "When will Kagome-chan be returning?"

Inuyasha blinked, caught off guard. "She said three or four days, two days ago," he groused, scowling. "And told me not to follow this time. Who is he?"

"Later, Inuyasha. I know you can sense no inherent danger from him. I need you to fetch Kagome-chan. If she protests, tell her the summons are from me, and are somewhat urgent. A young man would greatly benefit from her purifying powers, the sooner the better for it."

Inuyasha visibly brightened at having an incontestable excuse to bring Kagome back. The scowl returned, however, when he glanced back at Ansem.
"When we get back, you had better be damn well ready to tell me who and what you are. You smell wrong in too many ways to count. And if you hurt anyone, especially Kagome when I bring her, I'll rip you limb from limb."

Ansem inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment, and the odd-looking boy turned and jumped behind the wooden slats. Mystified by his behavior, Ansem looked inside the square wooden frame, which he belatedly realized was the outer supports of an old, dried-up well. The fact that the boy had voluntarily jumped into a deep and empty well was unusual in and of itself. The fact that within the confines of the old stone walls there was nothing but air and sturdy vines, no flashes of white-red-gold to be seen, was even stranger.

And when Inuyasha got back from wherever he had just vanished, Ansem was going to have to convince him that quartering strangers was an unnecessary extreme.

Why was it that ever since he met Kaito, he was continuously being forced to interact with people and explain away whatever about him didn't fit into their definition of normal? The thief had to be a people magnet, and it apparently worked even when he was unconscious.

…Maybe that was why he had talked to Kaito in the first place. He drew people in like—well, like Sora. Insofar as Ansem had observed, people instinctively liked them both. He still didn't know how they did it.

A sudden impact against his shoulder made him whirl, reflexively summoning a dark firaga against the threat. A split-second later he registered that the apparent attack had come from Kaede wielding a fallen tree branch, and he quickly let the purple-black flame dissipate just before it released in her direction. Kaede seemed to purposefully ignore his reaction, and his spate of cursing when he realized what she had just risked for no apparent reason.

"Pay more attention to your surroundings, young man. There are many dangers in this countryside, and few are polite enough to give their prey a warning. It's a good sign when you have control enough over your reflexes to recognize friend from foe, however. Now, if we want to return to the village before Inuyasha arrives there, we had better be on our way."

Shaking his head in disbelief, Ansem headed back towards the village. The old lady was completely crazy if she went around antagonizing strangers with unknown abilities like that. Oddly enough, however, upon further reflection he felt relieved. He hadn't really known he was capable of suppressing his more dangerous reflexes until she had provoked him. He refused to believe she had done that for those reasons, though—some things were too far-fetched to even consider.

True to Kaede's word, they arrived mere minutes before Inuyasha literally leapt over several of the village's small houses on his way to the old woman's hut, carrying piggyback a dark-haired girl slightly younger than Kaito. Had Ansem not seen six impossible things before breakfast on a regular basis for some time, he might have been more surprised. As it was, he concluded that the inhuman speed and strength were a corollary to whatever genes gave Inuyasha dog ears, slit pupils, and yes, those were claws.

The girl spoke first, climbing off of Inuyasha's back. Now that she stood in close range, Ansem was tempted to shield his eyes. If he hadn't already met the seven princesses of light, he would have wagered anything that this girl could have been one of them. Only very faintly, almost too weak to detect, could he sense the residue of darkness previously purged.

"Kaede-obaaasan, what could possibly be so urgent that you sent Inuyasha to kidnap me from my after-school tutoring session? I failed my last three tests, and I need to graduate!"
Kaede, at least, had the decency to look repentant. Inuyasha's too-loud *Feh!* earned him a baleful glare that promised pain at some later, more convenient time.

"Come inside and see, Kagome-chan. Inuyasha, why don't you try catching something extra for dinner? Three more mouths to feed, tonight. And find Shippou-kun while you're at it, I know you chased him off to entertain himself somewhere away from the well."

Kagome disappeared inside the hut, but Inuyasha growled at the dismissal, shooting a glare at Ansem.

"It can wait, Inuyasha," Kaede said dryly. "Interrogate him over dinner tonight, since I admit I'm curious as well. We need enough food for there to be dinner, first."

Inuyasha bared his teeth, then vaulted away on his errands. Kaede ushered Ansem inside the hut, where Kagome had already knelt beside Kaito's sleeping form.

"What happened to him? It's like he's been… infected by something similar to Naraku's miasma. He even has a fever!"

"Our path was infested by it," Ansem offered, somewhat reluctantly. "I'm—immune. He seemed all right at first, but then…” he shrugged.

"You can purify him, can you not, Kagome? It shouldn't be much different from how you helped Kikyo."

"I think so. I hope so." She frowned. "Do you see that? Even without the miasma, his energy feels different from anyone I've seen. White and shades of silver, all laced through light blue. I've never seen anything like it, not even in Miroku's..."

"Leave it be," Ansem interjected, somewhat harsher than he meant to. He looked away when both women's gazes focused on him. "It's who he is. His strength. He walks the shadows, staring into the darkness but always knowing light guards his back. Do you understand?"

Kagome nodded, slowly and thoughtfully. "It makes a peculiar sort of sense. I'm not sure who I could liken him to, but that doesn't matter so much right now. I'll purify the darkness from him as well as I can."

"Thank you." Ansem turned. "I need to find a friend. He should be able to help him after he wakes back up."

"You mean that someone else was traveling a path infested by some evil youkai's miasma? What—"

"We were separated," Ansem lied smoothly before Kaede could work her shocked indignation into a full-blown tirade. "I don't know exactly where he is, but he didn't wander onto that old lost pathway with us. I doubt I could find that way again, regardless, but I can find him. When your friend Inuyasha comes back, be sure to tell him that I'll be returning and didn't simply disappear."

Before they could protest, he ducked outside, skirted around the hut to the side out of sight of anyone in the village who might care enough to watch, and entered a dark corridor.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, groggy and aching, voices filtered into Kaito's half-dreaming state.

"The ones who helped him are eating just outside here. I want you to see him before dealing with
them."

"Why're you still using your old sword?" High-pitched and slightly nasal, but not quite the voice of a child. "Don't think I didn't notice when we were fighting the enemy on the way here."

Silence.

"I chose the twilit path, but right now, all that I have, all I am, is darkness. A dark form wields a dark sword. Perhaps when I step back onto that road towards light, I'll receive another blade. Until then, this is enough."

"Well, I can't say I completely agree with you there, but if that's what your heart tells you to do I won't say otherwise."

A mirthless chuckle. "Ironic, isn't it? Even after I defeated my darkness and made it my own, I still didn't have the power to compete with him. I had to resurrect the dark completely just to beat half of him. And now I can't banish or defeat the darkness anymore without destroying myself."

"I told you this when you first showed up with that money pouch for Sora, and I'll tell you again. Only your form is of the darkness you used to hold. Deep down inside, your heart is of the light, R—"

"Ansem." The interruption, though said calmly, carried a hint of ice that left no room for argument. "I may not have always been this way, but this is who I am right now. Unless you know how to rectify that, I am no longer who I was before."

Softly, regretfully: "I don't. Not yet. I'm sorry."

"I chose it. The exchange was necessary and worth the price. There's no time for regrets. Now…"

Muted footfalls approached Kaito's bed in tandem.

"Can you help him?"

A soft whistle. "The darkness did a number on him. I can still see the scars where his aura hasn't wholly repaired itself yet. How many times did he travel the corridors?"

"...Half a dozen?"

"Gosh, that's still some amazing endurance. To travel the dark without a ship, the protection of darkness, or the protection of light… it's a miracle he lasted so long."

"It didn't cross my mind." Was that… remorse? "I never thought he might not have defenses; it's been so long since I didn't have them I nearly forgot what it was like. And he didn't act like he was fighting anything off…"

"Not your fault, Ansem-kun. You can't blame yourself."

"Mmm. Are you going to wake him?"

"Not unless you want him to be hurting while I try to teach him. Give his heart time to recover. In the meantime, can you show me who helped him? I've never seen anything like it!"

"If this is a plot to force me to rest as well, I'll have you know I slept and ate recently."

Quiet, high-pitched laughter. "I hadn't even thought of that. I won't say it's not a good idea, though.
I'm positive you need more rest than you've been giving yourself. Now come on, introduce me."

"Just be aware that you're probably going to be called a youkai. And I've put off explaining anything until now, so you can do that, too. One of them can sense my darkness, and it puts him on edge. He's more likely to believe what you say."

"Well, let's see what I can come up with that convincingly places us as inhabitants of this world. The less worlds meddled with, the better."

The voices faded, moving farther away, then muffled completely. Kaito let himself relax again, knowing that Ansem wouldn't leave him where it wasn't safe. Probably. He didn't fight the wave of sleep as it washed inexorably over his senses.

"Are you awake, boy?"

At the unfamiliar voice, Kaito transitioned from drowsy to electrifying alert in less than a second, though he knew better than to suddenly fly upright. He tried to relax his unconsciously tensed muscles, eyes still closed.

"Ah, there you are. You might be a bit confused, but rest assured you're safe."

Kaito risked opening one eye into a cautious slit. A silhouetted form approached slowly, cautiously, until the person's features resolved in the dim light into that of an old woman.

"My name is Kaede. You were being slowly overwhelmed by darkness when your friend brought you here for help. Kagome has purified you, but your energy is likely still low."

Kaito inched his way upright with the same care he put into disarming 5-star security systems. Parts of his head were threatening to start World War III with his pain sensors if he didn't go smooth and slow. Kaede handed him a cup of water, which he drank slowly, though all his instincts were clamoring to down it in one gulp and ask for more.

"I have a tea for your headache, when you are ready, and I believe Kagome-chan sent some ramen back with Inuyasha when he took her home, if you feel hungry."

Kaito's stomach growled in response, eliciting a chuckle. "I thought as much. I'll go make sure they leave enough for you, and tell your friends that you're awake."

He nodded gently. She disappeared and a few minutes later Ansem entered, bearing a cup of tea and, against all probability given the rustic surroundings, a cup of instant ramen. Kaito was too hungry to comment on the seeming anachronism, and gladly ate and drank. Ansem stood by the bed, silently waiting for Kaito to finish.

"Okay, now that my head isn't threatening to fall off, what happened? And where are we?"

"Where we are… is better experienced than described. As for what happened, you nearly fell prey to the dark, but a girl of this world with some power over the dark managed to purify you. I've also brought a friend here who can help keep it from happening again."

*So, the man does have friends. Or at least, a friend.*

"Not DiZ-san?"

"No. Someone who's less likely to draw you from shadows into darkness."
"Um." Kaito considered that for a moment. "DiZ-san would?"

Ansem's smile held no humor whatsoever. "People who aren't strong enough in themselves turn to the darkness for power. Then it's a battle of strength and will to keep your heart from being devoured by the dark. DiZ-san always offers people a choice they can make… but if I know him, your choice would have been between fighting the darkness as you are now, with it eating away at you, or embracing the dark and holding it captive within you as you use it to traverse the outer dark. Like him."

"Pass."

"I thought you might. Someone I know did neither, however, and still traveled the way we do for some time. I brought him here to teach you, if you want to stay on this road. If you'd rather go home now, you can."

_The implications of what you're not saying mean you took one of the methods other than your friend's way. Which means at some point in the past, you must have embraced the darkness like DiZ-san if you can travel through the dark. Hoo boy. I think we just brushed the edges of the untold 'complicated and personal' part of your history again. You still haven't given me enough pieces for it to make sense, though. Drat._

Kaito reluctantly pushed the puzzle-solving part of his thoughts to the back of his mind. "I already chose this, and I'm going to see it through." Had he been paying enough attention, Kaito would probably have been shocked to see an expression akin to relief on Ansem's face. "Where is this guy, then?"

In response to his question a figure entered and approached the bed, illuminated by the morning sun shining into the hut. Kaito stared.

"Hi, there. Glad to see you're doing okay." The high-pitched voice from his earlier waking dream. Kaito stared some more, unintentionally ignoring the outstretched white glove.

"Ansem, I'm being talked to by a mouse."

_Wearing a child-size version of your creepy organization's coat. Why? He seems less likely to be a member of their group than you are._

A rueful smile. "I guess your world didn't have animorphic people, huh? Sorry to surprise you. Most people's minds just accept the differences between worlds if they ever wind up among people outside their world. Your power probably exposes things for what they really are, instead of glossing over them."

"Great."

_Somehow, that's not comforting. I'm talking to a two-and-a-half-foot-tall mouse. In black._

_And I have been hanging around with Hakuba far, far too long if I want to call him an MiB. Him and his American movies… and I'm going to kill him for rubbing his sense of humor off on me. Or at least heavily, heavily embarrass him next heist night, if I make it back alive._

"Anyway, I'm King Mickey. Kaito-kun, right?"

"…Yeah." Kaito hesitantly shook the humanoid mouse's hand.

_A mouse with his own kingdom, even. Ansem seems to accept it, though, so he's probably not_
suffering from delusions of grandeur. This is still disturbing.

"You can call me Mickey. I'm not sure exactly how this is gonna work, because I'm still learning about the nature of the shadows, but I want to help you get a hold on your power. It's dangerous to travel untrained, especially when you have a strong heart's talent. The darkness tries to absorb strong hearts."

"Why am I not surprised?" Kaito responded dryly. "By now I should be used to diving headlong into mortal danger with no guidelines or known precedents."

"Oh, there's precedent of a sort—"

"But not one you'd want to emulate." Weariness had crept into Ansem's tone.

Definitely no. Not when you're apparently the only precedent around, and talk as if you gained the shadows by traveling through the dark and coming out the other side.

You and DiZ-san both told me that I hold the shadows, but as if they're my natural habitat, or my playground. You also happened to warn me that spending too much time in the dark might mean eventually losing important things of the light.

I don't like these odds.

I really don't like the idea of darkness being attracted to me like Dobermans to a slab of steak.

"Right," the king continued, oblivious to Kaito's internal monologue. He cracked his interlaced hands, stretching child-like arms out to their full length. "Let's get started. To those with powerful hearts, the darkness should have no hold on them or be a source of fear."

Kaito emerged from the hut some time later, blinking in the sun's glare. He felt slightly disoriented from the other details Mickey had provided while explaining about what had happened to him, and from the training itself.

Mickey had once traveled safely through the dark corridors protected only by his own light, and then by the key-shaped blade he wielded. Which was indeed a keyblade, like the one Sora was supposed to wield, and the term made a lot more sense now that he'd seen one. A blade found in the dark, it opened corridors of darkness between worlds even though Mickey bore it for the sake of light. Kaito had somehow had the impression that Sora's keyblade was the only one, but that was evidently not the case. Kaito still wasn't sure how Mickey's experiences reconciled with his own abilities, but they managed to innovate (i.e., make things up) as they went along.

By the time Mickey was satisfied with his progress, Kaito could at least use the raw shadows to protect himself from any encroaching dark. To Mickey's surprise, though the king quickly caught on and explained his discovery to Kaito, apparently being a child of the shadows meant that his magic remained malleable while he traveled through the worlds. A child of light like Sora or Donald brought their magic with them and forced a world to mold its power around their shape; a darkchild merely took their original magic into the taint of darkness with them. Kaito seemed to adapt to the way a world expressed power like a chameleon, or a mimic.

The king had speculated about whether or not Kaito could remember those old imprints, and if necessary fight with the form of any world he visited. Surrupetitously fingering a stack of cards that opened his mind to faint sensations of power and shadow and master—call!, Kaito gave no more than a non-committal shrug. Ansem never stayed in any world long enough for him to really adjust to
the newest power-channel, and using them against the natural flow of another world would take more mastery than he currently held. Maybe he would admit to something once there was anything worth admitting to.

Mickey had also suggested the possibility that Kaito could eventually open a corridor on his own. Kaito loathed the thought.

Strong heart or not, power kinda like a distant-cousin-who-never-writes to the darkness or not, I'm not touching the stuff to try and manipulate it until I can use what I've already got.

Kaito’s musings were unpleasantly disrupted by an unknown entity landing on his shoulders, almost knocking him off his feet.

"Gah!" Recovering his balance, he plucked the thing away from where it seemed to be burrowing in his unruly hair, and held it at arms length.

Impossibly large blue eyes stared out at him from under a thick fringe of rust-orange bangs, set in an innocent, pouting face. The appendage held in one hand felt soft and silky and bizarrely like… fur.

What the—?

Tiny fists beat the air, his captive squirming and struggling against his grip.

"Cut it out! That hurts, ya know!" Young, but definitely male. Not even Aoko could have made the growl bubbling out of the boy's throat.

Kaito opened his hand reflexively, letting bright-colored clothes and fur drop to the ground.

"Ow!"

The boy dusted himself off, glaring. Kaito realized that the sensation of fur had come from the bushy tail currently waving about in an irritated manner. White-tipped rust—a fox's tail.

"What—who—are you?"

"I'm Shippou! Haven't you ever seen a kitsune before?"

...Here myths are real.

"What, are you from through the well like Kagome-chan? She didn't know what I was, either."

Kaito raised an eyebrow at two and a half feet of disgruntled fox-spirit. "Maybe."

"Hmph. You don't seem like much. I bet Inuyasha could pound you in two seconds flat, let alone what a full-blooded youkai would do to you."

Youkai. Old Japan's spirits, magical creatures, demons. Inuyasha—Dog demon? If this guy is a canine youkai, his parents had no imagination.

"What was that, shrimp?" An irate white-and-red blur pounced on Shippou from a short distance away, and a scuffle of growls, yips, curses and yelling ensued.

"Hey!" Shippou skidded along the dirt for several seconds before he ran out of inertia. Back on his feet, he launched into the air, landing on Inuyasha's shoulders. Small, sharply pointed fangs zeroed in on very sensitive dog ears.
One powerful swat later, Shippou sat on the ground nursing a sore head and a bruised ego. The two glared at each other, arms crossed. "I can take down a full-blood any damn day of the week, brat, even that bastard Sesshoumaru."

Well, those ears are a dead giveaway for some youkai blood, but apparently not a full-blooded one like Shippou. Half-blood, then?

Sharp golden eyes met Kaito's as he observed the interaction, and narrowed. "So you're the one Kagome had to purify. Are you an idiot for not recognizing the miasma for what it was, or just suicidal?"

"Let's stick to 'inexperienced.' It shouldn't happen again."

"It'd better not. Your two friends might be right about Ansem not having a personality to match his miasma, but I don't want you guys hanging around this place any longer than you have to be."

"Ansem-san and Mickey-san had some stuff to talk about, but then we planned to move on. We've still got a long way to travel, it looks like. I just figured I'd find out for myself where I ended up, being unconscious and all when we arrived."

"How did you wind up traveling with a youkai and a cursed human in the first place?"

Kaito glanced at the newcomer, absorbing in an instant dark hair and eyes, a gauntleted arm and rosary-bound hand, several earrings, and traditional robes of a Buddhist priest that could have been pulled from a history book back home. Beside the man a similarly dark-haired girl stood in a traditional, informal kimono, unremarkable except for a massive bone-colored boomerang strapped to her back.

Not bone-colored, Kaito realized. Bone. I think I should be creeped out by that.

She spoke when he didn't reply right away, taking his distracted silence for confusion. "Mickey-san explained how Ansem-san was cursed by another youkai a year ago, so strongly that his entire aura has been changed. It is unusual for youkai like Mickey-san to associate with humans, however, even the good or kind ones. How did you meet?"

A youkai curse? Intriguing thought. I wonder how close to the truth that is…

"Some days I'm not even sure myself," Kaito admitted, trying to be as honest as possible. The most believable lie holds an element of truth. "I met Ansem-san when he passed by my hometown a while ago and decided to follow him. Curiosity is one of my failings."

He grinned disarmingly, and was rewarded with a smile from the girl. "When he realized I had tagged along, he decided not to send me packing for the time being. I only just—such a wonderfully vague term—met Mickey-san. I'm not sure what the story between them is, but they seem to be working together to help some people that need it. What about you? A youkai child, a handful of humans, and a…" he paused, still unsure. "Half-blood youkai?"

"Hanyou, yes," the man confirmed, ignoring Inuyasha's snarl at the term. "We all found a common ground in an enemy we'd like very much to see dead."

Erk. These people are completely serious about wanting to kill someone. None of them look over twenty. This is definitely a long way from home.
Though a lack of indoor plumbing should probably have been my first clue.

"Kaito-san." Ansem ducked outside through the nearest doorway, cutting off further conversation. "We're leaving."

"Thanks for all your help," Mickey added cheerfully. "Good luck with your fight against Naraku. I wish we could stay and give you a hand—"

"We don't need it," Inuyasha interrupted gruffly.

The priest promptly dealt him a jingling staff-thwack, and continued smoothly, "What our rude friend is trying to say, is that wouldn't want to needlessly endanger people who have no stake in our battles."

"Our thanks for the offer, though," the young woman added.

"Well, there's still a lot of daylight left and even more ground to cover before we stop," Mickey said after a pause. "Take care of yourselves."

"Thanks for everything," Kaito said, and really meant it. Mickey had filled him in on some of the details regarding his collapse and the steps necessary for his recovery. "Please tell Kagome-san I'm very grateful, and I'm sorry I can't tell her so in person."

A grumble that sounded suspiciously like an "I'm not," drifted from where Inuyasha stood.

Add 'territorial' to the canine attributes of a dog-youkai. That would explain why Ansem-san annoys Inuyasha-san so much even beyond his darkness—Alpha males don't get on with each other.

…Getting out of here sounds like a really good idea right about now. If he's gone this long without actively challenging Ansem, I don't want to take my chances on what would happen if he finally snaps and can't help it any more.

After a final round of goodbyes, the unconventional trio headed off into the sunset.

Or would have, if not for the fact that the sun had barely passed mid-morning.

Surprisingly, the king kept up with Ansem's long stride without difficulty until they reached a ravine offering shelter from most prying eyes or ears. Mickey then said his farewells and left through a path opened by his keyblade, searching for a man reputed to have understood the phenomena of heartless and nobodies plaguing the worlds.

Who is also named—surprise!—Ansem.

"How many Ansems are there, anyway?" he muttered to himself. He neither expected nor received an answer from his taciturn companion.

Something is seriously wrong here, but I can’t figure out what. Not the least of which is how an unknown, sentient force can grant certain people a blade with strange power over the laws governing the universe. How does job-screening work for that one?

"Out of curiosity, how many keyblades are there? Sora-kun's got one as champion of the light, but that obviously doesn't define the position because Mickey-san's got another one, and he's, um… researcher for the light? Are there any more of them floating around?"
"We don't know much more about keyblades than we do about the heartless and nobodies. That's part of what the king is trying to find out."

"Why does he wear a cloak like you do? Are there any more people out there who wear those things but aren't members of that organization either?"

"He has his own reason for wearing that cloak, but anyone else who bothers is exceedingly unlikely to be friendly."

As Inuyasha-san would say, Feh.

"I'm assuming that since we didn't stick around, their big bad evil is homegrown?"

"Yes. Almost on par in nastiness to the dead Ansem from what they described, but not involved with our sorts of creatures born from the dark. Strong hearts seeking the darkness can sometimes draw the heartless to their worlds, but he hasn't. No one else seems likely to breach the worldwalls. They'll be fine, so long as he doesn't kill them."

"So optimistic."

"Harder to be disappointed that way."

Ouch.

Dark flame blossomed into a doorway. Kaito eyed it uneasily, wary of exposing himself again despite Mickey's reassurances. Inuyasha's bad mood seemed to have rubbed off on Ansem, however, because either didn't notice or didn't care. He stepped through and left Kaito with the choice of following, or being essentially stranded.

"Sometimes you're really annoying," Kaito muttered, despite Ansem's inability to hear him, and ran through before the way could close.

Chapter End Notes

The Inuyasha timeline is from the later volumes of the manga, though you probably have to squint to see the specific references. Sora is still on his first round through the worlds, being shiny and optimistic and heroic.

Wielders of a keyblade and their companions seem to receive the magical equivalent of a babelfish, given that Sora communicates just fine with worlds like China or an animal kingdom. Isn't instant-translation handy?
Traveling through the corridors, Kaito realized, had become both easier and harder simultaneously. Easier, because he was no longer in immediate danger of another collapse. Harder, because recognizing the darkness for what it was and pulling on the shadows to protect himself fully from the corridor's atmosphere was lot more exhausting than he had anticipated. The necessary focus took the majority of his concentration, and even then he felt himself slip once or twice. As a result, he was close to useless when it came to defense against more tangible enemies, but his luck seemed to make a temporary reappearance. This particular trip remained uneventful up through exiting the corridor.

The first thing Kaito noticed when he stepped into the world was the darkness of night lit only by the moon and stars. Exhausted and unable to see clearly, he stumbled forward, and the second thing he noticed was dirt beneath his hands, instinct transforming a fall into a handspring.

An unexpected flash of silver in the movement distracted him, however, and said handspring's momentum sent him sprawling on the hard-packed earth.

"Ow..."

*So much for luck.*

A faint prickle of sympathetic amusement danced in the far corners of his mind. Startled by the alien impression, he failed to catch it before it disappeared into a broader sense of awareness that hadn't previously been in his head.

"Are you alright?" Ansem asked.

Eyes closed, Kaito pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to diminish the dull throb of his forehead. His right side ached, but probably wouldn't bruise badly.

"Ugh. Give me a minute." When he felt a bit more normal he stood and turned to look at Ansem, and immediately threw an arm over his eyes. "Augh!"

After a pause Ansem ventured, "The nearest light source is a torch over fifteen feet down the road. I didn't know shades of black were blinding."

Kaito tentatively lowered his arm part way, blinking as his eyes adjusted to a piece of day-in-night.

"Oh, black is fine. You, however, happen to possess a bright steely-gray outline."

*Overlaid by what looks like a black camouflage net, but that's beside the point. I doubt you'd tell me*
Ansem lowered his hood and raised his arms to inspect them, then let them drop.

"And without my permission, too. Any ideas as to why you're suddenly seeing auras that I'm not?"

Kaito considered for a moment, thoughtfully observing his hand as he turned it this way and that. Pale light exposed its position clearly, but left no afterimage on his retinas and revealed nothing visually beyond the appendage itself.

"You don't illuminate anything else, and you don't see anything around either of us. The only thing that comes to mind is that auras, or *ki*, or whatever this place calls it, play a major part of this world's magic system." He sighed. "I seem to be a bit silvery as well, which means anyone in this world with magic is going to be able to sense us."

"Don't you mean see us?"

"No, I mean sense," Kaito confirmed with a bitter smile of bad news. "In line of sight we're as good as carrying neon signs, but beyond that anyone with the right talent or training is going to know about us the second we get too close."

Ansem raised his eyebrows. A faint mood of inquiry, but without disbelief, suffused the vague awareness in the back of his mind that Kaito was slowly recognizing as *Ansem-ally-searching-hiding*.

"Trust me, it's hard to describe," he said with a roll of his eyes. "I've got a conglomeration in my head of who you are, where you are, and what you're feeling."

"Intriguing, but also worrying. Something feels off about this world, and I don't like the idea of being vulnerable."

"Neither do I," Kaito agreed grimly.

*Phantom thieves do not glow in the dark, and they certainly don't give advanced warning of their movement. Um, besides riddle-notices, which are much more general, and—urgh.*

If Kudou were here he'd have a field day catching him. No, that was wrong. Kudou would carry his own magic with him, and the odd power-glow-sense that he was just going to call *ki* unless informed otherwise didn't seem to exist back home. On the other hand, if there were glowy *ki* outlines to be found, Kudou would probably see them out of sheer spite.

But Kudou wasn't here, which made the whole thing moot. Kaito pushed a pang of homesickness out of his mind. He probably needed to tie up some loose ends at home in the near future, but there were more pressing concerns at the moment.

"You already shield yourself from the darkness, right?" Kaito asked, mind racing against the problem.

"My own darkness is wholly at the forefront when traveling the corridors, if that's what you mean."

"Close enough. Can you try it now?"

Ansem furrowed his brow in concentration. Almost immediately, his pale glow dimmed and vanished, along with the faint awareness of him in the back of Kaito's mind.

"Looks like we have success." Kaito grinned, then grimaced. "And I'm still horrible at doing that."
"I'd suggest you improve quickly, then," Ansem replied matter-of-factly.

"Oh, yes, potential life-and-death situations do wonders for my learning curve." Despite the sarcasm, Kaito followed Ansem's example. Besides, it was mostly true. He'd proven that during his first heist, when he ventured into a dangerous, completely foreign world and lived to tell the tale.

He then trailed behind Ansem through the dark streets, keeping an eye out for auras, whether from himself, Ansem, or a potential enemy. By tacit mutual agreement, they refrained from speaking as they walked through the empty streets. The silence of the city discouraged any kind of noisemaking.

The streets felt old. Hard-packed dirt scuffed beneath his feet—he didn't want to dwell on anything else he might be walking through—and the only light came from torches scattered near the occasional entrance. All the nearby buildings were private residences, the houses barred tightly against the outside. No one traversed the roads.

Ansem stopped so abruptly that Kaito almost ran into him.

"What—oh."

Oh.

Shapes darker than the surrounding night rose from the ground, solid amber eyes focusing with instinctive malevolence on the two travelers. Ansem didn't even pause long enough to give Kaito a warning; he launched forward, drawing his sword in a single fluid movement, and cut a deadly swathe through the ranks of heartless.

Hoping he was up to multi-tasking, Kaito drew his cardgun, currently loaded with solitaire cards. Duel cards were currently out of the question. He aimed for the heartless on the edges of the fight, where Ansem wasn't likely to move into his sights.

With Kaito mostly occupied with shielding himself, Ansem's skill and experience in dispatching the dark creatures became truly evident. Despite wielding a sword rather than a keyblade proper, insofar as Kaito could tell, the man could not only destroy the elusive enemies—a rarity on any world, from what Kaito had pieced together—but also do so without requiring an ally's support.

Which brings us back to the question of why he let me tag along in the first place. Maybe it's for my charming personality.

The last heartless disintegrated. Kaito quickly gathered the shining crystals scattered across the ground while Ansem stood still, gloved hands clenched.

"If heartless have been brought here, someone has plans," Ansem practically spat the word, "for this world, or at least one of the people in it. Come on."

He hurried onward, long legs eating up the ground in such haste Kaito had to nearly jog to keep up. They traveled with purpose, now that Ansem seemed to have gotten his bearings. Kaito divided his concentration between following Ansem's lead and bolstering his control over his own shadow-ki.

They reached bigger and better-lit roads with business places, and even passed an inn or two from which the partially muted sounds of eating, talking, and laughter drifted.

Occasionally, Ansem paused and pulled Kaito aside into the shadows, to allow what looked like a squad of historically dressed samurai to pass them by. Watching one group come almost too close for comfort, Kaito realized every man carried with them a dimmed or wholly absent aura.

"Masking ourselves was a good idea," he whispered to Ansem after the soldiers disappeared. "The
swordsmen do something similar."

Said samurai also look like they've come alive out of a history book. Only the Shinsengumi of the Tokugawa Shogunate ever wore blue robes with white mountains edging the sleeves. In fact, this entire world resembles Japan as it was a hundred years ago, like it was during...

…the Bakumatsu.

There are no swear words strong enough for this.

"Ansem-san," he quickly said aloud, voice tight. The other man gave him a surprised look at his sudden change in tone. "This is a very, very bad place to be. We're standing in a world straight from Japanese history near the end of the 19th century, smack in the middle of a civil war. We're in a war zone."

Understanding lit Ansem's eyes as Kaito outlined a few details. "Dangerous men indeed," he murmured as they hurried onward, much more alert than before. "I simply hope no one has had the bright idea of trying to turn some of the stronger hearts of this revolution into heartless."

Kaito swallowed hard. "That would be rather bad. What are we trying to do, then? Where are we going?"

"To find the source of this idiocy," Ansem growled. "The sooner we can fix this, the better for all involved."

And you're worried, aren't you? When we first met, you said you were traveling just in case this kind of thing happened, but I'm starting to doubt you've actually had to do it before. At the very most, no more than once or twice.

For the second time that night Ansem came to an abrupt halt, head raised as if testing the air, then turned his focus to a rooftop a few buildings up the road. Kaito followed his gaze, and froze.

A dim outline slunk across the roof tiles, blended almost invisibly into the night. Only the faint movement of silhouette-against-stars revealed the figure's position; no hint of aura existed. But rather than a marked absence, as Kaito had recognized in the patrols, this seemed more to be a natural blending into the landscape. Had Ansem's attention not alerted him to the man's presence, Kaito would never have seen him. A handful of men kept pace in the shadows of the street, ducking between small alleyways and generally avoiding notice.

This guy understands camouflage very, very well. If only I could ask him for tips without fearing for my life.

Further commentary was squashed by the nearly silent appearance of another patrol, almost twice the size of previous ones. Other groups made at least a smattering of noise, but even in the relatively well-lit street these men glided wraith-like in search of enemies.

The rooftop traveler and his companions may or may not have been able to escape detection, but as the samurai approached, a band of heartless escaped the shadows in search of more prey: the small, gold-eyed creatures, and another kind that hadn't appeared previously. These were larger, far more plentiful, and — Kaito could feel the irony oozing from the situation — wielding katana against their foes.

So, as heartless get stronger, they start taking characteristics from the world they've been loosed in. They had better not be very good with those katana, or we might be in trouble…
Caught off guard by the inhuman foes, the hiding men vanished into the darkness, with only the last having time for a surprised shout before he was gone.

The patrolling samurai attacked the heartless, but only the two pony-tailed men who led their fellows appeared to have any effect on the creatures. Even then, the fight was oddly quiet, as men fought in trained silence against monsters who lacked speech. Heartless quickly vanished only to be replaced, and a gang of katana-bearers overwhelmed one of the ineffective samurai, who disappeared with a cut-off wail.

Ansem ran into the mêlée, clearing a path towards the two swordsmen with a black-and-purple fireball. Still frozen in the shadows, Kaito couldn't hear what Ansem said, but the taller of the two men gave a curt nod and all three began working in deadly, systematic tandem. He breathed a sigh of relief. Ansem was unmistakably non-Japanese in a period when Japan hated the "foreign barbarians" encroaching on its insular culture, but clearly his sword skill outweighed any other considerations in the heat of battle. At least Ansem somehow spoke this archaic dialect of Japanese.

*Ok, I guess the enemy of their enemy is their friend, at least for now.*

*Speaking of which…*

The Shogunate's enemy during the Bakumatsu had been the Ishin Shishi. Kaito glanced sharply up at the rooftops again. The hidden figure that had escaped the initial attack remained motionless for a few moments more, then launched off the roof into visibility, all dark clothes and a shadowy flash of flame-bright hair.

"Ryuutsuisen!"

Kaito's jaw dropped. *Ki* energy exploded into being around the newcomer, the need for masks at an end. He plummeted straight into the roiling mass of heartless, the force of his overhead strike scattering them before his blade.

Not daring to join the battle for fear of getting in the way, Kaito watched the four swordsmen dispatch the dark mob until the last stragglers were destroyed. Only then did he dare approach, and in the time it took him to jog three house-lengths, the group reached a tense standoff.

The redhead—*so small! He looks younger than me*—stood with his sword sheathed, but his hand ready to draw. A fringe of bangs shadowed his eyes, and his stance radiated wariness. Kaito was willing to bet anything that he had planned to leave before his enemies could corner him. Since he had not, and Kaito remembered how exhausting fighting even a few heartless or nobodies was, Kaito wondered if he had more than the strength to stand, let alone escape his hunters.

The tall, dark-haired captain held his sword in his left hand, pulled back at shoulder height in preparation to thrust forward. The younger Shinsengumi bore a faint smile, but also held his sword ready to attack. The surviving samurai arrayed themselves behind their two captains, while Ansem stood resolutely between the two sides, sword in one hand and a half-formed fireball in the other, glancing back and forth.

*Treading carefully, treading carefully… Why do I feel like I'm in the presence of several ticking time bombs?*

Kaito bowed deeply to both parties in respect, aware of his out-of-place black turtleneck and jeans and hopelessly wishing that they wouldn't notice. "Good evening. My name is Kaito Kuroba and this is my fellow traveler, Ansem," he said politely, then paused.
I don't even know his last name. Does he **have** a last name?

The three people of significance gave him nods of acknowledgement, two terse and one accompanied by the same faint smile.

"Okita Souji, and Saitou Hajime. Forgive us for not greeting you properly," the more amiable Shinsengumi captain offered, "but the man behind your friend is our quarry. Even when fighting a new and strange common enemy, we cannot forget our first and true goal."

*I'm not going to ask, I'm not going to ask, I'm not — oh, hell."

"Which is?" he inquired curiously, hoping his tone held more deference than demand.

Saitou chuckled maliciously. *"Justice. Aku. Soku. Zan."*

…*Slay evil instantly.*

*Eep?*

A heartbeat later, the flame-haired boy countered quietly, "To protect, bringing a new era of peace and equality."

Before the tall man could reply, Okita spoke again. "Yet we cannot agree on what either entails, and so stand ready to slay for our differing ideals. Were you not present, our battle would have continued already. Why are you here?"

The younger Shinsengumi's tone stayed calm and personable during the whole of his small speech, but Kaito heard the naked steel beneath his words. If they found it necessary, they would dispose of any existing threat to their cause without animosity or empathy. The polite words did little to soothe the stark reality of death that followed in the wake of these men.

*Nobody gets hurt,* whispered through his heart. Kaito felt his skin crawl.

"We have come in pursuit of the dark's children, nothing else," Ansem interposed, adapting his speech patterns to more closely resemble Okita's. "We swore their destruction, no matter where on this world they lead us. If you are capable, your continued assistance would not go amiss." He glanced at the nameless Ishin Shishi fighter, who still had not moved, a wordless extension of the same offer.

"These creatures, they do more than kill?" The boy's tone was unreadable.

"…Yes. It is worse to be taken by the darkness than to die." Ansem's voice roughened slightly, and dropped almost to a whisper. "To be rescued out of that darkness requires a miracle."

The Shinsengumi captains exchanged no more than a fleeting look, but seemed to reach a decision.

"We are needed among our own men," Okita said, shaking his head. "We will fight the shadows as we find them, however, and warn our allies of your presence. You need not fear the Shinsengumi unless you attack one of our own, or aid our enemies. Do not let yourselves be distracted from your original goal."

"Now," Saitou continued coolly, his sword aimed directly through Ansem's position, "move."

Ansem darted out of way just as the samurai lunged forward with a killing stroke.

Metal clanged on metal. Without even looking up, the boy had drawn his sword faster than Kaito
thought physically possible, stopping the blade before it could pierce his heart.

Saitou sneered. "Not good enough, Battousai!"

Battousai raised his head. Kaito caught a glimpse of hard amber eyes above a cross-shaped scar, before the swordfight began in earnest.

Behind Ansem a corridor flared, and Kaito followed him through without hesitation. Anywhere was preferable to a battleground containing the assassin Battousai, especially if he knew that they knew his identity. Battousai's terrified memory dredged up Aoko's voice, reciting from a schoolbook how the legendary Battousai had been called demon. He left no witnesses to his assassinations, a whispered rumor of the shadows, until he simply vanished from history after the battle of Toba Fushimi.

A step in and out a corridor, and Kaito and Ansem exited into another part of the city.

"If we die here," Kaito told Ansem, "I will never, ever forgive you."

"Are we likely to if we meet any of those men again?"

"Ugh, I hope not, but I wouldn't put it past any of them." Kaito relayed what little he remembered about the three men they had met. "Do you think we will?"

"I sense no hearts stronger than theirs here in this city. Power calls. Unless we resolve this quickly, we may be drawn together more than once."

"If Koizumi ever says again that she wishes she had been born earlier in history, I'm going to tell her to try and visit this year, in Kyoto," Kaito muttered to himself as they walked on. "She could use a better appreciation of the present."

The pair spent several more hours fruitlessly searching both for the intended plan for the world, and the mastermind behind the groups of heartless that occasionally ambushed them. Ansem quickly became visibly frustrated at his inability to sense another wielder of darkness. From what Kaito could interpret among intermittent growls and cut-off curses, there were too many pockets of highly concentrated darkness — filled with the overpowering scents of blood, hatred, and vice — for Ansem to locate anyone specific.

Unused to fighting so often, Kaito eventually convinced Ansem to sleep for the rest of the night and continue in the morning. He was still pretty sure that Ansem would have ignored the idea of he hadn't been forced to pick up Kaito's slack in the battles — it took at least half a dozen fights before Kaito figured out the katana-wielding heartless' weakest points and could take one down with the card gun. Even then, Kaito couldn't fight in close quarters, leaving Ansem to take the brunt of the enemy's attacks.

They found a decent Inn, and paid the old woman named Okami with one of their flawed crystal shards. Some of the men lounging around gave them interested looks, but the darkly forbidding scowl on Ansem's face discouraged any conversation as they passed by.

Once in the room, Ansem immediately stretched out and fell asleep. Kaito took advantage of the solitude to toy with his Duel cards a bit, recognizing the inherent benefit of extending his arsenal. Finally able to study the details, his nearly eidetic memory stayed true, and soon he knew both deck and extra cards by heart.

Glancing sidelong at Ansem's sleeping form, Kaito pulled out what looked to be a low-power card and put the rest away. He hadn't fully understood everything about the Heart of the Cards and all, and it was probably way to soon to try anything like this, but…
Here goes nothing.

Cyber Commander!

:Master:

The energy drain felt worse than a punch in the gut. Gasping, Kaito held onto consciousness by sheer bloody-minded determination as a shadowy form flickered into existence at his side. A soldier dressed in combat gear and bearing both a grenade launcher and a bazooka watched him critically for a moment, then bowed and vanished.

Okay, bad idea…

Kaito collapsed backwards onto his bed mat and passed out.

"Kaito-kun."

Kaito groaned, burying his face in his arms. "Five more minutes."

"Kaito-kun." The harmonics of Ansem's tone resonated through Kaito's subconscious, carrying him into a sitting position as his brain snapped into full alertness.

"What is it? What's going on?"

"Someone's knocking."

"At our door?"

"Quite. I thought you'd appreciate the warning. And I think this is yours," Ansem added, flicking Cyber Commander at Kaito with an experienced cardhand's graceful accuracy. Kaito put the card away with a sheepish smile, half-grateful that their unexpected visitor had saved him from a more reproving expression from Ansem. He had been supposed to be sleeping last night, after all.

"Do you want to get it, or shall I?" he asked.

Ansem didn't answer, simply moved to the front of their small room and pulled the sliding paper door open, standing partly aside as if to be out a direct line of fire. Kaito spared a brief, cynical smirk for Ansem's paranoia, until he caught a glimpse of their visitor.

Kaito stared.

The boy Saitou had called Battousai stood waiting calmly in the hall, the tense wariness of the night before replaced by a calm almost-smile.

"Good morning." He bowed politely, so smooth and confident that Kaito's eyes focused on his movement, and almost slid over his sword as if it wasn't there. Kaito was vaguely disturbed by how natural the sword looked at his side. He probably wouldn't have thought twice about it had he not already seen what it could do.

"Is it?" Ansem replied.

"So I have been told. I am afraid I no longer consider myself a worthy judge of them." He paused, watching them as Kaito rolled up his bedding. "You needn't trouble yourself. Okami-dono takes pride in her meticulous housekeeping."
"You know her?"

"Yes."

When no further information appeared forthcoming, Kaito volunteered, "So, what can we do for you?"

"May I enter?"

Ansem stepped fully out of the way, granting him access, and closed the door behind him. Battousai folded gracefully onto the floor, while Ansem stood beside Kaito, waiting.

"The creatures you pursue; I believe they are a greater threat to the people of Japan than the war is. I became a master of the sword to protect. Would my assistance benefit you?"

Kaito exchanged a glance with Ansem, who nodded. If Battousai had voluntarily approached them he was probably counting on their foreign appearance to mean they didn't know who Battousai was, and there was no reason to advertise Kaito's semi-oracular knowledge of the time period.

"We meant what we said last night," Kaito said, when Ansem remained silent. Ansem had gotten into the habit of letting Kaito do all the talking, it seemed. "What's your name?"

"Himura... just Himura. Have you considered where to begin your search?"

Another exchange of glances. Kaito shrugged. "Any suggestions for us? We're not too familiar with the layout of the city, or anything that might count as suspicious and worth investigating."

Himura took them at their word, and over a breakfast provided by Okami (who seemed to have a soft spot for the guy), he related the recent arrival of the heartless to the city of Kyoto. Kaito was blown away by his sense of tactics and eye for details within a whirlwind battle. By the time Kaito had polished off the last rice ball, they knew the movement patterns of the heartless throughout the city.

With Ansem's knowledge of heartless behavior, he and Himura soon determined several places most likely to host their master. They walked to investigate those areas, since Ansem didn't want to advertise his own mastery of darkness in Himura's presence—he was enough of an oddity already between his physical appearance and his fashion sense. (Though Kaito doubted Himura would be one for pointing fingers, what with having coloring equally as atypical in a country of dark eyes and hair. Himura was more dangerous in that he would probably sense the manifest darkness' similarity to the heartless, and instinctively neutralize a perceived threat before realizing its source. Kaito didn't care to trust the younger man's control further than he could throw him, and although Himura was short, that still wasn't very far.)

The first two destinations turned up nothing promising, poor return for an entire morning's effort. The trio ate a light lunch in moody, frustrated silence—that is, Ansem brooded, Himura's carefully controlled expression remained neutral, and Kaito tried to ignore them both in favor of his miso soup and small serving of sake. He got the whole bottle to himself after Himura's first sip—there was a story behind the boy's despondently resigned sigh after he tasted it, but Kaito didn't dare pry.

When Ansem declared his intention to try one of the suspicious places outside the city, Himura's eyebrow raised above an otherwise impassive expression. The boy made no comment other than to insist on bringing the bare necessities for a night spent outside, just in case.

Early afternoon brought them into the wooded mountains just outside Kyoto, where they discovered an ambush of heartless. The swarm quickly engulfed Ansem and Himura, leaving Kaito to desperately dodge and shoot while trying to shield his heart from the heartless' perception. Whenever...
he slipped, which was often, the heartless zeroed in on him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Himura use the creature's nature to his advantage. A blur of movement, Himura would alternate between clearing an area and briefly unmasking his ki to bring another wave into range. As an added bonus, his actions often drew the heartless away from overwhelming Kaito.

Himura apparently kept an eye on his further surroundings, because after the battle he approached Kaito with a faint frown.

"You are vulnerable in these battles."

Kaito sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. Ansem had already gone ahead looking for the source of the heartless swarm, so there was no hope of getting out of the conversation.

"The heartless' ability to sense people is stronger here, and I'm not used to masking myself. They're harder for me to destroy, too, if you must know."

And I'm drained from my idiotic attempt at summoning last night, but I'm not about to tell either of you that. Ansem-san would never let me live it down.

…Why am I sure his personality will guarantee that? He looks at least twice my age, but I keep placing him in the same age bracket as the detective trio, and, well, me.

Himura interrupted Kaito's train of thought. "Stay here and practice while we search. If you are not competent fighting here, you will be worse off when we find their captain. I will not allow you to fight, if you will only get yourself killed."

Himura vanished in pursuit of Ansem, leaving Kaito completely floored by his protectiveness.

If he's an assassin with that kind of attitude, I think I understand why he vanished at the end of the war.

Regardless of Himura's unexpected behavior, Kaito recognized good advice when he heard it. He spent the next hour or two dissecting the sensations of the shadows, an opportunity that hadn't existed since their arrival. With the ability to build up slowly from the basics—scrutinizing all the different angles and approaches—rather than diving in headfirst, he soon identified his difficulties and set about remedying them. He even managed to devise a strategy or two for reducing his mental stress levels and the drain on his energy reserves.

When Himura and Ansem returned from their reconnaissance efforts, they were just in time to watch Kaito begin another run through one of the acrobatic routines he used to stay limber (and one step ahead of Aoko's mop). His ki remained masked, and at the end, for good measure, he shot a zigzag line of cards at his audience's feet, then bowed theatrically.

Himura graced him with a vaguely pleased smile. Kaito realized belatedly that Himura would have little experience with projectile weapons, let alone one that spat game components, but the boy seemed to have taken it in stride. Ansem smirked.

"A high learning curve, indeed."

"Only when it's life or death," Kaito shot back with slightly forced cheer. "Otherwise it tends to be rather hit-and-miss."

Aoko would say I have no learning curve at all, given that we do the same tease-and-chase tradition
all the time at school. Did. Will do, if I have anything to say about it.

Keeping his grin in place, he asked Himura, "So do I pass?"

"We shall have to see upon your performance in a true skirmish," came the non-committal reply.

"You'll get a chance to find out soon enough," Ansem added. "Judging by the heartless' pattern of appearance around this place, we're heading in the right direction."

Kaito caught a Significant Look sent his way. Ansem had probably also sensed their quarry, now that he knew where to look. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation, slightly nervous but with the familiar wave of adrenaline washing over him that was half focusing, half manic glee. Not knowing what would happen next, his subconscious was responding as if to a heist night.

_Time to go to work._

Following Himura and Ansem, Kaito didn't have to wait long to employ his new strategies. Now that Ansem knew where he was going, they spent the next several hours alternating between destroying increasingly denser bands of heartless and tramping deeper into the forest. Himura made no further comments upon Kaito's fighting style, but occasionally destroyed a heartless that got too close for comfort.

Eventually Ansem paused and sniffed the air, gaining a puzzled expression.

"Smoke?"

He changed direction, veering slightly to the left from his original path. Before Ansem hadn't cared how much noise they made, but now he walked carefully, avoiding the more obvious noisemakers of the forest floor. Himura followed as a soundless shadow, Kaito trying his best to follow their lead.

_I'm only a phantom thief in the city, dammit. Concrete muffles sound a lot better than autumn leaves on loam._

After a few minutes they approached a clearing in the woods, faintly illuminated by paper lanterns hanging from the eaves of a small domicile. A wood fire burned somewhere unseen, since between trees and Ansem standing in front of him, Kaito didn't have much of a view of anything.

A faint breeze carried two voices into range—one gruffly irritated, the other smooth as oil.

"You are a particularly tiresome individual. Leave."

Himura paled.

"Shishou?" he breathed, eyes wide.

Kaito eyed him askance, but was distracted by Ansem raising his hood—an oddity in itself, given how it limited peripheral vision while they were in enemy territory—and walking to the edge of the clearing. Following out of habit, Kaito paused to glance behind, only to find that Himura had vanished into the growing evening gloom. When he turned back around, he discovered that the two strangers had interrupted their previous conversation in favor of watching him. Ansem seemed to have disappeared into the shadows also, out of sight but doubtless nearby. He hoped.

The first man would have stood out in any crowd, between his imposing height and a white cloak with a collar so large and pointed as to be almost ridiculous. He stood at the doorway to his small house. However, the second man, standing near the well in the middle of the clearing, arrested
Kaito's attention. Brown hair streaked gray, oddly pointed ears, a wicked scar on his left cheek and an eye patch all paled before the fact that he wore a twin to Ansem's cloak.

Cloak like Ansem-san's equals creepy organization member equals person behind the minions. Bad. Very, very bad. Even if his depth perception should be shot with an eye patch, anyone with the power to control all the heartless we just destroyed is extremely bad news. And Himura-san has just gone absent without leave, despite recognizing the guy in the white cloak.

Wait a minute…

He called White Cloak, 'Master.' As in, what old school sword-art students call their teachers.

A grin stole onto Kaito's face.

Maybe we'll make it out of this alive after all.

"Sorry, got a little turned around," he began, hands raised peacefully. "Keep going, don't mind me, I'll just be going now…"

A non-committal grunt came from Himura's master, as if Kaito was someone beneath his notice. Judging by his narrow-eyed glare, his uninvited guest didn't rank much higher.

"You came here, to my private home, uninvited. You annoy me more than most people manage, which is saying something. I disowned my idiot student when he left to become a tool of other men's disagreements, and your pitiful attempts to infuriate me through news of his… stupidity, will go unrewarded. I care not why you have come here, trying to anger me, but you will fail."

Twin blurs of movement—a monstrous sword arcing in the space the heartless' master had been standing, at the same time the black cloak vanished into thin air.

"Well, aren't you difficult."

Kaito whirled in the direction of his voice. The man had reappeared far enough away as to be out of immediate reach, almost into the line of trees.

"If you're going to be this much of a stubborn idiot, you're more trouble than you're worth."

A cough, and he leaned over, favoring his left side. Kaito goggled. The swordmaster's strike had been so fast that while reflexive teleportation had prevented the stranger from being halved, he hadn't entirely avoided the blade.

"I'll just have to go and find myself a different dragon to turn, then, won't I? A pity you aren't more amenable, we could have done so much with you in our ranks…"

Did he just call White Cloak a dragon?

Unable to resist, Kaito let his mind relax and abandon his previous assumptions. If he concentrated then a pale, glowing silhouette appeared around the Japanese man, as if half-masked *ki* possessed its own form: scales and claws borne by sinuous coils, striking quick as thought through the way of the sword.

Himura's master shifted his weight meaningfully and the draconic *ki*-image lowered its head, mirroring intent to kill. The enemy took the hint and retreated through a dark corridor. Almost instantly, an oppressive shadow weighing on the edges of Kaito's awareness lifted.
He must have taken the heartless with him when he left, when he didn't get what he wanted.

"My patience for visitors is at an end." The man's full attention bored into Kaito, echoed by a dragon's snarl. "Leave."

Kaito didn't wait to be told twice. Ducking back into the cover of the trees, he stiffened when a black cloak appeared out of the darker shadows, only relaxing when Ansem pulled down the hood.

"Don't do that! I like my heart beating, thank you very much," he growled quietly, lightly punching Ansem on the arm in annoyance.

At Ansem's startled expression, Kaito realized that apart from occasionally letting Ansem drag him around, he'd never initiated any sort of physical contact with the guy. Nor could he remember ever seeing Ansem do more than put a hand on anyone's shoulder, except for when he'd carried Kaito's unconscious body.

Surprised, but not offended, which means people used to do stuff like that with and around him. Add voluntarily touch starved to the list of Strange Qualities, then.

Rather than draw much attention to it, Kaito asked where Ansem had disappeared to, instead.

"The swordsman looked unlikely to welcome anyone, but I guessed from his attitude that everyone in cloaks would be run off with extra force. I also assumed that the man who taught Himura swordplay would be able to handle himself."

"You caught that too?"

"Yes. Himura-san's gone, by the way, back to the city. He probably has another group to guard tonight, and didn't want to stick around near his old master any longer than necessary."

"Fair enough, given that guy's attitude. Wish I could have thanked him, though."

And now I'll always wonder whether Himura-san has a dragon of his own, too.

Kaito stretched his arms above his head, feeling sore muscles stretch and joints pop back into place.

"Now what?"

"Our problem has been rather unorthodoxly solved. With nothing else worth pursuing here, Xigbar will have taken the heartless with him. The people here created the remaining darkness, and it's their task to defeat their own evils."

"So, barring some unexplained deaths and a few events so unbelievable most people will forget on purpose, this place is back to normal?"

"Quite."

Ansem paused momentarily to open another corridor and begin heading to their next destination, Kaito following behind.

"Xigbar's comments were rather odd, though. I want to make sure he's not going to make trouble anywhere that Sora can't reach, again. Speaking of which…" Ansem seemed to be talking more to himself than to Kaito, now. "I should make sure Sora and his gang don't need any more clues to keep them on the right track."

Kaito considered the statement and its implications, and was severely unimpressed. Which probably
explained why he didn't take time to think about his response.

"Hold on—You know what's generally going on, you know Sora better than you care to admit, he's the best one to try fixing everything, and you only give him clues? When he would be infinitely better prepared from even a brief face-to-face conversation? What's wrong with you?"

The instant he said it, Kaito knew it was a mistake. Surprise, guilt and anger flashed across Ansem's face in an instant, and then it completely shut down. There was, quite literally, nothing to read as Ansem turned away and kept walking.

*That's not a poker face. That's a stone wall. Nicely complemented by the subtly clenched fist that looks like it wants to strangle something.*

"I'm sorry, that was stupid of me—"

"Yes. It was."

"But hear me out, all right?"

Ansem stopped and crossed his arms, still not looking at Kaito."You don't know me. Don't you—" His voice broke into the slightly higher, more boyish tone and back again. "Don't you dare judge me."

Kaito sighed. "You're right. Even though we're allies I don't know you, at least not very well. I don't have much right to give you advice. But I want to know you better, and I want to help you."

"No, you don't."

"Let me decide that!" Kaito glared, aware that he wasn't helping the situation much. "Let me know why you are the way you are!"

"So I'm a puzzle you can't let rest until you know the solution?"

"Ye—No!" Kaito threw up his hands, rolling his eyes. "No. You're not a puzzle. You're a puzzling human. I want to figure you out, I admit—I can't resist a challenge, and you're a champion of contradictory behavior. But you're a person, and ally, and I think if you were to ever take off those masks you insist on wearing around everyone, you could even be a friend."

"You wouldn't understand."

Ansem finally met Kaito's eyes again, defiant and with a hint of anger. Kaito took any reappearance of emotion as a good sign, especially if he felt the need to be defensive. It meant he was listening, unable to ignore Kaito's words.

"Try me. I know a fair bit about doing things you don't want other people to discover. I'll even swap stories, if you want."

Ansem watched him for several moments, then trembled involuntarily. He snapped his head to the side, eyes tightly closed.

*Your masks are cracking,* Kaito realized with a hint of wonder. *You're so torn between wanting a friend and thinking you don't deserve it, you're going to break soon if something doesn't change. I can't believe I didn't realize it before now.*

Kaito deliberately softened his voice, keeping his body language open and vulnerable. "Whatever it
is that makes you think you have to”—hide—"isolate yourself, I won't judge you. I already trust you to watch my back. Knowing more about you won't change that."

_I doubt it would change Sora's opinion of you either, but let's take one hurdle at a time, ne?_

Ansem took several slow, deep breaths, eyes still closed but face relaxing. Abruptly he stiffened, eyes flying open to meet Kaito's gaze. He closed and opened them a few more times with slow deliberation, then stopped and stared.

Okay, that's weird.

Ansem gave a soft, shuddering laugh, tone warring between panic and relief. "My choice seems to have been made for me."

"Don't say that. It's your choice." Kaito raised an eyebrow challengingly. "I find it hard to believe anyone can force you into something, let alone me. I want you to talk to me, but only if you'll do it voluntarily."

"You don't get it." He paused, unsure, then whispered hoarsely, "I can see you even with my eyes closed."

"What?"

Shoulders shaking, another helpless chuckle escaped at Kaito's near-yelp. Ansem visibly tried to pull himself back together. He succeeded, for the most part, by looking at a point above and beyond Kaito's head.

"Even though I kept you at a distance in my head, my heart thinks of you as a friend. I'm—Sora and I both, really, and maybe Mickey-san too—we're sensitive to other hearts, especially those of our friends. If I looked for you with my heart rather than my eyes, you could be in a perfect disguise and I'd still recognize you."

A jolt of near-panic thrilled down Kaito's spine. His life depended on his skills of disguise, even among his friends. Especially among his friends, what with Hakuba and Aoko both trying to catch his alter ego. To have someone able to break that…

No. Stop that. He's not about to use it against you. You said you trusted him to watch your back, so mean it.

"Well, so long as you don't join the police force back home, I don't think it's a problem," Kaito said lightly. He smiled. "Friends, then?"

Ansem flinched. "Not yet."

Kaito barely refrained from smacking Ansem for not believing that he would look beyond the man's mistakes. As it was, he couldn't rest glaring again in annoyance.

The tension in Ansem's body—so constant Kaito hadn't fully realized until their current conversation that the man was like an over-wound clock, narrowly holding himself together with nerves, stubbornness, and adrenaline—vanished all at once. Ansem sagged a little in resignation and bone-deep weariness, crossed arms shifting into a makeshift self-hug.

"But... I'll tell you."

Kaito was put in mind of a wounded bird, shocked and skittish, reluctantly accepting the help of a
soft-spoken human. Anything besides a soothing voice and gentle hands would provoke a panicked escape, with more damage than before.

"Thank you," he said simply. "If I can, I'll return the favor."

"Probably best to get it over with, anyway. I'm… tired." A half-hearted smile emerged, looking out of place against the harsh angles of his face. "Everything was simpler before you came along."


A sharp intake of breath, as the consequences of his acquiescence really hit home. "Riku." His voice changed again into his slightly higher tone—his natural voice, Kaito surmised. "My name's Riku." A pleasant baritone, it lacked the harshness of the rough bass Kaito had become accustomed to hearing.

Had Kaito been a cat, at the moment there would be an empty bowl of cream sitting nearby, bright yellow feathers scattered everywhere, and a conspicuous lack of bird.

"Riku-kun. Nice to meet you, I'm Kaito." Smiling, he stuck out his hand Western-style, which Riku hesitantly took. "This may sound odd, but it's been bugging me for a while—just how old are you?"

Riku's lips quirked into an almost-smug smile. "Sixteen."

"You're kidding! I've been running around following your lead, and you're younger than me?"

Some of Riku's humor reappeared at the sight of Kaito's incredulous expression. "Since you're positively ancient yourself, of course."

"I'm nearly eighteen, I'll have you know. Youngling," he added with a wicked grin, earning a faint chuckle.

A shiver of darkness brushed Kaito's awareness, and he became aware that they'd been simply standing together for much longer than he cared to, given their surroundings.

"Um, do you think we can do this somewhere else? Unless delaying will change your mind, I don't really feel like hanging around in a corridor for any longer than I have to."

"I said I'd tell you. This isn't the best place for long conversations, anyway." Another pause, and Riku's golden eyes met Kaito's in an agonizingly bereft expression. "I don't have anywhere to go."

You don't have a base, you said before. No home, friends or family, at least none that you're willing recognize as such. How have you survived for so long, with just you and maybe Mickey-san and DiZ-san?

On impulse, Kaito blurted out, "Come home with me." He'd been thinking of them more and more over the last few days, now was the perfect chance…

"What?" Riku looked so startled, Kaito was torn between laughter and pity. He bit down on both reactions, knowing either would be badly received.

Gentle, gentle… Give him a logical, undeniable argument that he can't object to without sounding like a stubborn idiot.

"We can go to my house. My world is safe, so there's nothing to worry about. Worlds aren't connected linearly, right? We can talk, and then figure out where to go next from there."
Please say yes. I really want to know what I've missed, and make sure everyone's okay.

If we're lucky, I can convince you to take a break, find some equilibrium again, and get re-acquainted with normal, consistent social interaction. Our alliance certainly doesn't count, and you seem to have been stuck with only yourself for company before I showed up. That would give me a few days to convince you to find Sora again, because if your history is what I suspect it is, you'll both be better off that way. You've been traveling ungrounded for way too long.

I wonder how long I've been away? Hey, I still have the amethyst hidden in my suit. Inspector Nakamori has probably gone crazy by now.

"I… All right." Barely audible, but it was enough.

Home!

Chapter End Notes

Terms:
Battousai: Master of lethal sword drawing
Ryuutsuisen: Dragon Hammer Strike

Kenshin didn't realize they were near Hiko Seijirou's home because he had other things like heartless ambushes on his mind rather than actively seeking to recognize nearby human ki. He knew there was something familiar, but couldn't give it much thought.

Time frames: Rurouni Kenshin occurs almost at the end of the Bakumatsu, probably only a short time before the battle of Toba Fushimi. As noted, Kenshin already has his cross-scar. Kingdom Hearts 2, Sora is coming to the end of his first tour through the worlds. As for Magic Kaitou, the plotbunnies have convincingly argued that The Scroll of the Dark Night hasn't happened yet, but all other MK canon applies.
Spring breezes played through one of Tokyo's many public parks, disheveling hair and toying with skirts as they grew and faded in turn. Several ruffled Kaito's unruly spikes where he lay in the shade of a blooming cherry tree, loose petals blowing haphazardly into his eyes and bangs. Riku leaned against the trunk, one leg bent, amber eyes focused on nothing. A small playground was situated a short distance away from them, bright colors surrounded by greenery. Children ran about in loosely controlled chaos, voices muffled just enough by distance to fade into the background.

"Well," Kaito began conversationally in English, when the silence became unbearable, "I have a few ideas about what might have happened to you, but I'd rather not start hazarding guesses. Would it help if I promised not to interrupt?"

Riku slowly exhaled, pensive. "It might, actually. I've never had to tell anyone – they either know most of it already, or not enough to even ask. I don't know if I could stop and restart very easily."

"No questions, then, at least not till after. I'll try not to pry into stuff that's not important, too. It's not my place to know everything about you all at once." He flashed Riku a quick smile. "I plan to annoy the rest of your quirks out of you later."

Despite the serious air surrounding them, Riku couldn't stop a quiet snort of amusement. "We'll see."

Kaito rolled onto his stomach, resting his chin on the back of his overlapping hands.

"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

His firm tone attracted Riku's attention, and he let his determination bore into the other man's gaze.

Kaito focused so intently he almost thought he saw Riku's dark exterior fade away into an altogether different face, before speech broke his concentration.

"Starting from the beginning… I do know Sora a lot better than I admitted to. We grew up together, he and I and a girl named Kairi. I was always the best at everything, but I was never content like they were. I wanted a life beyond what we had so badly, eventually I didn't care how I got it. Desires like that, where the means don't matter any more… it calls to the darkness, to the heartless. In seeking a
way out, I gave them a way in.

"I lost myself in the darkness. First to escape our too-small world, then to find my friends... to save Kairi, stuck in a coma... and then from jealousy of Sora's new friends and the power of his keyblade. I kidnapped and hurt people, even tried to seriously harm Sora. I tried to steal the keyblade from him, too, with some justification—the keyblade had chosen me first, before I opened myself to the dark—but Sora reclaimed it, and defeated me at my strongest. I was desperate to beat him, so when a voice told me to open myself to the darkness completely, I didn't hesitate.

"You see, a heartless is born when darkness consumes a heart and then controls whatever spark of instinct remains. Without the heart, which holds light and darkness, the body and the soul—basically the consciousness, a person's mind and will—vanish into the nothingness between light and dark. They act as a conduit to give rise to a nobody, a creature with some kind of mind, but no emotions or memories of who they used to be. Someone with a strong enough soul, however, if he chooses to embrace the darkness, can keep both familiar form and a sense of will as a heartless. In which case, the nobody created from the cast off body and soul also has strong will and intact memories, though still no emotions.

"One man who did that was named Ansem."

Kaito's eyebrow involuntarily twitched at the name, and he couldn't help mumbling 'Of course,' under his breath.

The corner of Riku's mouth quirked up for a moment before he continued, more somberly, "The heartless that Ansem became whispered to me that the darkness would grant me the power I sought, only to possess me when I followed his counsel. Too late, I tried to throw away the darkness, just as I had previously thrown away everything important to me. I failed.

"Ansem's heartless used my body to seek the door to Kingdom Hearts, the heart of the entire universe, for the power of the darkness there. He would have killed Sora, Kairi... anyone who got in his way.

"Ironically, my cast out heart appeared beyond the door. The strength of my will held out against the darkness, but I couldn't reclaim my body and leave. All I wanted..." he trailed off, clenching and unclenching his fists. Kaito said nothing, merely waiting for him to continue.

"I just wanted to see Sora and Kairi again, know they were safe. That was when the King found me—the keyblade had chosen him before I'd ever met him, but he left the realm of light to claim the keyblade of the dark realm for his own."

Well, that explains part of the whole keyblade weirdness... They aren't—or at least the ability to wield one isn't—necessarily given out like candy, and so far there's one for the light and the dark. Can there be multiple wielders for a given side? I'll have to remember to ask about that later...

"He managed to find another entrance to Kingdom Hearts, braving its vast darkness with only his own light. When Ansem's heartless opened the door, Sora called upon the light hidden deep within Kingdom Hearts, and defeated him. Together, he and I and Mickey closed that door for good... but Mickey and I were stuck behind the door."

He chuckled self-deprecatingly.

"I still don't know exactly how I reclaimed my body, but DiZ and his choices were involved. Sora
and I appeared separately in a castle controlled by the group of nobodies DiZ and I told you about, Organization XIII. Ansem's nobody is their leader, by the way. That—"

Riku clamped his mouth shut, glowering.

"Bastard?" Kaito suggested helpfully.

"Yeah. Doesn't have the decency to die properly. He has to be killed in bits and pieces. Anyway, Sora's memories were manipulated by a unique nobody named Naminé, a girl held prisoner to their will. In the end he won, but to regain his true memories he had to sleep while Naminé replaced what she had stolen. I faced the darkness left within me with Mickey's help, and eventually defeated the remnants of Ansem's will in my heart.

"He couldn't control me any more, but traces of him remained in the darkness I had claimed as my own. I traveled for several months with Mickey, looking for a way to purge my heart and thwart the remains of Organization XIII, but eventually my worry about Ansem led me to leave and wander the dark alone for a while, until I met DiZ again. He needed a favor."

Riku ran a hand through his hair, a bitter smile on his face. Kaito raised an eyebrow, but remained silent.

"Before he defeated Ansem's heartless, Sora temporarily became a heartless and then regained his body with Kairi's help. He unknowingly left behind a nobody without memories but with a portion of his power, Roxas. Roxas could wield the keyblade, so Organization XIII snapped him up. Of course, typical Sora-stubbornness eventually led him to leave in search of why he was a keybearer, knowing no more about his other self than Sora's name. DiZ believed Sora needed Roxas in order to be able to regain himself completely and defeat the Organization. He asked me to capture Roxas.

"I couldn't beat Roxas as myself any more than I could Sora. I... I got desperate. I called on the darkness I had accepted as part of myself, reached so far that my body remembered what it was like to wear Ansem's likeness, and changed to more effectively accommodate the dark. I won, but this was the price." He gestured at his now-brooding visage. "Myself, now become my worst enemy. His worst enemy."

Kaito didn't need to ask to who the 'he' was. Riku took a deep breath, looking exhausted.

"I don't—I don't want them to see me like this. I don't know why they'd want to see me at all, really. I betrayed them, and now exist as a living memorial for the one I betrayed them to." His expression twisted painfully, eyes closing. "The trade was worth it, but I'm not me any more, not properly. I'm Ansem. I still want to help Sora—that's why I've been traveling like this in the first place—but unless a miracle happens..."

Kaito got the distinct impression that Riku had no idea what he was going to do with himself. More than anything, the stress of not knowing what would happen or what to do probably contributed to why Riku rarely rested. If he worked himself into total exhaustion, he wouldn't have the energy to worry about the future.

"I can't face them."

Sitting up cross-legged, Kaito cupped a hand around his chin, letting his arm rest on one knee.

"I think I know why Sora puts up with you. You may be a stubborn idiot, but you're a likeable stubborn idiot."

Whatever Riku had been expecting Kaito to say, Kaito felt fairly certain that wasn't it.
"Look," he went on, taking advantage of Riku's temporary speechlessness, "the way you've described Sora, he's an extremely nice guy. If he put up with you for his whole life, I don't think much would change his opinion of you, particularly since you've rediscovered what's really important. However, you're letting what you believe you deserve—which is a load of crock, by the way—also become what Sora would think you deserve, in your mind. You seem fatalistically determined to think the worst of the both of you."

"Weren't you listening? I'm the one who completely screwed up. Sora played the perfect hero, all goodness and light and hopelessly optimistic."

Kaito smirked. "Are you listening to yourself? If Sora is half the hero and all-around champion you claim he is—"

"It's not just what I claim, it's what he's done!"

"—then what kind of hero would condemn his best friend for making a mistake? Especially one he regrets?"

Riku went silent, attention turning inward, then grunted noncommittally. "It's not that simple."

_Arsène Lupin help me if I ever act this pig-headed._

"I think it is. Tell me this. If you had stayed the Keyblade master, and Sora had embraced the darkness but seen the error of his ways… _Would you abandon him?_

Riku actually flinched. "No."

Kaito leaned forward, pressing his point home. "Has Sora ever done anything to justify your opinion of his character, or are you refusing to hope solely because you don't want to face how much it would hurt if the one-in-a-million chance came true and Sora rejected you?"

Riku slumped against the tree. "I'm afraid to lose my last hope to keep going, all right?" He glared at Kaito, now-petulant expression the most like a teenager Kaito had ever seen from him. "Why do I put up with guys like you? You and Sora are the most aggravating people I've ever met."

A sly smile spread across Kaito's face. He looked sidelong at Riku. "It's because we refuse to let you get away with brooding alone."

Riku looked startled again, and then after a moment he started to laugh. Not a dark chuckle or amused snicker, but full on, unrestrained laughter. Kaito watched in satisfaction, letting the other boy release tension held in check for far too long. (A small part of him was also infinitely relieved that they made it through their entire conversation without the threat of tears—Aoko crying was bad enough, let alone a fellow guy.)

After a few minutes, Riku showed signs of subsiding, and Kaito spoke again. "Now. We've established that Sora is not one to hold grudges or abandon his friends, yes?"

A genuine smile, slow and the most relaxed Kaito had ever seen from him. "Yes."

"I've heard the worst you can throw at me, and rather than drop you like a ton of bricks I'm sitting here, two feet away, trying to knock some sense back into your head."

"No sense of self-preservation."

_Banter. Good. About time, too._
"We've proven empirically that you aren't better off trying to do everything alone—it's not weakness to work together with someone. If you'd really believed that, you would never have let me join you in the first place."

Consideration. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right. So, you just told me that Sora and I are quite similar in the way we treat you. Using the rules of simple logic, we can come to what conclusion?"

*Come on, you've been wanting to believe this all along, you've just needed someone else to tell you that it's true.*

Riku sighed, but in relief rather than frustration.


*He learns! He can make independent conclusions! He can extend applicability!*

…*He really brings out the sarcasm in me.*

"Excellent deductive reasoning, grasshopper," Kaito settled on saying aloud.

Riku snickered, the strain in his demeanor all but vanished. Abruptly, a yawn escaped him. He blinked owlishly.

"Funny, I didn't feel this tired an hour ago…"

"You've been running on adrenaline for who knows how long, and your body has decided it doesn't need to any more."

Kaito stood and tugged Riku upright. "Come on. There's a futon with your name on it, if you can stay awake till we get home."

Riku swayed slightly, but managed to stand and walk unassisted. "You still owe me your story. 'S not fair if you know so much about me and I only know bits about you."

"Later, I promise. In fact, you'll probably know more than you ever wanted to, by the time we finally leave again."

"We shouldn't stay too long, there's too much…" Another yawn. "…To do."

"Sora's survived all right so far with minimal meddling from you. He can keep for at least a few more days."

"A few days!"

"Yes. You need a break; I need a break. You need to spend some quality time with people who aren't out to kill or manipulate you, I need to reassure quite a few people that I'm not dead, and we both need time to sleep, eat, and unwind."

"But Xigbar," Riku protested weakly.

"Creepy eye-patch guy can wait."

They made it to the bus for Kaito's house, and conversation suspended as Kaito rummaged through the satchel holding his suit and gadgets for his public transportation pass. It was crowded, but they managed to find one free seat. Kaito let Riku collapse into the seat, and stood beside him. Riku's unusual appearance earned them a few strange looks from the people nearby, but Kaito ignored
"Okay, this has been bothering me," he said as the bus lurched forward. "There's the original Ansem. Who was an idiot and turned himself into a heartless and a nobody and is therefore effectively dead. That's one. Then there's his heartless, also now dead, thanks to Sora. That's two. And then there's you, who looks like he did but isn't actually named Ansem, initial introductions to the contrary, so that's not three. I suppose that would actually be his nobody—"

"Xemnas."

"...What?"

"Ansem's nobody is named Xemnas."

"Not Ansem."

"No."

"...Okay, that's good, I guess. So...Xemnas is not four. And then there's the other Ansem Mickey's off trying to find."

"Yes."

"Okay. So...we actually have exactly one Ansem, who we haven't actually found yet and who therefore hasn't ticked anyone off. Then there's one who's dead, plus the sort-of Ansem who's also dead. And then a Xemnas, and you."

"Pretty much."

"Good. This finally makes sense. One other question, then. Sora's supposed to be the hero of light and all, defeating the bad guys wherever they are?" A nod. "Then why assume that he won't get the better of them no matter where they go? Your world-hunting has been nothing but an excuse to avoid Sora and feel useful while you're at it."

Riku sighed, glaring up at Kaito again, but without malice.

"All right, all right. Himura's was the first place I've found the Organization without Sora soon catching up, and the world took care of itself, anyway. Sora's method of travel is tied directly to his heart and given how badly he wants to protect people it's unlikely, if not downright impossible, that he'll miss them. And cut it out, will you?" He knocked Kaito's leg with a foot.

"Cut what out?" Kaito shot back, hanging on to the bar above his head.

"Ferreting out my character flaws. I've been rather attached to them, I'll have you know."

"I would never have found them if I hadn't met you, so it's entirely your fault for letting me tag along in the first place."

"Damn. I was hoping I could blame you."

They shared a grin.

"My turn for a question. What do you plan to tell your mother and friends about me?"

"Um. Very good question." Kaito grimaced. "Mom would understand if I said you'd rather not talk about yourself, but anyone else… no. I can't exactly explain that tall, old, dark and brooding is
actually younger, shorter, paler, and brooding, can I?"

Riku looked surprised. "Paler?"

"I mean—well, yeah. You're not naturally that color, are you?"

"No, but I've no idea where you could have gotten the idea into your head."

Kaito shrugged.

"Well, since I'd rather not haunt your house and talking with decent people again is growing in attractiveness, we need a plan."

"Yeah. Thinking..."

Recalling DiZ's cover stories from however long ago, the pair spent the rest of the bus ride and walk to Kaito's house hashing out a believable background. Riku became Yuushi Riku, a half-Brazilian aspiring magician's apprentice and general gopher for the traveling ensemble with whom Kaito supposedly was touring. Said show was taking a few days sabbatical, and Kaito'd invited his friend to spend the interim at his house.

"I'll try teaching you a few of the basics, in case anybody asks for a trick." Kaito eyed Riku critically.

"Does your hair naturally do that?"

Riku ran a hand through his silver hair, temporarily flattening the gravity-defying locks. "As far as I can tell, yes. Any ideas?"

"Some sort of hat, and a story about prematurely greyed hair. You look at least near thirty, so it's believable."

"Do I? I don't spend much time in front of a mirror. Oh, and I draw the line at top hats."

Kaito snickered. "I should give you one just for that. But you don't get to be a master of disguise without costume accessories, so you should find something sufficiently inoffensive for your tastes. We'll find you some amber-tinted sunglasses, too, because no offense, but your eyes are a shade of near-orange that really shouldn't exist."

"How kind," Riku replied as they reached the front door to the Kuroba home. No one answered Kaito's knock, but his spare lock picks had survived intact and made short work of gaining entry.

"No key?"

"Not on heists," Kaito answered, mind already elsewhere. "No trace of who I am that can be left behind at a scene." He walked inside, looking around the front room. "Mom?" he called, switching flawlessly from English to Japanese.

Silence, and then a breathless, "Kaito?"

Kuroba Mizuki appeared in the entrance to the kitchen. She stopped dead at seeing Kaito, hand flying to her mouth. After an endless moment, she darted forward, crying Kaito's name again and enveloping her only son in a fervent hug. Kaito stiffened in surprise as she buried her face in his shoulder, silent tears leaking from her eyes.

"Mom?" He tentatively folded his arms around her.

When did you become so fragile? You feel smaller, older. Or have I just grown?
"Six weeks, Kaito, without knowing if you would ever come home. Bad enough when it was your father, bad enough when you followed in his footsteps and I could only watch, but this, not even knowing what you're doing, no news if you or the Kid anywhere... I'm not that strong."

"I'm sorry, Mom," he whispered. "I didn't mean to worry you."

She pulled back and smiled bravely at him. "You're here now, and you're alive and well. I know what you do, what your father did, is important. I could never stop either of you. Just don't ever do that to me again!" she scolded.

"I won't, I promise." Even if it means dragging Riku-kun back with me. "But..." he hesitated. "I can't stay long."

Her face fell. "How soon?"

"Maybe a week. It's not directly related to the Kid, and this is unbelievably disconcerting, talking openly about my night job, but it's not something I can ignore."

Several emotions flashed across his mother's face, but in the end she nodded. "You have your father's spirit. You won't be happy unless you see it through, but please, say goodbye this time. Let me know you're all right when you're gone."

"I'll try." Kaito looked over his shoulder, where Riku had hung back by the door.

"Mom, I'd like you to meet a—"

"Friend," Riku said, also switching to Japanese, briefly meeting Kaito's gaze with an ironic smile. He bowed. "Yuushi Riku. I'm honored to meet the mother of such an impressive young man."

Kaito tried to conceal his surprise at Riku's statement, but it didn't make much difference because no one was looking at him anyway. His mother laughed softly.

"A pleasure, Riku-san. Please, call me Mizuki. Welcome to our home. Someone from the so-called magician's troupe Aoko-chan told me about?" she asked Kaito.

"Right as always. Riku-kun's between houses right now because of what we're trying to accomplish, so I was hoping you wouldn't mind a guest for a while."

"In my opinion, you've never had your friends over often enough," she declared. "I was just making dinner. Why don't you pull out the extra futon while I finish?" She chuckled. "I'm afraid that tonight I'm making sushi, Kaito."

Kaito stiffened. "What?!"

"I didn't expect you home to complain. I'll make eel and tempura and extra rice, too, so you'll manage nicely. I haven't forgotten how much men eat."

Kaito groaned. "But, Mom... fish!"

Already walking back to the kitchen, she paused at the door to say, "Really, after what you do all the time, fish is nothing to be afraid of. I still don't know where you picked up such a phobia."

Too late, Kaito realized that their exchange had an observer. "Is it too much to hope that you didn't hear that?"
"Yes," Riku said, humor evident in his voice. "So... fish?"

Kaito headed to the chest of linens. "If you breathe a word of this, I will be forced to harm you. You, Aoko, Mom, and maybe Inspector Nakamori know. I admit to it, I disavow any memory of how it began, and I'd be happiest if it never came up again."

To Kaito's chagrin, Riku teased him all the way through airing out Kaito's room and setting up the extra futon in the den. Once they sat down to dinner, however, he faded into the background, allowing Kaito and his mother time to reconnect. She told him stories from the hospital where she worked as a nurse, and how Aoko had occasionally visited and asked for news. Kaito couldn't reveal too much information, but he did tell her about some of the people they'd met traveling.

After a while a yawn from Riku interrupted them, reminding Kaito why they'd come home in the first place. "Mom, do you work tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "I have night shift in a few hours, but tomorrow is my day off."

Kaito blinked. "What day is it, anyway?"

"Thursday," she laughed.

"Well, I think we both need to get some sleep. We've been traveling for a while."

"Until morning, then." She gave Kaito a fond smile and began clearing dishes. He squeezed her hand briefly, and shooed Riku ahead of him.

"You. Shower. Clean towel on the bar, and I'll rummage up a change of clothes for you by the time you're done."

"I'll be shocked if anything in your house fits someone over 5'8"."

Kaito snickered at the deadpan and pointed at himself. "Phantom thief. Disguises come with the job."

"Oh?"

"Yep. Hey," Kaito added as a thought occurred to him, "why do you wear those cloaks, anyway? Stealing fashion from the bad guys is a good way to get a keyblade upside the head."

Riku cocked his head thoughtfully. "The people who wear these belong neither to the light or the darkness. And even though I don't possess their nothingness, I don't belong, either. It helped remind me."

Kaito's brow furrowed. "Why let me temporarily force a change of attire on you right after we met, then?"

A wicked smile appeared on Riku's face. "To stop your overbearing cheerfulness for awhile."

"Hey!"

Riku disappeared into the bathroom, chuckling. Kaito shook his head after him. Once alone, he walked to the picture in the living room of his father in full magician's regalia, complete with several doves.

"I'm home, Dad." He brushed his fingers against Kuroba Toichi's enigmatic face, and stepped through the rotating portrait into the hideout of the Kaitou Kid.
Everything was exactly the way he had left it. Not a surprise, given that his mother, the only other person to know of its existence, probably hadn't entered since before his father's untimely death. Knowing he'd have time to come back, Kaito rummaged through the collection of various disguises he'd inherited and added to over previous months, finally finding a satisfactory outfit for Riku's stature and apparent age. He decided to let Riku pick out a hat for himself later, and dropped the clothes outside the bathroom door.

Riku still occupied the shower, so Kaito took his mom's laptop computer into his bedroom and began catching up on relevant news. The articles decrying his disappearance and a subsequent police newscast were the most amusing, but the recent human-interest article on a large ruby on display until the end of the month really caught his eye. Plans already taking shape in his head, Kaito became so engrossed in research that he didn't sense Riku's approach until the other boy spoke.

"Kaito-kun?"

He waved absently at the unoccupied part of his bed. "Have a seat. Got to finish this note and deliver it to the police before old Inspector Nakamori goes home tonight."

"Say what?"

Kaito stopped typing mid-sentence, hands hovering over the keyboard. "I never did tell you what my night job entails, did I?"

"No, nor your reasons for gallivanting around stealing jewels in a white cape and top hat in the first place."

"Can it wait?"

A yawn. "Given that I'm likely to fall asleep mid-explanation, yes. But I'd like one tomorrow."

"Deal."

Riku wandered off to sleep, leaving Kaito to scheme in silence. If he wanted to return as both Kid and himself, he needed Kid to appear first. Not that Hakuba would accept them both returning at the same time as a coincidence. Only obsessive attention to detail, luck, and some outside help has prevented Hakuba from getting conclusive proof already. Kaito's next best option was plausible deniability to everyone else.

The next morning, the boys were so tired that Kaito's mother returned from her shift at the hospital, snatched a few hours of sleep, and made breakfast before either one began to stir. Kaito checked the newspaper over their late morning brunch. Kid's mysterious disappearance and the new note announcing his return had made the front page. Kaito grinned and cut out the article once they finished the meal.

"Why did you do that?" Riku asked as they washed the breakfast dishes.

"Two reasons: For the Kid's records, and because my civilian identity is an avowed Kid fan."

Riku nodded. "Since you've persuaded me to take a sabbatical from the show," he smiled slightly at the alias, "what do you expect me to do while you return to school?"

"First of all, I'm not going back to school yet. The heist is tomorrow night, and I'm going to need most of the time until then to make sure I won't get caught. You can help me out with that if you feel like it. Mostly, though…" Kaito flicked some soapsuds in Riku's direction. "I thought you'd like to
simply relax. Read a book, take a walk, do all the things you haven’t felt able to do for so long. You need some normalcy for a while."

Riku half-smiled. "I suppose I do. That sounds rather nice, actually."

"I'll introduce you to my friends when they get out of school tomorrow. I can use the Kid heist as an excuse for a temporary reappearance—they'll believe I'd take an absence of leave to be in Japan for one, after such a long break."

*I hope.*

A knock at the door interrupted them, and a *very* familiar voice called, "Hello? Mizuki-obachan?"

Kaito grabbed Riku by the arm and shot out of the kitchen, waving to his mother as she approached the door. "We're not here!" he hissed, and hustled Riku through Toichi's portrait.

"Should've known," he muttered once they were safely concealed. "Aoko *would* come over on Mom's day off, to keep her company and catch up on news." For all her boyish behavior, Aoko could be surprisingly feminine and thoughtful when she wanted to be.

Riku ignored him, staring at the Kid's lair: Kid costumes, mirrors, various pieces of a normal magician's stock in trade, boxes and chests holding the more select tools of a phantom thief, a bookshelf stuffed full of books and another beside it of notebooks, stairs leading up to a loft with a miniature lab, various mechanical setups designed to keep the room secret, and, of course, the car.

"This is… impressive." He sat down on the foot of the stars and looked at Kaito. "Tell me."

Kaito's mouth went dry. Much like Riku, he'd never had to tell anyone either. Old man Jii had already known from being dad's assistant, his mom never talked about it, and he'd never admitted to Akako or Hakuba that their suspicions were correct.

Riku noticed his expression. "Fair trade," he added good-naturedly. "I'll annoy the rest of your quirks out of you later,' wasn't it?"

Kaito grinned. "Yeah."

Walking around the room, touching various objects here and there for silent support, Kaito shared how over fifteen years ago, the Kaitou Kid stole jewels and returned them in an elaborate game with police all over the world. Then of nine years ago, when world-famous magician Kuroba Toichi died in an apparent accident during a show, and the Kid vanished.

He told about the legendary jewel with the power of immortality that Toichi had died trying to find and protect from a ruthless, mafia-like organization. And how almost a year ago, his son stumbled upon the Kid's legacy, learned Toichi had been murdered, and took up the mantle himself to find his father's killers.

Finally, he described the nature of a heist—the note, the show for the inevitable crowd, the police chases, and some of the tricks he'd used to avoid being caught. When he reached the increasingly odd dynamic between himself, Inspector Nakamori, Aoko, Hakuba Saguru, and even Koizumi Akako, he became even more subdued, but persevered through the tangled threads of friendship and loathing that tied both his personas to the people he was closest to.

His friendly enemies led inevitably to Conan, the child-who-wasn't-a-child with no tie to Kaito outside of the Kid, but with whom another strange accord of cat-and-mouse had developed. Out of professional courtesy Kaito avoided mentioning that Conan wasn't the child he appeared to be, but...
he felt able to share how they’d even occasionally helped each other in matters outside of a heist proper. Similar to Hakuba, Conan wanted nothing more than to see the Kid behind bars, but (to Kaito’s slight bewilderment) both detectives were territorially protective of the one quarry they’d never been able to catch. Conan was also refreshingly determined to leave out the innocents.

Kaito enjoyed the rare challenge Conan’s appearance brought, and smiled reminiscently over telling some of the ways he’d managed to tease the miniature detective. He added in a few stories that had Nakamori as the main antagonist, and the times he’d masqueraded as Hakuba or Aoko to keep from getting caught.

"You actually pulled off impersonating his own daughter?" Riku chortled quietly, mindful of the guest potentially still in the house.

"Seeing her nearly every day for close to a decade means I know her mannerisms better than almost anyone else. Voices are easy." Kaito shrugged, grateful that Riku seemed to have taken everything in stride. He’d looked slightly grim upon learning about Kaito’s atypical social life, but made very little comment. A good thing, because Kaito knew just how absurd his life sounded, just like he knew that unless something changed drastically, there was no other way to proceed.

Which was part of why he’d conveniently forgotten to mention that people occasionally shot at him during heists, and lately the ones he could detect had all been wearing excessive amounts of monochrome.

"And Hakuba-san?"

"Arrogant, smug, obsessed with details, and a slightly British lilt to his Japanese that he still hasn’t managed to get rid of. Although," Kaito added contemplatively, "he’s lost some of the arrogance. If it didn’t mean the world was coming to an end, I’d almost say he’s loosened up a little." He grinned.

"I’ll take your word for it." Riku paused. "Kaito-kun? Are you really sure this is what you have to do? Especially alone?"

"I won't put anyone else in danger. Even if someone I told believed me and didn't turn me in or arrest me on the spot, they could do nothing. Except worry, the way mom does. And this has to be done."

"If you think so, then if there's anything I can do to help..." he trailed off.

Kaito nodded, hoping that after this Riku would be able to leave everything alone.

"I mean it. Anything."

Kaito smiled slightly. "I'll keep it in mind. Thanks."

A voice sounded through the wall. "If anyone were able to hear me, I'd tell them that Aoko-chan just finished eating lunch with me and there's more where it came from. Of course, now that she's gone home, there's no one around to hear..."

Riku smirked at Kaito. "I think I like your mom."

"Best in the world," Kaito agreed quietly, walking towards the portrait door.

For the rest of the day, Kaito stayed busy preparing for Saturday night. Riku puttered around the house, in and out of the Kid's lair. Kaito couldn't begrudge him the opportunity to explore; he had his own difficulties with staying put or not having something to stay occupied with. Eventually the other
boy settled in front of the TV, a book in one hand and the remote in the other. He kept the volume down in deference to Kaito's need to think, and after a while Kaito thought he heard some faint snores.

_The guy must have really stretched himself thin before I got to him._

*Hm, light rain tomorrow night…*

Kaito scrutinized the website's weather report, trying to decide whether it was worth risking the chance of too much rain to fly in, or if it would be better to try and form an alternate escape route. In the end, the glider won.

_Familiar, confirmedly successful as an escape route, and my luck usually holds for little things like that._

But some familiar little things _had_ changed, Kaito remembered abruptly. He pulled his card gun out, wondering what of the outside worlds he'd managed to bring home with him. The playing cards looked no more than laminated pasteboard, until he scrutinized the edges carefully and found a faint silver glow.

_I wonder if that's always been there, and I've just never been able to see it before? I never did figure out why only my own shots could cut into concrete, not that I plan to complain…_

Aoko had fired his card gun once, just before he'd retired it from Kuroba Kaito's life in favor of using it as a heist tool. The cards had sliced through the air with ease, but slapped flat against the wall, fluttering to the floor. Everyone had accepted that the unique qualities of his projectiles were one more magic trick, and he'd seen no reason to dissuade them. He'd usually tried not to think about it.

On impulse he found his Duel Cards. As he touched them, the tug at his consciousness was almost imperceptible, vague threads of connection constricted still more by the nature of his world. Unless he could find a way to easier draw through those pathways, no assistance from the Shadow Realm's denizens was likely to be forthcoming.

Although, come to think of it… If he could still feel the threads of the Shadow Realm here on this world, there must be something there. Darkness and light seemed to be everywhere in and among the worlds—why not the shadows, as well? The inventor of Duel Monsters had probably never existed in this Japan, but that didn't mean the Shadow Realm didn't. Akako called her power black magic, but since real darkness would probably have chewed her up and spat her out years ago, what if she had found a way to access the shadows without Duel Cards?

The style of her favorite regalia tended toward Ancient Egyptian, and there was probably a card _somewhere_ that explained her irresistible allure to any male beyond puberty. Attractiveness to anyone but him, of course. He had a growing suspicion that his own connection to the shadows had something to do with that. And maybe Hakuba, but he personally wondered if the blond boy felt much at all, let alone enough for Akako to manipulate.

…I wonder if I'm going crazy. But if I'm right, I wonder which monster it is that's masquerading as that 'Luci' guy she says she summons to talk to…

Kaito couldn't help himself, and began snickering madly. The look on Akako's face if he was right, and she ever found out…

_Note to self: For whatever reason, this world's channels are minimal outside of augmenting natural human talent. When you leave again, practice what you can so that when you come home, you'll
Maybe I can convince Riku-kun to visit Yugi-san again. I wouldn't mind a few more tips about how to summon the shadows without passing out.

And I really, really don't want to ask Koizumi-kun about something like that, no matter how much more familiar she is with non-legerdemain magic.

Kaito shook himself free of his train of thought. He needed to worry about the here and now—there would be plenty of time to worry about everything else later. Wandering back to his laptop, he went back to work.

There were some worrying rumors floating around the less-than-legal circles that warranted investigating, about a strange new wild card calling himself 'Nightmare'…

By the time Saturday morning rolled around, Kaito could see Riku getting antsy. Since he felt reasonably sure of success—it helped that the ruby was being displayed in a museum he had previously infiltrated—Kaito felt justified in taking the rest of the day off.

They walked around town for a while, Kaito pointing out landmarks and his favorite hangouts and slowly gravitating towards his school. Riku blended well into the crowd in casual clothes, a newsboy cap, and amber-tinted sunglasses to disguise the orange-gold glow of his eyes. Kaito opted against wearing his school uniform to avoid accusations of skipping school. Of course, he technically was, but Kaito never let little details like that get in the way. When he said as much to Riku, the other boy chuckled.

"You're insane."

"I prefer the term reality-challenged, thank you very much. It's easier to change reality when you see what else could be there instead."

"And you're good at seeing what isn't there?"

"Why, it's a core part of being a magician—your audience can only see what you choose to show them. I'm surprised more people don't do the same, really."

"You're still crazy."

Kaito grinned unrepentantly. "I never said I wasn't."

Impeccable sense of timing intact, they showed up just as the bell signaled the end of the school's half-day study session. Soon students streamed past them, groups chattering and laughing as they made plans for the afternoon. They waited beside the entrance to the campus, chatting casually, waiting for the inevitable.

Sure enough, Aoko, Hakuba and Akako appeared among a knot of other students, Hakuba and Aoko bickering good-naturedly over the Kaitou Kid's heist, and whether Hakuba or Aoko's father would manage to catch the thief first. Akako walked along with a faint smile on her face, watching them. They were so intent on arguing that they had passed him by completely before Akako paused, and turned, dark eyes wide.

"Kuroba-kun?"

I seem to be getting that a lot.
Any further thoughts were interrupted by Aoko's shriek, and she instantly set about hugging him so hard that he was absolutely certain she'd bruised a few ribs.

"You idiot! Inconsiderate jerk! Going off without warning, no calls or letters or anything to let us know you were okay…” She sniffled ominously.

"Gah! Aoko, no, don't cry." Unable to think of anything else to do, he conjured a white rosebud and tucked its thornless stem behind her ear. He could practically feel Riku's surprised gaze on him at that, but he did indeed carry the necessary elements for several magic tricks at all times. "I'm fine, all right? I've just been busy with shows and all."

Aoko blushed and let go of him, looking down at her feet. Akako raised an eyebrow, less than convinced, while Hakuba looked on with a remarkably unreadable expression.

Kaito eyed him, surprised that no outburst or accusation was forthcoming. Hakuba generally didn't just stand and watch him in silence.

Hakuba… had just handcuffed his left hand to the bicycle rack he'd been standing beside.

"You are staying put until I get a satisfactory answer for why you up and vanished without telling us and made your classmates worry both before and after your little telegram."

Kaito blinked innocently, trying to reach more familiar ground. "You were worried about me? Aww, I didn't know you cared!"

"Only about what you could possibly getting up to, if that's what you mean, but Aoko-kun and—" Hakuba stopped abruptly, registering exactly what Kaito was now playing with in his hands. "And I expect those back from you reassembled and in working order by the end of the afternoon."

"Planning to use them on Kid? Hey, are these a new style? I thought the spring was a little tougher than usual." Kaito brought the handful of curved metal and chain closer to his eyes, surreptitiously watching Hakuba pinch the bridge of his nose, the blond boy's tell for when Kaito's antics were having an effect.

"I'd almost forgotten how much I've missed this. Too easy…"

He decided to play nice for once, and answer Hakuba. "Well, like I told the school, I've been working with other magicians and performing here and there, mostly around different parts of Japan. When word of the heist got out, though, I got an absence of leave to be home for it."

The best part was, it was almost entirely true. Except for the magicians bit, but Riku had magic, so it could count…

True to form, Aoko glowered at mention of the thief, Akako narrowed her eyes, and Hakuba seemed to mentally scrutinize his excuse before giving Kaito a silent look of frank disbelief.

Well, not like I expected him to trust anything I say in regards to the Kid, anyway…

"Hey, I have proof!" He grabbed Riku by the arm and dragged him into the spotlight. "I brought him home with me." He gave a summary of Riku's fabricated background, ignoring Riku's frozen expression upon being shown off like a souvenir, then continued: "Riku-kun, meet the most dedicated Kid-chasers of Japan outside of the official Kid Task Force."

Once Kaito had introduced the trio with slightly more detail, Riku bowed politely. "A pleasure to meet you. It's a wonder you put up with such an enthusiastic fan."
"Oh, this idiot and I grew up together. I'm pretty much stuck with him." Aoko sniffed disdainfully, turning her head up and away.

"And there's so much more to him than a simple fan of Kid," Akako added with an enigmatic smile.

Hakuba didn't respond, evaluating Riku instead. "Aspiring magician, are you?"

Kaito watched Hakuba warily as Riku nodded.

"What sort of tricks do you have up your sleeve, then?"

Kaito hid a grimace behind a poker-face grin. He knew he'd forgotten something in the past few days, but he'd been too busy planning the heist to remember his promise to teach Riku some simple magic tricks. He glanced up at Riku, unable to say anything with their audience present.

"Well, I don't know much, since I'm more an aspiring gopher, but I do have one trick I'm fairly proud of." A snap of his fingers conjured a flash of dark fire above his hand, there and gone in an instant. "I'm rather fond of fire. If I ever become good enough, I'd like to create a show around it."

Hakuba seemed slightly mollified, but still suspicious, while Akako gave Riku an intrigued look. Kaito glanced sidelong at the self-proclaimed magic user.

 Damn. She probably knows that he didn't do that by sleight of hand.

Aoko saved them from any increasing awkwardness. "Kaito, when did you get back? Have you seen your mother yet? She's been worried sick about you, and she said yesterday she still hadn't heard anything from you!"

"We just got in, and Mom's working today."

Aoko put her hands on her hips. "Fine, then. You spend the afternoon with us, today, and then go home to spend the evening with her. No excuses!"

Kaito saluted. "Ma'am, yes ma'am!"

"Hey!" Aoko laughed, smacking him lightly on the arm.

"I'm afraid I'll have to bow out," Akako announced. "I've some things to do at home that can't wait."

"Are you sure, Akako-chan? Just for a while?"

"Not this time. I'm sure Kuroba-kun won't run off by tomorrow. Will you?"

"Er, no…" Kaito never felt comfortable when Akako turned her full attention on him. He always felt vaguely like a piece of meat. It didn't help that he suspected she was going home in order to use her own vaunted magic to investigate Riku's powers.

"Well, then, enjoy your afternoon together." Sparing one last look to share between Riku and Kaito, she drifted off into the thinning pack of students.

"You'll come, won't you, Saguru-kun?" Aoko asked hurriedly.

Kaito blinked. While he'd been gone, Aoko'd started calling Hakuba by his first name. He wasn't sure what he thought of that.

"I wouldn't dream of being anywhere else, Aoko-kun." Hakuba's words felt unusually serious, at
least until he smiled. The smile could have been stolen from a shark.

Translation: You're hoping to keep an eye on me for evidence of my being the Kid, or prevent me from any last-minute preparations for tonight's heist. Tough luck, Hakuba-kun.

Because the way Kaito had simply disappeared had been so mean, and he'd supposedly been making money the whole time, Aoko demanded Kaito treat her to an amusement park. Surprised both by the request and by her vehemence, Kaito agreed almost automatically. He paid for Riku's ticket as well, though Hakuba calmly insisted on buying his own.

They wandered around for a while at first, the boys following Aoko's undisputed lead. Conversation continued to revolve around the Kid heist, and she seemed determined to drag Riku into the argument, asking his opinion or confirmation repeatedly. She seemed to think that because he was Kaito's senior in the magic troupe, he might have some kind of authority over Kaito, because at one point she demanded, "Yuushi-san, tell Kaito it's true that Kid's thieving hurts people!"

Startled, Riku looked between Kaito and Aoko, unsure how to respond to such an accusation towards Kaito's alter ego. After a moment, he came to a decision and smirked slightly, pushing his up his sunglasses. "Aoko-san, Kaito-kun doesn't listen to me, either."

Aoko pouted. "Well, he should! He doesn't listen to anyone."

"Hey, I resemble that remark."

"The correct quote is 'resent', not 'resemble', Kuroba-kun," Hakuba interjected."

"But I do resemble it!" Kaito grinned. Aoko stuck the tip of her tongue out at him.

"Just for that, you get to buy me soda."

Girls have no business being this manipulative. If only they didn't look so irresistibly cute when they did…

Placated with her drink, Aoko dragged the boys onto a few rides, then suggested going to the Haunted House.

Kaito took one look at Riku's expression and realized this would be a Bad Idea. The sole purpose behind a haunted house was to surprise, startle and scare—and even knowing he was home, and safe, Kaito still jumped at movement in the shadows and fought combat-honed instinct to keep from pulling his card gun. Riku's instincts were likely even deeper ingrained.

The sound of flowing water attracted his attention, an ornamental fountain in the center of the plaza. The work of a moment brought him over outward-aimed water jets to the apex of wrought metal, still perfectly dry, and he grinned cheekily down at the earthbound trio.

"This has a nicer view!"

Aoko put her hands on her hips. "All of that water is being spouted out of fish, Kaito," she announced, unusually serene.

Kaito's grin froze. Very cautiously, he tilted his head further down to confirm that yes, he was perched directly above a ring of exquisitely detailed copper-green fish. Abandoning all ideas of avoiding the haunted house in favor of getting as far away from fish as possible, Kaito launched himself upward and outward, dropping lightly to the ground back into his friends' company. He
earned a surprised glance from Hakuba.

"Rejoining us so soon?"

"Oh, didn't you know?" Aoko laughed. Laughed. "Kaito's horribly afraid of fish."

Oh, no. No. You did not just tell Hakuba that.

Hakuba eyed Kaito speculatively. "Is he now?"

He's going to do something at the heist tonight; he's going to do something at the heist tonight...

Kaito mentally swore, but kept his grin pasted on. He was going to have to work 'dealing with extremely unpleasant surprises' into his contingency plans.

"Shall we go, Aoko-san?" Riku asked, saving Kaito from having to think of anything distracting to say. He still looked anxious about the prospect of the haunted house, and Kaito decided to return the favor.

He sauntered ahead of the group, using every trick he knew to anticipate where the next scare would come from, and relentlessly spoiled every one, either with a trick of his own or a mere, "Hey, Riku-kun, come look at this one!"

Aoko finally lost her temper at his purposeful obnoxiousness, storming past Kaito towards the exit. "Hmph! If you want me mad at you again, you got it!"

"Hey, Aoko…" Kaito hurried after her, still tripping all the supposed surprises along the way. Riku and Hakuba trailed after them. Once they reached sunshine again, Kaito saw from Riku's faintly relieved expression and slight nod that the other boy knew and appreciated what he'd done.

He turned his attention to remedying Aoko's volatile temper, missing Hakuba's questioning glance darting between the two boys.

When they continued onward, a game booth grabbed Aoko's attention.

"So cute!" She clasped her hands together, staring starry-eyed at the massive penguin displayed as the grand prize, then turned to Riku. "Please, Yuushi-san, will you win that for me?"

Riku raised his eyebrows. "Why ask me?"

"Because it's a carnival game, and magicians would be good at that sort of thing, right? Kaito's too much of a screw-up about stuff like this, but you're part of the magic troupe and older so you'd be better at it, right?"

Riku looked startled, then shrugged and looked over the game, which required good enough aim to knock down five targets with as many throws to earn the grand prize. Kaito, though glaring good-naturedly at Aoko, paid the operator and Riku hefted one of the balls. After an embarrassing total miss for his first throw and a partial hit for the second, Riku paused, mentally recalculated, and proceeded to knock down the last three in rapid succession.

Aoko squealed over the medium-sized penguin Riku presented her with, beaming at the taller man. Kaito scoffed.

"Too easy."

"If you could do better then why didn't you play, hmm?"
"I'm a magician, not a game player!"

"I've seen your game playing, Kaito… it's terrible."

"Fine, I'll show you what I mean." Kaito looked around until a prize offered nearby caught his eye, and he bounded over to the game, a shooting challenge. Kaito paid, took the imitation gun, and fired away—to miss every single target.

Aoko turned to him in confusion, but he winked at her. Paying again, he narrowed his eyes, adjusted his stance… and won a grand prize. "You just have to figure you how they're rigged," he declared with a grin at Aoko's astonishment. "…Or it could just be luck."

When the proprietor moved to get down the huge stuffed figure, Kaito waved his hand. "I want to split it into four mini-prizes. It's just a reversal of trade-ins, right?"

The man shrugged, silently handing over Kaito's quarry: four plush dolls of the white-costumed Kaitou Kid, complete with hat and a button monocle. He gave one to Riku, pushed another into Aoko's hands despite her protests, and paused as he realized Hakuba had disappeared into the crowd.

"Where'd he go?"

All three looked around briefly, without success, so Kaito did the next natural thing, finding a high place to look from. Of course, most people usually stood on a bench, not ten feet above the ground on the rounded dome of an old-fashioned street lamp. He shaded his eyes, letting his balance hold him steady on the uneven surface as he peered over the crowd. In this case, blond hair stood out amid the crowd like a beacon.

"Oi! Hakuba-kun! Get your rear back here, you're not escaping that easily!" He shook his fist in the air, not caring that he was attracting attention. Any good magician enjoyed an audience. "If I have to suffer through this afternoon so do you!"

"Hey!" Aoko cried from below. "What are you calling suffering?"

Riku crossed his arms. "…Why am I with you people? Maybe Hakuba-san had the right idea…"

Kaito ignored them. "Oh, no you don't. Hey, Hakuba-kun!" He raised his voice. "Stop pretending you can't hear me!"

Hakuba shrank down behind a hotdog cart, trying to look inconspicuous.

"I can still see you! Hey, can you guys over there tell the blond guy to get back here?"

That finally earned a reaction from Hakuba, who seemed to have finally hit his limit. "Stop yelling at me in public, you're making a scene!"

"You're yelling too! So get back over here!"

"No! You're a bloody nuisance!"

"Well, you're not doing any better! And you're the one who agreed to this in the first place, so you are going to come over here, you are going to experience it with the rest of us, and you are going to like it!"

Hakuba briefly buried his face in his hands, then slunk towards the group, trying not to look at anyone. Quite a lot of the crowd was staring at this point. Aoko had decided a glare was more
appropriate. "Suffering through an amusement park, are you?"

Kaito flashed her a grin and hopped off the light pole. "It got him back, didn't it?" Hakuba stalked up to them, glowering at Kaito. The magician laughed and tossed him the third Kid plushie, staying safely out of arm's reach. "Here, Hakuba-kun. Now you can say you caught the Kid!"

Hakuba caught the doll reflexively, registered what he was holding, and opened his mouth to retort, but was interrupted by the arrival of park security. There was a moment of confusion as Aoko automatically looked to Riku to take charge and Hakuba followed her lead, and Kaito realized that he would have to play along as well. Given Riku's appearance and cover story, it would look odd if he tried to take charge himself, so he let himself fade back slightly rather than have to deal with a lot of awkward explanations. Riku glared at him upon suddenly finding himself at the front of the group in the apparent position of Responsible Adult, and Kaito offered a faint apologetic shrug in reply.

Riku seemed to decide against bringing the matter up while they were in public, because he turned to the newly arrived security guard and slid smoothly into the air of authority that he'd had to assume often enough on the other worlds. He was actually doing quite well right up until the guard asked to see his identification, and he discreetly froze. Given the variety of worlds they'd been through, Kaito doubted that he even knew what that consisted of here. Fortunately, Kaito himself was far better prepared, a habit without which he would never have made it this far.

Scratching his head sheepishly, he pulled out a wallet and handed it over to Riku.

"Sorry, looks like I have it."

Riku took it without missing a beat, and pulled out a flawless ID with his picture. He handed it over without comment, but Kaito caught a glance that promised some sort of retribution in the future for the lack of warning.

"What have I told you about practicing your pickpocket routine on me? Save it for the other magicians!"

"Hah! Thief!" Hakuba crowed, though with a surprisingly good-natured undertone.

"Magician, thank you," he retorted.

"Sir, what is your relationship to these young people?"

"Er..." Riku opened and closed his mouth several times. "Babysitter?" he managed weakly.

"Chaperone," Kaito chimed in easily. "Because Aoko's father doesn't want her spending the day alone with two boys."

"And you did not prevent them from disturbing the peace because...?"

"I'm afraid they caught me off-guard," Riku replied, giving Kaito a sufficiently forbidding expression. "It shouldn't happen again."

Aoko turned her most pleading face on the guard. "Please let us stay! We never go to places like this, and we've hardly been here any time at all."

Kaito was pleased to see that he wasn't the only one affected by Aoko's mostly unconscious efforts at manipulation. The guard, a young man not much older than they were, sighed.

"Take this visit as a warning. Anything further and we'll be forced to escort you from the park."
"Oh, thank you!" After the security guard left, Aoko turned on Hakuba and Kaito. "You two. Behave!"

Riku put a hand on Kaito's shoulder. "Why don't you take that one, and I'll take this one?"

Aoko smiled. "All right. Here, Saguru-kun, as punishment you get to carry my Kid doll for me."

"What? Two of them?"

As Aoko explained what Hakuba had missed, Riku turned to Kaito. "Why did you have a fake ID with my picture with you?"

"Because it seemed like a good idea to make one yesterday, in case something ever came up?"

Riku crossed his arms. "And why would you think something would come up that would require an ID for me?"

"Narrative causality?" Riku stared blankly at Kaito. "No, seriously," Kaito continued as they trailed after Hakuba and Aoko, who had begun arguing amiably about the Kid again. "I know odds. Looking like you do, if you were going to spend time with us you would be considered the one in charge. Therefore, ID necessary."

"The way your mind works is somewhat scary. And why didn't you warn me about any of it?"

"Didn't want to worry you if I was wrong?"

"Yuushi-san!" Both boys turned to see Aoko waving them over to a souvenir shop. They approached just in time to see Aoko buying a ridiculously bright-colored shirt with a jungle pattern, complete with monkeys and a few parrots. Once hers, she turned and held it out to Riku. "Because you won my penguin, and you're from Brazil!"

Riku stared at the shirt in concealed horror, and Kaito barely restrained his laughter. At his hesitation Hakuba leveled a 'Don't you dare hurt her feelings' glare at him, and Kaito decided to intervene.

He sidled up behind Riku and discreetly murmured, "If you make her sad, I'm telling Kairi-san on you."

At the threat, Riku accepted the shirt with apparent good grace, but insisted on the day being too brisk for such short sleeves and thin fabric. This seemed to satisfy Aoko, and she hurried them all off towards another attraction.

"This is not incentive for me to ever take you to meet Sora or Kairi, you realize," he said quietly to Kaito when the others weren't paying attention.

Kaito grinned in response. "Trust me, I'll find a way."

"...How did you talk me into this again?"

"By showing you good sense, of course!"

"Oh, of course."

The rest of the afternoon passed relatively smoothly. When they reached the roller coaster, Riku went through the line but flatly refused to get on when he saw the ride restraints. No amount of cajoling from Aoko could change his mind. Hakuba volunteered to wait with him at the exit, leaving Kaito and Aoko to ride together. As the train climbed to the first apex, Kaito remembered the last time he
had rode on one: hanging on to the outside of a car in his Kid costume, trying to make it back from a heist before Aoko noticed he had disappeared from the dark movie theatre. He grinned at Aoko, who smiled back, and then they were rushing down in semi-controlled freefall.

Had Kaito known of the conversation taking place below, he might have been tempted to leave a blowup doll in his place and eavesdrop instead. By the time they made it to the exit, Riku was staring thoughtfully at Hakuba, who waited calmly with his hands in his pockets.

"What'd we miss?" Kaito asked curiously.

"Nothing," Hakuba replied, smug smile intact.

Aoko shook her head. "Boys. Come on, it's getting late. I want to watch the sunset from the Ferris wheel before we go home!"

The massive wheel had semi-enclosed cars capable of carrying four people comfortably, with room to stand and move around. They piled into one just as setting sun turned the sky into a beautiful palette of colors. After a few cycles around, admiring the view, they stopped as passengers unloaded below.

"What's that?" Riku suddenly asked, craning his neck to try and see around the wheel-spokes blocking from view whatever had caught his eye.

"What's what?" Aoko replied.

"I'm not sure. Hm..." Before any of them could react, Riku swung himself gracefully out of the car and flipped onto the flat roof. "I was right, that is the ocean!"

Aoko stared up at the car's ceiling, looking betrayed. "You're as crazy as he is!"

Hakuba pinched the bridge of his nose, muttering quietly, "Oh, no..."

"Really? Where?" Kaito duplicated Riku's move, crouching beside him. There was nothing to hang on to, but since Riku seemed to have equally perfect balance and no more fear of heights than he did, Kaito wasn't worried.

"Oi, Hakuba, come see the ocean! Hey... I think I can see your house from here!"

Hakuba didn't deign to respond, but Kaito thought he heard a sotto voce mutter: "Yes, you would know."

"Which one is it?" Riku asked, interested.

"The big smarmy mansion down that way, y'see?"

"Oh, yeah. Nice place!"

A yell from below attracted their attention, and they peered down at where the ride operator was gesticulating wildly.

"Whoops! Time to get back inside," Kaito announced.

"Why was he doing that?" Riku asked as the ride rapidly descended.

"Truthfully? Because we both just broke park-ride rules, and they're afraid if we somehow get hurt trying crazy stunts we'll try to sue them anyway."
"We what?!"

"Honestly, no one ever listens to safety warnings," Hakuba sighed.

"But we weren't about to fall," Riku protested weakly.

"Ah, but they don't know that."

As they exited the ride, security arrived for the second time.

"You lot again?" It was the same guard as before, this time with a partner.

"Security guard-san! Fancy meeting you here," Kaito began brightly. "How has your afternoon been?"

Riku tried to hide in the background, quite a feat for a man standing almost a head taller than the entire crowd. Kaito suspected that an embarrassed blush hid beneath his dark skin. Hakuba merely covered his eyes with a hand, and Aoko glowered at Kaito and Riku.

"Mostly? Containing you. We've reason to believe you also caused trouble around the haunted house, given your description and tendency for trouble."

Kaito grinned cheerily. "So it's been a good afternoon, then?"

"Possibly for some very rare definitions of 'good'."

"Now, Yuushi-san…" began his partner, an older man with a severe expression.

"Yes?"

"As you do not seem able to take responsibility for your own safety or the safety of those in your care, I'm afraid we must insist that you leave. And you, young man," the older guard continued to Kaito, "have shown flagrant disregard for the rules of this park. You're very lucky we aren't banning you from returning."

Kaito smiled, all innocence.

"Kaiiiitoooo…" Aoko growled dangerously. She bowed deeply to the security guards. "Accept my sincerest apologies for my friends' behavior, sirs. We were just going to be leaving anyway."

Letting her previous respect for Riku's elder status fall by the wayside, she hooked an arm through one of his and her other through one of Kaito's, dragging them towards the nearby exit. Hakuba gave the two guards a helpless shrug as the three fell in step behind them. The guards ended their escort once they reached the edge of park grounds, leaving Aoko to give a lecture on behavior.

"Aww, Aoko, we were just having fun…"

She crossed her arms. "Hmph. You need to go home anyway, your mother should be home by now. Is it too much to hope you can stay out of trouble on a trip across town?"

"I've got an errand to do first, but we'll be good! Scout's honor," Kaito added with a mischievous grin.

Aoko blinked, confused. "What?"

"Another one of Kuroba-kun's references to the United States, Aoko-kun," Hakuba said wearily, and
explained, muttering, "Should never have let him borrow those American movies, 'studying English' or not..." under his breath.

"Oh. Thank you. I need to go, I promised Daddy that I'd be home for dinner. If you won't be going back with us, I'll see you tomorrow, Kaito. I'll tell Daddy you're back; he'll be glad to hear you're okay."

"Sure, Aoko. Be sure to show him your Kid. You too, Hakuba-kun!"

"Oh, you." Aoko made a face, but she hugged both penguin and Kid doll tightly. Hakuba smirked, tucking the doll inside his jacket.

"I'm sure the Kid is overjoyed to know that manufacturers are making a killing from merchandizing his likeness."

"Well, it's not like he can do much about it, is there? Come on, Riku-kun. See you!"

They parted ways, Hakuba and Aoko to the subway, and Riku and Kaito to the nearest place out of sight. A few steps through one of the dark corridors, and the two boys reappeared outside Kaito's house.

Kaito bounded through the front door, enthusiastically greeting his mother and the prospect of dinner. She in turn challenged him to spend the intervening time between dinner and the heist relaxing rather than obsessing over last-minute details. Feeling slightly chastened for neglecting her since his return, Kaito agreed.

Both Kurobas laughed at Riku's obvious surprise when she suggested poker. Once assured that she was serious, and a formidable player in her own right—after all, she and Kaito both learned to bluff from Toichi, who was a master card shark—Riku settled at the card table with a grin.

"I won't feel like I have to go easy on you, then."

"You wish." Kaito grinned. "You're going down."

All things considered, Kaito would have done better if he hadn't been so distracted by the looming prospect of fish.
Chapter Notes

The heists in this chapter are taken from the DC/MK chapters *The Scroll of the Dark Night*, twisted slightly to account for events in Promenade.

Dedicated to my amazing editors, Snickerer and Ellen, without whom Promenade would not exist the way it is now. You have pulled out so much of the story's potential, and given me more ideas than I know what to do with, crackbunnies not included.

Chapter warnings: All of the main characters have been under varying levels of stress, so beware the occasional swear word. There's also some violence and death in here, but if you read Detective Conan that should be pretty standard…

You will notice that a lack of Kaito's perspective for a while. This is intentional, because it's easier to watch a person from the outside. Hakuba is referred to by his first name, Saguru, in scenes from his perspective.

Unless otherwise stated, conversation is generally held in Japanese.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Since Saguru had escorted her home from the amusement park, Aoko invited him to stay for dinner. That way, he could ride with Inspector Nakamori to the heist instead of relying on public transportation or his housekeeper's driving. To their mutual chagrin, a vein started to throb in the man's forehead when he realized that both of them were carrying Kid plushies. He calmed down marginally once Aoko explained Kuroba's role in their presence, but he still glared and muttered a few choice words not quite under his breath.

After Saguru borrowed the computer to confirm some rather disturbing information about Kuroba's new friend, he and Nakamori discussed (argued) last-minute strategy and tactics while Aoko made dinner. It was fish, which Saguru found oddly appropriate, and he silently toasted to Kuroba and Kid while Aoko told Nakamori all about their afternoon. Saguru cringed at the light pole and Ferris wheel incidents, but almost to his surprise Nakamori gave a gruff bark of laughter at Kuroba's antics. Hearing that he was alive and well enough to act outrageous was probably a relief to the old man, though. From everything Saguru had gathered, Nakamori treated Kuroba rather like a nephew in his somewhat absent-minded way.

Saguru also suspected that Nakamori was the closest thing Kuroba'd had to a father figure for a long time.

Dinner ended far too quickly, and Nakamori whisked him off to the museum display where Kid's target waited. Rather than wait with the congregating police, Saguru promised to stay in radio contact and wandered through the museum, enjoying the excellent art as time counted down to Kid's promised arrival. Looking at the displays was more pleasant than letting his thoughts wander, because on a heist (and more often lately, whenever he had a few moments to spare,) his mind inevitably turned to the Kid: both the unanswered questions burning in his mind, and the information he already had but would rather not contemplate too deeply.
He really was hopeless.

Things had been simple, once. Chase a thief, and bring him to justice. He hadn't expected the ensuing cat-and-mouse challenges to awaken his curiosity, nor the answers that his various avenues of research revealed. And it was impossible for him to fail to notice the shadows in the night that occasionally took potshots at the Kid, which hadn't helped his peace of mind much, either. It's hard to think of someone as a bad guy when even worse people try to kill him.

He'd tried to ignore the increasingly disturbing theories coalescing in his brain by obeying his mother's request to rejoin her England; tried to leave the fears and faintly growing sense of desperation safely buried half a world away. Throwing himself back into British culture, the British school system (where he could focus on Criminal Science), and British crimes, for a few months he'd thought he succeeded.

Then Nakamori had called with the news that the Kaitou Kid had vanished almost 48 hours ago, with the jewel.

Visions of the snipers that tended to follow Kid dancing in his head, Saguru caught the next flight to Japan. Arriving mid-morning the third day after Kid's disappearance, he spent the entire rest of the day with the Kid Task Force rehashing all known information about the Kid. Eight hours of fruitless searching later, Nakamori received a personally addressed letter from the Kid, and Hakuba got a phone call from his mother describing a similar notice that'd come for him in England. Nakamori had been so relieved, he didn't question it… but Hakuba felt slightly paranoid about the veracity of Kid's—Kuroba's—safety, and looked closer.

The caricature had been wrong.

He'd never have been able to convince Nakamori of anything, but the doodle wasn't properly hand-drawn, as it should have been. Almost perfect... but just that little bit off. Then Aoko had shown up at the precinct straight from school with the news of Kuroba's disappearance and telegram, and Hakuba's worry returned twofold.

Kuroba was gone.

No warning, no decent explanation, simply gone. He couldn't tell if Kuroba's telegram to the school was genuine, or from someone else allaying suspicion about the boy's unexpected disappearance. And Saguru couldn't get the image of black coats and bullets out of his head. The fact that there was no record of any traveling magician's troupe currently active in Japan did nothing to calm his quietly building panic. Digging further revealed that all forms of traveling entertainment, magical or otherwise, had no one of Kuroba's name or description even loosely attached to them. Hakuba's grandfather was a technical genius, and the miniature lab he'd given Hakuba as a birthday present a few years ago included a nest of supercomputers that put all but the most sophisticated of search engines and databases to shame. But even that couldn't find any trace of news of other boy. Kuroba Kaito had simply vanished off the face of the earth.

Not knowing if Kuroba was still alive or if the mysterious assassins after Kid had quietly taken him out of the equation, Hakuba had been unable to bring himself to go home.

And so he'd stayed, and waited, and worried. For six weeks.


Until the Kid's note had arrived for the Kid Task Force, but even then he hadn't dared trust it. Until two days later, when Kuroba reappeared as if nothing had ever happened.
When he’d first seen Kuroba he’d been almost willing to punch him, just to be sure that the other boy was real. Mildly disturbed by the violence in the thought, he’d settled for handcuffs instead.

His internal clock warned him of the impending time, interrupting his train of thought. After checking his pocket watch to confirm the hour, he sighed. He’d ended up thinking about Kid after all, rather than the stunning Rembrandt he’d been standing in front of for the last half-hour. He entered the nearby stairwell, climbed to the top landing, and settled against the wall by the door to the roof. Unless he was mistaken—an unlikely occurrence, even if Kid could usually outmaneuver him when it came to thinking on his feet—he wouldn't have to chase the Kid tonight. Kuroba would come to him.

Sure enough, distant shouts echoed from elsewhere in the museum, and soon running footsteps echoed lightly in the stairwell. Almost too soft—did the other boy ever walk anywhere, or did he really know how to fly?

He pushed himself off the wall and stood in the middle of the small landing at the top of the stairs, crossing his arms just as the white phantom came into view… and paused half-way up the last flight of steps.

"You're getting predictable, Kuroba-kun."

The words tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop them, a feeling of distant anger boiling up through layers upon layers of tightly held control. Before Kuroba, he'd always skated on the surface of emotions, never feeling anything very deeply. Then the magician had pushed his way into Saguru's life, and words like concern, fear, anger... contentment... had taken on new meanings, new depth and clarity. He was still trying to figure out why.

"If I can anticipate your movements, who's to say no one else can? And if you're going to vanish, or someone else makes you vanish, cover your tracks better—there are no groups of traveling magicians in Japan right now, and do you know that Yuushi-san isn't who he says he is? If you brought him back from wherever knowing that, fine, but don't let him con you, all right? You're supposed to be the conman, not the other way around. And don't you dare disappear like that again! Either of you."

He glared down at Kid, who'd remained silent through his entire tirade, although it seemed like the shadows hiding his face in the brightly lit stairwell had inexplicably deepened. After several more moments of silence, a gloved hand tipped the hat brim down slightly in a type of salute.

"I'm afraid I've no idea what you're talking about, detective."

He might have been about to say more, but the sound of a door bursting open several flights below interrupted them. Immediately, Kid set off a sleeping gas minibomb. Hakuba stumbled forward, automatically trying to delay Kid, and miscalculated his position relative to the stairs. He recognized the presence of air under his foot just too late to do anything but twist his body to absorb the imminent impact. Desperately hoping he wouldn't reach the bottom of the stairs with a broken neck or a broken thief beneath him, he succumbed to darkness.

To his surprise, Saguru woke to a distinct lack of head injury, broken bones, or even any real bruises. Glancing around, he realized he was propped against the wall in a stable, fairly comfortable sitting position, positioned directly perpendicular to the door leading to the roof. In other words, safely out of danger from trampling feet or accidentally rolling down the stairs. Kuroba had cared enough to waste precious escape time looking after Saguru's wellbeing. Saguru wasn't sure which made him more uncomfortable: the fact that Kuroba cared, or the fact that he hadn't expected the thief to care.
Still slightly woozy from the sleeping gas, he wandered down the stairs in search of Nakamori. The Inspector turned up in the street outside the museum, ordering his men to regroup around a few particularly colorful curses. He hadn't even seemed to notice that his raincoat's hood had fallen back, and the slowly lightening rain had already soaked him. Saguru stayed beneath the covered part of the entrance, wishing he had bothered to borrow a hat. One of the unoccupied officers noticed him, and hurried over.

"Ah, Hakuba-kun, are you all right? We saw you while we were chasing Kid but couldn't stop to help, and then everything became rather hectic."

"I'm fine. What happened?"

"Well… the rain was too heavy for Kid to use his glider, but he escaped down the side of the building and into the alleyways, where we lost track of him." The man shrugged. "Inspector Nakamori isn't happy, but that's business as usual, really."

"Snipers?"

A wan smile. "Not this time, thank goodness."

Hakuba reciprocated the smile with a grim one of his own. Not this time. What kind of a sentiment was 'Not this time'? They were bloody snipers! They were supposed to exist under the category of 'Not now and not ever,' not 'We're relieved we caught a break on this one!'

He swallowed, letting the rage recede behind a wave of cool rationality. He couldn't really remember why anymore, but whispers of memory and instinct always brought him back under normal control before he could lose his temper.

"And the jewel?" he asked, voice betraying nothing.

The officer shook his head. "Hasn't turned up yet, as far as I know."

Saguru pinched the bridge of his nose. Even beyond the usual stress of a Kid heist, sleeping bombs tended to leave him with a headache afterwards. He could see the media swarming around out in the streets, seeking details about the outcome of the heist; while he usually gave an interview every few heists, this time he wanted nothing more than a cup of tea and a good night's sleep.

"Fine. Tell the Inspector I'm going home."

After Kaito left, Riku summoned his courage and asked Mizuki about Toichi, hoping he wasn't being too bold. To his relief, she smiled softly, reminiscently, and they spent the next several hours in pleasant conversation about the magician, husband, and father. Riku had to admit that there weren't very many adults that he respected—not many people, period—but he suspected that Kaito's father would have been one such man. Honor, duty, a love for life, and an intense protectiveness for his loved ones were prevalent in his character, all worthy qualities and ones he had managed to instill deeply in his son in only a few short years. Too few years.

The appointed hour drew near, and the two turned on the TV to watch the news channel's live broadcast of the heist. They worried over the rain together, breathed sighs of relief in tandem when he escaped into the alleyways, and then waited in tense silence for Kaito to come home.

Riku barely managed to restrain himself from wearing a hole in the plush, white carpet. He'd developed an even greater respect for Mizuki over the past few hours, now that he saw what she had gone through too many times to count between her husband and her son.
Several hours later, he had just reached his limit for sitting still and pretending to read when he heard the faint 'fwipfwip' of the portrait turning. Kaito stumbled into the room, sans hat and monocle, but white-faced to match his suit and absolutely soaking wet.

Without a word, he bore down on his mother's position on the couch and enveloped her in a hug, burying his face in her shoulder. She exchanged a surprised glance with Riku, then turned her concerned attention on Kaito.

"Kuroba Kaito, what is going on?"

Silence, broken only by Kaito's carefully controlled breathing.

"...Kaito." Her voice was gentle, but still managed to leave no room for argument. "Tell me."

"Another heist. Friday," was all the response they got, in a surprisingly hoarse voice.

"Well, that's an awful lot you're not telling me," she said after a pause.

"No good if I did. Has to be done."

Riku really, really didn't like the sound of that. He'd never imagined anyone capable of coercing the magician into anything he didn't want to do.

"Stubborn boy." She didn't press, however, merely leaned her cheek against the top of his head and absently smoothed the spikes of hair sticking every which way.

Riku wasn't sure he'd ever seen anyone so scared, not even Sora when the brown-haired boy had been preparing to face down Riku's possessed self with nothing but guts and a wooden toy sword. He had little to no skills at giving comfort, but Kaito's mother seemed to be handling herself admirably. Realizing there was nothing for him to do at the moment but give them privacy, he quietly stood and went to bed.

The next morning after breakfast Kaito still looked subdued and slightly on edge, so while Riku asked about the heist he didn't press for details.

"Pretty standard. Inspector Nakamori still hasn't found a security design I can't bypass, and the task force alone is too small to be able to cover all angles. Hakuba-kun…" Kaito trailed off. "Hakuba-kun was waiting for me near the roof. I honestly expected him to pull a fish on me. I'm still not sure why he didn't."

Riku smiled slightly at Kaito's confusion. The thief seemed to have expected that nothing would have changed in his absence, and hadn't adjusted yet to the subtle differences in those around him, particularly Hakuba.

"Hakuba-san has an interesting sense of honor," he settled on saying. "If his victory over you is to have any meaning, that means no cheating when it comes to information. No using accidental revelations outside of your little game against you."

"Game?" Kaito's expression didn't change much, but his tone held underlying currents of amusement, incredulity, and outrage.

"Competition, if you like." Riku sighed internally, resigning himself to fact that if he actually wanted to befriend Kaito, then that meant revealing pieces of his past and character. "Sora and I had an ongoing contest back home, practice bouts with wooden swords. I usually beat him, but he improved
a lot right before everything went crazy.” He shook his head, turning back to the topic at hand. "I've seen the way you treat your night job. The deeper issues aren't anything to mess about with, but the heist itself is like a game. Maybe Hakuba-san took a few rules out of your book, and only wants to catch you if he can do it under his own power, fair and square."

Kaito laughed noncommittally. "Maybe."

At that point Aoko knocked on the front door, and the discussion effectively ended.

Nothing more was said on the subject until later that evening, when details about the heist were leaked to the press. Specifically, about the thief-ally named Nightmare, who claimed responsibility for the Kid's last escape and had sent the police a heist notice for the following Friday in both of their names.

Riku turned to Kaito, who'd been practicing his card tricks but had frozen at the special news bulletin on the TV.

"Care to tell me why the Kid, who has always worked alone, suddenly has a partner? Especially considering the fact that you wouldn't let me help out with your last heist, even with transportation?"

Kaito smiled bitterly. "I missed having a darkness corridor last night. It might have saved me some trouble, or it might have made things worse."

"Kaito-kun. Why are you doing this heist?"

Kaito sighed, looking away as he internally debated something.

"All right. It's not like knowing will endanger you more than you already are."

He started describing what had happened after the previous heist, as he eluded the task force in the alleyways. How, nearly trapped, he'd been addressed by a radio planted on the ground nearby. The caller gave him a name, 'Nightmare', an escape route to a safe place to wait out the rain, and then a job offer, which had swiftly turned into threats when Kaito tried to decline.

Riku's lips thinned. "What kind of threats?"

"Against my dad's old assistant, who's always been the assistant for the Kid, too, when necessary," Kaito admitted somewhat grudgingly. "Nightmare figured out my dad was the Kid when they both disappeared at the same time, and while he doesn't know who I am, he figured Jii-chan out as the Kid's assistant. He'll expose him to the police if I don't do this. I can escape offworld myself, but that leaves Jii-chan exposed. I have to play along until I can find a way to get him out of this. These opal earrings can't even be Pandora," he added, somewhat bitterly. "Too small, and there are two of them, anyway."

"This is blackmail."

"Do you think I don't know that?" Kaito stood and started pacing, voice rising slightly as he lost another layer of calm to being over-stressed. "D'you think I'd let someone use the Kid—and you can be damn well sure that's what he's doing—if I could see any way around it? It's not good enough to warn Jii-chan, because he'd either have to go into hiding or else do something stupid like turn himself in to protect me."

"And there's no one you can tell?"

Kaito glared at him, startling Riku slightly. He hadn't realized the older boy had been this affected,
but perhaps he should have. Someone had struck right to the heart of what Kaito held most dear, and
the magician was effectively helpless in facing it. Riku realized that if someone had threatened
Mickey, Sora, or Kairi, he'd probably be reacting in a similar fashion.

"I took it on faith two days ago that you can't tell anyone in your immediate circle of acquaintances.
Enlighten me again as to why."

Several moments went by as Kaito's face blanked into a mask that would have made a mannequin
proud. When he spoke next, it was in a flat, mechanical tone of voice, as if reciting from memory
information he'd examined forwards, backwards, upside down, sideways, skewed, and at right
angles. Which, given the situation, he probably had.

"Nakamori would arrest me if I told him, not to mention I'd destroy the poor man's entire worldview.
He's built the Kid into the last 20 years of his life. Even if, by some obscure chance he decided to let
me go, he'd want to know about why I'm occasionally shot at—"

Kaito broke off, obviously not having meant to reveal that little tidbit of information. Riku's eyes
narrowed.

"I'll come back to that wonderfully informative bit of news some other time. Go on."

"Nakamori'd go after Jackal, but he can barely handle my heists, he'd have no chance against them,"
Kaito practically spat the word. "He'd get himself killed. He's safest being loudly and publicly
opposed to Kid. The sense of honor you said Hakuba-kun has wouldn't outweigh his sense of duty
towards me in if he ever got tangible proof. At the very least, he'd have no qualms revealing
my identity, and that would put everyone around me in danger. And in the million-to-one-chance that
he doesn't," Kaito continued, appearing to anticipate Riku's question, "he'd get himself killed even
faster than Nakamori, the way he pokes around. Mom could do nothing besides worry herself sick,
and Akako-san has the distressing tendency to alternately stalk me or try and hurt me. Aoko…"
Kaito swallowed. Hard. "She'd be forced to choose between me and her dad, and she couldn't do
anything to help, anyway. She'd be worse off than mom, with loyalties torn like that, especially since
she's so close to the Inspector. I won't do that to her. I won't," he repeated fiercely.

Riku took some time to put his thoughts in order.

"Kaito-kun, you've just effectively admitted that there is no one in your life you feel
even mostly capable of trusting. Given how you went after me about acting similarly, I can't tell if I
should be surprised at your own blind spots. Right now, however, I'm more worried about how if
Nightmare could discover Jii-san's identity, and the mysterious organization could discover and kill
your father, then your own hidden identity is much less secure than you'd probably like. And if they
somehow happen to find your identity, then hiding who you are from your friends and family
becomes at best, moot, and at worst, more dangerous than telling them the truth."

He received only stubborn silence in return.

"I handled it…" Riku needled, trying for some kind of reaction. By this point, he didn't even care if it
was a punch in the stomach. Anything was better than the blankness growing in Kaito's expression.

"You have sparkly magic powers. Ergo, a better handle on weird and better ability to defend against
it. They aren't you. You also have the ability to leave this entire world to escape them, if you have to.
They can't."

Riku realized he was probably pushing his luck, and decided to let the matter drop for the time being.
He still wasn't happy with the situation, however. After all, Kaito seemed as determined to think the
worst of his acquaintances as Riku had, if he was honest with himself, previously done with Sora.

Kaito probably wouldn't take being told that very well, though, given his current state of mind.

The next morning Kaito left for school with shadows under his eyes, and a grin too bright to be genuine. He did, however, tell Riku to **relax**, under the threat of Kaito getting creative once he got back home.

Since Mizuki had the day shift, Riku spent most of the morning quietly worrying alone. Not only did Kaito have Nightmare's threats on his mind, but they'd had the questionably good luck of coming home just in time for Kaito to take his school's May mid-term tests. Given that he'd left a week into the school year, Kaito'd been forced to stay up all night studying for the first day of tests, and looked to be doing similar every night until Friday.

Trying to distract himself, Riku pulled out the laptop Kaito had been using and started fiddling. DiZ's computer setup had been more sophisticated in some ways—Riku still wasn't sure exactly how you could deconstruct people and things into pieces of data or reform them into the real world, and he'd had it **happen** to him—but that technology was strictly one of a kind. Kaito's computer was significantly smaller for the amount of power it held, and in the midst of his explorations Riku discovered the wonders of the Internet.

"Yo, Riku-kun!"

Startled, Riku looked up, clamping down firmly on the instincts screaming to materialize his sword. Kaito stood on the other side of the coffee table where Riku had set the laptop, looking at him curiously.

"Find something interesting?" Kaito set his school bag down on the table and peered over the top of the screen, reading the open webpage upside down.

"Your world's electronic network of information. We didn't have technology this complicated at home, and I never stayed in worlds like yours long enough to find things like this. DiZ-san's cache of computers are more powerful, but don't have anything like **this**."

"Well, you learn something new every day. What've you discovered?"

"That one of the Kaitou Kid's many targets was a baseball. What's the story behind that one?"

Kaito laughed, with more real humor than Riku'd heard in a while. "One of my many impostors. This one wasn't so bad, though—a little kid idolized a baseball player and the Kid at the same time, wanted to 'steal' a homerun ball. I gave him a little help, and everyone went home happy."

Riku smiled. "Well, what do you know? The Kid's nothing but a big softie."

"I deny everything." Kaito's grin abruptly faded a little. "Ne, Riku-kun… can I ask you for a favor?"

"Anything," Riku responded instantly. "Anything, if it'll help keep you in one piece." He still hadn't forgotten Kaito's slip about being shot at, but he didn't want to go too in depth with that one for the time being.

"It's more for Hakuba-kun. I don't want him anywhere near Friday's heist, not with what's riding on success. Especially when I can't afford the distraction of his possibly bringing fish into it when he's had more time to prepare."
"And, presumably, because you don't want him around the threat of Nightmare, either."

Kaito sighed. "No. Idiot detective's luck would lead him right to Nightmare, and Nightmare would hurt him to get away, if my information is correct."

"All right." Since Riku wasn't coming up with much on his own, he'd take what Kaito was willing to give him as a way to help. The stubborn thief would likely have to come to terms with the rest of his predicament in his own time. "What do you want me to do?"

"Do you know how to drive?"

Riku paused. "No, but I suspect I'll be learning in the very near future…"

"Maybe I can get mom to teach you, then… and talk her into letting me get a driver's license, since now I wouldn't have to explain away how I learned in the first place… " he trailed off into scheming silence.

"Why will I need to drive?" Riku asked, returning the dark-haired boy's attention to the present.

"I don't want Jii-chan involved in this heist for obvious reasons, but I need to delay Hakuba-kun's arrival. On Friday, I'd like you to take my mom's car and go to Hakuba-kun's house. He lives just outside the city, on the other side of town from the Shuuhou Museum. If you offer to drive him as a favor from me, he'll suspect I'm trying to trick him but he can't say no politely unless he explains why he doesn't trust you to drive him. He doesn't think you know I'm Kid, does he?"

"No. He tried to ferret it out of me at the amusement park, but no." Along with a few other things, but Riku had quite a lot of practice keeping information to himself.

"Good. So if you can drive him and get stuck in traffic, he won't be able to show up until it's too late—even if he gets out and runs, which I wouldn't put past him." Kaito made a face at that to convey his annoyed disdain.

Riku considered him for a minute. "...You're scary when you start playing mind games."

His only response was a sharp grin.

When Kaito's mother heard their intention and reasons, she acquiesced to teaching Riku on the condition that she approve their progress before they tried anything without her around. If she seemed surprised that someone Riku's apparent age hadn't yet learned to drive, she didn't say anything. She did comment, however, once Riku had settled behind the driver's seat and Kaito in the back to be amused, that Riku was quite lucky Toichi had preferred cars with automatic transmission. Learning to drive a stick shift would inevitably have taken more than a week, but an automatic transmission made it at least possible.

Riku felt he did passably well in the mostly deserted streets of Kaito's neighborhood that evening. His assigned homework consisted of researching the different rules of the road, so that, as Mizuki put it, "You don't cause as much havoc on the streets as Kaito does at school."

The expression on Kaito's face was priceless.

Watching Kuroba's behavior at school over the next few days, Saguru came to the disheartening conclusion that something was very wrong. No matter how much he tried to fish—no pun intended—for information, Kuroba was being even more obfuscatory than usual about Kid and his unsolicited partner. Saguru'd heard the police report from Nakamori, of course, including the
unwelcome promise of being joined by representatives of Interpol. All of the official information, however, brought him no closer to answering why the Kid, a lone wolf for over 20 years, would team up with a calculating, double-crossing bastard like Nightmare.

Saguru couldn't decide whether Kuroba was trying to protect someone else—Yuushi, maybe?—or himself. Either way, the magician's smile had an extra edge to it. Saguru'd been watching his rival too closely and for too long not to notice the subtle changes. Kuroba either didn't realize, or didn't care.

And that was even more worrying.

Nightmare had something that worked as leverage against the Kid. Saguru really didn't like having to think about the Kid as vulnerable.

After the first two days, Saguru spent some quality time considering the problem, absently staring at the Kid doll sitting on his bookshelf. He hadn't been able to bring himself to get rid of it, not when it held so much potential teasing fodder against the magician.

That thought led to another, and another, and slowly he smiled. Perhaps a return to the status quo was in order… He strolled out to the slightly smaller building behind the Hakuba family manor, which housed the private lab his grandfather had given him, and spent some quality time with some scrap metal and a blowtorch.

He'd probably deny it if anyone asked, but he much preferred electronics and other mechanically-minded devices to people. At least they did what you expected them to do. No surprises, no chaos. Just simplicity and order.

With the physical and mental therapy of melting, pounding, and shaping bits of metal for the purpose of That Greatest of All Causes—getting a good dig in at Kuroba—Saguru showed up early at homeroom in an unusually smug mood, even for him. He earned a raised eyebrow from Kuroba, despite the teen's current attempts to ignore him, and that caused the self-satisfied smirk to widen further.

Kuroba seemed about to break in spite of his best efforts and ask what was going on when Aoko beat him to it.

"What is it, Saguru-kun?"

"Oh, I have something for you."

"For… me?" Despite herself, Aoko flushed prettily, looking down at her clasped hands.

"Yes, I'm sure you'll appreciate it. But first—" he reached into his briefcase and withdrew the Kid doll, setting it on his desk. Bemused, Aoko leaned over to look at it more closely, along with their other classmates present crowding around for a better view, and Saguru caught Kuroba trying to watch surreptitiously as well. When she saw the personal touch added to the plushie, Aoko immediately burst out laughing.

"It's perfect!" She picked up the doll with care and showed it to Kuroba. "See, Kaito? Handcuffs for the Kid!"

Saguru smirked proudly at the miniature cuffs capturing Kuroba's gift. "I made a set for yours as well, Aoko-kun." He held them out to her, and she relinquished his doll to Kuroba to take them.

"They're amazing!" Aoko said admiringly, running her fingers along the metal. They worked almost
exactly like the standard police issue, enclosing cloth hands too tightly to be simply slipped off without pushing a pin-triggered catch. She smiled.

"At least this one will actually stay in them," he replied.

A mischievous grin tugged at Kaito's mouth, to Saguru's faint satisfaction and simultaneous dread. "That's what you think."

Hardly a moment later the doll reappeared on Saguru's desk with the handcuffs jauntily looped around its hat brim. Kuroba appeared not have moved at all from his desk a few feet away.

"What… how… you didn't even…" he sputtered. No matter how many times he saw it, Kaito's conquest of the 'impossible' always left him nearly speechless for a few seconds.

Kuroba grinned. And grinned some more. Aoko glowered at him, clutching her handcuffs protectively. Saguru looked faintly hapless for a moment, then resigned.

"I give up. Just don't look under the hat, Kuroba-kun."

5…4…3…2… Saguru was willing to swear that Kuroba had some cat-blood in him. The Kid was flexible to the point of contortionism, and Kuroba had more curiosity than a kitten. Saguru could almost hear a 'Mao?' in the faint tilt of his head, eyes narrowing consideringly. The magician seemed just as likely to bat the top hat aside with a paw as to carefully lift it up with a hand. Regardless of the other boy's suspicion, Saguru received the intended response when Kuroba's curiosity got the better of him and he couldn't help himself.

"Augh!" Kuroba jumped away from the doll as if it were a hot coal, crouching on his desk and glaring at Saguru. "Hate you," he muttered sulkily, almost drowned out by the laughter of his classmates.

Aoko picked up the offending object, which had slid out from under the hat and onto the floor. "Saguru-kun, where did you find a fiberglass fish?"

Saguru smiled as the teacher arrived and tried to restore order. "Trade secret, Aoko-kun."

When school ended that afternoon the three of them left the building together. Aoko and Kuroba usually walked together anyway, and his own presence wasn't terribly odd, even if it hadn't exactly been a regular occurrence before the magician's temporary disappearance. The next heist was only two days away, and Kuroba seemed to be winding up tighter as the week passed.

Oh, he still grinned like a maniac, played tricks on anyone who got in range, and teased Aoko until she was forced to resort to her personal mop-fu… but the grin froze occasionally, and Saguru thought he had seen a flash of relief in Kuroba's eyes when Aoko had pursued him yesterday. The normality of it was probably soothing.

The human mind operated much like a machine, and Saguru knew quite well how devices worked. If you wound them up too much, put them under too much pressure… eventually they would break.

Just as he had yesterday, Yuushi sat on the bench near the bus stop, completely engrossed in a book as he waited for Kuroba to get out of school. The man seemed to have nothing better to do than spend his time with Kaito and his friends, and apparently felt perfectly comfortable in company over a decade younger than he was. Saguru still wasn't happy that Yuushi didn't seem to exist on record anywhere, but he had no other grounds to doubt Kuroba's trust in the man. Especially since
Kuroba seemed to relax in Yuushi's company more than he did anywhere else. Saguru still suspected that Yuushi knew more about Kuroba's nightlife than he admitted to, as well. It was all immensely frustrating. Saguru hated mysteries.

"Riku-kun!" Kuroba practically bounced over, the same bundle of never-ending energy he had been at school, dragging Saguru and Aoko in tow. Saguru flinched slightly at being grabbed without warning. "Hakuba-kun decided that his doll is the only Kid he'll ever catch!"

Yuushi looked up from his book with an amused expression, eyeing them through his amber-tinted sunglasses. As Saguru approached, he realized that the man was reading an English translation of Arséne Lupin short stories. The knowledge of English was unexpected, but he honestly couldn't bring himself to be surprised that a guest of Kuroba's was reading about the epitome of the gentleman thief.

"Did he now?" Yuushi looked past Kuroba at Saguru, pushing his hat brim up. He also seemed to have a strange affinity for his newsboy cap, because he'd worn it every time he'd been in their company. "What brought this on?"

Saguru obliged by displaying his Kid plushie for a second time. Yuushi's lips curved upwards slightly at the doll, then further upon hearing about Kuroba's mischief and deserved comeuppance. "Somehow, I can't bring myself to be surprised."

They engaged in general chatter for a while before a bus for Kaito and Aoko's neighborhood came into view. Aoko announced that she needed to go home and study for the history midterm the next day.

"But there're still hours before tomorrow!" Kaito protested cheekily. Aoko rolled her eyes in response.

"Unlike some people, I have to study a lot in order to remember everything on a test. See you tomorrow morning, Kaito, Saguru-kun. Take care, Riku-san."

"I should probably study some more, myself," Saguru admitted. The unexpected heists had eaten significantly into his time for schoolwork.

"History, or ineffectual preparation for Friday's heist?" Kuroba inquired teasingly.

Saguru looked straight at Kuroba. "If I were going to study for Friday, why would I bother to go home?"

Riku chuckled before he could help himself, even though before he'd neatly evaded Saguru's probing into whether he knew about the Kid. Saguru didn't move his gaze, but mentally added the response to his list of 'Suspicious Things about Yuushi.'

Kuroba's easy laughter had joined in as well. "Now, Hakuba-kun, I thought we'd agreed I'm not Kid."

"You're the one who says it. I merely haven't contradicted it yet."

"Lost cause, that one," Kuroba said in a false aside to Yuushi. "Sees a thief in every honest, teenage magician." Yuushi smiled.

Saguru suddenly felt tired at the prospect of trying to catch Kuroba again. "Go home and prepare, Kuroba-kun." He turned and left, letting the dual meaning hang in the widening gap between them.
What would happen if Kuroba missed something? If a heist went wrong? What would Kuroba do?

…What would he do?

As soon as Hakuba was out of sight, Riku watched Kaito slump faintly, manic energy evaporating into an alert calm underlaid by exhaustion. The same thing had happened every time they'd left Aoko and Hakuba's company in the past week. Once or twice he might have brushed off as coincidence, but this many indicated some sort of habit. A habit Riku didn't much care for.

He sat back down on the bench, gesturing for Kaito to do the same. The only people around were ignoring them, and he didn't want to wait until they finally made it home.

"You don't do that just for Hakuba, do you," he began in English.

"Do what?" Kaito blinked at him, and the difference between this unfeigned confusion and the false innocence he'd just dropped only strengthened Riku's resolve.

"Put up all the masks like that and play the fool. Why is it that when we're not alone, you tend to lose a hundred IQ points?"

"What makes you think that?" Kaito sounded casual, but wouldn't meet his eyes.

"What I've heard from your classmates certainly makes it look that way. Does the phrase 'caffeinated hummingbird with ADD' ring any bells?"

Kaito glanced down at the bench, then at Riku, then down again. He sat, expression distant, as if he were watching a memory. "Always leave others free to underestimate you."

Except, of course, when you're in life and death situations, the wry part of Riku's mind added.

"…Kaito." The other boy turned his head and met Riku's gaze. "You do it to Hakuba and Aoko, too. You shouldn't need to have the people you're close to underestimate you."

Kaito blinked, as if Riku'd spoken in Portuguese rather than in English.

"Friends know who you are and like you anyway, and aren't about to become your enemies. Shouldn't, anyway," Riku added in response to his own memories, and sighed. "For someone who lectured me about being isolationist, you do a good impression of it yourself."

"Hey! I don't stay as far away as possible while still… helping…" Kaito trailed off into silence.

"I grant you that Aoko is your friend. But she's a friend of the Kaito who existed before you became Kid," Riku said quietly, trying in vain to soften his argument. "She doesn't know the Kaito who became Kid, because you've changed since then and you don't let those changes show. Hakuba is a classmate and acquaintance, but more a friend of Aoko's—or even the Kid, as a rival—than you as Kaito. You spend your time insulting, evading, and joking with him, usually only when Aoko drags the both of you into something. Those two and Akako are the closest thing you have to friends on your world, and you don't let them know you."

Kaito crossed his arms. "I can't let them know me. Look at my options: Policeman's daughter, high-school detective, and girl obsessed with making me her minion. This does not inspire confidence in me at the possibility of revealing myself."

Riku thought back to Hakuba's behavior of the past week, especially the detective's attempt at the
amusement park to discreetly ascertain Riku's motives while Kaito had been on the roller coaster with Aoko. "You know, Hakuba might surprise you."

For a split second Kaito's expression froze like a deer in the headlights, then turned into a picture of disbelief.

"I doubt it, but it doesn't matter. Can't take that chance."

Riku eyed him. Kaito was going back to less-than-grammatical sentences, which he did in English only when he was feeling defensive, stressed, or exhausted. Persevering, Riku continued: "I thought you knew odds, and how and when to play them. Risk-benefit, isn't it? You've said it yourself, Hakuba's been surprising you since you came back. Your expectations of his behavior are built off of out-of-date information. Stop, step back from all your assumptions about who he's been, and look at who he's being."

Kaito had half-turned away from Riku, staring in moody silence down the street. Riku couldn't decide if Kaito's reticence on this particular subject was due to fear for himself, or fear for Hakuba, or both. Probably both.

"Look, I won't force you into anything. But I think Hakuba just might be worth gambling on."

"Then what? Instead of arresting me, he gets himself killed trying to help me?"

"Ah."

"On the whole, he seems capable of taking care of himself. Didn't you say he practices martial arts?"

"…Some form of aiki-jujutsu he picked up before he came to Japan."

"And when you told me about the Kid's antagonists I seem to recall you saying he was good enough at it that you take extra care during heists never to get within arm's reach. He's not helpless. He's also not an idiot. You can't seriously think that if you told him about Jackal and company he'd immediately run off and get killed."

"No. I think he'd meticulously research himself into their notice, and then get himself killed."

"As opposed to you, whose entire nighttime persona is designed to attract the attention of the same people you're afraid will kill Hakuba." Riku glared at Kaito. "You're asking for them to try and kill you, and there's no one to watch your back."

"I have Jii-chan already, and look how well that's going right now. I can't put any more people at risk," Kaito retorted.

"Dammit, Kaito, can't you see that I don't want you to get yourself killed! If something doesn't change, it's going to happen! You're running yourself into the ground, Jii-san has his own life he's trying to live around helping you heist nights, and when he does he's as much in the thick of things as you are. You can't look over your own shoulder all the time! If you want to make sure you live to the end of this, you need someone to watch your blind spots. You can't catch everything."

"You seem quite happy with taking the job." Kaito crossed his arms.

"Because I'm your friend. I care about what happens to you. But this isn't my world, and I can't stay forever to be here to help you." He sighed again. "Just... think about it, will you?"

Kaito was silent for a minute, then nodded. "All right. I'm going to go for a walk. I'll meet you at
home for dinner."

He stood and walked away in silence. Riku watched him go, then wandered in search of an empty alley. He didn't feel like spending another hour alone on a bus in order to get back home.

Riku allayed Mizuki's concern at Kaito's absence by saying that Kaito had some things he had to do, and allowing her to assume they were related to the heist. Since she was in the middle of cleaning various parts of the house, Riku settled in the den with the Lupin short stories, Kaito's computer, and the TV remote, hoping to find something that could distract him for a while. As luck would have it, one of the TV channels had replaced its regular programming with a special on the Kaitou Kid in honor of two heists in close succession after such a long absence. Riku watched the statistics, interviews, old recorded footage, pictures of previous targets and rampant speculation with a kind of morbid fascination. Most of his information about the Kid (some internet research notwithstanding) had come straight from Kaito; this was the Kid viewed from the other side.

Hakuba had apparently been unavailable for comment at the time of the documentary's production, and an old interview had been included among more recent ones conducted with the Kid Task Force and random heist bystanders.

Riku's jaw dropped at the sight. According to the accompanying narration, the video had been recorded almost a year ago, just after Hakuba's first Kid heist. The blond boy wore an absurd overcoat and hat, purportedly in honor of his favorite detective, Sherlock Holmes, and his Japanese still held a British undertone. As the interview went on, Hakuba talked about his disdain for criminals and his determination to capture the Kid despite the thief's poor attempts at trickery. The overconfident arrogance and stubborn inflexibility behind the boy's every word stunned Riku. If something like this detective was what Kaito still saw every time he looked at Hakuba, then Riku couldn't blame the magician's adamant resistance to letting anything slip. The blond boy who'd accompanied them to the amusement park felt like a different person altogether.

The documentary continued, but Riku couldn't focus on it any longer. Instead, he pulled out Kaito's laptop and searched for every scrap of video footage he could find about Hakuba Saguru. It was amazing, the amount of information archived on the internet. With a bit of finagling he managed to order them in a semblance of chronological progression, and began watching.

The first few interviews all seemed to uncomfortably echo the first one, although Hakuba soon stopped wearing the odd costume. Riku suspected that Kaito had been referring to the blond when he'd said his friends possessed a distressing lack of fashion sense. Soon, however, Riku watched as little by little, Hakuba seemed to relax and lose several degrees of hostility towards the Kid. Instead, his comments seemed driven by a need to understand the Kid, even more so than the other criminals whose confessions were always greeted with the question, "Why did you do it?"

Then, suddenly, Hakuba's presence in the Japanese news disappeared. The only evidence of his existence came from a few interviews in England, where it seemed he had returned for a while and simply stopped chasing Kid altogether.

The last clip was dated several weeks ago, and turned out to have been conducted just after Kid vanished with the jewel, an unheard of event since the thief's return from apparent retirement. Hakuba looked exhausted, standing silently behind Inspector Nakamori as the older man described the notes Kid had sent his usual pursuers. At the end, when asked if he had any comment, he ignored the newscaster and looked directly at the camera.

"Kid-san, if you can see this, then get back here."

That wasn't the same boy who'd been at the first heist. That wasn't even the boy who'd left for
“Riku-kun?” Mizuki’s concerned voice interrupted Riku’s thoughts. He glanced up. "Did Kaito say whether he would be home for dinner?"

Surprised, Riku glanced at the wall clock to see several hours had passed while he hadn’t been paying attention. "He said he would. I’ll try calling his cell phone to see where he is, all right?"

She nodded, looking faintly relieved, and entered the kitchen. Riku tried to reach Kaito, growing concerned when the call rang through to Kaito’s voicemail. The phone was obviously on, but Kaito wasn’t answering. Reminding himself not to panic, he poked his head into the kitchen, and decided against worrying Kaito’s mother needlessly.

"Kaito-kun’s on his way home, and shouldn’t be too much longer." She smiled at him, and he left her to cooking while he went to find out why Kaito seemed to have gone temporarily missing.

Closing his eyes, Riku reached out in his mind towards the familiar presence of Kaito’s heart, then opened a dark corridor and stepped through. After a few steps, he exited in the general vicinity of where he sensed Kaito to be.

"Kaito-kun?” No answer. He looked around. The room he stood in was obviously under construction: spare drywall materials littered the bare, concrete floor; plaster and half-empty paint cans were scattered here and there; and the windows were covered with plastic sheeting to protect them from paint splashes. Exploring around, Riku found more rooms just like it, until in the corner room across the building from where he’d appeared he found Kaito.

Kaito lay sprawled on the concrete like a ragdoll, breathing in the steady, even rhythm that indicated sleep. On his right side, in easy reach if he were sitting up, sat his deck of Duel Cards. A handful of cards were scattered as if dropped, which they likely were.

A half-smile appeared on Riku's face. The elder boy always wanted to have an edge over the enemy, and he seemed to have been exploring the possibility of the Shadow Realm a bit too eagerly. Nothing appeared to have been summoned, and Kaito had worked himself into exhaustion.

"Are you trying to prove me right?” Riku groused. He shook Kaito's shoulder. "Hey, wake up."

Kaito groaned, but didn't open his eyes. Riku tried again, and again, and again, until on about the fourth or fifth shake, Kaito batted irritably at his arm.

"Go 'way."

"Time to get up, Kaito-kun, or else you'll miss dinner. Your mom is worried."

Kaito woke up a bit more at the statement.

"Again? Damn. Hate worrying her." 

Riku raised an eyebrow. Kaito only looked about halfway coherent, not in any shape to go through a corridor or talk to his mother. Hoping to wake the other boy up, he asked, "Why did you come up here?"

"I fought myself here. Big ol' robot with missiles and my own face," Kaito rambled, not quite recovered from the energy loss. "Tore up the upper floors of this building like it was paper, trying to
hit me. Reconstruction recently finished, so it seemed like a safe enough place to practice without getting seen or damaging anything."

Riku had to pause at that. "You have the best and worst luck of anyone I've ever met."

Kaito snorted, levering himself into a sitting position. "Tell me about it. Tends to put me in the worst possible situations, and then get me out again." He pulled his deck back together, scowling at the cards in frustration. "I can't summon anything. Not even the card I could summon on Himura-san's world."

Riku considered the phenomenon. "Well, ignoring the fact that you're probably worn out from your workload this past week… Compared to Himura-san's world, this place has only a handful of outlets that express the Light and Dark, and most of those aren't overtly supernatural. That probably makes it harder to pull the shadows into your world, too—like trying to drink with a very small straw." At Kaito's grin, he added, "I never claimed to make good analogies."

"A good thing, too." Kaito looked much more alert, thankfully. He sighed. "I guess I'll have to wait until later to try this again."

"Given how complicated this kind of conscious summoning is compared to little things like your card-gun, I'd recommend it."

"A pity, that. Didn't you say my mom was getting worried?"

Nodding, Riku opened a portal. "You're running late, although that's not surprising when you practically knock yourself unconscious. She thinks you're on your way home, walking but close."

"Good. I'm starved."

"Energy drain tends to do that," Riku replied. He wanted to bring up Hakuba again, but it didn't seem like the right time. To his disappointment, no better opportunity presented itself afterward, either.

After dinner Kaito's mother gave Riku his nightly driving lesson. Kaito seemed satisfied to lounge in the backseat with a book and a flashlight while Riku navigated through the heavier traffic of Tokyo proper. He did, however, turn off the light to listen when Mizuki gave advice about which streets tended to be empty and which attracted traffic jams. He'd probably already begun planning the best route for Riku to take when delaying Hakuba.

Once they returned home Kaito dove back into his homework, still stuck with make-up work as well as studying for the next day's midterm. Despite joking with Aoko, Kaito had so much more material to review for their tests that he would be going to bed late… again. Riku watched him for a while, impressed by how quickly Kaito still managed to work despite his exhaustion. Riku doubted Kaito had gone to bed before 3 AM all week.

Kaito glanced up, catching Riku's gaze. He flashed a quick grin. "Want to give me a hand? A lot of this is your fault, after all."

Riku chuckled. "I doubt I'm in your grade. And you seem to be handling it perfectly well."

"The benefits of a photographic memory and a high IQ," Kaito admitted. Which explained how the magician managed to have any sort of confidence in decent grades, given his circumstances. "Still, you're probably even further behind in school than I am. You've been gone over a year, haven't you?"
Riku stiffened. He usually tried to not think about things like that. It always seemed so unreal compared to everything else he'd been going through. With a groan, he sank down on the floor next to Kaito and held out a hand imperiously.


Kaito snickered and passed the textbook.

Chapter End Notes

Unless people really want longer chapters, I'm going to be capping lengths at approximately 10,000 words. These are long chapters, people. If you're reading, please be kind enough to review.
The next afternoon, Riku paused in his reading as familiar voices drifted into earshot.

"Oh, c'mon! Please?"

"I don't know…"

"We're going to have to leave again soon, and it's not that far away…"

"But what about homework?"

"There's not that much for tomorrow, and we can do it together on the train. Come on, it's been a long time since we've gone there, and I'm sure he'd be glad to have you along, too!"

"I suppose…"

"You too, Hakuba-kun! Right, Aoko?"

"Uh? Oh, yes! Please, Saguru-kun?"

"I really don't think—"

"Have you even been there yet?"

"Well, no, but-"

"So come on, then!"

"We'll have to call home and tell them we'll be out…"

"That's easy enough. You have your cell phone, don't you?"

"How would we even get there?"

"Oh, that's easy! We know the train route!"

Riku blinked and pushed his sunglasses up his nose as Kaito fairly bounced over to the bus stop bench, once more pulling Aoko and Hakuba with him.

"We," the young magician announced, "are going on a little trip right now." Riku looked at the other two for an explanation, but Kaito promptly clapped a hand over their mouths. "Ah, ah, ah… No spoiling it!" He grinned at Riku, but looked between Aoko and Hakuba authoritatively. "It's a surprise."

"So I gathered. You three don't need to study for tomorrow?"

"Nothing that can't wait. All we've got left is English, and we all need a break for a while, anyway."

"…All right."

"Then come on! You're gonna like it, Riku-kun. Promise."
Following Kaito's lead, they notified the relevant parental figures of their day out, although in such a way that gave no hints to their destination. Throughout the entire train ride, Kaito monopolized Hakuba and Aoko's attention by arguing about the various answers to their homework. They left Riku to continue reading his book, smiling occasionally at their antics. Kaito was in rare form, filling the discussion with word games and puns, much to the others' resigned amusement.

Finally, they reached the right station and Kaito ushered them outside. The walked a few blocks, and then turned the corner. Riku stopped dead at the sight of the horizon, and the sheer amount of blue leading out to it. Kaito grinned proudly.

"I remembered you looking the other day, and thought you'd like to see it a bit closer up."

Riku couldn't say anything at first, his thoughts too full of memories of an island that should have been breaking the smooth line of the horizon. But even without it... this was home. He hadn't realized how much he hated always being so closed in by the city until now, how much he missed the open sky and sea. Aoko stepped up beside them, now smiling as well, all of her earlier reservations evidently gone. Even Hakuba looked reassured that they'd done the right thing, so his thunderstruck expression must have been interpreted as a good sign.

All Riku could do was smile at the three of them. "...Thanks."

Had Riku been any shorter, he suspected Kaito would have slung an arm over his shoulders. The boy settled for companionably clapping a hand on Riku's shoulder blade and guiding him across the last few streets to where concrete yielded to sand. Then, abruptly, he dropped his schoolbag and took off running, calling behind him:

"Race you!"

"Cheater!" Riku ran after him, long legs eating up the gap between them as they dodged around other beachgoers in their path. It was a short beach, however, and they skidded to a halt at the water's edge almost simultaneously, laughing.

"I won!" Kaito cheered exuberantly, ignoring Riku's protests to the contrary. After a moment a faintly reminiscent smile appeared on Riku's face.

"I guess that makes the score zero to one, doesn't it?" he said slowly.

Kaito gave him a questioning look, then seemed connect some of Riku's other comments to this one, and smirked. "You bet it is. I'm sorry the water's not that great for swimming," he added apologetically as Riku bent to dip his hand in the water. If the islands were anything to go by, the temperature wouldn't warm up until the middle of summer.

Riku looked up, even though Kaito had turned to watch Hakuba and Aoko rather than meet his eyes. Kaito didn't seem to want to talk about it, but it looked like he really had been thinking about what Riku had said about his friendships earlier.

"It's great."

Saguru and Aoko crossed the beach at a more sedate pace, carrying the three schoolbags and Riku's book with them.
"You'd think with his personality, he'd be more restrained." He nodded at the water's edge, where Yuushi had just flung a handful of surf in Kuroba's direction, earning a shout.

"I guess the ocean brings out the kid in Riku-san," she replied.

Watching them, Saguru briefly wondered why he and Aoko had been invited along. The trip was obviously for Yuushi's sake, and he didn't really know anyone but Kuroba very well… Saguru nearly stumbled. Kuroba was doing to Yuushi what both Aoko and Kuroba had been doing to him ever since he moved to Japan: dragging him into social contact, and to have fun. Kuroba really was a sneak.

The beautiful spring day was unusually warm, and quite a lot of people seemed to have also decided to take advantage of it. A significant portion of the beach had already been claimed by bags, towels, and various sunbathers. Setting the bags down well above the tide line, near one of the collections of large rocks scattered along the beach, Aoko quickly ran barefoot to join the other boys. Saguru methodically took off his shoes and socks and cuffed his pants before approaching the water's edge.

They spent a while bantering and wading in the shallow water. At Aoko's request, Yuushi told them a few stories about growing up by the ocean and some of the mischief he and his friends had gotten up to when they were kids.

Soon, Yuushi somehow convinced the other three to help him hunt for shells while it was still mostly low tide. Saguru suspected the culprit was Yuushi's current unusual enthusiasm. After Yuushi and Kuroba dropped their shoes with their other things, the four of them wandered around the beach in a loosely connected group, splitting and meeting up several times. Saguru picked up one or two shells that caught his attention, since he'd been telling the truth when he'd said that he hadn't visited any of Japan's beaches before. However, he quickly became far more interested in watching Kuroba and Yuushi. Both of them were being extremely annoying enigmas.

Whenever Yuushi went too long without seeing Kuroba, he would tense up and look around, relaxing only when he located the younger boy. Kuroba, for his part, exhibited more subtle seeking behavior, but still casually scanned the area every few minutes to confirm where Yuushi was, and to lesser extent Aoko and Saguru. Then, although his previous behavior had shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that he felt comfortable around Yuushi, whenever the three of them met up again to compare finds, Kuroba would hang back slightly. After a while Saguru realized that Kuroba had been avoiding making eye contact with Yuushi since school let out.

It was all rather bewildering. He'd never known anyone who could affect Kuroba's behavior and Yuushi was, simply by his presence. And he didn't think either of them were even aware of what they were doing.

The next time they met up he approached Kuroba, who was watching the water, as Aoko showed off her latest find to Yuushi.

"Having a staring contest with the fish? Any threatening to wriggle their little fishy selves up the beach to terrorize you?"

Kuroba paused, giving him a considering look. He'd been doing that a lot lately, too. There was an odd new undercurrent to their dynamic that didn't seem related to the heist tomorrow, a tension that focused somehow on Aoko and himself. All of it combined was enough to give Saguru a headache.

"Oh, no, just imagining what it would be like to dunk you in the surf."

Saguru smirked. "Unlikely."
"I don't know," Yuushi began, catching Saguru's eye with a glint of mischief, "it could be… interesting."

Kuroba started to grin, having missed the exchange occurring behind him. Saguru took a split-second to contemplate how odd it was for him to actually be considering this... and then nodded. If Yuushi and Kuroba were picking today to act out of the ordinary, then so could he.

Realizing their plan, Aoko clapped her hands over her mouth as Yuushi silently counted to three with his fingers. Then they each grabbed an arm and a leg, Yuushi compensating for Saguru's shorter stature, and picked Kuroba completely off the damp sand. He had no time for more than a squawk of surprise as they ran a few steps forward and heaved him into the next incoming wave, retreating to avoid getting wet themselves.

Kuroba broke the surface of the water, sputtering, and surged toward shore. Shoving his limp hair out of his eyes, he stopped at the edge of the waves and stared openmouthed at Saguru, realizing exactly what had happened. Aoko's laughter augmented the other boys' satisfied expressions.

"I think we broke his brain," Yuushi commented with amusement, when Kuroba remained frozen.

"Well, if I'd known this was all it took, I'd have done it much sooner," Saguru shot back, not taking his eyes from Kuroba in case retaliation was forthcoming. The magician had a wicked prankster streak, and never took being a target lying down.

Kuroba's eyes narrowed, darting back and forth between them. He moved without warning, and Saguru suddenly found himself trapped in a cold, soaking wet hug. In only a few seconds his school uniform absorbed an excessive amount of salt water, and with an evil little chuckle Kuroba thoroughly mussed his hair before releasing him to chase after Yuushi. The man had taken advantage of Saguru's plight to gain a head start, but Kuroba was a fast runner.

Observing the brief chase, Saguru realized that whatever was making Kuroba more twitchy than usual couldn't be Yuushi. They acted like normal friends, provided you took into account that Kuroba was a part of the equation. Kuroba obviously trusted him and relaxed around him, to the point where Yuushi could sneak up on him, of all things.

Saguru very carefully buried the thought, along with any implications thereof, that Kuroba had just treated him exactly the same way.

Aoko, of course, got off scot-free. She was Aoko.

After Kuroba managed to catch Yuushi, things settled down for a while. Saguru pulled out one of the extra-curricular books in his briefcase and perched on a flat rock by their belongings, hoping to dry out quickly beneath the sun. Luckily, there was very little breeze even when he was facing the ocean, so being wet wasn't too much of an inconvenience. Kuroba went in search of a towel, or barring that, a snack, and Aoko took it upon herself to show Riku the tide pools located down the beach in the direction they hadn't been yet. The pools were close enough that Saguru could still keep an eye on them both, and he glanced up occasionally from his book to see them happily engrossed in exploring among the rocky shore.

When he looked up again a while later, one of the many large rocks near the tide pools hid the pair from view. Although it normally wouldn't have mattered to him much, something about the way Kuroba had been acting made him feel vaguely uneasy about it now, and before he realized it he was moving to catch sight of them again. Climbing around a few rocks to find a better position, he was startled to discover Kuroba had been sitting nearby, on a rock slightly above and behind him. The dark-haired boy sat with one leg drawn up, leaning his shoulder against another rock beside him.
Though partially obscured by the rocks, he was angled so that he could still keep an eye on Riku and Aoko, and, Saguru realized, himself.

Kuroba hadn't acknowledged his presence, face still turned towards the tide pools, where Saguru could now see the other two kneeling down to get a closer look. In that moment, he was struck by how weary Kuroba looked, quiet and drawn in on himself but still watching out for them. And something more, too, that same odd undertone he'd been unable to quite identify.

At one time, he would have been highly tempted to try and wring some answers out of the magician while his guard was down. Now, almost to his own surprise, he went back for his other book and walked over to sit next to Kuroba.

"Yuushi-san and Aoko-kun seem to be having a lot of fun at the tide pools," he began, keeping his voice casual. "It's not my sort of thing, though, so I brought a couple of books. Would you like to borrow one?"

He hadn't really expected much of an answer, not with their mutual dance of caution and suspicion revolving around his unanswered accusations about Kid. But Kuroba looked like he could use some company.

"...Okay."

Saguru paused, unable to believe he'd actually heard what he thought he had.

"Really?"

Kuroba turned his head to face him, and while behind the faint shadows there was still an odd glint in his eyes, there was a sliver of genuine warmth in his smile. "Of course. That's what friends do, isn't it?"

Saguru's had to stop his jaw from dropping, and he bit down on the demand 'Who are you and what have you done with Kuroba?' that automatically sprang to mind. Instead, he silently held out his reading choices.

"The Hound of the Baskervilles?" Kuroba raised an eyebrow, but his voice held no edge. "How original."

Hakuba shrugged. "Unless you'd prefer Forensic Entomology: Maggots and You, by Dr. Grissom, or Robert Goren's dissertation on the criminal mind, but I'd planned on getting through that one today. Not that I think they'll have any really comparable case studies..." he added, and then smirked internally when Kuroba perked up. He held out the spiral bound dissertation without comment, and when Kuroba took it from him picked up the Holmes mystery for himself.

Kuroba drew up his other leg to support the open book and avidly began to read, glancing up every few pages in the direction of the tide pools. Assured that Kuroba had a handle on things, Saguru allowed himself to become engrossed in Watson's narrative and lost track of time. The next time he looked around, Kuroba's head rested against the rock with his hand laying slack beside him.

Kuroba was asleep.

Kuroba acting friendly was one thing. Letting his guard down enough to fall asleep in his rival's company was something else entirely. His borrowed book was starting to slip off his lap, and Saguru instinctively reached to re-stabilize it. Only after he pulled his hand away did Saguru realize that Kuroba had barely even twitched at the close proximity to his person.
He swallowed. If he wanted, he could take a DNA sample from Kuroba to test against the sample he'd gotten from Kid months ago, and Kuroba'd be none the wiser. Kuroba had to have known that. And he'd fallen asleep beside him anyway.

Not only that… Saguru blinked, turning his head back toward the tide pools, where Riku and Aoko were still exploring. Given how on-edge Kuroba had been all afternoon, this amounted to his not only trusting Saguru with himself while his defenses were down, but also entrusting him to watch over two of the most important people in his life.

The entire situation was mind-boggling.

Watching him, Saguru was further struck by how unbelievably innocent Kuroba looked while sleeping. The innocent mask that tended to frame his eyes was so good that if Saguru didn't know it wasn't true, there were times he would almost believe it… but this was in an entirely different league.

Saguru stiffened as what he was seeing really sank in. This was Kuroba without a mask.

The magician seemed to make a hobby of turning his world upside down. Ruefully but not unfondly, he whispered under his breath: "What am I going to do with you…?"

Kuroba didn't answer.

Since Kuroba looked so exhausted, Saguru simply let him sleep, honoring the implicit transfer of responsibility by checking on Riku and Aoko every few pages. He finished the mystery and began the book on forensic entomology, wishing he could continue the criminology dissertation but not wanting to risk disturbing Kuroba. The magician didn't wake up until quite some time later, when Aoko ran toward them, calling his name excitedly. Saguru pretended not to notice as the other boy performed a quick inventory of who, where, why, how, and 'what's going on?!'. By the time Aoko reached them Kuroba had re-oriented himself, and Saguru couldn't help but notice that while still tired, he looked far better than before.

"Come see, come see!" Aoko exclaimed, beckoning. Saguru stood, brushing sand off his clothes and tucking his books under his arm. Kuroba closed his book and hauled himself upright, slinging an arm around Aoko's shoulders. The smile he gave her seemed much more genuine than it had been earlier in the day.

"All right, what's this amazing sight you don't want us to miss?"

Aoko didn't reply, but grabbed Saguru's free hand as well before he could avoid her. Saguru suppressed a sigh as she dragged them both towards the tide pools. Kuroba and Aoko had both known him long enough to recognize his discomfort at being touched, but they seemed to ignore the fact with such suspiciously cheerful abandon, he sometimes felt they went out of their way to do so. Especially Kuroba.

His thoughts were interrupted by said annoyance exclaiming, "Ooh, takoyaki on the hoof!"

Following Kuroba's gaze, Saguru realized they were watching a small octopus wander through the pools. He smirked. "I think it looks like you, Kuroba. Have any relatives you never told us about? A distant cousin, perhaps?"
"There are worse things to be related to," Kuroba replied with a shameless grin.

"Like fish?"

"Hey it's getting away! After it, Aoko!"

The octopus had darted beneath some rocks, evidently a natural tunnel between two of the pools. Laughing, Kuroba and Aoko climbed over them to follow the creature's progress. Saguru watched them with a growing sense of satisfaction. Maybe for just a little while, Kuroba could bury his worries and act like a normal teenager. As normal as Kuroba ever got, anyway.

A hand touched his shoulder and he turned to find Yuushi standing behind him. Did neither of them know how to make noise when they moved? The man smiled softly, knowingly, and then gave an acknowledging nod of thanks.

In that instant, something seemed to shift. Saguru could have sworn he almost saw something else… someone else… but then Yuushi turned away, and the sensation vanished as if it had never been.

Saguru tried to figure out what the smile and nod were for, then remembered that even at the tide pools, he'd seen Yuushi look around to confirm Kuroba's location every once in a while. In fact, he'd probably made sure he and Aoko stayed in line of sight for the entire time. He would have noticed Kuroba sleeping, and if the man knew half as much about the magician as Saguru suspected he did, he would have recognized the significance.

By the time the octopus disappeared and showed no signs of coming out again, it was almost sunset. Picking their way back along the rocks carefully, the quartet returned to their things and sat together on the sand, watching the sky change.

"Hey, Kaito," Aoko said after a while, once the palette of colors had begun darkening towards the purple-black of night.

"Hm?" Stretched out with his hands behind his head, Kuroba turned his head slightly towards her.

"Daddy was wondering if you could come to the museum tomorrow and look over the security system from a magician's point of view, because Kid's a magician, too. I'd ask you, Riku-san—" she added quickly, but Yuushi interjected:

"But I'm not even a proper magician."

"Right. People are professionally recognizing Kaito now, but he's not well-known enough that anyone from the International Police would recognize him."

"He doesn't want to advertise that he's consulting with a magician, then?"

She shook her head. "No. He doesn't want them to look down on the Task Force. It's already bad enough that Kid humiliates them every heist," she said with a flash of anger, then calmed. "You can just come as my friend when I take him an early dinner tomorrow night."

"Sure, I can do that."

Saguru pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to ward off a headache. Letting Kuroba anywhere near the museum was a bad idea, but it wasn't like he had any influence. Especially not with having international allies interfere. He was lucky Nakamori acquiesced to his father's wishes and allowed Saguru relatively free access to Kid heists, otherwise he probably would have been banned from the heist tomorrow. He still couldn't believe Kuroba was getting a free pass into the
museum and straight to the jewel, though.

"I'll probably be there around then, too," he declared, eyeing Kuroba. The other boy just grinned.

"Well, if we're all going to be there, can I bring Riku-kun?"

"That's right, talk about me like I'm a piece of luggage again, why don't you."

Aoko laughed. "I guess that would probably be all right. I can't promise Daddy'll be very friendly—
bears have nicer growls than he does on a heist night—but I doubt you'll be in the way."

"Sounds fine, then. Meet you at the museum?"

"Yeah." She stretched her arms. "Time to go home, I think. He might burn dinner without me."

As they gathered their things, Kuroba handed Saguru the dissertation. "Thanks. I think I'd like to
borrow and finish it sometime."

Saguru eyed him, unsure what to think of the other boy anymore. That tentative trust had been
astounding, even a bit humbling… but he'd been uncomfortably aware the entire trip how unusual
everything was being. Was the day just a momentary impulse from Kuroba, with the walls destined
to go up again as if it had never happened?

Did Kuroba believe that their cautious de-armament was real?

The conversational games between them made up too much of their history to just set aside, and to
be honest he found them too much fun to really want to try. But would Kuroba notice if for once
they really were no more than a game? He'd held back his reflexive taunt at the rocks, too surprised
and then reluctant to risk shattering the fragile peace between them earlier, but now he suddenly
wanted to know if it was true. Whether the magician got defensive, or if he saw that the teasing, for
once, held no hidden, probing edge…

"Are you proofreading it?"

The words slipped out lightly before he could think better of it. To his relief, Kuroba's mildly
surprised expression wasn't accompanied by immediate withdrawal or slamming up of masks. The
dark-haired teen gave him a mock dirty look, but it seemed they both recognized he'd left himself
wide open for it. Then Kuroba grinned.

"Yes, actually. He misspelled 'propriety' on page 214."

Aoko and Yuushi both sniggered. The traitors.

They parted ways after the return train ride. Kuroba claimed his mother had asked him to do some
shopping before going home, so he and Yuushi went off together the same way they'd been doing all
week. Saguru walked Aoko home again, even though Kuroba used to be the one who'd done so
after they'd done something together. Aoko's house was far closer to Kuroba's than to his own, after
all. Perhaps that was why she seemed unusually subdued.

"What do you think of Yuushi-san?" he asked on a whim, wanting to compare her opinion to his
own. She'd spend much of the afternoon alone in the man's company, after all, and may have seen
something he had not. Aoko was silent for a few minutes, swinging her schoolbag thoughtfully.

"He's not what I thought he'd be like. I kept forgetting he's older than we are, for one thing. There's no question why he and Kaito get along so well." She chuckled, then looked down at her feet. "Kaito changed while he was gone, you know? And I think it's because he met Riku-san. Kaito's… comfortable around him. And now Kaito's getting more comfortable around you, too."

She smiled at Saguru, almost cheerfully. "It's good to see you getting along better. It would be nice if he'd be that way with me, too, but… at least he's opening up to someone. It's important that he can have someone to rely on."

She turned back to face forward, and Saguru shook his head, unnoticed.

"To be honest, Aoko-kun… I'm not even entirely sure why we're getting along. And you don't have to fake your smile just for me."

She looked up at him, wide-eyed. "I mean—That is…"

"Detective, remember?" He smirked. "And trust me, you do matter to him. You probably didn't notice this, but at school, since Kuroba-kun came back… the only time I've seen the tightness around his eyes really go away is when you chase him with your mop."

She paused, then gained a shy little pleased smile. "Really?"

He nodded, glad to see some spring come back into her step. He still wondered sometimes about Kuroba and Aoko's unusual relationship. They both obviously cared about each other, had been close friends almost their entire lives… and yet Kuroba kept a wall between them that she couldn't breach. To protect himself. To protect her.

"Now, if only he'd figure out that Kid is a jerk!"

Saguru succumbed to a short choking fit at the unexpected declaration. Once recovered, he wondered briefly if Aoko would have a heart attack if he said the Kid seemed to have a reason for what he did.

"I'm afraid Kuroba-kun is a lost cause with that one, Aoko-kun."

She sighed. "I wish he wasn't leaving again so soon. But I guess a week off all at once is a lot, isn't it? Even if he has to be working a lot to be gone all the time…"

Saguru didn't answer. That was odd. Kuroba's behavior had distracted him from the fact that the magician was going to leave again. But that didn't make any sense. He didn't believe Kuroba's story about magicians, so why did he leave in the first place? Where did he go, and now that he had returned, why was he leaving again?

…What could possibly be more important to Kuroba than whatever he was trying to accomplish as Kid?

And where did Yuushi fit into it all?

Because Kaito planned to return directly after school, Riku stayed home on Friday and took an unofficial driving test from Mizuki. Their initial plan to delay Hakuba seemed to have been thwarted,
but it certainly couldn't hurt to have access to a car if they wanted. Driving was a far more legitimate mode of speedy transportation than the corridors, after all, and involved no awkward questions.

She complemented him on his hard work over the past week (it was amazing what hours of practice every day could do for competency), gave him a long quiz on road safety, and admonished him to be careful. He more than most didn't want to get pulled over — no matter how good the forgery, a driver's license wouldn't be much help when his identity didn't exist anywhere but on that card.

"Thank you for your understanding," Riku offered when they had finished. She smiled at him from the passenger seat.

"If I didn't understand that sometimes breaking a few rules is necessary, I would never have allowed Toichi to become the Kid."

"You what?" Riku asked, startled.

"You didn't think Toichi was always the Kid, did you?" she laughed.

"Even though we talked about him before, I suppose I never really thought about it. You knew him before he was Kid, then?"

"Oh, yes. It's a bit of a long story, though. Would you indulge an old woman?"

"Hardly old," he pointed out. "But if you would like to tell me, I'd be honored to hear more about Toichi-san."

"Memories can make you old. And these memories," she added decisively, opening the car door, "are best shared over a cup of tea."

A short while later they sat together in the den with cups of tea, Mizuki curled up at one end of the couch and Riku slightly sprawled at the other.

"Do you know, I've never told these things to Kaito?" she confessed. "I supposed I've never quite known how to."

"You've never talked together about the Kid, have you?"

"No. At first I thought it might be easier on him, somehow. And then there never seemed to be the right opportunity."

"I think, after this is over, Kaito-kun would like to hear about it."

"Yes. I've told him so much about Toichi in some ways... and so little, in others. He knows what Toichi — died chasing, now, but he never knew why Kid was created in the first place."

"You mean that the Kid wasn't originally created to find Pandora?" Riku sat up and leaned forward, intrigued.

She took a sip of her tea and shook her head. "No. It was... oh, but I should start at the beginning, for it to make any sense.

"I met Toichi almost 20 years ago, at the hospital where I was volunteering. His friend, Ginzo-kun— that's Aoko-chan's father, who I don't think you've met—had gotten a concussion playing baseball. Toichi teased him to no end, but when I told them what to do and watch for during the next few
days, he became perfectly attentive. After they left, I thought no more about it until a few weeks later, when he reappeared with a bloody right hand and requested my assistance by name. He seemed oddly hopeful and embarrassed at the same time, when I showed up. His reasons for embarrassment quickly became clear; not many people are ever savaged by a dove!"

A brief chuckle, which Riku couldn't help but join, and she continued.

"He was sweet, and charming, and once I first agreed to dinner, remarkably faithful. Even when he agreed to give my younger, exotically beautiful sister lessons in role-playing, his attention never wandered once. We were married almost a year later, just before his international debut as a magician. I don't know if anything could have prepared me for the level of fame Toichi attained, but there was something satisfying in knowing that while I had to share him with thousands of fans on a regular basis, I was always the one he came home to every night.

"What I didn't know was that the night before our wedding, Toichi and Ginzo-kun spent the evening discussing their futures. Ginzo-kun was entering the Police Academy to fight murderers and thieves, and that made Toichi think long and hard about thieves who keep what they steal."

She sighed, taking another drink of her tea. Riku silently waited for her to continue.

"You see, Toichi's father was a professional thief. Toichi could pick a pocket by the time he was four. His mother found out about his father after Toichi was born, and only stayed for her son's sake. She taught him that stealing to keep was wrong, and encouraged him to use what his father taught him to entertain people. In other words, sleight-of-hand. He was a genius at it, and already well off by the time we met. Ginzo-kun's words made him want to show people the need to protect their precious possessions from men who had his skills, but not his honor. As a way to honor both his mother and his father, he came up with the idea of a thief who gave back what he stole."

"The Kid?"

"Yes, although he had no such name for many years. A few months into our marriage, he broached the idea. He'd seen how his father's secret had torn his own parents apart, and would not allow the same to happen to us. He promised me that if I didn't agree, he would find some other way."

She smiled, now, eyes sparkling at the memory. "I can still hear his voice as he told me about it. I wasn't hard to convince, I admit; for him to be able to prove his point, for a theft to be truly authentic, he couldn't work under a contract. And the way he planned everything out, it was just like another show, designed to help people as well as entertain them."

"I'm home!" Startled, Riku froze momentarily. "Mom? Riku-kun?"

"In the den, Kaito," Mizuki called. She looked at Riku. "That's how it began. There's more, but there are some things Kaito deserves to be the first to hear. It's strange, the way life's paths diverge in ways you never expected them to."

Riku nodded, thinking of storms and keys and a raft that never set sail.

"But, Riku-kun…" she paused, eyes soft. "I want to thank you for helping Kaito, for being someone he can trust. He's still only a boy, and I can do so little. Thank you for no longer letting him be alone. When what you're doing together is over… please know that you'll always be welcome in our home."

Riku swallowed, mouth suddenly dry, using all his willpower to meet her gaze. She couldn't know what she had just given him. She didn't know who he'd been, or anything about him, and didn't ask.
She had no preconceptions, no expectations from his name, and deliberately extended him the offer just because of who he was now and what he was doing. A loose, ragged part of his heart that hadn't dared call anywhere home since he threw home away anchored as the lingering fear of what would happen if he ever returned to the islands dissolved into insignificance. He had somewhere real, solid, tangible, that he could always come back to if there was nowhere else to go.

"Thank you, Mizuki-san," he whispered.

"There you are," Kaito interrupted, his delayed entrance explained by his wearing casual clothes instead of his school uniform. "Do we have a car?"

Riku wordlessly pulled out the keys from his pocket and held them up with a satisfied smile.

"Perfect," Kaito proclaimed. "Then we can leave in a little while rather than right now, and still be in time to meet Aoko."

"Will you be gone until after the heist, then?" Mizuki asked.

"Yeah. I still need to finish packing my bag of tricks, but I can't pass up this opportunity of a free pass in." He grinned. "I'm probably driving Hakuba-kun nuts right now."

"Well, we'll probably leave close to the same time, since I have the night shift again. Why don't you go finish getting ready, Kaito, and I'll make an early dinner?"

"Thanks, Mom!" Kaito grinned, and vanished into the Kid's hideaway. Mizuki spared Riku another smile before heading off to the kitchen, leaving Riku alone with his thoughts until dinner.

Before they left, Mizuki captured Kaito in a long hug and ruffled his hair fondly.

"Stay safe?"

"It's a hundred years too early for them to catch me," Kaito boasted, mischief dancing in his eyes. "We'll see you tomorrow, Mom."

The drive to the museum was mostly silent. Riku concentrated on navigating early evening traffic, and Kaito stared out the window with an expression of distant concentration. He only came back to the here-and-now when they pulled into the nearest free parking space to the museum, on the outskirts of the crowd gathered around the police cordons.

"Hey, Riku-kun..."

Riku cut the car's engine and waited expectantly.

"Since we can't keep Hakuba-kun out of this heist... can you keep an eye on him, instead? What he really needs is a full-time bodyguard, but you're the next best thing. Keep him out of trouble, and out of Nightmare's way?"

"If I can. I just wish we could get you out of Nightmare's way too."

"Wishing for the impossible won't make it any more true. I'll find some way to get out of this. Everyone has some kind of weak spot, even Nightmare. I just have to find it, and use it to get him off
my back."

"Hm." Riku felt considerably less optimistic. Nightmare seemed to have a lot more experience than Kaito, and he worried that things were going to be a lot more complicated than Kaito hoped for.

"I don't see Aoko anywhere," Kaito said, opening the car door and scanning the surrounding area. "Hey, there's Hakuba-kun. Hakuba-kun!" Kaito called, getting out of the car. Grabbing his bag, he hurried to meet up with the blond boy, who was talking to one of the men keeping the police department's entrance clear of the crowd.

Riku joined them in time to hear Hakuba say, "...No, he's not police force, yes, he has a reason to be here, no, he doesn't have a pass to justify his presence."

The policeman, young and inexperienced and probably working his first heist, glanced nervously between Kaito and Hakuba, including Riku at the last minute. "I can let you in, Hakuba-kun, but we're under strict orders not to let civilians get in the way. Inspector Nakamori is too busy to be interrupted with questions right now..."

"Look," Hakuba interrupted, exasperated, "if it'll make you feel better, I'll take responsibility for him. Him, too," he jerked a thumb in Riku's direction. "And I won't tell Inspector Nakamori about this either."

"I..." The man looked wretched, torn between enforcing his duties and letting his quandary become someone else's problem. "All right, just go ahead."

Kaito was practically skipping ahead of the other two as they headed toward the building entrance, grinning in counterpoint to Hakuba's vaguely disturbed expression. The detective fell in step with Riku, nodding towards Kaito.

"Did I really just say I'd be responsible for his actions?"

Riku chuckled. "Yes, Hakuba-san, I'm afraid you did."

"I must be crazy."

"Probably," Riku agreed amiably.

Hakuba just shook his head.

The door guards seemed to be from the Kid task force, and after a cursory cheek pinch to ensure none of them were the Kid in disguise—you couldn't be too careful, after all, although Riku suspected Kaito's grin held an extra glimmer of triumph when they were waved through—they made it inside. The scene they entered held a more frantic air than Riku had expected, but listening to Nakamori yell to his forces about not being looked down upon by their international brethren, Riku realized the Inspector was probably feeling out of his depth and trying not to show it. The footage of other heists Riku'd seen had felt more like a game, a challenge. Tonight held a far more sober air.

"Inspector Nakamori!" Hakuba waved, getting the man's attention. He turned, an almost manic brightness on his face, which deflated the moment he saw them.

"Oh, it's just you, Hakuba-kun, Kaito-kun." He paused at Riku. "Who're you?"

Riku bowed. "Yuushi Riku, Inspector Nakamori."

"He's a friend of mine from the troupe, Inspector," Kaito added. "I was running late, and asked him
to give me a ride here. I wouldn't want to be too late and miss the heist, after all." The sheer wattage of Kaito's innocent grin was hard to look at.

"Che, fine, let him stick around. Aoko said she'd talked to you about lending us your unique perspective, Kaito-kun?"

"That's why I'm here," he responded brightly.

"All right, I'll take you to look at it later. Stay out of trouble in the meantime, all right?" He left to attend to another pressing matter. Hakuba looked briefly torn between following the inspector and keeping an eye on the still-grinning Kaito. Kaito won.

"What's so funny… Kaitou Kid?"

Kaito twitched, and Riku figured the dark-haired boy had just stomped hard on the instinct to spin around and filet the startling newcomer with his card gun. Sneaking up on Kaito these days was a bad idea. Hakuba's presence insured that Kaito was on high alert, however, and extremely conscious of his actions and reactions. No instinctive answering to the title of Kaitou Kid, or succumbing to battle-ingrained defensive habits.

Riku looked behind them, where a diminutive figure in riot gear regarded them happily.

"Just kidding!" Aoko declared, giggling at the trio.

"Aoko!?" Kaito exclaimed. "What's with the outfit?"

"Shh!" She countered quickly. "I always wanted to wear one of these at least once, so I borrowed it from a guy I know who isn't working tonight. I was going to meet you in front of the museum, but you got here too early. Don't tell Daddy, okay?" She peered around. "I can't seem to find him, though, and I still have his bentou."

Hakuba pointed towards the doorway Nakamori had gone through. "He went that way. I'd suggest you change your clothes before you try to find him."

Aoko looked ready to retort, but a young voice interrupted them. "Are you also going to fight the bad guys, lady?"

A little boy with messy brown hair, freckles and a backpack regarded them with a curious expression. Aoko visibly melted, and leaned down to better match his height.

"That's right! I'm going to help catch them both, so that evil can't flourish!"

"Oh, then you're helping Papa! Good luck!"

"Your dad?" Kaito asked. "Who are you?"

"I'm Connery Kenta," the boy replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "My papa is Connery Jack. He chases the bad guy called Nightmare at a place called Interpol. He's famous, too."

At that moment, Nakamori entered with a tall blond man. "Ah!" Kenta darted towards the men, waving. "Papa!"

The men turned, and Aoko immediately ran the other way before Nakamori could recognize her. Riku suspected that Connery had realized she was a girl, though, even as the man knelt down to ask how his son had arrived. A man in his profession was unlikely to miss anything, even little details. Nakamori was many things, but given his lack of reaction to Aoko, not a detective.
Riku faded into the background, knowing Nakamori would prefer not needing to explain his presence. Aoko reappeared quickly, just in time to overhear Connery mention how he had no time to take Kenta back to the nursing facility the boy had managed to escape from to find his father.

"Then why don't we go together?" She said with a smile. Connery appeared temporarily at a loss.

"I'm sorry, this girl is…?"

"My daughter, Aoko!" Nakamori said, and hurriedly added, "She came to give me a bentou."

"Then I leave Kenta to your daughter." Connery appeared unmoved by Kenta's disappointed expression, and turned his attention to an officer hurrying toward them.

"Connery-san, your subordinates need you outside."

"Certainly. Well, I'm counting on you for Nightmare," he told Nakamori.

"We'll get Kid as well!" The Inspector agreed. They shook hands. "Ah, one last thing," he added as an afterthought, when Connery was walking away. "What kind of a person is Nightmare, frankly speaking?"

Connery glanced over his shoulder, a particularly forbidding expression on his face. "Nightmare penetrates into people's hearts, and then freely manipulates them. He's a sly devil…"

Nakamori looked less than reassured after Connery left and he turned to the three boys. "Hakuba-kun, I have a favor to ask."

The blond look surprised. "Yes, Inspector?"

"You heard what Connery-san said about Nightmare. Now, I know that the ICPO says that they're going to handle the Nightmare side of this heist, including the exchange of goods if the Kid somehow circumvents the security system, but I'd feel better if you would help us keep our hands in. Kid can't go too far, anyway. Could you scout the surrounding area for likely meeting places?"

Hakuba glanced at Kaito unhappily, but Riku knew the blond had no reason to refuse. Nakamori made a lot of concessions just to let a teenage civilian hang around a normal heist, let alone something of this magnitude. You did not contradict 'orders' from the man in charge. But if Hakuba was going to be leaving…

"Since your officers all seem so busy, Inspector Nakamori," Riku offered respectfully, "I could give him a ride to likely places."

With the added bonus of being able to watch him the way Kaito had asked.

"Fine with me, I can take the bus home," Kaito volunteered.

"What? Oh. Yes, fine." Nakamori's attention had already moved beyond them. "You have my number if you find anything. Now, Kaito-kun, if you could come this way…"

Kaito waved and followed after Nakamori. Hakuba turned toward Riku.

"Awfully convenient of you to have a car."

"Isn't it?" Riku merely smiled.
"I feel conspired against."
"Completely unintentional, I assure you." This time, at least.

They drove around for a while, Riku following Hakuba's directions. The blond boy became progressively disgruntled until roughly an hour later, when he threw up his hands in exasperation as they waited for a red light to change again.

"I give up. I wanted to believe Inspector Nakamori had a good reason for this, but this is impossible. Connery-san should already have plotted out Nightmare's possible movements in detail. He can't have any good reason to send me out here, except to get me out of the way. Wouldn't want the teen detective showing up the Japanese police force in front of Interpol, would we? Send him on a wild goose chase instead."

He pressed his spread fingertips together, setting his elbows on the armrests and watching the road ahead. "Head back to the museum."

When Riku hesitated, the blond put his hand on the door handle. "I'll get out and walk if I have to."

He moved to open the door, but Riku grabbed his arm in a paralyzing grip. Had Riku been paying more attention, he might have realized that he'd augmented his strength with a whisper of power in order to ensure he kept hold of Hakuba.

"Stay in the damn car," he growled, letting his voice temporarily deepen to Ansem's gravelly bass. Kaito wouldn't forgive him if he let Hakuba out of his sight, and consequently outside of his protection. Startled, Hakuba met his gaze and froze, eyes widening. Riku realized belatedly that since the sun had gone down, he wasn't wearing his sunglasses anymore so as not to draw attention to his eyes. The blond hadn't been looking earlier, but in the darkness Ansem's amber eyes glowed faintly.

Riku sighed, letting him go and facing forward. "You realize the Inspector could also be looking out for your well being? Being out here means you're nearly guaranteed to not run into Nightmare, which is, I'm sure, his first choice. If I'm right about the Kid's disposition, he'd rather you stay out of harm's way too."

"And what about Kuroba-kun?" Hakuba challenged immediately. "If he's really so obsessed with Kid, do you think he really took that bus home?"

"...I'll drive you back." If Hakuba was being kind enough to give Riku plausible deniability for going back to be around if Kaito needed help, he'd be a fool not to take advantage of it. He hadn't particularly wanted to be driving too much in the first place.

Unfortunately, even following Hakuba's directions, they managed to become entangled in a maze of one-way streets. Since the blond detective was trying to navigate from memory, and neither one was familiar with the area, they were inevitably delayed. The unease radiating from the blond boy affected Riku as well, and after the third time they traveled through the same intersection, the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Or a card gun.

Riku's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I didn't want to let him be there tonight, you know," he murmured with forced casualness. "Not with Nightmare."

Hakuba gave him a considering look. "I believe you. Turn left!" He added sharply, pointing. "The museum is down this road."

In the distance, the high level of activity surrounding the building suggested that events had already been set in motion. Hakuba hurriedly pulled out his phone, tapping his fingers impatiently against the
armrest as he waited to ring through.

"Hello, Inspector? This is Hakuba. What's the situation there?" Hakuba's perfectly calm voice surprised Riku, given his earlier reaction. The blond boy seemed to have buried his annoyance in favor of answers.

Riku couldn't hear the Inspector's side of the conversation, and tuned out Hakuba's voice as much as possible to focus on the surrounding traffic. The last thing he wanted was to be involved in a car accident tonight.

"Please, wait! Don't touch anything until I get there!" Riku risked a glimpse at the passenger seat. Hakuba jerked the phone away from his ear and ended the call, gazing anxiously through the windshield at the swiftly approaching museum.

"Is it over?"

"Something's wrong, but I won't know anything until we arrive." Hakuba scowled. "Inspector Nakamori can't wait two minutes, apparently."

Watching the police cordons near the car, Riku reached a decision. He pulled into a no-parking zone on the curb just outside the police area, turning on the car's flashers.

"I'll wait here for you."

Hakuba nodded quickly, exiting the car and dashing towards the museum. Riku waited with the engine running, hoping no one would either notice or care that he hadn't moved in the past ten minutes. A passing desire for a mobile phone entered his mind as he wondered whether Hakuba had figured out whatever Kaito's trick had been, and if Kaito'd managed to escape first. Nothing was worse than uncertainty.

Movement in front of the museum attracted his attention. Looking beyond the edges of the crowd, Riku realized that a caravan of police cars was loading up. The building entrance was a decent distance away, illuminated almost solely by helicopter spotlights, but Riku's excellent vision allowed him to recognize Hakuba's distinctive blond head as the detective made a beeline for Riku's position. He threw the door open and clambered inside as the police cars began to depart. Riku noted absently that despite the amount of running he'd been doing, Hakuba wasn't even breathing hard.

"Follow them!" He commanded. Shrugging, Riku obeyed, sparing a portion of his attention to figure out the current situation.

"What happened?"

"I figured out Kid's trick. Absurdly simple, when you get right down to it. Some basic mineralogical knowledge, transparent acrylic, a disguise as the museum curator, and he circumvents the system invented for the single purpose of thwarting him. You'd think by now they would have learned to check a person every time he or she enters the room, no matter how important the person is," he added wryly, then continued.

"Connery-san called us with Nightmare's projected meeting place, and Inspector Nakamori ordered half the Task Force to join Interpol there. And I will not be left behind. Not on this case."

"Why this one?"

"Everything about this heist rubs me the wrong way. I don't care much for hunches, Yuushi-san… but I have a bad feeling about tonight."
The squad cars turned into the lot of an older abandoned warehouse some distance from the museum. Pulling in behind them, Riku and Hakuba joined the milling police. As they approached, a familiar young voice cut through the murmur of the policemen waiting quietly for instructions.

"Papa!" A pause. "It's him! I heard his voice just now!"

Nakamori turned in shock. "Wait, what are you doing here?" he demanded, bewildered by the unexpected company. Riku looked over the crowd of much shorter policemen to where Aoko was watching Kenta with a worried expression. The boy was looking around wildly, searching for a repeat of whatever he's heard before.

"This kid… We were leaving the restaurant where we'd eaten together, when Kenta-kun saw Connery-san drive by," she explained to Nakamori. "He told the taxi driver to follow his car and I couldn't really stop them."

Riku decided then that Aoko had a dangerous susceptibility to cute. If Kaito knew that, and made use of his innocent face often, it was no wonder he could get away with so much around Aoko. Of course, it meant she would have an almost impossible time saying no to anyone under the age of ten.

"I saw Papa's car come in here," Kenta piped up, still looking around. "I don't know where it went, but I know it was here!" Without warning, an ominous thud sounded from within the warehouse, and he darted towards the nearest entrance.

"Stay!" Nakamori barked at Aoko when she started after the boy, and ran in pursuit. Riku and Hakuba didn't even exchange glances, simply followed without thinking. For his small size, the boy was extremely fast.

"Papa!"

The warehouse was old and empty except for some scattered crates and random detritus, not much more than concrete floor and several catwalks crisscrossing the upper level of the two-story building. With nothing to block their view, the prone figure on the floor stood out in sharp relief.

"P—Papa!" Before they could catch him, Kenta knelt beside his father's body, heedless of the blood pooled around the man's head.

Riku automatically paused and tilted his head up, letting Nakamori and Hakuba hurry past him. He'd never seen a dead body like that before, and he wanted to stay as far away from it as possible. Instead he considered his own preferences for heights, and Kaito's similar tastes… There was a hint of white at the edge of the catwalk directly above Jack Connery's corpse, which quickly vanished upon the others' arrival by the body. Sometimes he really hated being right. Kaito had been there.

Looking back down, he realized Hakuba had come back to stand beside him with an eyebrow raised inquiringly. Since he couldn't deny something had attracted his attention, he admitted to seeing white among the catwalks.

Hakuba pinched the bridge of his nose. "Judging by the angle of the Ace of Spades imbedded in the facemask by Connery-san's head," he whispered too quietly for Kenta to hear, in a tone of clinical detachment, "he was Nightmare. Kuroba-kun must have delayed his departure, probably at hearing Kenta's voice, to preserve the honor of the boy's father."

Letting his eyes brush briefly along the grisly scene, Riku gulped against a sharp rebellion from his stomach and turned away. Hakuba gave him a look of grim sympathy.

"First dead body?"
Riku nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He'd never seen the absolute stillness of death before, not even when he'd been among the darkness. It was… highly disturbing.

As he looked at the boy and the body again, Hakuba paled. He clenched a fist and turned to Riku. "Yuushi-san. Go home." He looked back at Connery's body. "I'll get a squad car to drive me home, or call a taxi or my grandmother. Just… go."

Riku stared at him for a moment, mind working furiously. He knew Hakuba believed Kaito was the Kid, but there had been something more in the inflection of that command to get home. He followed the blond's gaze back at the warehouse floor, where Kenta was bent over his father's chest, crying brokenly.

A son.

Crying for his father.

Mizuki would still be at work, so Kaito was going home to any empty house.

*Go home and be there for him.*

He looked up sharply, meeting Hakuba's grimly impassive gaze. Riku hated the thought of acknowledging the detective's request, because it felt like a passive admission of Kaito's identity. On the other hand, even if Riku didn't know all the details of how and why… Kaito had just seen a man die. Considering his own reaction, the thief was going to be shaken, to say the least.

The threat of Nightmare was gone, then… but the price for that to have happened felt too high. He nodded slowly at Hakuba, and went home.

Every time he ran into a red light along the way, he was highly tempted to create a darkness corridor and simply drive through. Only the need to be inconspicuous and not knowing what would happen to the car if he tried it deterred him. As it turned out, he managed to reach the Kuroba home, park the car, and get into the den five minutes before the portrait turned. Kaito stumbled through in his civilian clothes, nearly falling before Riku reached out and caught him by the arms.

A sickly smile wavered on Kaito's face as he met Riku's concerned gaze, and he trembled slightly within the taller man's grip. Riku dragged him over to the couch and sat him down before he could collapse.

"Told you I wouldn't have to worry about Nightmare by the time the heist was over," the dark-haired boy rasped, and then shuddered.

Riku sat on the coffee table to stay across from him, waiting. Kaito looked utterly drained, still shaking slightly, but he also seemed to need to share some of his more pressing thoughts.

"Kenta-kun didn't need to know something like that. Did the Inspector or Hakuba-kun figure it out?"

"Hakuba-san knew. Inspector Nakamori thought Connery-san fell trying to protect the earrings."

"Of course he knew. I saw him looking at Connery-san's body before I left." Kaito fell silent briefly, pained. "He slipped when he heard Kenta-kun's voice, and when I grabbed him, he wouldn't let go of the earrings. He fell right out of my hand. I couldn't save him."

"It's a miracle he didn't pull you over with him, given his size."

"I was pretty well anchored. I could feel it. But I couldn't pull him up, and I couldn't hold onto him."
He was… he was only trying to save his son," he murmured, closing his eyes. "But what kind of man swears to uphold the law, and then uses thieves as his tools? Wants to save his son but is willing to kill for it?"

He paused.

"He said—he was going to retire after he reached his goal." Kaito shuddered. "I don't know if he could have. But looking at him tonight, there was almost nothing of himself left. Nightmare, that obsession… it ate him."

He looked at Riku, eyes haunted. "How can you be sure you're not consumed by a mission?"

Riku couldn't help but feel like Kaito was probably asking the wrong person. He glanced around the room, trying to think of what to say. Kaito nestled further into the couch, watching him. As the seconds stretched on the dark-haired boy looked more and more drained, only awake because he needed an answer. Any answer.

"I think… by remembering that other things are important, too."

"Then how do you know… when you're doing…" he trailed off, eyes closing involuntarily. Riku waited a few minutes for him to finish his train of thought, but Kaito appeared to be too exhausted to wake back up.

Resignedly, Riku picked up the sleeping magician and carried him to bed. He seemed to be picking Kaito up a lot, lately. Kaito barely even stirred at being moved, and settled beneath his blankets without any sign of consciousness.

Riku watched him for a while, not quite comfortable with leaving Kaito alone. In the end, he dragged the spare futon from the den into Kaito's room—quietly, because while Kaito subconsciously accepted his presence, any unexpected noise would still be likely to knock the teen back into a state of high alert. Riku stretched out on his bed and stared at the ceiling, waiting and listening, until he finally began to doze.

Chapter End Notes

ICPO: International Crime Police Organization (Interpol)
Kaito scrutinized the massive ruby critically. The Boss had said it showed promise of being the gem they sought, but he said that every time. If the Boss didn't think there was a high chance of successfully obtaining Pandora, the job would never have been commissioned in the first place.

A muffled sound caught his attention, and he glanced around. One of the security guards had slipped down the wall to the ground, leaving red streaks behind. He'd had the bad luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time: namely, being on duty the night of a heist and patrolling a bit too thoroughly. The Organization left no witnesses.

Turning back to the ruby, he lovingly rescued it from behind the joke of a security system, letting a black-gloved finger trace its facets. No one would be coming, so he could give it the attention it deserved, regardless of whether it held Pandora or not. There was so little to appreciate these days.

Suddenly, alarms blared, and he heard feet pounding through the corridors. Surprised for the first time in years, Kaito quickly sprang into action. Judging by the echoes the way to the stairs was blocked, but the elevators were close by. Some enterprising use of leverage gained entry to the elevator shaft, and he slipped inside. The cars would have frozen at the alarm, but shafts possessed ladders. He climbed three flights, then slipped out onto the top floor. The roof could only be reached by stairwell, which the police wouldn't check until last. After all, people couldn't fly, even phantoms…

"So, even invisible thieves can follow a pattern."

Quicker than thought, Kaito's silenced gun reached the ideal angle for hitting the speaker at the top landing of the stairs. Only once the figure stood clearly in his sights did he recognize the man who had just signed his own death warrant. The man's blond-brown hair, coupled with his trench coat and an outstretched gun, left no doubt to his identity.

"Hakuba Saguru," he said without surprise.

He'd half-expected something like this from the man, but not so soon. It was a shame, really, that he'd been so interested in finding the thief who had crippled old Nakamori. Only Hakuba and his obsession for research, combined with a genius-level talent for data evaluation, could possibly have collected the last five years' traces of jewel thefts and whispered rumors of a phantom thief into a coherent framework from which to set a trap for this heist.

"Son of Police Superintendent Hakuba. Youngest officer of the force to reach the rank of Inspector when at age 22 he succeeded Nakamori Ginzo. Engaged to his daughter, Aoko. You had a life waiting for you, Inspector."

Kaito shook his head in disappointment. He hadn't seen Aoko for almost fifteen years, but he still had a few fond memories of the headstrong girl she had been. They were some of the only fond memories he had left.

"You shouldn't have thrown it away."
Hakuba was looking at him strangely, brow furrowed. His gaze raked across Kaito's bare face, which was upturned to ensure good aim at such an elevated target. Kaito had never bothered with masks or eye-coverings. They itched or impeded his vision, and none of the very few people who'd ever seen his face had lived to tell about it. Even if they had... he no longer existed in the real world. You couldn't catch a ghost.

"Your face is familiar," Hakuba murmured. Kaito was silent, watching him. Another moment, and recognition blossomed in the Inspector's expression. "Kuroba? Kuroba Kaito? Aoko, she still keeps pictures of you on the walls at the house, talks about how you disappeared when your father died. She thinks of Mizuki-san like her own mother, prays at your memorial every year. You..." He trailed off. "What happened to you?"

Kaito didn't know why he was answering. Possibly because it was the first time anyone had ever asked him that question... and Hakuba sounded like he actually cared.

"When idealism killed a man, his son gave up that path and sought to never die."

It wasn't the entire truth—he vaguely recalled being a boy who hated his foster mother, before Vermouth convinced him that stubbornness was futile. It had taken her a long time, though, to break him... and some buried instinct still despised her. Especially the triumphant little smirk she'd sported the first time he'd promised to behave, and learn. The first time she'd given him a gun.

"I'm sorry to hurt Aoko, but we are invisible."

"We? Kuroba, whoever took you, whatever happened, it shouldn't have. Come back with me. We can help you." Hakuba lowered his gun a fraction, reaching out with his off-hand towards Kaito, face a mixture of pleading and concern.

Something roused in the back of Kaito's mind. He watched, mesmerized, as Hakuba took a tentative step forward to the edge of the stairs, hand still outstretched. Then, footsteps echoed on the stairs below—

...and whatever possibilities there might have been—

shattered.

Kaito fired, rushing up the last few steps to catch the Inspector before the man's gun could clatter on metal and give away his position. The silencer had been drowned out by the hurrying steps of the policemen several flights below. With unexpected gentleness, Kaito laid Hakuba's larger frame on the ground, blood already staining the area around the blond's heart.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again, as he saw the spark begin to fade from Hakuba's blue eyes. "You should have stayed home. Tell my father I haven't forgotten him?"

Kaito stood and moved to the roof access, running a gloved hand through his unruly hair. A glider black as crow-wings waited for him, ready to ride the updrafts. Halfway through the door, an unfamiliar impulse seized him and he looked over his shoulder.

Hakuba had managed to turn his head to the side before his heart gave out, keeping Kaito in sight just long enough to be facing him with an unfocused, accusing stare.
Riku awoke to a scream that could have shattered glass.

Kaito flew upright in bed, hunching over slightly, chest heaving in erratic, shuddering sobs and quickly approaching hyperventilation.

"Kaito-kun!" Riku put a hand on the magician's shoulder. He'd been worried about Kaito's dreams, but he'd hoped for more than—he glanced at the bedside clock's glowing red digits—four hours of restless sleep before nightmares set in. "Slow down, breathe. Everything's fine, provided you didn't wake up the entire neighborhood."

Kaito didn't even look up from whatever nightmare danced across his unfocused gaze. His breathing slowed marginally at Riku's voice, but remained far too fast and shallow for Riku's peace of mind.

"I'm right here," he continued, but was interrupted when Kaito began mumbling in spurts, broken only by his desperate need for air.

"Killed him—killed Hakuba-kun—my fault. He's dead—he's dead! he's dead! Couldn't stop—didn't wanna shoot…"

"Kaito-kun, Hakuba-san is fine. You saw him right before you came home."

No sign of recognition. Kaito shrugged Riku's hand off and curled up further into a ball, rocking back and forth slightly. "Saw 'm die—looking at me. I'm sorry—sorry, Hakuba-kun."

Riku felt the beginning of panic set in. Kaito's mother wasn't home from work yet, and he was obviously having no luck in reaching Kaito. The thief's dismayed, broken babbling varied wildly in pitch, from the voice of a young girl to an old man and everywhere in between, but didn't stop and didn't calm.

From what he said, Riku had a sinking suspicion he knew what Kaito had seen to unnerve him so badly. And he could only think of one thing that was likely to help. Riku reached out mentally towards the heart he'd gotten to know over the past week, and a corridor flared. He plucked Kaito out of bed, hooking arms under the boy's knees and mid-back, and ducked through.

Hakuba Saguru had not been having a good morning. In fact, he hadn't even bothered to go to bed after the heist, so in a way the disastrous evening had never ended. After Yuushi had gone home to Kuroba, he'd examined Connery's corpse more closely. One of Kid's white gloves lay loosely clenched in the dead man's right hand. Saguru'd immediately hoped that Yuushi would get home in time, because it looked like Kuroba had not only protected Nightmare's identity, but grabbed the man when he fell. For Connery to have slipped right through the thief's fingers…

Saguru had quickly glanced at Nakamori, who was occupied with Nightmare's mask and the earrings, then pocketed the precious white silk. He hadn't been ready to think about the possibility of confirming Kid's identity from anything that could be found in the glove's inner lining. He hadn't wanted to give Nakamori the opportunity to think about it, either.

As he did so, he'd been surprised to notice that the man's right cuff and jacket sleeve were oddly
wrinkled, far more than the left. Almost as if he'd slipped out of a grip on his sleeve as well as one on his hand… but it had hardly been the time for clinical analysis when there were more pressing things to worry about. Like the little boy beside him, still crying.

Saguru'd gently pried Kenta away from his father and ushered him back into Aoko's keeping. No child his age should see a corpse, let alone one of a family member. At her concerned inquiry, he'd given her a brief explanation of what had happened. He had no idea what was going to happen to the newly made orphan, but he had a hunch that Kenta was going to spend at least a night or two at the Nakamori's home before he went anywhere else.

As he'd watched Aoko kneel beside Kenta and enfold the distraught boy in a comforting hug, Saguru'd wondered if a similar incident had occurred with Kuroba, ten years ago. Then the boy had winced, and pulled out the medicine for his headaches, and Aoko had whispered to Saguru how Connery had promised his son that once Nightmare disappeared, Kenta would be able to chase the 'bad horseman' (Nightmare's symbol was a black chess knight, after all) out of his head.

When Saguru's mind had put Aoko's new information together with the rest of what he'd already known about Nightmare, his jaw had begun grinding his teeth together all on its own. Since there was nothing pressing for the Task Force to do any more, he'd commandeered one of the squad cars to give him a ride home. His grandmother—technically his father's housekeeper, but she'd been grandmother, aunt, and nanny all rolled into one whenever he'd visited his father in Japan while growing up—had been waiting up for him, and didn't comment when he headed for his father's library-study rather than his lab.

She'd brought him a snack and then gone to bed, closing the study door behind her to let him work in peace. He'd been glad about that, because it meant that neither she nor his father were awake to see him break into Superintendent Hakuba's laptop computer rather than search among the books. He wasn't a brilliant hacker, but the use of his father's identity and security codes gained access to quite a lot of information legally, including the majority of Connery's financial records and Kenta's medical history. He'd spent the next several hours assembling little hints and data inconsistencies to find the hidden accounts holding the money from Nightmare's takes. Once he tallied all of Connery's assets, plus the massive life insurance policy the man had taken out as an ICPO agent, Saguru realized there was enough to cover the projected cost of Kenta's surgery.

Connery had managed to provide for his son, but he'd made the boy an orphan to do it.

Damn the man.

To top it all off, Saguru had just decided to turn off the computer and clean up his small mess of notes from the coffee table and couch he'd taken over for his research, hoping to get to sleep for the first time in almost 24 hours… when the order of the universe went twang.

The unexpected thump of shoes on carpet, accompanied by the advent of a hysteria-edged voice with a range that could only ever belong to one person, caused Saguru to look up from his work in shock.

Yuushi hurried forward from the corner of the room in which he'd somehow spontaneously appeared, wisps of shadowy smoke dissolving behind him. But Saguru didn't have any time to think about how he'd gotten there, because Yuushi set a hunched, shivering, gasping figure down on the couch beside the blond, heedless of the papers being crushed.

"Kuroba-kun?"

At his stunned voice, Kuroba twisted and huddled against him, latching onto his left arm with a death grip. Eyes unfocused, the dark-haired boy buried his head against Saguru's shoulder, as if he were
afraid of what he'd see if he looked up. Even slightly muffled, however, his words were unmistakable.

"Killed you—shot you—sorry—only trying to help me—_shot_ you—watched you _die_—don't want you dead—I'm sorry…"

Saguru gaped. He'd been worried at the warehouse for Kuroba's state of mind, given the outcome of the heist, but he'd managed to ignore it while chasing Connery through cyberspace, especially after he'd sent Yuushi to look after him. He hadn't wanted to believe that anything could truly disturb the other boy's equilibrium. Kuroba without his lively, teasing grin was unthinkable. In fact, the extent of his imperturbable cheerfulness was practically a legend around school.

But now… it had _shattered_.

The part of Saguru's brain that had been attempting to parse the magician's unceasing litany of apologies and broken explanations suddenly registered that Kuroba was apparently having a breakdown because he'd somehow gotten the idea that he—Saguru—was dead.

The world tilted a bit.

Out of all the nightmare fodder that Kuroba'd been through in the last 24 hours, it wasn't Nightmare or even the magician's own father whose death was apparently sending him over the edge. It wasn't even his own guilt for not being able to save Nightmare. No, of all the things to have a breakdown about, he was choosing the one completely out of left field.

Saguru'd just gotten used to the idea that Kuroba filed him in the category of 'trustworthy ally' for some unfathomable reason, and possibly even 'friend.' He hadn't been ready to discover that the line had been moved to 'integral part of my universe.'

"Can't be gone—wasn't Kid, Kid was dead too—just me left—chased like always, but you shouldn't have—"

He looked over at Yuushi, his mind processing the other man's unheralded appearance more easily than Kuroba's unnerving behavior. He didn't even care that Yuushi's silver hair, for once unhidden by his usual cap, seemed to not only be defying gravity, but also half the laws of physics.

"What the hell is going on?"

Yuushi settled on the couch arm on Kuroba's other side, peculiar amber eyes watching the magician worriedly. "Nightmare," he said in English. Saguru couldn't even bring himself to be surprised that Yuushi seemed to default to English instead of Japanese, though the small part of his mind that always watched his life from a semi-detached perspective wondered if the man was speaking it for Saguru's benefit or for his own. "Kaito-kun… needed a friend."

Which was completely truthful, without answering any of his questions as to exactly why a nightmare had left Kuroba in such a mess, or how Yuushi had known how to get to his house, or especially how the man had bypassed the house's security measures in order to enter the study without being noticed.

" Tried to help me, but I shot you—you _died_—Don't want you to die chasing Kid—chasing me—Not worth dying to catch me, it's _not_—"

Saguru froze, blanking out the rest of Kuroba's ramblings. Setting aside the fact that Kuroba seemed to think that not only was Saguru supposed to be dead but that he was the one who had killed him, Kuroba had just as good as admitted he was the Kid.
Saguru'd been sure of it for a long time, of course, but Kuroba had always denied it. Even now, when obviously traumatized, in shock, and not thinking clearly, Kuroba had still previously been referring to Kid as a separate entity. Saguru had suspected for some time that Kuroba regarded Kid as a role for a performance, able to deny being Kid with the sincerity with which any actor might deny being the character he played, and so maintained that thread of plausible deniability between them. Saguru’d used it to justify the friendly rivalry between him and Kuroba's civilian identity, and had tried not to think about what would happen if they lost it while he was still chasing the Kid.

Now it was gone, like smoke in the wind. The distinction Kuroba had so carefully constructed had been catastrophically shattered, and Saguru had no idea what was going to happen when Kuroba rejoined the real world from whatever private hell he was stuck in.

Kuroba's grip tightened painfully, and Saguru returned to the more pressing concern of pulling his rival back to the land of full consciousness. They could deal with the fallout later. He hoped. They would have to.

Yuushi shifted uncomfortably on the other side of Kuroba, and Saguru seized an idea floating at the edges of his fog-laced brain.

"Er, Yuushi-san, there's tea in the kitchen down the hall. It might help calm Kuroba down, and I think I need the caffeine. Please try not to wake anyone else up."

With a relieved nod, Yuushi disappeared, and Hakuba returned his attention to the trembling ball of magician attached to his arm. He tentatively covered the exposed nape of Kuroba's neck with his free hand, hoping that deliberate interaction would convince the dark-haired boy that the dream had only been a dream, and that this was reality. At the contact something stirred faintly in the depths of his mind, like an old memory just beyond recall. He ignored it in the face of a far more worrying realization: Kuroba was disturbingly cold to the touch, probably due to shock. He quickly grabbed the blanket draped over the back of the couch and pulled it around Kuroba's shoulders as best as he could with one hand.

"Kuroba-kun, I'm alive, all right? Alive. Whatever you're thinking, you did not kill me. Although you're rather successfully blocking all the blood flow to my arm," he added wryly.

A harsh, choking breath, and the fragmented rambling stopped. Kuroba loosened his death grip only to recapture Saguru's arm in a makeshift hug, and didn't move otherwise. Encouraged by the response, no matter how minimal, Saguru rested his free hand on the back of Kuroba's neck again, murmuring reassurances. No, this had not been a good night for him, but Kuroba's had been worse. He looked down at where Kuroba's face still hid from view under comb-eating spikes, and worry crept into his tone. "Listen to me, will you? Not dead."

When the magician still failed to respond, he shifted, prying free of Kuroba's grasp with a combination of more reassurances and simply overpowering the other boy. The nightmare seemed to have exhausted Kuroba, and while his grip had been absurdly strong, he couldn't put up much resistance otherwise against Saguru's superior strength. Physical touch seemed to be acting as some sort of lifeline, however, so Saguru rested his free hand on the back of Kuroba's neck again, murmuring reassurances. No, this had not been a good night for him, but Kuroba's had been worse.

He looked down at where Kuroba's face still hid from view under comb-eating spikes, and worry crept into his tone. "Listen to me, will you? Not dead."

"No one's—" Damn, that wasn't right. Someone was dead. "Kuro... Kaito-kun, I survived, all right? You haven't killed anyone."
Eye contact, Kuroba's given name, and persistent denial of death seemed to be having an effect. Slowly, a sliver of hope crept into Kuroba's devastated expression.

"'Kuba-kun?" he whispered, voice hushed. He still seemed to be looking right through Saguru, but listening on some level.

This was a good sign. Saguru tried to think of something to ground him with. "Ku—Kaito-kun, if you don't snap out of this and tell me what's going on, I'm going to be forced to subject you to fish."

A bark of a laugh escaped Kuroba, his eyes closing. He slumped bonelessly forward, hands going limp and forehead coming to rest against Saguru's. "Only Aoko 'n' Mom c'n use fish 'gainst me. Y're real?"

"I'm real. I promise."

To prove it, Saguru continued to hold Kuroba up for as long as he could stand. When the invasion of his personal space became unbearable he turned away, readjusting the blanket to give himself a reason for letting go. Kuroba opened his eyes when Saguru changed positions, watching the blond's every move with a kind of desperation. Saguru tried to meet his gaze, but it was disturbing beyond words to see the magician looking so vulnerable. Kuroba had worked so hard to create an image of unconcern and invulnerability, Saguru'd unconsciously come to think the magician truly was like that.

He wasn't.

Yuushi interrupted them when he entered bearing two cups of tea. Grateful for the distraction, Saguru shoved one into Kuroba's hands, not liking how chilled the boy still felt. "Drink. Pull yourself together." And then tell me what I need to know, he added silently.

Kuroba blinked sleepily, huddling over his cup, but he drank without protest. He continued to watch Saguru as if afraid the other boy would disappear when he stopped paying attention. Saguru savored his own tea, letting the caffeine make up for his lack of sleep. Yuushi joined them with another cup, sitting on the couch's armrest again and drinking in silence.

By the time all three teacups were empty, dawn was lightening the sky outside. Kuroba's eyes had finally lost their vacant look, but once his situation had seemed to sink in, he'd withdrawn as much as he could. Sliding to the end of the couch furthest from Saguru to the point where he was practically melting into Riku's side, he stared straight ahead at the bookshelves on the other side of the room. His expression betrayed his minimally successful attempts to reconstruct his usual unconcerned mask to hide behind.

Even though Saguru knew about Kid's perfect memory, and realized Kuroba was probably trying to process everything he'd just said and done while not fully in command of himself, it still hurt.

Saguru swept his stray notes into a pile simply to give his hands something to do, and then leaned back into the armrest on his side of the couch, watching Kuroba's profile.

He hadn't expected that seeing the mask come back up would hurt.

"Kaito-kun?"

Kuroba glanced over reflexively at hearing his given name. Saguru strongly suspected he would otherwise have gotten no response. The magician's eyes were alert but shuttered, trying to hide the shadows still lurking there. Saguru thought he saw guilt flash for a moment too, before the blank expression could conceal it.
He raised an eyebrow. Kuroba looked away, pulling the blanket tighter around his shoulders.

After several more minutes of silence, he spoke, staring at the floor.

"Hakuba-kun… when you first met the Kaitou Kid, you asked why he stole. He said that your job as a detective was to figure it out." Kuroba spun his handle-less teacup on his finger, a delaying tactic that Saguru waited silently through. "How much did you find out?"

Saguru paused to order his thoughts. He'd sometimes hoped for an opportunity like this, to share what he'd discovered, but never imagined circumstances quite like these. And if Kuroba was referring to his other persona in third person again, now wasn't the time to bring up the other teen's confession.

"Why does the Kid steal?" Saguru mused. "Because there's something out there worth killing for, or worth dying for, depending on your perspective. The first Kid died, and the second one nearly has…" Saguru was slightly surprised that Kuroba didn't react at that, before concluding that the other boy was simply too drained for anything to provoke much reaction at the moment. "But neither has ever killed. So I conclude that he's looking to protect something." He glanced at Kuroba, hoping that he was right. "He steals because something is so important to him, he's willing to stare in the face of death and laugh. If I'm right about his identity, he may be looking for some answers, too. Or revenge. He's never told me which."

Kuroba turned to sit sideways on the couch again, back against Yuushi's side, and looked at Saguru, tired and pale and drawn. He seemed to have finally given up on his masks, lacking the inner reserves to draw upon. Now he simply appeared raw.

"If you knew who the Kid was, what would you do?"

Saguru saw Yuushi tense almost imperceptibly. He couldn't really blame the man. His past record in dealing with the Kid wasn't anything to inspire confidence.

"Before you disappeared, I might have been able to answer that. Now, I simply don't know." He honestly didn't. He felt rather like he was sitting on a barbed wire fence.

Kuroba stared at him blankly, as if such an answer from his mouth were inconceivable. That hurt, too, but it was even more bewildering. Kuroba had evidently incorporated Saguru into the foundation of his world, and yet he still expected the detective to try to capture the Kid at his first opportunity. Saguru realized with surprise that from what he knew about Kuroba, he was probably the dark-haired boy's closest male friend. And given how obsessed he'd been about catching the Kid, back when the thief had still been an impersonal quarry… It was no wonder Kuroba's attitude towards him seemed full of contradictions.

Of course, the same was true of him, if he was willing to admit it. Saguru didn't make friends easily, but Kuroba had slipped through his walls almost as if they didn't exist. They made quite a pair, really: friendly rivals by day at everything from Aoko's attentions to who had the highest grades, and by night playing their tacit game of cat-and-mouse, though the roles of predator and prey seemed constantly in flux.

"Not good enough." Yuushi laid a protective, supportive hand on Kuroba's shoulder. "You can't maintain your balancing act any longer, Hakuba-san. It's time for you to choose. Will you attempt to capture the Kaitou Kid… or will you be a friend to Kaito-kun?"

It was one of his worst nightmares come true. Certainly not the worst—that honor was reserved for the dream that had started after Kuroba had disappeared, where he finally got the Kid in handcuffs
only to see a sniper's bullet go through the thief's head the moment he could no longer dodge. The nastiest variation included Aoko beside Kuroba, killed while trying to protect him. The situation he found himself in now was not much more pleasant, however. No more deniability, no more masks, simply the choice between the laws he'd always considered paramount… and Kuroba.

He briefly covered his face with a hand. He'd known this was coming, ever since Kuroba had vanished and he'd been forced to confront the idea of what he would do if Kuroba died, or if he caught the Kid. He just hadn't wanted to face it.

When he looked up again, Kuroba had leaned his head back against Riku, eyes closed. His expression held a faintly grim resignation, and Saguru realized what Kuroba thought his decision was. He swore mentally.

He could not arrest Kuroba. Not with the sneaking suspicions he'd formed about the details of Kuroba's undertaking, and not with the more-friends-less-rivals-to-the-death friendship they'd been forming since Kuroba returned home.

In fact, when he thought about it… he'd already made his choice, when he stole a glove for Kuroba's sake.

"You'd better have a damn good reason for being the Kid, Kuroba, because you've just forced me to restructure an entire paradigm for you."

Kuroba jerked up in astonishment, eyes flying open.

"Are you serious?" His hushed, half-hopeful voice crushed any lingering doubts Saguru might have had. This was Kuroba.

"I may need to have my head examined, but… yes. I'd rather not see you in jail, Kuroba. And as much of a pain as you are when you're Kid… I don't want to see you killed, either. I believe tomorrow I'll call Nakamori and inform him that I'm turning my hiatus from the Task Force into an official retirement."

Kuroba stared at him, and then a wondering smile slowly spread across the magician's face. It was the most heartfelt expression Saguru ever seen from him. He kept opening his mouth and then closing it again, as if he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

Saguru still felt slightly off-kilter from the magnitude of the decision he'd just admitted to, and waited a few minutes to see if Kuroba would ever return to proper coherency. When Kuroba finally shook his head, Saguru took it as his cue to introduce the next pressing question.

"Kuroba-kun… what are you looking for?"

Kuroba looked down at the carpet, silent for a minute. "When I started, I was looking for answers. What happened to my father, mostly. What I managed to learn put me on the trail of something else."

"What, then?"

"A myth."

"I did notice your later track record favors gems with legends attached, often related to healing or immortality… dear God." Saguru paled as several key pieces fell into place. Kuroba watched him impassively. "That's what you're after, why you've got people shooting at you. That's why you're willing to die for it."
"They're not the only ones who have tried to kill me… but they're the most persistent, yes."

"What do they want?"

"From me? They'd be happy if I did their work for them, I'm sure, although one or two would much rather see the Kid dead before I can cause too much trouble. It's why Kid isn't always shot at. As for specifics… I don't even know how much was lost in translation and over time, but supposedly in the light of a comet that comes once every ten thousand years, a gem called Pandora will cry tears of immortality. It hides within a larger gem, identity unknown, but can be found because it glows red under the light of the moon."

"I always wondered why there never seemed to be heists on nights of the new moon. I put it down to vanity after a while, but it didn't seem a good enough reason."

Kuroba gave him a ghost of a smile. "Vanity wasn't sufficient?"

"You're the Kid, Kuroba-kun. Kid never does things without a good reason. Although I take issue with you for essentially setting yourself up as a bloody walking target."

That got him a single, voiceless, mirthless chuckle. "It was my only lead to them."

"I know." Saguru briefly covered his face with a hand again. "That doesn't mean I have to like it."

"Young master? Are you in there?" A soft knock on the door announced his grandmother's presence. Kaito and Yuushi exchanged glances and disappeared behind the couch just before she opened the door.

"Did you stay up all night?" Her expression of fond amusement took the force out of her reproving tone.

He smiled faintly. "I was going to go to bed earlier, but I got distracted."

"Shall I see about breakfast, then, or do you plan on taking a nap first?"

Saguru weighed his possibilities. Sleep sounded rather attractive at the moment, but he still had Kuroba and Yuushi to deal with. While the past day's events had been more exhausting than most, this certainly wasn't the first time he'd stayed up all night. He'd done it many times, especially while chasing Kid.

"Breakfast," he said decisively. He'd go to bed early tonight instead.

She smiled at him and went off, leaving the door open behind her. He waited a moment to be sure she wasn't coming back, then turned to look over the back of the couch.

Kuroba and Yuushi were gone. In their place, one of his pages of notes rested innocently on the carpet. He picked it up, and found a hastily scribbled message on the back.

H-
Sorry to disappear. If you still want to talk, can you come over?
-K

Saguru simply shook his head in disbelief. He was definitely going to visit Kuroba's house today, if only to ask how on earth they managed to materialize and vanish like that. He hadn't had time to think about it when they first showed up, but if anyone else could figure out that trick then it meant there were some serious holes in his security system.
Because Kuroba's arrival had been so early, Saguru prepared for the day, ate enough breakfast to satisfy his grandmother, and still made it out of the house well before he'd usually be leaving for school. He felt less guilty about heading straight for Kuroba's since it was a Saturday, and missing the half-day of extra study at school wouldn't matter much for either of them.

The more he had time to think, the more he wanted answers. He'd always considered home to be safe, until Kuroba had managed to punch holes into that belief along with everything else. He wasn't stupid enough to think he'd gone unnoticed by the people after Kuroba; he was too high profile. He'd liked to think, however, that even if he did manage to catch their interest, then the manor security would hold good against attempted intrusions. To know that Kuroba had gotten inside undetected, when his potential enemies were probably better at infiltration than the Kid… it left him highly disconcerted.

At his knock, Mizuki opened the door. "Ah, Saguru-san. Kaito said you might be coming over. Please, come in."

Feeling slightly self-conscious, he obeyed, wondering what exactly Kuroba had told her. He didn't even know if she was aware of her son's activities.

When they entered the den, Kaito greeted him with an enthusiastic "Hakuba-kun!", coming over with a grin. "You got here earlier than I thought you would."

"You managed to arouse my curiosity," Saguru responded dryly.

Kuroba paused to look him up and down. "You wear that on a Saturday?" Kuroba wrinkled his nose. "You have got to get some casual clothes, Hakuba-kun."

Saguru glanced down at his outfit: a high quality, short-sleeved polo shirt and tan slacks. "This is casual, Kuroba-kun."

"Like I said. Do you even own a t-shirt?"

"I happen to like collared shirts."

Kuroba gave him a long-suffering look. "Do you ever bother to just act like a teenager?"

"If I do, no one will take me seriously," Saguru pointed out in a perfectly reasonable tone of voice. Of all the things for Kuroba to be arguing with him about, Saguru's fashion sense hadn't been something he'd expected. "It's fine for you, but I work with the police. I get enough flack for my supposed inexperience without juvenile behavior compounding the offense."

"But you're not always at work!"

"I have an image to maintain," Saguru countered, hating the stiffness creeping into his tone. "The Hakuba family is a prominent name in British society."

"...At the expense of having a life?"

Mizuki laughed. "Now, Kaito, play nice. I'll leave you alone, since I should be going to bed anyway. Oh, and Kaito?" she added, almost as an afterthought. Kuroba looked up expectantly. "If I'm still asleep, wake me up to say good-bye before you leave?"

Kuroba nodded and when she was gone, shooed Saguru towards the empty couch. Saguru sat, and promptly shoved Kuroba's legs off the couch when the magician attempted to prop his feet on Saguru's leg. Kuroba responded by bending his knees just enough to stay stretched out on the entire
couch except for Saguru's spot on the far end. Yuushi occupied the nearest chair, forming a lopsided triangle between them.

"I am not a pillow. And must you always sprawl?" Saguru inquired, temporarily sidetracked.

"Yep!" Kuroba responded brightly. Too brightly. Wondering if Kuroba felt nervous over his impending interrogation, or whether he was still fighting the residual effects of his nightmare, Saguru casually dropped his hand from his leg so that his arm rested on top of Kuroba's sock-clad feet. The dark-haired boy immediately unwound just a little bit. Still wanting to confirm Saguru wasn't a figment of his imagination, then. He left his hand there.

"How did you get in and out of my house?"

"Magic," Kuroba said with an impish grin.

"Kuroba-kun, between the enemies my father's collected over the years and the fact that I'm not far behind him, our security is supposed to be state-of-the-art. If you can get in… You may be the world's greatest magician, but that doesn't mean someone else can't use the same trick. I need to know where the hole in my security is, so that I can fix it."

Kuroba and Yuushi exchanged glances. "It's… not a problem with your security, Hakuba-kun," Kuroba said finally.

Hakuba raised an eyebrow. "Then what?"

Yuushi sighed. "I guess this isn't something where you'll be able to take our word for it?"

"When Kid's enemies are willing to threaten Kid's friends, and I've just set myself up as the latter? No."

Kuroba flinched slightly, but Saguru wasn't sorry for saying it.

"I can't believe I'm making this kind of exception again…" Yuushi shook his head. "Hakuba-san, will you swear that what you're told won't go any farther than yourself? Not even Aoko-san."

"Yes," he answered without hesitation.

"You may not like the answer."

"Yuushi-san, I need to know. If for nothing else, than for my peace of mind."

"Then do try and keep an open mind about this, will you?"

"I haven't had Kuroba-kun committed yet, have I?"

Yuushi smirked faintly in response and reached out a hand. A wall of what looked like dark smoke rose between them, then dissipated a moment later. Yuushi was gone.

"When Kaito-kun said magic… he wasn't lying."

Saguru shot upright and spun around. Yuushi stood behind the couch, arms crossed.

"…I see Kuroba-kun do that on a regular basis, and I know it's just a smoke bomb," Saguru said levelly, firmly ignoring the part of his brain that tried to point out that no smoke he'd ever seen moved quite like that.
Yuushi glanced over at Kuroba. "I was afraid of this. Do you mind?"

A mischievous smile emerged on Kuroba's face and he shook his head as Yuushi walked around the couch. Before Saguru could react, Yuushi grabbed him and pulled him forward into another dark something that formed behind the taller man. A riotous confusion of color and darkness confronted Saguru's vision for a split-second, and then he was standing outside on a cold, clear night, staring directly toward the spotlit Lord Nelson's Column across the way. Riku let go of Saguru's arm and gestured to the nighttime panorama before them.

"Is this or is this not Trafalgar Square?"

Saguru goggled, confirming that all the landmarks stood in their proper places: Canada House, South Africa House, Whitehall, the four plinths, even a few pigeon flocks bustling about and harassing tourists, despite the late hour. He looked behind him and found Kuroba dividing his attention between the view and Saguru himself, a faint smile on his face. Saguru returned to more important considerations, such as how they'd suddenly traveled over halfway around the world and through a dozen time zones in the blink of an eye.

"I'm a detective. I can't exactly deny what I'm seeing… but how?"

"The same way I can do this." Yuushi snapped his fingers, and dark fire blossomed in the air. This time, however, it floated above his fingertips instead of vanishing.

The instinct to run warred with complete fascination at the sight. Hakuba forced himself to maintain his usual aplomb and said, "You did that trick already. All that proves to me is that you have pyrotechnics, not that it's supernaturally based. What is it, a miniature flamethrower somewhere?"

"It's not technology, Hakuba-san…" The fire flared and vanished. Riku used the same hand to indicate Trafalgar Square. "How else do you explain being here?"

"I'm trying to. You're not helping. I admit that you seem to have just demonstrated teleportation, but you have yet to provide any evidence that it is due to magic rather than technology."

Kuroba stared at him for a moment. "I never thought I'd say this, Hakuba-kun, but I think you read too much science fiction. And what about Occam's Razor, then?"

"I find the existence of more advanced technology a much simpler explanation than magic," Saguru replied dryly. "And surely even you've heard that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

"Oh, give it a rest, Hakuba-kun! Skeptic…" Kuroba muttered.

"Your friend Akako-san has her own unusual abilities, after all, if you've noticed…" Riku pointed out. Saguru nodded reluctantly. He'd been trying rather hard to not notice, but it was difficult to ignore some of the girl's… peculiarities. "It's just not normal here."

"Which means… what, exactly?"

"It's why you couldn't find any records of Yuushi Riku last week, Hakuba-kun," Kuroba offered. "He doesn't actually exist here."

"Then where does he exist, Kuroba-kun?"

Kuroba grimaced. "…Another world."
"You're telling me alternate realities actually exist?"

"To be honest? I wouldn't put it past them," Kuroba admitted, with a shudder that piqued Saguru's curiosity as the dark-haired boy moved a step closer. "But that's not quite what I meant. These other worlds aren't necessarily reflections of our own. Some are similar, but others have no connections whatsoever, and all of them are just as self-contained and real as this one."

"I... see. And he's from one of them?"

"'He' is standing right here, and yes," Yuushi interjected, "I am. Not everyone could do magic there, either... but a friend and I managed to be exceptions to the rule."

"The same way you managed to miss 'normal' when it comes to eye color?" Saguru couldn't help himself—Yuushi's eyes had been subtly bothering him ever since he'd caught a glimpse of them the night before.

Yuushi's expression darkened. "Something like, yes."

"Then, while you've supposedly been gone with that magic troupe... you've been traveling between worlds?"

"Well, yes, though I would like to point out that the traveling magician part was true," Kuroba answered. "But you see why the cover story was necessary now, right?"

"...I can't believe I'm actually taking you seriously."

"That's your fault for being a detective. You have to follow a trail of evidence to the end... and then you can't deny your conclusions."

"I'm perfectly aware of that. It doesn't mean I always have to be happy about it. I'm not entirely convinced that all of this is necessarily magic, but I'll grant you that it's certainly not normal, and that other worlds may actually exist."

"Still your own fault. Back to your original question," Kuroba went on. "As you can see, no one else is about to circumvent your precautions the way Riku-kun did."

"Yuushi-san, you said that you and a friend were exceptions... can anyone else do what you can do?"

Yuushi gazed across the square. "Those who can aren't going to come here. They've got more important things to do."

Something clicked in Saguru's mind.

"Those people... they're why you're both leaving again, aren't they?" He narrowed his eyes at Kuroba. "They're doing something out there that's even bigger than what you're trying to accomplish as Kid."

And having just learned the specifics of what Kuroba was trying to do, the idea that the magician had gotten himself mixed up into something worse than snipers and seekers of immortality did nothing for his peace of mind.

Kuroba nodded slowly. "We would have left earlier if Nightmare hadn't happened. We need to catch up with Riku-kun's friend and give him a hand with some stuff."
His expression was unusually serious, the innocent-and-clueless act stripped away. In its place was the calm focus Saguru'd known had to exist, but which Kuroba'd always been careful not to show around him except on heists. Without the costume, this was neither Kid the thief nor Kuroba the class clown, simply... Kaito.

Saguru almost had to smile at the absurdity of the thought that popped into his head. But chasing Kid was practically expected of him by now, wasn't it?

"Can I come with you?"

After waving his hand in front of Kuroba's stunned face, Yuushi said, "I think you broke his brain again."

Kuroba seemed to visibly restart his mental processes, and started shaking his head. "Oh, no. Bad idea. You'll make everyone worry about you, especially if you've already submitted your resignation from the Task Force. People will wonder if someone blackmailed you, and then made you disappear."

Saguru shrugged. "I'll tell Inspector Nakamori I'm going back to England instead, then. I hadn't planned on staying in Japan, you know."

"And your parents?"

He thought for a few minutes. "...I'll tell them that I got a lead on Kid and want to chase it down in my own time, or something. It is the truth, after all. I already dropped out of my classes in England when I transferred back into Japan's school system, so I don't have any obligations waiting for me at home."

"But why?" Kuroba spread his hands helplessly. "You're not involved. And this is not a safe trip."

"I don't know. Because you think it's important. ...Because you need someone to watch your back."

Kuroba looked torn, crossing his arms and staring out at the Square's nightlife.

"Kaito-kun," Yuushi said quietly, "if Hakuba-san retires, then his uncharacteristic behavior may well cause him to become a target if Kid disappears again."

Saguru jumped on Yuushi's train of thought. "Whereas if I can't be found, I won't be in any danger until you're around again to give them hell for it. Besides," he added, thinking back on Kuroba's recent behavior, "I'm sure you'd probably rather keep an eye on me to know for sure just how much danger I'm in at any given time. Better the devil you know than uncertainty, right?"

Watching Kuroba's profile, Saguru saw the magician's eyes close and his lips thin. "You're being entirely too reasonable about this."

"Possibly. Things are boring when you're not around."

Kuroba blinked. "They are?"

"I miss having the chance to regularly think in Escher."

Kuroba snickered briefly, but then became serious again. "None of this has to be an issue. Hakubakun, some of the things out there... there are worse fates than dying. You can stay and simply keep your semi-hiatus from the Task Force, whether or not you stay in Japan. It's moot which you do, because either way you're not going to have a Kid to chase. No unusual behavior, no reason to
become a target. And you stay safe."

"Kuroba-kun—"

"I don't want to hear it," Kuroba cut Saguru off. "You have no good reason to convince me to take you with us, and I'll be damned before I let you risk your life for a bad one."

Saguru eyed Kuroba briefly, and then sighed. He obviously wouldn't be able to get Kuroba to back down on this one. "Fine. At least give me the courtesy of seeing you off."

Kuroba gave him a suspicious look, not trusting such an easy win, but eventually nodded. "We're leaving this afternoon. If it'll help you worry less, we'll stop by on our way out."

"It would." Saguru hid a massive yawn behind his hand. "Now, I'm sure you have lots to do where I'll just get in the way, and I never made it to bed last night. Would you mind taking me home, Yuushi-san?"

Yuushi obligingly made a portal, and they left England for mid-morning Japan. "Kuroba-kun?" Saguru said before they left him alone in front of his house. "Give Aoko-kun a proper goodbye. She's more worried about you than she shows."

Kuroba nodded. "I know. Why do you think we're not leaving until this afternoon?"

After they were gone, Saguru hurried inside and up to his room. True, he'd gotten no sleep and had wanted to be taken home, but he never told Kuroba that he'd be going to bed… He had some phone calls to make.

Several hours later, he was on a leave of absence from school in Japan, Inspector Nakamori believed he had obligations back in England he couldn't ignore any longer, and his parents both thought he was leaving to track down a private case. His mother hadn't been very happy about his news, particularly when he informed her that his phone service wouldn't be working for an unknown length of time, but she couldn't exactly stop him from half a world away.

He also had a small bag with several useful items hidden inconspicuously beneath his chair—close enough to grab quickly, but out of sight from Kuroba's too-sharp eyes. He couldn't say exactly why he felt so driven to go through with this, but now that he had made his decision, he was going to very thoroughly and methodically prepare to see it through. He was nothing if not efficient.

Which left one last important conversation: Aoko. Sighing, he dialed her number and waited to ring through. They'd become good friends over the past year, especially in the weeks Kuroba had disappeared. He might have even asked her out someday, were it not obvious to everyone but themselves that she and Kuroba had eyes only for each other.

"Hello, Aoko speaking!"

"This is Saguru, Aokokun. Have you seen Kuroba-kun today?"

"Yes, he came over for a while because he's leaving tonight. Why do you ask?"

"He said he would stop by on his way out of town, but didn't say when. Anyway, I had another reason for calling."

"Yes, what is it?"

Saguru sighed. "I'm leaving for a while, too. I'm sorry to give you so little warning, but I got a
private lead on a case that I need to follow up right away. I'll probably be out of touch while I'm gone."

For a moment, all Saguru heard was Aoko's quiet breathing. "You can't let the police handle it?"

Thinking quickly, he replied, "Private detectives have more recourse for investigation than the police force, Aoko. You know that. This one goes beyond their reach."

"You're sure you have to go?"

"...Yes, I'm sure. I can't tell you about it, but this is important."

"You and Kaito both, gallivanting all over Japan on a moment's notice. Hmph!"

"How about this? If I meet up with Kuroba-kun while I'm gone, I'll guilt him into calling you."

Aoko giggled. "I'm holding you to that!"

"All right. Thank you for understanding, Aoko-kun."

"I'm sure that whatever case you have is important to someone. You can't turn it down just to keep me company."

In the background, Saguru heard a young voice suddenly call, "Aoko-neesan!" He blinked.

"Is that Kenta-kun?"

"Hold on a moment..." Aoko's voice became muffled briefly, and then she returned to the phone. "Yes, it is." She lowered her voice, presumably because Kenta was somewhere relatively close in the house. "I wasn't going to let him go back to the nursing facility last night, not after what happened... To be honest, Saguru-kun, I don't want to let him go back at all. He doesn't have any living relatives, and I'm afraid of what might happen to him."

Saguru paused, processing the implications. "Aoko-kun, are you seriously saying you want to keep him?"

More silence, longer this time. Then, in a very small voice, Aoko replied, "Yes."

Saguru closed his eyes. "It's your decision, Aoko-kun, provided you can convince your father to agree. Just be sure you think it through, all right? He's not a pet."

"I know. But I know that if I let him go... I'll always wonder about it."

"If you do take him in, I'm sorry I won't be around. Although..." he trailed off as a stray thought demanded attention. "Since you don't really know anyone Kenta-kun's age, I've a passing acquaintance with a girl who is also raising a young boy. You might enjoy getting to know her, and the Beika district isn't far from Ekoda."

"Really?" The sudden hope in Aoko's question confirmed just how serious she was about Kenta, and her awareness of how big an undertaking she was looking to acquire. To have someone to turn to for advice, or even just commiseration... And with both Kuroba and Saguru gone for an indeterminate length of time, Aoko could use another friend besides Keiko.

"Her name is Mouri Ran. If you explain the situation, I'm sure she'll understand. The boy's name is Conan. He's been there for several months, though I'm not positive what his family situation is."

After a quick search through his cell phone database, he gave her the number for the Mouri Detective
"Thank you!" Pure relief colored her voice. "Um... do you think you could tell Kaito when you see him? Kenta-kun was taking a nap when he came by, so we didn't talk about him." She laughed softly. "Tell him I'll be too busy to miss him this time!"

A smile tugged at Saguru's lips. "All right, I will. I'm sure he'll be glad to hear it."

"I need to go now. I still have to talk to Daddy about this, but I'm pretty sure I can convince him."

"You can convince your father of nearly anything when you try, Aoko-kun."

She laughed again. "Daughter's privilege, I guess. Take care of yourself, Saguru-kun."

"You too."

They said their goodbyes, and he ended the call with a thoughtful expression.

"What is it I'm supposed to be glad to hear?"

Saguru jumped slightly in his chair and looked around. Kuroba stood on the far side of the room with Yuushi, grinning.

"How long have you been there?"

"Just in time to hear you say I'll be glad to hear something. So what is it?"

"Aoko-kun is determined to try and gain custody of Connery Kenta. She said to tell you that taking care of him will make sure she's too busy to miss you while you're gone this time."

A look of deep relief appeared on Kuroba's face. "So that's what happened to him. If Aoko's watching out for him, then he'll do okay."

"Connery-san also had a trust fund set up for Kenta-kun." Saguru gave Kuroba a significant look. "Between that account and the man's life insurance, Kenta-kun can have his surgery."

Myriad emotions flitted across Kuroba's face in the blink of an eye. Were Saguru feeling more alert, he might have been able to analyze them. As it was, he felt too exhausted to even try.

"That's... good." Kuroba shook his head as if to clear it. "We really do need to go, now." He leveled a glare at Saguru. "Look... Don't go looking for trouble, all right?"

Saguru let a hint of a smirk develop. "I don't plan to go after your snipers while you're gone, if that's what you're worried about."

"Good. I don't want to come back to find you dead, Hakuba-kun," Kuroba said quietly.

"You won't."

"Take care of yourself, Hakuba-san," Yuushi said, walking across the room and extending a hand for a Western-style goodbye. Saguru shook it firmly.

"You, too."

Yuushi opened a portal and stepped through. Pausing, Kuroba threw Saguru a final, inscrutable glance and followed behind. With no time to stop and second-guess, Hakuba grabbed his bag and
dove through the shrinking doorway before the route could close.

Chapter End Notes

Credit to Ellen Brand for this chapter's title. Also credit to her for the concept of the Black Phantom seen in last chapter's nightmare.
In Search of Sanity

When Kaito made it into the darkness corridor, he found Riku waiting with his arms folded.

"Did he ask you something?" Riku turned and started walking, pausing briefly to let Kaito catch up. "You took awhile."

"Eh? No, I was just behind you." Kaito snapped his fingers as realization dawned. "Right. Relative time. One of the craziest things about this place, I swear. That must be why everyone at home thought I was gone six weeks, when I was sure I kept track of days and we'd been gone less than that."

Riku opened his mouth to respond, but before he could comment a faint 'thump' sounded behind them. Instinctively, they both whirled around with weapons in hand. And then Kaito swore.

Over fifty feet away, Hakuba 'I-wouldn't-know-spontaneity-if-it-bit-me-in-the-arse' Saguru unsteadily picked himself up off the ground, the portal to their home world closing behind him. He swayed, looking around in a slightly dazed manner.

"No, no, no," Riku suddenly declared with increasing vehemence, and started running.

Kaito looked behind Hakuba and realized with a sense of horror that heartless were quickly beginning to materialize around the other boy. From what he'd learned about how heartless sought hearts, the stronger the better, and the inner strength Hakuba must have been relying on just to stand in a corridor without any type of shielding from the dark… Hakuba had to be shining like a beacon to them.

"Hakuba-kun! Run!" He yelled, dashing forward. The command spurred Hakuba into action and he ran in their direction, but his jerky and uncoordinated movements did nothing to ease Kaito's peace of mind.

They met up halfway, just before Hakuba half-collapsed onto the ground again, panting heavily as he tried to breathe under the influence of the corridor. Before Kaito could start chewing him out properly, Riku grabbed Hakuba's wrist, ignoring the blond's twitch when he did.

"The darkness likes to eat people like you, Hakuba-san. This is why Kaito-kun didn't want you along. Come on, you're going home."

Hakuba's head jerked up to look at Riku, a flash of anger tinged with panic in his eyes. The next thing Kaito knew the detective had handcuffed Riku's wrist to his own, and grabbed the other so that Riku couldn't interfere.

The reaction was instantaneous and completely unexpected.

Riku let out a savage cry unlike anything Kaito had heard from him before, his tall frame obscured by a flash of dark fire that forced Kaito to back away, temporarily blinded. When he could finally see again, blinking away residual spots, he saw that it had momentarily driven the heartless back as well, but that gave little comfort in the face of the state his friends were in.

Hakuba was curled up in a fetal position on the ground, trembling violently. He didn't look hurt, but he'd clamped his eyes shut and the heels of his palms dug into his ears, trying to block out something Kaito could neither see nor hear. Beside him Riku stood gasping, eyes wild, one hand cradling his handcuffed wrist—which was no longer handcuffed—and there was a half-melted pile of twisted
metal on the ground between him and Hakuba.

"Hakuba-kun!" Kaito temporarily ignored the heartless, stepping closer to the blond. Riku seemed to regain his senses and looked down, expression melting from fury to near-panic. He reached down a hand.

"Hakuba-san, did I hurt—"

Hakuba jerked away from Riku before the boy could touch him, though he failed to put any real distance between them. "Stay—the hell—away from me!" he snarled weakly, eyes still closed. "Oh, God—Kuroba-kun, get me out of here and away from those—things, dead zones…"

Kaito looked up sharply, to see the heartless were creeping towards them again.

*Okay, don't panic. You've got a detective who's being attacked by the environment, looks something just went 'sproing' inside and is suddenly scared to be near Riku-kun. And he's so out of it that he's asking you for help.*

*You've also got heartless trying devour all of your hearts, and there is absolutely no way you can take on this many with flashbombs and a sword and still protect Hakuba-kun.*

Under normal circumstances he might have been willing to try taking on such a massive swarm with just the two of them, but he and Riku simply weren't fast enough to defend Hakuba from all directions, and the blond was in no position to protect himself.

*Not to mention the longer he's here, the more danger he's in from losing his heart to the darkness of the corridor regardless of what else has gone wrong…*

*Panicking!*

Kaito desperately tried to think of a solution to their predicament as he stared the heartless down. His hand strayed to the inside of his jacket, toward the flashbombs that would be his best line of defense if they charged.

His fingers brushed against laminated cardboard, and he felt a pulse against his touch. Memory whispered suddenly, and he almost didn't dare let himself think as possibility began to solidify. There was no time to think it through too carefully, no time to warn Riku. They were outside the restrictions of home, now, and while his previous attempts hadn't exactly gone smoothly, this was Hakuba, dammit; he was not about to lose the infuriating detective when they'd just managed to discover that they could actually get along…

The top card slipped into his hand, and he was oddly unsurprised to find himself holding Luster Dragon, calling it forth almost before he'd flipped the card over.

Even though he'd been expecting it, the energy drain drove Kaito to his knees. This was going to have to work, because he was going to be pretty much useless afterwards. Flashes of light in the corner of his eye and the roar that accompanied them announced his ally's arrival, and he looked up in time to see some more nicely flashy explosions clear a decent sized perimeter around the trio, but it wasn't enough. The heartless still swarmed the edges and immediately began to approach again.

A glimmering muzzle nudged him. :There is not time for sleep, young one,: a calm female voice commanded. :Stand.:  

"Can't," Kaito muttered, looking up at emerald scales. Still curled in on himself, Hakuba twisted around to lean against their defender, pained expression relaxing by a fraction at the contact.
The dragon's tail curved around Riku as she crouched protectively over the three of them. "I cannot remain here long on your strength."

"We have to get out of here, but I can't find the king fast enough!" Riku protested.

Kaito stared bleakly at the heartless, hardly believing how quickly everything had gone sour. It hadn't been enough. They needed help and they needed it now.

:He is not the only one willing to give you aid. :Abruptly the dragon ran a claw through the air, opening what looked like a tear in the normal fabric of reality, edged with oddly familiar, swirling, colored mist. :Travel is safer this way. And you are not without allies.: 

Watching the heartless, Kaito felt his deck pulse again in his jacket pocket. Luster had been Yugi's card, given as a promise and a memory.

He made his decision.

Then, considering that Riku currently seemed to be the only one of them currently capable of standing… he looked up at the dragon.

"Help?"

Despite the dragon's lack of a human face, Kaito swore she gave him a look of amused exasperation. A moment later, she had swung Kaito onto her back, taken Hakuba in her arms (forelegs? Did it matter?) and loosely draped her tail around Riku's waist.

:Consider yourselves lucky that once I'm home, I won't need you in order to retain my form.: 

Kaito had no time to reply, only to wrap his arms around her neck and hang on for dear life as she ducked through the rip in reality, narrowly escaping the heartless into… somewhere else. Illuminated darkness—Kaito couldn't think of any other way to describe it, despite the inherent oxymoron—stretched as far as the eye could see, accented by swirls of blue, purple, and silver-grey.

"Where is this place?" Riku's voice held no fear, only a healthy dose of confusion.

: Haven't you guessed? This is where the shadows play, between the bounds of light and dark. These are not the wild shadows, though, where not even your rules of space apply. A long time ago a powerful shadowchild used the light and dark together to impose order and structure on a pocket of shadows, creating what we call the Shadow Realm. :

*Wait a minute… shadowchild?*

: The shadows are not safe for those not given the gift to know them, but you are both under Kaito-botchama's protection and consequently, under mine.: 

"It's not hungry, like the other place." At Hakuba's whisper, Kaito had to reign in the desire to interrupt and demand to know what on earth was wrong with him. "But it's curious, prodding and poking and—ohGod—tasting, all the way down to the bone if it could, just to understand something it doesn't recognize…"

*That does not make me feel any better! You're supposed to be staying safely at home, you idiot!* 

: They might with how vulnerable you are right now, young one, but you need not fear that. I could not take you directly from the darkness to where the Pharaoh is, nor can I leave this place myself, but I can open the way for you to reach him from here. Call upon me again when you have need of me.:
A claw rent the air in front of them, and she took a step forward. Abruptly, the real world replaced the Shadow Realm, and Kaito and Hakuba tumbled to the ground in the dragons' sudden absence. Kaito thudded onto carpeted floor with a wince, too exhausted still to catch himself properly, but he avoided anything beyond the promises of a few bruises later.

Hakuba wasn't so lucky. Not ready to regain his feet yet, he stumbled sideways, directly into Riku. Riku automatically reached up to steady him, hands wrapping around Hakuba's forearms. Hakuba yelped and jerked backwards, dropping heavily to the ground but immediately scrambling backwards into the corner of the room furthest from its other occupants, once more curling up in a ball with his hands over his ears.

"Grandpa!"

Kaito zeroed in on familiar tri-colored spikes, ignoring the blond American nearby who was now watching them with narrowed eyes.

"Yugi-kun! Listen, I don't know what happened, but something's gone wrong with Hakuba-kun. You guys know weird, and we don't have anyone else to ask, and Luster Dragon brought us here…"

"Luster? Yug', who are these guys?" The blond teen stepped in front of Yugi with a fiercely protective expression, traces of a Brooklyn accent edging his words. "Someone playing Shadow Games you never told us about?"

"It's okay, Joey. They're friends. I told you about Kaito-kun and Ansem-san, remember?" Yugi maneuvered around Joey towards Hakuba, looking concerned.

Joey followed behind, but he didn't make it more than a few steps across the room before Hakuba gasped out, "Stay away from me!"

"Everyone back away!" Solomon Mouto stood in the nearby doorway, taking in the scene in an instant. "You too, Yugi."

Hearing the tone of command and hoping that the old man knew what he was doing, Kaito picked himself up off the floor and grabbed hold of Joey. He half-dragged, half-leaned on Joey as he staggered to the far side of the room, not caring what the blond might think of him. Yugi and Riku followed, and they watched silently as Solomon knelt down beside Hakuba and calmly placed a hand on his arm. "It's all right, son."

Rather than flinching back like Kaito expected him to, Hakuba immediately turned towards the older man, one of his hands coming up to grasp Solomon's. A fraction of the tension in him bled away and he whispered, almost too quietly for Kaito to hear, "Help me."

Kaito stared, watching Solomon murmur something back and then take on a look of intense concentration. "You know what's going on?" he blurted before he could stop himself.

"Of course," Solomon replied absentl, focused on whatever he was doing with Hakuba. "This is hardly my first time seeing empathic overload, though rarely this dramatic. Most have the opportunity to grow into their talent as it strengthens over time. Is this his first time manifesting?"

Kaito nearly laughed. "Empathic? Hakuba-kun? The guy who defaults between smug, arrogant, and neutral?"

"Well, that would make sense." Solomon brushed the hair off Hakuba's forehead in a soothing motion. The blond had readjusted to lean against Solomon's shoulder with his eyes closed, seeming to ignore everything else but the man's presence. "If he's untrained, then I'm sure he locked down his
own emotions to keep control of what he was sensing from everyone else. Does he avoid physical contact?"

"Yeah, ever since I met him," Kaito replied with a growing sense of dread. No longer feeling up to standing, he sat down on one of the nearby chairs; they'd managed to show up in what looked like the Mouto's living room. From the corner of his eye, he saw Joey flop onto the couch beside Yugi, while Riku continued to stand and watch. "I've been trying to get him used to the idea for almost a year."

Solomon sighed. "Here's your reason, then. Touch usually boosts the empathic signal. Depending on the sensitivity of the person, often exponentially."

Riku closed his eyes with a resigned expression. "I grabbed him twice, and the first time was when he overloaded."

Solomon gave Riku a considering look. "What happened?"

Riku hesitated, glancing at Yugi and Joey, obviously less than thrilled at the prospect of an audience. Yugi gave him a tentative smile, while Joey raised his eyebrows impassively. Riku crossed his arms, and Kaito sighed internally.

"We showed up out of the blue, looking for help. I don't like it any better than you do, but I don't know if we can get out of this without having to explain a lot more than you'd want them to know."

"Hakuba-san followed us when we left—home—"

"We wound up in a place where magic manifests more easily than he's used to, and he wasn't expecting it. I grabbed him to take him back home and he handcuffed me."

Joey snickered.

"He's a detective," Kaito explained briefly. "I'm not exactly sure why he reacted like that, but his default response to a problem is 'bind and hold' until he's had time to think it through."

"And I… panicked," Riku continued.

"Which means?" Joey inquired.

Riku shifted uncomfortably, and Kaito decided to answer for him and get it over with. "Melty handcuffs."

Solomon's eyebrows disappeared beneath his spiky grey bangs. "I can see we're going to need some more in-depth explanations on this at some point, but that can probably wait. A response that explosive could easily rip through an inexperienced empath's shields, especially if what you said about a strong magic field is true."

He glanced back down at Hakuba, who seemed to have finally relaxed. Kaito couldn't tell for sure, but it almost seemed like the blond had fallen asleep. "Poor boy, you have no idea what you can do, can you? So you respond by throttling it down." He sighed. "I could hate the Japanese school system sometimes."
"But Hakuba-kun grew up in England. His mom took him there when he was six."

Solomon snorted at Kaito's reply. "They're just as bad. An odd time, though... do you know why?"

Kaito shook his head. "He didn't tell me about it. The newspaper mentioned that he'd been briefly hospitalized, because his dad's a high-up police officer, and then his school records show him in England right after."

Joey leaned forward, looking between Kaito and Hakuba incredulously. "You ran a background check on him? And he's voluntarily followed you into the wide world of weird? You guys have got one of the strangest friendships I've ever seen, and after Kaiba and Yugi, that's saying somethin'."

Kaito shrugged. "He's the detective. He knows things about me that I wouldn't have told him. I just returned the favor."

"Well, if what you said about the hospital is true, it's possible he had an early manifestation, and locked it away in response. Leaving aside whatever trigger incident he may have experienced, hospitals can be traumatic even for empaths with their gifts under control. If they took him there while he was still in shock... it would have been overwhelming."

"That... makes too much sense. Dammit, Hakuba-kun!" Kaito stood and took a few steps in Hakuba's direction, until Riku's hand on his shoulder made him pause. The blond stirred.

"Go 'way. Sleepin'."

"If he really is on overload," Riku said quietly, "he's probably better off not picking up on your worry."

Kaito immediately backed off, returning with Riku to the chair he'd vacated. "Right. What did you just do, Mouto-san?"

"Solomon is fine, lad. Empaths call it projection. The only way to hide an emotion from an empath is to consciously mask it behind a different one. You can't shield your emotions the way you can shield your mind. Usually, the best you can do is consciously regulate what you feel. Concentrating on a single emotion over all others is more easily sensed by an empath, so they call it projecting. I knew an empath in my younger days, and he taught me how to control my emotional state. I took advantage of that to calm..." He looked inquiringly at Kaito.

"Hakuba Saguru."

"To calm Hakuba-kun down. You'll want to learn how to do the same, for his sake, but I suppose I can try to teach you while I help him. He needs time to recover and adjust, and won't be in any shape to travel until he gets a handle on his gift."

A chuff of laughter came from Hakuba, and he opened one eye to look at Solomon. "Gift? Ha."

The eye drifted shut, and a few moments later a soft snore indicated he'd fallen asleep.


"Eh?" Kaito raised an eyebrow. "I know he's got a dragon and what looks like a grudge against the world, but..."

"He has an almost pathological dislike of magic," Solomon informed Kaito, "which is unfortunate because his own power is so strong. I'm inclined to say he only tolerates it because it allows him to
protect Mokuba-kun in ways that conventional means can't. And with the trouble this group tends to attract, that's necessary."

"He's a control freak," Joey added, a warmth in his voice taking out whatever bite might have been in the description. "Magic's not logical or controlled. Why do you think the guy breathes computer stuff? He's hacked entire satellite networks, but he can't put magic in a box."

"Sounds about right," Kaito admitted, turning slightly to bring the couch's occupants into view without letting Hakuba out of his sight. "Hakuba-kun quoted Clarke's law at me earlier."

"What?" Yugi finally joined in on the conversation.

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," Solomon explained, giving his grandson a wry smile.

Joey smirked. "Kaiba'd like this guy."

"More than he seemed to like Kaito-kun, from what Yugi told me," Solomon agreed.

"Wait a minute... Kaito-kun?" A smile slowly spread across Joey's face. "Of course! I'm an idiot. You're that guy who helped out Mokuba-kun—kid's gonna want to see you when he hears you're back in town again—and gave Yugi his lockpicks! He ain't half-bad, now," the teen declared with obvious pride. "Learned from a master."

"A skill which will serve him well later in life, I'm sure," Solomon said dryly.

"Aw, come on, Gramps," Joey retorted. "Like you couldn't do the same thing at his age?"

"No, I waited until a dig in college, when Dr. Jones insisted that all his students learn a few practical skills while in South America."

"Close enough." Joey turned back to Kaito. "Except for the whole appearing out of thin air with a bunch of Shadow magic and an afterimage of Luster Dragon, I like you already."

"He what?" Solomon exclaimed. "No, never mind, leave that for later. First..." Solomon glanced around the room and then pointed at the afghan draped over Kaito's chair. "Toss that to me, please."

Kaito complied, and Solomon wrapped the blanket snugly around Hakuba before turning towards Yugi. "I'm not as young as I used to be, and even though he's asleep he's best off not being carried by any of you, untrained as you are."

"But if Luster Dragon carried him here," Yugi said thoughtfully, reaching for his belt and pulling a card from the cardcase Kaito saw rested there, "maybe... Dark Magician!"

The grey-blue-purple mist that Kaito was coming to recognize as the trademark of the shadows' presence swirled in the middle of the room, leaving behind an oddly-dressed figure, even by Kaito's standards, kneeling on the floor facing Yugi. The purple robes weren't too bad, or the archaic staff, but the two-foot-high, pointed and slightly curved purple hat not only broke all the laws of fashion, but left them mugged and bleeding in the corner of a dark alleyway.

:I come.: 

Though solemn and formal, the man's voice held a promise of laughter long-deferred. Kaito didn't know if even Yugi heard it, the undertone was so faint, but he knew voices. Were he to try imitating this one, he would have to remember that almost-laughter waiting for the right time and place to
sound. It made him wonder just what needed to happen first.

Kaito shook himself free from his thoughts as Yugi pointed and said:

"Can you take him to..." he glanced over at Solomon.

"The study, if you would."

Yugi nodded in agreement. The Dark Magician inclined his head, carefully gathered Hakuba into his arms, and carried the sleeping blond out of the room. They waited in silence until Yugi spoke, eyes glazed over slightly. "Hakuba-kun's asleep on the couch in there now."

"He told you?" Kaito asked, curious.

:Of course:.

The female voice that seemed to echo from somewhere behind him was so sudden, so unexpected, that Kaito didn't stop to think. He whirled around, card gun out and aimed at... the family portraits on the back wall of Yugi's living room.

:Did you think we always have to manifest in your world to talk to our favorites?:

He blinked uncomprehendingly, and then reality sank in with a cheery little wave hello. He had a dragon talking in his head, apparently whenever she felt like it. Because he hadn't had the chance to relax since they'd come here, let alone feel safe enough to let his guard down, he'd drawn what was unmistakably a weapon without justifiable provocation. With Yugi watching.

And judging by the familiar presence behind Kaito, Riku had decided to guard his back and ask questions later. Riku was wielding a freaky sword that looked more like a stylized dragon wing than a blade. Brandishing serious weaponry at the people they'd been trying to get help from did not bode well for getting out of this situation without having to explain what was going on.

With a groan he dropped his arm and turned back around to stand beside Riku, staring at the wall between Solomon and the couch with Yugi and Joey. Riku lowered his sword from its position over his shoulder and opened his hand, letting the sword vanish into thin air. Holding Solomon's piercing gaze with an impassive expression, Riku tilted his head slightly towards Kaito.

"What was it?"

"I got surprised." Kaito looked at Yugi, who looked deceptively unconcerned. "You might have warned me that a side effect of using your cards was a voice in my head," Kaito said flatly. "I liked it better when my thoughts were my thoughts."

Almost unnotice, Riku rippled in a suppressed shudder. Kaito tried to make a mental note to ask about it later, but he wasn't sure if he'd manage it.

"Not all Monsters choose to speak with those who summon them," Yugi replied, hand brushing the golden pyramid around his neck as garnet flashed in his purple eyes. Abruptly, his voice deepened into the baritone Kaito vaguely recalled hearing in front of the amusement park, before he'd gotten distracted by Seto's dragons. "You might have warned us that you have reason to fear being attacked." His eyes narrowed. "You ran here, to us. What were you running from?"

Riku shook his head. "You don't want to know. You shouldn't need to know."

"I don't believe you. If you're running, something's chasing, and that means following. Which means
eventually coming here. I don't know what you can do beside a sword and 'melty handcuffs,' but any­one with battle instincts like yours can hardly be incompetent. Whatever you're fighting, I will not remain ignorant while you stand here capable of telling me."

His voice didn't rise, but a cold edge Kaito wouldn't have thought Yugi capable of had crept in by the end.

*Of course... this isn't exactly Yugi-kun, is it? What do you call a nameless ghost who both technically is and isn't the teenage boy he's timesharing a body with?*

Riku tried staring him down, but Riku's appearance didn't seem unusual on this world, which would have been his main advantage, and amnesiac or not, the spirit likely had a lot more experience making sure he got his way. Kaito doubted you could ever really forget something like that.

Riku broke first, covering his face with a hand and muttering, "The king is going to kill me..." Kaito winced slightly in agreement. As Riku had warned him when they'd first started traveling together, the rules of world-travel strictly forbade revealing the existence of other worlds for the sake of 'preserving world order'. This would make three times Riku had broken the rule, and twice for Kaito, both in the span of less than 24 hours.

King Mickey had been remarkably understanding about Kaito, all things considered, but Kaito suspected that was because the king had seen the way Riku'd been slowly starting to withdraw to the point of collapsing in on himself before Kaito came into the picture. He really didn't want to know what would happen if they managed to make Mickey, not only a keyblade bearer but currently the closest thing to a mentor-like figure in Riku's life, angry with them. Tiny and unassuming the King might be, but Kaito had no desire to ever face the business end of a keyblade.

....*What would happen if a keyblade was ever used on a human heart?* He filed the thought away for later. Much, much later, the way things were looking right now.

"You're in a fairly bad way yourselves, if you both go off that easily," Solomon offered quietly. "How far in over your heads are you?"

"It's not—quite—like that," Riku replied with a sigh. "It's complicated."

"Well, complicated sounds like my cue to leave," Joey stated abruptly, stretching. "I promised Mokuba-kun I'd cream him in Street Fighter tonight, and if I go now I can annoy Kaiba by showing up for dinner, too. Yugi'll fill me in on the high points tomorrow morning, since you can bet Mokuba-kun's going to come over and see you," he nodded towards Kaito, "before he heads to Kaiba Corp. Seeya, Gramps. Yugi, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Joey grinned, clapped Yugi on the back, and headed out of the room. In his wake, Solomon shook his head with a smile. "That boy... well, with his appetite, this way we'll probably have enough dinner to go around. Come into the kitchen, boys, and we'll warm everything up. I was just about to call Yugi and Joey-kun when you dropped in, and long explanations are better with a full stomach."

Kaito shrugged and followed behind. Not much difference in the long run, but any reprieve was still a reprieve. While the food reheated, Solomon returned to the living room briefly and Kaito heard the words "a bit of a situation" in slightly muffled tones. Since Yugi was watching the stove and Riku seemed to have reverted to a version of his more withdrawn 'Ansem' behavior, Kaito slipped nonchalantly into the chair closest to the open doorway and listened.

"...latent and didn't know it for years, skeptic of the supernatural and possibly even blocked, and just had all his channels blown wide open. I think there was some pretty major trauma involved both
times. I managed to calm him down enough to sleep and my study has the wards for him to feel like he's in soundproofing, but that's only a single room. I'm not exactly equipped to train a complete neophyte in this and still keep him sane in the meantime."

Kaito winced slightly. After a pause Solomon continued with a chuckle, "I run a game shop, not a magic store, and I haven't been in close contact with an empath for years. This is Japan, remember? Where would I have the room to store things on the off-chance I'll need them?" Another pause, and then he said, "Thank you. I'll be expecting it."

When Solomon rejoined them, he served dinner without mentioning the phone call. Kaito decided to focus on eating rather than begin the question-and-answer session any earlier than necessary, because his first extended summon had left him absolutely ravenous. Three servings later, he finally sat back and regarded Yugi from across the table. The Moutos had finished eating almost five minutes before, although Riku had continued to pick half-heartedly at his rice. Kaito suspected the younger boy didn't want to begin until he could have backup.

"So…" Kaito began hesitantly.

"Unless there is anything more fundamental for us to learn first, I believe I echo Yugi's desire to know what it is you boys are running from and why," Solomon replied, folding his hands on the table.

Kaito glanced at Riku. "This is your area of expertise."

Riku nodded. "First things first. My name is Riku, not Ansem. I was hiding my identity when we first met, until Kaito-kun rather forcefully pointed out to me that it was no longer necessary."

"Oh, so that's why your voice is different," Yugi commented. "You sound younger. Is this your real voice, then?"

"Yes."

*You refrain from adding that Ansem's voice is just as natural as your own. You wouldn't have been able to keep it up so long otherwise.*

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Riku-kun, though I wish it were in better circumstances. Go on," Solomon prompted.

"We're running from what are called Heartless." The way Riku pronounced the word, Kaito could hear the capital letter fall into place. "You could say… they're darkness made real."

The Moutos exchanged glances and gave Riku a pair of unreadable looks, but didn't interrupt. Kaito noticed that Yugi's posture looked deliberately casual now, concealing a tension that had come up at Riku's statement and then vanished too quickly.

Riku sighed. "You have to understand, there's only so much I can say. Some things wouldn't make any sense, and some things aren't mine to tell. You already know that there are… other places, given your knowledge of what you call the Shadow Realm."

"Yes, but in our experience, what's out there is generally nasty," Yugi replied. "How can you be sure that these Heartless won't follow you and manage to come here?"

"We were traveling through one of those magic-rich places when they attacked us. There are barriers that they can't get through, but since you seem the paranoid type: your cards make an effective weapon against them."
"They can't follow using the same path you took?"

"They can't come unless someone guides them there…"

I sense a 'but' coming on, and I don't like where this is going.

To Kaito's surprise, Yugi interrupted Riku before Riku could finish. "But a guide can be from here, and call to them," he stated grimly. If Kaito hadn't known better, he would have thought the certainty in Yugi's voice was borne from firsthand experience.

"…Yes." Riku suddenly seemed fascinated by the kitchen table's wood grain. Kaito leaned across the table and smacked him in the side of the head.

"You didn't think to tell me that it was still possible for them to show up back home?"

"The possibility was so remote—"

"I don't care," Kaito gritted out through clenched teeth, ignoring the Moutos for the moment. "You could have—should have—told me. And all of the places we've been, there's still a danger to them too."

"If they haven't been found by now, all the odds are astronomically against it, and you know why it's no good to think of warning most of them," Riku shot back.

Kaito dropped his elbow on the table and let his hand fall into his palm. "Point." He looked up again. "But you could have at least told me."

Solomon cleared his throat. "While I understand that there may be things you'd rather not talk about, can you tell us how you came here? Joey mentioned that Luster Dragon was somehow involved, I believe."

Kaito turned his attention from Riku back to Solomon. "She took us… through the Shadow Realm, she said."

Yugi raised an eyebrow. "Travel through the realm? I've never attempted it, but it must be possible; Bakura-kun's returned from there so many times you'd think he'd installed a revolving door."

"Yes, that would account for what Joey described earlier, I believe—"

:I've been talking to Dark Sage.: Luster Dragon's voice cut in, overriding Solomon's and causing Kaito to twitch slightly. :He thinks that you can also learn to do the same thing, through your connection to the shadows.:

"…can you hear us at all, Kaito-kun? Don't worry, you should soon adjust to being able to process the occasional intrusion without tuning out everything else."

Kaito shook his head to clear it. "I can now," he replied. "That was… bizarre. Did any of you hear her?"

"No. Monsters rarely speak from the Shadow Realm to anyone but the Duelist who summons them, if they choose to speak at all."

"If this is going to keep happening, I had better adjust soon. I don't like the idea of zoning out with no warning."

:I am sorry. The closer a connection, the easier it is to multitask.: These words were like a whisper in
his mind, a breath of wind seeking to be unobtrusive. :Motivation to practice, you might say. A hoard of raw talent connected to the shadows is only so helpful without the ability to control what you have. Unconscious instinct can only bring you so far.:  

Kaito realized that the others were watching him patiently, waiting for him to speak.

"Your eyes lose focus a little when they talk to you," Yugi explained. "It happens to all of us; it's one way to tell if anyone is having a conversation you can't hear."

"Great." He sighed. "Luster—" he paused as a thought struck him, and let his mind shape the words with a sense of deliberation.

_Do you have a name?_

:Méraud, young one.:  

_Méraud._ Emerald. Fitting, for a dragon who looked like she could have been carved out of one. _Call me Kaito-kun?_  

Kaito had never considered it possible to have the sensation of a nod inside your head, but the feeling of assent he received in return couldn't really be described any other way.

"Right," he began again. "Her name is Méraud, and she just told me that someone named Dark Sage thinks I could learn how to do the same thing, although I've no idea how. And before we start playing question and answer by proxy," he added quickly, "is there any way to have this discussion a little more directly?"

"Well…" Yugi pulled out his deck and began sorting through it. "Dark Sage is a facet of Dark Magician: someone he could become in the right circumstances. If he's the one who suggested this—would 'shadow-walking' be a good term, do you think?—then it's probably best to just talk straight to him."

"If you wouldn't mind…"

"I think you told us the primary things we need to know, and it wouldn't hurt to learn more about this." Yugi finally found the card he was looking for, and pulled it out. "Dark Sage!"

:I come.: The man who materialized standing behind Yugi's chair had the same clothes and build as the Dark Magician, but his face was shadowed by his helmet and a grey beard. He took one of the empty seats at the table, laying his staff across his lap and pushing up his helmet just enough for Kaito see his eyes as he regarded the rest of them. :What is it you wish to know?:
Unstable Equilibrium

Chapter Notes

This particular YGO world belongs to Ellen Brand, and went through the events of Shade and Shadow within the last week or two.

Promenade uses honorifics in any spoken Japanese to reflect the relative levels of distance and familiarity held by the various characters. However, if a conversation or significant part of an interchange has no honorifics at all, it's usually safe to assume that they're speaking English.

Many thanks to Snickerer and Ellen for their continued support, ideas, and nitpicking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes:

:What is you wish to know?:

At Dark Sage's inquiry Kaito paused, trying to organize his thoughts, but before he could formulate a question Solomon interrupted. "Since this might take a while, why don't we move to the living room? I'm sure the couch is more comfortable than kitchen chairs."

Yugi immediately looked to Dark Sage. "If you don't mind…"

:Not at all.: With the Duel Monster's agreement, the group adjourned back to the living room. Kaito and Riku took the couch, while Dark Sage and Solomon settled into chairs and Yugi sprawled slightly on the floor in typical teenage fashion.

Kaito took advantage of the interlude to think, and once they were finally seated settled on asking, "Well, first of all… what are Shadows, anyway?" He glanced over at Riku, then at Yugi and Solomon, and added, "And how do they relate to Light and Dark?"

Don't kill me if they find out everything because of this, Riku... We need to know.

"Light and Dark?" Yugi asked, curiosity roused.

:Hmm.: Dark Sage regarded them intently for several moments, his gaze unsettlingly knowing. :An interesting question, and one few would know to ask. But an important one, as it happens.: He shifted slightly in his chair, looking between the four of them consideringly. :As you may or may not be aware, Light and Dark are, on a fundamental level, the forces that make up all of reality. The nature of Light is to bring things into being. Darkness… takes. It is hunger, and the need to make things its own. The balance between them, give and take giving rise to ordered patterns, makes up everything you know as reality. The world and its people are composed mostly of Light, with the Dark maintaining balance and the boundaries between things.:

And from the way you're looking at us I'm willing to bet that you know about there being other worlds out there and I should be glad you're apparently inclined to help keep it under wraps. Because otherwise, I get the feeling you just might have started talking about Darkness making up
the boundaries between worlds as well. Which... would actually explain a lot about how we've been traveling and why we need to go through Darkness corridors to get between worlds when they're so dangerous in the first place.

Beyond the world, where there is mostly Darkness... well. The Dark in itself is merely hunger, no more, no less. But when it is manifested through a living being, rather than merely inanimate forces and matter, the interpretation of that hunger is up to the individual—as is any decision to act on it. Obviously no creature would survive without knowing that it had to eat, and the world would be a poor place indeed if no one ever felt the need for companionship, or the drive to succeed. But sometimes, when filtered through a will and a mind... Dark can be twisted into the need to possess everything and bring it under dominion, by any means possible.:

Out of the corner of his eye Kaito noticed Riku's hands, half-buried in his trenchcoat where the others could not see, slowly clenching to white knuckles as Dark Sage spoke of the nature of the Darkness.

Riku... I know you didn't tell me all the details of what happened to you before. What the Darkness did to you... We really need to catch up with Sora soon, because there's a limit to how much I can really help you when it comes to this stuff.

As for creatures composed mostly of Darkness...: Dark Sage continued: ...Well. I'm sure you already know how they tend to regard things of Light.:

He paused, watching them again—not only him and Riku, Kaito realized, but also Solomon and Yugi. Putting that together with Yugi's odd air of personal experience from earlier... Kaito decided he really didn't like that line of thought much. Nor did he like the scrutinizing looks he and Riku received when the Mutous, for their part, apparently put together Riku's earlier mention of having traveled through a magic-rich environment with 'beyond the world'.

"Does that mean Light and Dark are pretty much creation and destruction?" Yugi's expression as he turned back to Dark Sage could only be described as utterly fascinated.

The Duel Monster shook his head. :It is more complicated than that. Light can be used to destroy as well, for one—think about the effect of bringing a fireball into existence in the middle of an object. But there are some fundamental differences. When Light destroys something, it tends to do so by breaking it; the form and structure may be lost, but the matter remains. The Dark, on the other hand, tends to remove the essence of what it attacks from existence entirely; consuming it, or altering its nature. It is not limited to destruction, any more than the Light is barred from it. Especially when it has been twisted into covetousness, the Dark can steal, or conquer, or corrupt.:

There was a moment of silence, and trading of thoughtful glances.

"Then... where exactly do the Shadows fit in?"

Ah.: Dark Sage smiled slightly at Yugi. :That is where things get interesting. For while Light and Dark are eternal and make up the very substance of existence, Shadows stem from the the conflict between the two.:

"...Conflict?" Yugi tilted his head, his brow furrowing slightly as the Dark Sage nodded. Riku showed no such confusion. Given what they'd been through, Kaito was somehow unsurprised that he seemed to find it perfectly natural to think of Light and Dark as inherent enemies.

Light and Dark are of opposing natures, after all, and so when they meet...: The Dark Sage gestured slightly with one hand.
"They destroy each other," Riku said quietly. The Dark Sage glanced at him briefly, enigmatically.

"Yes. But the conflict does not always go smoothly, and sometimes things... twist. And sometimes what is thrown off is not of Light, nor of Dark, nor even a mixture of the two. And this, the tertium quid...this makes up Shadow.:"

"Tertium quid?" Riku echoed.

Dark Sage glanced at him again, this time with a faint smile. :It means "third thing" in a language that was once commonly used, though I believe it has fallen out of favor these days. It is used in the context of a third choice that offers escape from choice between the two absolutes of a dichotomy. For instance. If I were to ask you to choose between black and white, and you did not like either option, what would you choose?:

Riku was very, very still. "...Grey?" he said lowly, after a moment.

Dark Sage shook his head, still smiling gently. :Grey would merely be halfway between the two, still subject to the dichotomy you were given.: His gaze shifted to Kaito. :And if I were to ask you the same question? What would you pick, if I offered you black and white and you did not feel you could be comfortable with either?:

Kaito blinked, and said the first thing that popped into his head. "Blue?"

Dark Sage smiled at him. :Spoken like a true child of Shadow. That is the essence of the tertium quid, you see.; he continued, returning his attention to all of them. :Rather than being constrained between the choices given, the third path takes a different direction entirely. If you were in a maze, and your path to the exit was blocked by a wall forcing you to turn left or right and travel farther away from your goal...:

"You'd go up," Kaito chimed in, starting to grin.

"Or point out that both the jerks are lying..." Yugi muttered under his breath, then blushed and ducked his head when Dark Sage smiled proudly at them both.

:Exactly.: The Duel Monster's gaze turned distant, contemplating things that Kaito increasingly suspected normal languages lacked the proper words to accurately describe.

:Shadow has been called the essence of paradox, and with good reason. By its very nature...: He trailed off for a moment. :Light and Dark are strongly defined in being what they are, and this constancy manifests in the order and rules of the reality formed by their interaction. But it is Shadow, that which has no set definition of its own, that allows them to interact to make up that reality. For even as Shadow belongs to neither Light nor Dark, it also opposes neither, so when thrown off by a clash between Light and Dark it pools between them, separating the warring forces. Without Shadow to act as a buffer against direct contact, the meeting of Light and Dark would have produced nothing but a single great flash of annihilation. And yet because it belongs to neither Light nor Dark, Shadow has no place in the rules of either, no proper hold in the ordered framework of reality. And so it slips through the cracks and lies around, beneath, and creeping along the edges of everything, whispering in the edges of the boundaries carved by Darkness.: Against all logic, a bizarre tone of fondness crept into Dark Sage's voice as he continued.

:Even as they have no form or rules of their own, the Shadows tend to mimic the pattern of the structure formed by Light and Dark simply because that is the path provided for them to follow, just as water conforms to the shape of its container or ivy will grow along a trellis. But just as roots will
crack stone and ice can shatter glass, they can break other rules by imposing the ones they follow.:

*That… that bit about the mimicking sounds almost like what King Mickey was talking about, that chameleon thing. But not quite. There's something more to it…*

*If you take away an ivy plant's trellis after it's finished growing into an arch…*

As Dark Sage continued, Kaito carefully squirreled away that spark of thought for later consideration.

*I really ought to start making a list.*

:Having no form but making it possible, needed for it to *be* possible, taking and making and breaking the rules…the nature of Shadow is flexibility and contradiction. It only makes sense that the Shadows also catch and become home to whatever else may fall between the bounds of Light and Dark, unable for whatever reason to adopt the nature of either. They are home to the unique, the mistakes, the exceptions; those to whom the usual rules of existence do not apply, whether involuntarily or by conscious choice. We Duel Monsters are among those who make their home among the Shadows, though we are somewhat unusual in that we are a group bound by common characteristics. Such groups are not common, for it is rare for there to be enough beings of the same kind to form one; the majority of the individuals who wander the Shadows do so precisely because they are utterly unlike anything else that exists. Part of what distinguishes Duel Monsters in particular is that we are bound to our place in the Shadows, unable to leave the Shadow Realm unless we are summoned.:

"Méraud-san said something like that earlier. You take the energy necessary to become embodied from your summoner, right?"

:In part. We also draw upon whatever Shadows may be present near our summoner to grant us a space, a part of the universe whose rules allow us to exist. This is why some places are easier to summon in than others.:

Kaito nodded, thinking about Himura's world as opposed to his own. "She also mentioned a 'Shadowchild'. …Is that what I am? What Yugi-kun is?"

Dark Sage looked around at the four of them for a moment, and then nodded.

:In some people, Light goes beyond its role in making up the foundation of reality. It can manifest as extra gifts: high intelligence, natural aptitude, heightened senses or abilities, psychic gifts, even—:

Dark Sage inclined his head toward Riku, :more traditional ideas of magic. My colleagues and I, who study the Shadows and as much of your world as we can, have yet to discover why some people have these abilities while others do not. Nor can we determine why certain people possess a link to the Shadows regardless of what other gifts they have. You and your friends all possess gifts of the Light, yet Riku-san, Hakuba-san, and many of your other friends cannot draw upon the Shadows.:

"That link… that's the Heart of the Cards, isn't it?" Yugi asked.

:That is a part of it, yes, but it is more specific than simply being a favored child of the Shadows. What we call the Shadow Realm is only a sub-pocket of the Shadows, stabilized from its chaotic nature by the imposition of powerful patterns of Light and Dark and closely tied to this world through some ritual even I am not old enough to remember. All that we have been able to discover is that it must have taken unthinkable power to manage. The cards act as a link to that place, a focus that allows Shadowchildren to call a more complicated incarnation of the Shadows than would
otherwise be possible. This is why you can call not only upon the Monsters, but on the magic and
traps from the game as well.

:Beyond the Realm lie the untamed Shadows. Those with the affinity and proper control can use
them for things other than summoning… such as traveling through them. All Shadows are connected
to each other, which allows for instantaneous crossing to an intended destination, provided that you
know how to reach for it. To pierce the Shadows haphazardly… it is so very easy to become lost.:  

"Oh. So that's what Méraud-san meant about traveling." Kaito thought for a moment. "What did she
mean that unconscious instinct could only go so far?"

From beneath his helmet, Dark Sage's eyes suddenly glinted with amusement. :I believe I will allow
her to tell you herself. If you decide you wish to better master your gifts, which do indeed extend
beyond Shadow-walking;: here Dark Sage's beard twitched in what Kaito realized was a smile as he
used Yugi's term, :and summoning, Méraud has volunteered to be your teacher.: 

:I have?: Méraud's voice echoed in the back of Kaito's mind, but the intrusion was already less
startling than before. :Sage!:  

Kaito bit back a grin. Apparently he wasn't the only one who liked to keep people on their toes. 

:You can't hide your amusement from me, Kaito-kun,: Méraud murmured in the back of his mind, in
a tone of voice that reminded Kaito of Hakuba plotting suitable revenge for a prank at school. But
what kind of (hopefully) harmless retribution could a disembodied dragon achieve? 

…I probably really don't want to know.  

:Now is the time and place to begin learning, young one,: Dark Sage continued. :Here the shadows
are everywhere and easy for those connected to them to draw on, unlike your home, where the
ambient magic is nearly stifled.: His head tilted slightly as he regarded them. :Remember, the
Shadows follow the patterns of the manifestations of Light and have access to this world around their
edges. Where there is less Light, there will also be fewer Shadows to work with.: 

Kaito nodded thoughtfully. "That makes sense. And I do want to learn." 

:Then I shall allow Méraud to answer any further questions you may have.:  

Yugi seemed to take that as his cue to end the summon, and after Kaito thanked Dark Sage the Duel
Monster faded out of existence. 

"I suppose that's enough for now." Solomon stood. "You both look exhausted. The guest bedroom is
always made up; Yugi can show it to you upstairs while I clean up the kitchen."

"Thank you," Kaito said. "For all of this. You didn't have to help us at all." 

"I'm hardly going to throw an untrained empath out of my house," Solomon replied. "Quite aside
from the fact that I'm not heartless and you need a place to stay, Hakuba-kun has no one here besides
the two of you. Taking everyone familiar to him out of reach could be just as bad as throwing him
into a crowd. More about all that later, though. Get some sleep."

After exchanging goodnights, Kaito and Riku settled down to sleep. Riku started snoring almost
immediately, reminding Kaito with a twinge of guilt that he'd prevented the other boy from getting
almost any sleep the night before. He waited for a while, listening, to make sure Riku stayed asleep
and the Motou's had also gone to bed, then slipped out of bed and headed downstairs towards the
back room. The door was open, but remembering what he'd heard Solomon say about soundproofing
over the phone, Kaito elected to stop just outside the doorway. He didn't know if the room's wards would still work if he joined Hakuba inside of them, and he didn't want to risk them not.

The light from the room dimly illuminated Hakuba's sleeping form. Grabbing a nearby chair, Kaito sat on it backwards with his arms folded across its high back and his chin resting on his arms. Watching Hakuba be alive all night was an infinitely better prospect than the possibility of falling asleep and murdering the blond in his dreams for a second time. Either that, or when he reached his limit for lack of sleep, he'd be too deep under for dreams for most of the night. He'd managed to distract himself for most of the day, but here in the dark the possibility was far too real. Tomorrow currently felt a long way off, however, and he fought the weariness seeping into his bones as he waited through the silent night.

Though he'd tried hiding the fact from Riku, Kaito'd been up all night two of the nights they'd been back home, and then gotten no more than two or three hours of sleep the rest of the time. There'd simply been too much to do. He hadn't had much energy reserve to draw on even before that, what with a month straight of traveling at Riku's obsessive pace… he felt his eyes slip closed of their own accord for the third time in less than a minute, and this time it was too hard to force them open again.

He slept.

Kaito scrutinized the massive ruby critically. The Boss had said it showed promise of being the gem they sought, but he said that every time. If they didn't think there was a high chance of successfully obtaining Pandora, the job would never have been commissioned in the first place.

A muffled sound caught his attention, and he glanced around. One of the security guards—

"Kuroba-kun?" The disembodied voice pierced Kaito's sleep-fogged mind, jerking him awake before the dream could go any further. He raised his head quickly, taking stock of his surroundings, and realized it was already morning. Beyond the doorway, Hakuba sat up on the couch on the far side of the room with a faintly bewildered expression.

Kaito gave him a wan smile, letting his chin drop back onto his arms. Apparently he'd won the gamble with his dreams, at least for now. Although why the exact same nightmare had returned for the second night in a row, or why both times it had felt so real as to be more like a memory than a dream… he deliberately stopped his mind from wandering down that pathway for the moment, and refocused on Hakuba.

"Morning."

"What… happened?"

"How much do you remember?"

Hakuba ran a hand through his hair. "I followed you, but things went decidedly odd. Yuushi-kun…" he trailed off, eyes losing focus. "He did something, and it felt like the universe exploded. Or imploded. Something. It's difficult to describe… like… like burning water, and slipknots of barbed wire, pulled into crushing pressure…" he shuddered, but quickly regained his composure.

"Then you did something I'm still not sure I didn't imagine, and it muted for a minute, before everything went haywire again. A voice I didn't recognize, and it sort of grays after that." He glanced back at Kaito, eyes haunted. "Tell me that what I suspect happened, didn't. Please."
The last plea was so quiet, Kaito barely heard it. He shook his head helplessly. "I can't. Besides, you'd know better than I would, with the amount of fantasy you read."

"How on earth do you know that?" Hakuba blurted, startled and temporarily sidetracked.

"Um… I'm very thorough? The Discworld novel in your briefcase a month or two after you first came to Japan made for excellent English practice and was extremely entertaining." He grinned disarmingly, trying without much hope to continue distracting the blond. "Should I call you 'Binky-kun' now?"

Hakuba smiled slightly. "Somehow, I can't bring myself to be surprised that you not only kept track of the contents of my school bag, but did so without my noticing. I always felt sorry for the poor horse, stuck with a name like that. But you're trying to change the subject."

"Yes, I am," Kaito conceded. "Because if you want to be on topic, I'm mad at you for being such an idiot."

Hakuba gave him a tired look. "I woke up two minutes ago and my head feels like it's been stuffed with cotton. I'm not having this conversation with you right now." He subtly clenched one of his fists, unaware either that he was doing so or that Kaito could see the motion. "I had my reasons. That still doesn't explain where… this… came from."

…Okay, that's a bad sign when you're unwilling to call your newfound empathic ability by name. On the other hand, it's still a step up from rejecting magic's existence even in the face of undeniable empirical evidence.

Kaito sighed, trying to determine a good way to approach the issue. "Psychic abilities seem to be the… default, I guess, for the insanely gifted people on our world. The stuff beyond heightened natural talent."

Hakuba was silent for a long moment. "I don't know whether to be flattered or horrified."

Kaito shrugged as well as his position, slouched over the chair back, would allow. "Well, I know of at least two other people whose abilities are probably not quite normal."

Whether that's a comforting thought or just makes it worse, I don't know.

Almost despite himself, Hakuba looked intrigued, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, chin resting on folded hands. "Who?"

"Kudo Shinichi and Hattori Heiji."

Hakuba's expression turned thoughtful, and Kaito was willing to swear that the detective was mentally pulling out a file folder and rifling through an index, searching for the profiles that matched those names.

"Hattori-san… Rather easily provoked, but he remembers what's important."

Kaito blinked. He'd obviously missed more than he'd thought, if Hakuba had met the Osakan detective during his absence and whatever events they'd survived together had inspired such a cryptic comment. He'd have to ask about that later… one more thing for that list, which was growing with disturbing rapidity.

Hakuba continued, "I've yet to have the pleasure of meeting Kudo in person."
Yes, you have, but you didn't hear that from me. Stifling the comment, Kaito stated instead, "I have. Hattori, you probably didn't get the chance to notice, but he's damn near unkillable."

At least when it comes to situations where he should have fallen to his death. ...I wonder if that has any relation to why half the cases he and Kudo have solved together involved dead bodies falling from great heights.

With some effort, Kaito pulled his mind back from wandering and finished his train of thought. Sleep deprivation, when it finally caught up with him, always wreaked havoc on his already-short attention span. "Kudo has a psychic link to his girlfriend, although I don't think either of them are quite aware of it."

And a magnetic attraction to dead bodies. I don't know how he can live surrounded by that much death and stay sane. Although... that could be why he's always so focused on solving a case. "Bringing Criminals to Justice as a Form of Therapy"

"I see," Hakuba responded after a pause. "And yourself? I don't quite know if dragon-summoning classifies as psychic."

"No, that's because of something else. Remind me to give you the magic-and-metaphysics lecture later, or ask Solomon-san. I think I saw him taking notes. As for what I can do..." Kaito closed his eyes. He'd never really acknowledged it before, but in light of what he'd learned recently, it made sense. When he really thought about it, especially given what Dark Sage had said about Shadows and their relationship with normal rules... "Probability manipulation, I think. Odds always play out in my favor, even when logic or the laws of physics say they shouldn't."

Aoko'd always said he had uncanny luck growing up, and as time passed he couldn't really deny it, particularly when the odds he defied started going beyond plausibility. Even given the location of the hidden pocket in the suit, only preternatural luck explained how both times he'd been shot in the heart without a protective vest the heist had absorbed the bullet's impact, leaving him with nothing worse than bruised ribs when he knew he should have received cracked or worse; how he'd had just the right equipment in his suit to survive falling from a high-rise without a working glider, the first time Snake had attempted to kill him; how Scorpion had shattered his monocle and injured one of his doves, yet the bullet and broken glass had left nothing but a small scar across his cheekbone when by rights he could have easily lost an eye; how the inevitable bullet from Nightmare two days ago, when nothing protected his heart, had been interrupted by Kenta-kun's timely shout.

…I should probably be highly disturbed that my more spectacular cases of defying of the odds all involve bullets and assassins at some point or another.

"Having seen the Kid in action," Hakuba interrupted Kaito's unspoken train of thought, "I suppose I can't say I'm particularly surprised." Kaito opened his eyes again, to see Hakuba looking down at his hands. "But if the three of you have had your... talents, why would mine decide to show up only after we left?"

…There really is no easy way to put this. "I'm not sure it did. You were hospitalized at age six. Brief coma. No record as to why."

Under any other circumstances, Kaito would have found Hakuba's astounded expression amusing. "I... what?"

"Right before your mom moved you to England full time."

"I remember moving," Hakuba said pensively, "but I don't remember anything like that."
"I'm not surprised. If you reacted at six the way you reacted yesterday…"

Hakuba closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as if trying to ward off a headache. "…Denial. If I overloaded that badly as a child, I would have tried to suppress it just to become functional again. And if I succeeded…” he trailed off. "But I couldn't do that this time."

"No. But then again, you didn't need to. Because this time, you've got the strength and support to deal with it." Solomon, to teach you… and no matter how ticked off I am at you, I won't leave you hanging out to dry.

Hakuba gave him a half-smile. "Thank you… I think."

Kaito smiled back. "Not just me, of course, since I'm out of my league—"

"Will wonders never cease?"

"—But luckily, we landed in a pretty good place for you to learn to get control."

"So I gather, if our hosts have a room like this." Hakuba waved a hand at the warded study.

"To be honest, I'm not sure there's much of anything Solomon-san doesn't know about. It's kind of scary."

It actually reminded Kaito vaguely of Jii, and the way his father's old assistant had a list of contacts a mile long, a large chunk of which the older man had used to ensure Kid had access to whatever he needed, when he needed it. Solomon exhibited a similarly insane level of competence and connections.

"What about our current taboo?"

After a moment's pause, Kaito realized Hakuba was referring to the knowledge of other worlds, and their current status as travelers between them. "I think they've got some experience with that sort of thing, coming from another angle." And I'm really not sure I really want to know what that particular angle is.

"…That is mildly disturbing."

Hakuba: King of the Understatement. Creatures that might not be Heartless, but that are close enough in nature to merit being lumped in the same category…

"No kidding. Especially since I have a feeling that whatever they've run across from out there is on a par with Heartless."

Gentlemen, start your wibbling.

Hakuba, however, merely seemed to be confused. "Heartless?"

…Right. You missed the, well, never actually got any.

"Those things you met in the corridor when you followed us. Remember them?"

Hakuba's brow furrowed briefly, before he abruptly went wide-eyed and ashen.

"Apparently you do."

"Not what they look like, just…” Hakuba shuddered slightly, eyes closing and hands clenching the
blanket still pulled over his legs. "Imagine being surrounded by a mob of mobile black holes, nothing but terrible, aching ravenousness—and they're closing in on you."

Kaito shivered in sympathy. He could only imagine what Heartless would feel like to an empath, and he had absolutely no desire for firsthand experience. Ever. "Yeah, I'd figure that's how they'd come across. They're pretty much living Darkness."

"That entire place, the corridor, it was the same thing Yuushi used to go to Trafalgar Square, wasn't it? Just… larger, because of relatively greater distance. And it wasn't empty and blank… it was hungry, like the Heartless, only less focused and everywhere. How do you stand it?"

Kaito winced at the reminder of how close the Darkness had come to eating him, and immediately resolved that that was on the list of Things Hakuba Will Not Learn, Ever. "I'm… a little different."

"I never would have guessed," Hakuba interjected dryly. Kaito felt a faint sense of relief at the dig, because it meant the blond was closer to his usual sarcastic self than he'd been before.

"I've learned to shield myself…"

"So that it doesn't try to eat you, or so that you just don't notice?"

"So that it doesn't manage to eat me. It does keep trying." Unfortunate, given Hakuba's state. Unless the detective could manage some spectacular shields, he would probably remain vulnerable to the Dark, and unable to travel anywhere through the corridors, even simply back home.

As Kaito watched Hakuba, the other boy seemed to come to a decision. "All right. Is it possible for me to learn how to do the same?"

"I don't know. Yet."

Hakuba sighed. "This apparently isn't going to go away… but I'll be damned before I let it control me."

Kaito grinned. "Yeah, I thought you'd say that." However it started, your life seems to revolve around control. No reason this would be any different. "We'll find something." Because even if he managed to leave Hakuba back at home… given Riku's admission that Heartless could potentially show up there someday, he did not want him to be left so vulnerable to them.

"Good." Hakuba nodded. "I need to be able to face those Heartless creatures without feeling like I'm being stalked by a pack of hungry predators while being able to feel exactly how hungry they are."

"Not to mention the nearly passing out," Kaito added, still slightly unnerved over how quickly Hakuba's strength had drained.

"That was the corridor. I could feel it eating at me, and I couldn't stop it…" He shuddered again.

"Yeah, and that's going to be a problem too, when we try to leave. We'll find a way around it." Kaito would tell Yugi about other worlds and get him to make a way home through the Shadows before he'd let Hakuba into another Darkness corridor or leave him stranded on Yugi's world. If Kaito could learn to start traveling through the shadows himself, so much the better, but…

Hakuba smirked faintly. "And here I thought you were vehemently opposed to my tagging along."

"I am," Kaito growled, glaring again. "We'll talk about that later."
If I didn't want you coming along when all I had was my imagination's images of losing you or Aoko or mom to the Darkness... Now that I've seen what it does to you, I don't want you anywhere near this.

To Kaito's surprise, Hakuba became quietly thoughtful rather than pushing the argument. He felt too relieved that Hakuba was willing to let the matter drop to look very hard into why.

"I trust you gentlemen slept well?" Kaito barely suppressed his startle-reflexes, not having heard Solomon coming up behind him. The old man carried a breakfast tray in his hands, complete with both tea and coffee.

"Well enough, thank you," Hakuba responded politely. "You're... Solomon-san? I remember your voice last night, I think. I apologize, it's all a bit fuzzy."

"Yes, that's me. Don't worry about last night—an overload that severe you might be better off mostly forgetting. I believe I can help you avoid such episodes in the future, though. But first, breakfast. I wasn't sure if you preferred tea or coffee, so I brought both." To Kaito, Solomon added, "If you're up to company, Yugi is downstairs making breakfast for himself and Riku-san."

Kaito glanced at Hakuba. The blond looked willing enough to be left in Solomon's company, so he bade them goodbye and headed for the kitchen. When he was nearly out of earshot, however, the sound of Hakuba's voice made him pause out of habit and listen.

"Solomon-san... I will do whatever it takes to master this. Please. Help me."

"Given your reaction last night, I have to say I'm surprised. May I ask why you changed your mind?"

There was a pause, and Kaito strained to hear Hakuba's voice when he spoke again, quiet but determined. "If I could, I'd be rid of this in a heartbeat. Since that's apparently not an option, given that I can't deny it into non-existence, I refuse to let it dictate my actions. I will especially not let it be used against me as an excuse to leave me behind."

"Very well," Solomon replied, and Kaito could hear his approval. "Today is Sunday, my day off, so I can spend quite a bit of time working with you today. Why don't you start eating, and we'll begin. As a friend of Kaito-kun's, I suppose you've never heard of Duel Monsters either?"

Hakuba's reply seemed to be nonverbal, because a moment later Solomon began the same explanation Kaito remembered from his first visit, and Kaito decided to continue on to the kitchen. He found Yugi once more by the stove, this time supervising Riku in the art of doctoring a bowl of raw eggs with vanilla extract, milk and cinnamon.

"What is this, a chemistry experiment?" Kaito picked up the open bottle of vanilla and inhaled, wondering for the thousandth time why the dark brown liquid never tasted the way it smelled. (He'd been remarkably persistent in testing this when younger, one of the few instances where he'd displayed a low learning curve. The other such curve, of course, had been in teasing Aoko.)

Riku smiled in the way Kaito'd come to recognize as faint embarrassment. "Yugi-kun said I should know how to cook something. My mother used to make eggs this way, and apparently it's something Solomon-san picked up on a visit to the United States, so..."

"Right. Smells... interesting. Carry on." Kaito leaned against the refrigerator, watching in amusement while Riku scrambled the eggs in a frying pan and narrowly avoided scorching their breakfast. The three of them settled at the table with their eggs and some generous helpings of rice,
and ate in hungry silence interspersed with conversation, mostly centered on the safest topic available: what Dark Sage had told them the night before.

"I'd never heard most of what he said before now, but it makes sense, everything about Light and Dark and Shadow," Yugi said eventually, between bites of rice. "How did you know to ask about it like that?"

Kaito glanced at Riku, wanting to let the other boy decide how much to reveal.

"Kaito-kun and I both have some magical talent. Our previous teachers were fairly knowledgeable about the Light and Darkness, especially as it relates to magic, but we all only recently learned about the existence of Shadows, let alone what their nature might be."

No kidding. King Mickey and Diz-san really don't understand the Shadows much at all, if Dark Sage is right. And I think he is. Like Yugi-kun said, it makes sense.

"What exactly can you do, Riku-san?" Yugi gave Riku an inquiring look.

"I… fire. I can summon fire. That's it, really." Riku glanced down at his nearly empty bowl. Seeing the younger boy's reluctance to talk about it, Kaito found himself wondering for the first time if Riku's purple-black flames were due to his experiences with Darkness and might otherwise have been traditionally colored. "Unless you count swordsmanship as magical."

"Well, maybe not magical, but impressive." Yugi smiled. "I just started self-defense lessons last week, and it's harder than it looks. I can only imagine how complicated using a sword in real combat would be. Everyone I know uses barehanded martial arts."

"Ah, that would be Hakuba-kun's area of expertise," Kaito replied.

Yugi turned, eyes wide in an innocent curiosity that should have been impossible for someone his age to pull off. Not that impossibility had ever stopped Kaito from using it himself once or twice in the recent past…but still. It was highly disconcerting to be on the receiving end. "What about you, Kaito-kun? You pulled out a gun last night, I thought, but it looked a little odd."

Kaito couldn't be certain, but he suspected Yugi's other self was behind that question. Guests though they might be, the three of them were still relatively unknown quantities, with the potential to be dangerous.

He shrugged and pulled out the card gun, pushing it across the table towards Yugi. "I'm a decent marksman, although my ammunition is selectively non-destructive."

"Selectively non-destructive?" Yugi examined the gun with fascination. "I've never seen a design like this before… did you make this yourself?" Not waiting for an answer he fiddled some more, faint surprise appearing on his face when he realized what the ammunition was. "Cards?"

"May or may not explode, and you can play poker with them too. I got tired of practicing card tricks one afternoon, started wondering what else you could do with them… spent a few weeks cobbling it together, and liked it too much to give it up."

And there's no chance of me telling you that dad helped me troubleshoot it, getting the weight and the firing mechanism just right, the month before he died. "To be honest, I think they're an example of me accessing the shadows before I knew what they were."

Yugi nodded. "It's not very strong right now, but I can feel the residue on them. This is why you bought solitaire cards last time, isn't it?"
"Yeah. They work as projectiles, and occasionally more, when I have the time and components to get creative."

Kaito knew he was being more ambiguous than was probably necessary, but the habit of not revealing his secrets was too ingrained. Before Yugi could ask more specific questions, the bell over the entrance to the game shop jingled, heralding the arrival of visitors.

"Knock, knock," Joey called from the shop's front area, still out of sight. "Yugi, you up yet?"

"In the kitchen!" Yugi replied, handing Kaito's card gun back. A few moments later Mokuba preceded Joey into the kitchen, expression brightening at the sight of Kaito.

"Kaito-san!" he beamed, waving a little. "It's good to see you again."

"You too," Kaito replied as the pair slid into empty chairs at the table. "How've you been?"

Mokuba grimaced faintly. "We've been okay. Things never stay quiet for very long, but maybe this time we'll get a break before something else happens. Nii-sama always tries to overcompensate with normality for a while whenever we have to deal with things that… aren't." He looked back at Kaito. "How about you? Yugi said you and Ansem-san were traveling, and Joey-kun said you brought a friend with you this time…"

"Well, firstly, Ansem-kun's going by Riku-kun, now—long story, not important. Hakuba-kun came with us this time, yeah. Did Joey-kun tell you what happened when we got here?"

Mokuba nodded. "Is he doing any better?"

"A little. Solomon-san's talking with him right now, but you could probably meet him later." Kaito glanced at Joey. "And you can meet him properly. None of us were exactly at our best last night."

"Eh, no big. I've seen worse bad days."

"Well, if Hakuba-kun is busy and you don't have any big plans, you have to come with us to Kaiba Corp., okay?" Mokuba cheerful smile gained a distinctly mischievous edge.

"Um… sure? What are we doing?"

Joey grinned. "Since you gave Yugi those lock picks you got an automatic induction into The Conspiracy to Make Seto Kaiba LIGHTEN UP. We're founding members."

"Riku-san's a member too, of course," Yugi added thoughtfully, gathering the dishes and taking them to the sink. The memory of Yugi and Riku's last conversation rose up in Kaito's mind, and he assumed Yugi was also remembering Riku's admonition to watch out for the teenage CEO.

"So… we've got a mission?" Kaito felt the grin creeping onto his face, and decided to go with it, gears already turning in his mind. Darkness, shadows, nightmares, the mess with Hakuba—the lot of it could take a hike for the next few hours.

"Nii-sama skipped dinner last night," Mokuba said seriously, folding his hands on the table and looking for the world like a miniature executive conducting a business meeting. "He's been putting in long hours since we got back from New York last week, but yesterday was the first time he just stayed at the office all night. If we don't do something he's probably going to work through lunch, too, and Nii-sama hardly ever has anything for breakfast besides coffee."

"Which means it's up to us to kidnap him. Holding his laptop for ransom is optional, but we're more
likely to get him out of the building that way." Joey looked thoroughly cheered by the prospect.

"It worked last time, after all," Mokuba added with a smile.

Kaito glanced at Riku, who shrugged in acquiescence, then turned back to Mokuba. "Sounds like fun. We're in."

"Great!" Seemingly satisfied, Mokuba settled back in his chair. "It's at least 20 minutes to drive to the main office—it's a different building from Kaibaland, more in the heart of the city—so if we're lucky, we'll make it in time to grab him for an early lunch."

Kaito looked out the window again, since he'd forgotten to get a watch while they'd been back home and world-travel threw continuity out the window anyway. "Isn't it a bit early for lunch?"

A shrug. "Late breakfast, early lunch... it probably depends on the restaurant we end up going to. Either way, Nii-sama just gets worse as time goes on and it'll probably take at least half an hour before we can get him out of the building. And even though we ate before we came here and I guess you just finished breakfast, Joey-kun at least will be eating again so that makes it lunch..."

"Hey, I'm a growin' teenager," the blond defended himself. "Nothin' wrong with a little snack."

"Joey-kun, I've seen you call a three-course meal, a snack."

"Details, details," Joey replied airily, tipping his chair back to balance on two legs. From his place nearby at the sink, Yugi surreptitiously knocked his foot against the nearest back leg, causing the other boy to fall backwards with a yelp. Kaito noticed, however, that the blond took the impact with the ease of someone who'd learned how to fall, immediately standing and righting his chair with a good-natured glare directed at Yugi (and then Mokuba, for laughing). "Very funny."

"What?" Yugi's didn't even try for genuine innocence, the amused smile on his lips belying his otherwise ingenuous expression.

"All right, wise guys, let's go before this becomes Pick-On-Joey-Day."

"But Joey-kun, we're going to see Nii-sama," Mokuba responded as they vacated the kitchen. "Isn't that kind of self-defeating?"

Joey's answer was unintelligible and, in Kaito's opinion, quite possibly bordering on unprintable.

Chapter End Notes

Yugi's comment during Dark Sage's explanation of the tertium quid references anime episodes 19-21.
The *Discworld* Death's pale white horse (he tried skeletal steeds for a while, but they kept falling apart) is, indeed, named 'Binky'. Luckily for Hakuba, he is not a werehorse.
The Conspiracy

The limousine Mokuba and Joey had come in had plenty of room for five passengers in addition to the security guard riding shotgun to the chauffeur. As they started off Kaito wondered aloud at the lack of a guard in the passenger area, at which point Mokuba and Joey tag-teamed an explanation of Joey's relatively new status as head of site security (the site being the Kaiba Corp. building or, alternately, wherever Mokuba happened to be at the time).

"Right now it's only some weekends and evenings, what with school and all," Joey concluded, "but there's only a year till graduation, and I ain't big on the thought of university. 'Sides, with how Kaiba pays his security staff I can make a living no problem, if I go full-time."

Mokuba nodded in agreement. "Nii-sama made sure that the salary of the security forces includes hazard pay. They earn it."

"No kidding." Joey's hand drifted to cover the area between his shoulder and his neck, massaging it gently. Yugi immediately changed the topic of conversation, taking the opportunity to fill Joey and Mokuba in on the basics of Dark Sage's lecture. Both boys listened with intense interest, making the occasional question or comment in a way that made Kaito quickly realize that not only did both of them know about the Shadow Realm, but they had to be Duelists in the sense Yugi and Kaiba were.

Hm, both Kaibas are Duelists. I wonder if there's a genetic factor behind that connection to the Shadow Realm. Not necessarily a direct link, but a trait that generally tends to run in families. Of course, that would mean that if I have it, there's a chance that maybe dad…

Deciding to let Yugi do all the talking, Kaito glanced over at Riku, mindful of the younger boy's tendency to brood. Judging by the islander's dour expression while he thought no one was paying attention to him, Kaito suspected that despite the news of Hakuba's improved state, Riku still felt guilty for being one of the catalysts behind the whole situation. Kaito was definitely going to need to talk to him later, and if necessary, smack some sense into him again.

…Figuratively, of course. Actually laying a hand on Riku would probably earn a sword at his throat for his troubles, given the underlying current of tension in the other boy's body language.

Since company precluded any private conversation for the time being, Kaito added it to the top of his mental list of things to do and then relaxed into his seat, enjoyed the novelty of his first limo ride until they pulled up outside the imposing skyscraper that housed Kaiba Corp. headquarters. Following Mokuba's lead, they piled out of the limousine and entered the building.

The first thing Kaito noticed as they entered was the large number of fire extinguishers present: one on every wall and two behind the receptionist's counter. The second was the way the lobby seemed to have been designed not only with good taste in mind, but also defensibility against possible assault. The third was that every employee they passed on their way through the lobby acknowledged not only Mokuba and Joey, but also Yugi. Yugi seemed to know them in turn, greeting every person who said hello by name as the group walked to the elevators. It was interesting, given how their boss had seemed distinctly unhappy to see Yugi the last time Kaito'd been around. Kaito chalked it up to being part of the many things about Yugi and Kaiba's relationship that he simply didn't know about.

"So what's the plan?" Kaito inquired as they rode upwards.

"Well, first order of business is to see whether Kaiba's locked himself in to keep people from trying
to interrupt him. After that… Eh. We'll play it by ear," Joey supplied. "We're good at improv."

When the elevator doors opened, the secretary took one look at their group and breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, good… He's been worse than usual today, Mokuba-san, Yugi-san…"

"No worries, Amano-san," Joey replied cheerfully. "We got a secret weapon! Come on," he added to the others. "The dragon's lair is this way."

Upon reaching a relatively inconspicuous door (if you didn't count the fact that Kaito suspected it could hold up to a battering ram, given Kaiba's high status and level of paranoia), Mokuba tried the door handle only to find it locked. Joey reached over and ruffled the younger boy's hair. "Looks like you can show off those new skills after all."

"Hey, you learned too?" Kaito asked, perking up in interest.

Mokuba smiled proudly. "I made Joey teach me when I learned he was teaching Yugi. You never know when stuff will be useful."

"You got that right," Joey agreed. "I think Alix-kun plans on teaching you to hotwire next."

"Go ahead, Mokuba-kun," Yugi encouraged, looking faintly relieved that he didn't have to take the spotlight.

"Okay!" Mokuba turned to the door and held out an imperious hand in Joey's direction. "Tools."

With a snicker, Joey dug into the recesses of his jacket and produced a rolled up fabric, which Mokuba set on the floor and opened to reveal Kaito's old set of spare lockpicks. He eyed the lock critically, then hunted through the various bits of metal and went to work. Kaito watched for a few seconds, evaluating Mokuba's skill level. The boy wasn't too bad for a relative beginner, but Kaiba's locks weren't going to be child's play.

"Yugi gave 'em to me for safekeeping," Joey said to Kaito as they waited, indicating the lockpicks. "Mine was made from whatever useful stuff I'd got my hands on, and he figured I'd get more mileage out of these."

Kaito nodded in understanding, then, not feeling comfortable just standing around without doing anything, pulled a deck of solitaire cards out of a pocket and began absentmindedly shuffling them. As Kid, he was perfectly capable of sitting still for long periods of time, but when it wasn't strictly necessary he always preferred to be moving in some way or another. If nothing else, it was a way to distance himself from the mindset necessary for Kid, both in his own head and that of anyone who cared enough to try associating his civilian identity with his night job. Not to mention the fact that card tricks made for good, low-concentration, self-contained entertainment, and judging by his smile Yugi was having fun playing audience.

He'd just begun a more complicated trick when the approach of a newcomer distracted him and he stopped halfway through. A very short, very red-headed, very American-looking newcomer.

"'Scuse me… are y'all trying to break into the boss's office?" Not only were the young woman's words in English, but they held a distinctly Cajun drawl.

Kaito felt himself being sized up for threat potential in an instant, even as he (and Riku as well, he was sure) returned the favor. Despite her casual clothes and relaxed manner, he could see the faint bulge of two guns hidden beneath her coat, and he had no doubt she knew how to use them. The sheer level of confidence and competence in her bearing warned anyone who bothered to pay attention that despite her youth—she didn't look much older than he was—and barely-over-five-foot
"Nii-sama skipped dinner last night, so we're kidnapping him for lunch," Mokuba answered. Kaito noted with faint interest that the dark-haired boy referred to his brother as 'Nii-sama' even when speaking English. She raised an eyebrow, still watching Kaito and Riku, but remained unperturbed. Holding his lockpicks in place, Mokuba glanced back at the young woman. "Hey, where's your cane?"

Her expression twisted slightly in distaste. "One, the docs cleared me from the wheelchair; I can walk on my own two feet again without assistance. Two, I am not your sibling, thank God, I do not need you mother henning me. Unlike some people," she tilted her head toward the locked office door, "I know when to come in out of the rain, when to eat a balanced breakfast, and when to shut off the damn computer and get some sleep." She turned back to Kaito and held out a hand. "Alix Gaudet, Kaiba Corp. security head."

Taking his cue from her western mannerisms, Kaito responded in English, "Kaito Kuroba, traveling magician." He pocketed his cards again and shook her hand, then grinned mischievously. "Talk, dark and broody over there is Riku."

"Well, at least I'm not luggage this time," Riku said resignedly, reaching out to shake her hand as well.

In that position, Alix was forced to tilt her head quite far back in order to see Riku's face. "You're even taller than my brothers," she declared, switching back to Japanese. The remains of her drawl sounded somewhat bizarre in the other language, but at least she remained intelligible. "I was just getting' used to not feelin' like a shrimp."

Riku shrugged silently, simply looking down at her with a somewhat wistful expression even after releasing her hand.

"Nice to meet you both. New members of the local Dueling club?" Her mouth quirked slightly.

Since he wasn't sure just how much she knew about the other side of Duel Monsters, even if she was Kaiba's head of security, Kaito decided to err on the side of caution and grinned disarmingly. "…Sorta. We just got inducted into the Conspiracy against Kaiba-kun, though."

Alix looked at Mokuba. "Oh, I want to hear the story behind this… should I get the peanut butter sandwiches?"

Still wrestling with the lock, Mokuba grunted. "No, I want him out of the building altogether, or else he won't eat enough."

"…Want me to get Kambashi and his tranq rifle?"

Riku smirked, and the rest of the group snickered.

"Think we got it covered, boss lady, but thanks," Joey replied.

Kaito stepped closer to Mokuba, peering at the door. "Hey, you're doing good. Keep it smooth, all right? Feel it."

Alix looked at Kaito, cocking her head. "You know how to pick locks too?"

"It's a hobby. Mokuba-kun's using what used to be my spare kit—I gave it to Yugi-kun last time we met, in case something like this ever happened, actually."
"Well, if you're a magician, it's probably good to know. Also if you hang out with this group of trouble magnets for any length of time." She waved a hand at Yugi and company.

"Oh, I'm a trouble magnet all on my own…" All the way up to 'lethal,' in fact.

"Isn't that the truth," Riku agreed.

"Oh, lovely. Do you actually Duel? Or just play the game?"

Well, that answered that question. "Erm… Other way around, to be honest," Kaito said, eyeing her.

"…Ouch. That must have been a shock. What about you, Luggage-san?" she added, turning to Riku and smirking.

Riku rolled his eyes, probably the most childish behavior Kaito had seen from him to date. Ever since Kaito had broken through the façade of 'Ansem,' depending on his mood Riku seemed to waver between a mostly normal teenage attitude and cold, withdrawn maturity. Since he usually tended to act closer to his age when he felt more at ease, the eye-roll either said a lot about Alix's people skills or, given his earlier wistful look, she reminded him an awful lot of one of his friends back home.

"I'm the transportation. I have a few tricks, but no Heart of the Cards." He turned slightly and looked away, discouraging any further conversation.

Definitely fluctuating. Of course, the number of unfamiliar people probably didn't help. Riku wouldn't have interacted closely with so many people in such a short span of time in who knew how long.

"Got it!" Mokuba exclaimed, interrupting the conversation. He quickly put the lockpicks away and pulled the door open, peering inside.

"Wheeler, you have ten seconds to tell me why you should still have a job."

Alix stepped up behind Mokuba. "Wrong guess, chere, care to try again?"

Kaito could imagine the look on Kaiba's face as he looked up to see Mokuba's half-guilty, half-triumphant expression. "Mokuba?"

Joey pulled the door open enough to poke his head in as well. "We have a winner! You want the bedroom set, or the all-expenses-paid trip out of the building?"

"…I'm installing a retinal scanner." A sigh. "Who else is with you?"

"Yugi and Kaito-kun!" Mokuba replied cheerfully. "You remember him, right? His friend Hakuba-kun is at the game shop, but Riku-kun is here too."

Kaito joined the growing mob at the door, manically cheerful grin in place. It wasn't strictly necessary, but it would probably bug Kaiba to no end. Just because he wasn't in costume didn't mean he stopped enjoying the chance to mess with people's minds. "Nice to see you again, Kaiba-kun! Mokuba-kun was just showing me his new skills."

The CEO sat at his desk, hands still on his laptop's keyboard, eyeing them all with a wary resignation. A coffee cup rested near the laptop, and behind him the window blinds shut out what was sure to be a panoramic view of the city as well as the morning sun. "Kuroba-san, yes, unfortunately… who is Riku-san?"
"Apparently, he's the luggage."

From behind them, Riku muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "Hate you all…"

"Anyway, this is a kidnapping," Alix continued. "You've violated the cardinal rule, 'Man does not live by coffee alone.'"

"…I ate."

"The only food in the vicinity disappeared at the feeding frenzy last night, when the shift changed. You know how fast Amano-san's muffins go when she brings the chocolate ones."

"Nii-sama, you can't work 24 hours a day. You promised."

The slight twitch around Kaiba's eyes would have been a wince in anyone else. "All right, give me five minutes."

"Fine, but we're gonna stand here and glare the whole time," Alix promised.

"I have no doubt," Kaiba stated dryly. "What are you dragging me into this time?"

"It's a surprise," Joey countered with a Kid-worthy grin.

"Nothing bad, we promise," Yugi added.

"I fail to be reassured."

Kaiba transferred his laptop to a briefcase and stepped out of the office as the group clustered in his doorway moved out of the way. He scanned the room, and when his gaze found Riku standing beside Yugi, his posture changed subtly. Nothing showed on the teenage CEO's face—Kaiba wore his stern impassivity the same way Kaito knew he hid behind smiles and mischief—but Kaito'd learned how to read body language as a part of his talent with disguises. Kaiba was not happy to see Riku. Out of the corner of his eye, Kaito noticed that Alix had caught the change as well, judging by the way her eyebrows had shot up.

…You didn't notice Riku before because he didn't want you to, but I'll bet you remember he was there, now. You recognize a potential threat when you see one, though, and it's probably killing you that you somehow missed it entirely last time. This should be… interesting.

The rest of their group also seemed to have spotted the difference as well, though only Yugi likely had any idea about the reason behind it. Kaiba said nothing, however, and no one else commented on it as they headed back to the ground floor. As they went, Kaito realized that the security personnel looked more amused than anything at seeing their employer being escorted out of the building by their miniature mob.

"Does this happen a lot?"

"On occasion." Joey smirked.

"Two days after Nii-sama hired Alix-kun, we got him hustled out the door with nothing but a sandwich and some onigiri…"

"The woman stole my laptop," Kaiba grumbled, although without any real bite.

Kaito chuckled. "I like you," he informed Alix. She grinned back.
"Yeah, yeah. Flattery will get you nowhere. I may not be as good a pickpocket as you or Joey, but I get by."

He raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think I'm a pickpocket?" Not that he couldn't…

"The way you move, the way your hands work… The way you sized up my pockets, my guns, and the bulge from my wallet."

She was good. Might as well have some fun, then—time to get Riku to lighten up a little, and maybe get a head start on bringing Kaiba back from being on edge. Besides, he didn't get to show off often, and he had no doubt that everyone present wouldn't object to learning more about just what he could do. Kaito wouldn't put it past Joey to have suggested bringing them along on this little escapade for precisely that reason.

"I probably could pick your pocket, if I wanted, but your cash is safe from me. Your keys, not so much." He twirled them on a finger, grinning at her amused expression.

"I didn't think you'd go after the money… or you wouldn't have let on you were looking at it. Can I have those back, please?" Kaito quickly moved his hands, leaving the keychain clipped back on her belt. "Wow. You're good," she laughed, unconsciously returning his assessment of her.

Kaito grinned. "You should see what I can do with a tablecloth."

"You know, there are people in this world who actually have respect for the law. Admittedly, I don't know any of them personally…" Kaiba ducked into the limousine waiting for them at the curb, followed by his kidnappers.

"What, Yugi-kun doesn't count? And is that any way to talk about your own brother? I'll admit Joey's a lost cause, and make no promises for myself…" A resounding snort from Kaiba, Joey and Mokuba answered Kaito, and Yugi turned faintly pink.

"You haven't known Yugi for very long, have you?" Alix asked. In the background, Mokuba had turned to give directions to the driver.

"Well, we met him a while ago, but only for a day before we had to leave for America. He and Solomon-san are giving us some help now, though… our friend Hakuba-kun needed some basic magical training."

Kaiba's frown deepened at the mention of magic, but he refrained from comment.

"Does he know about…?" Alix directed the question at Kaiba and Joey, glancing briefly at Yugi.

"The hitchhiker?" Joey nodded. "Yeah, though they ain't been formally introduced."

"It wasn't under the best of circumstances, either. And probably before you were hired, because I can't imagine you ever letting something like that happen."

Alix thought for a moment. "Oh! Was that the mess with the loony out front? Yeah, that was about a week before I got here."

"Between that and the Black Pharaoh, it made it quite clear I needed new security." Kaiba gave Mokuba a forbidding look as the dark-haired boy absconded with his brother's briefcase and deposited it safely beyond the CEO's reach. Mokuba responded by crossing his arms and making a face.
We've previously established that you guys attract the weird and the dangerous, and that does not sound good. I probably shouldn't even ask, but…

"Black Pharaoh?"

"God, that's a story and a half, and I wasn't even there." Alix rolled her eyes.

"Doesn't sound like someone you'd want to meet in a dark alleyway." Or anywhere else, for that matter.

"No. He wasn't." Joey rubbed the side of his neck again.

"He's one of the reasons why we weren't surprised at the thought of living Darkness, before," Yugi offered quietly. "We've fought off two attempted incursions of Lovecraftian entities in the past six months."

…Lovecraft. Ok, I'm not big on horror lore, but I know bad news when I hear it. Am so not thinking about whether Nameless Horrors are limited just to this world, or whether they're in any way related to Heartless themselves…

"…Ouch."

"Basically," Joey agreed.

"Wait a minute," Alix broke in, eyebrows going up again. "You have run into stuff like that before? You weren't kidding when you said trouble magnet."

"Really, really long story, but… yes. Not exactly anywhere around here, though. Hey, did you use any cards?" Kaito asked Yugi and Joey, steering the conversation away from more touchy subjects. "I wouldn't mind some pointers from a Duelist's perspective, not just a player's… I don't even know anyone who plays back home."

"Oh, yeah…" Yugi put a hand under his chin contemplatively. "Well, actually, you'd have to ask Bakura-kun or Kaiba-kun. They did most of the card-based Dueling. Mine was more me and Yami turning the puzzle against the Black Pharaoh."

Okay, the pyramid is apparently more than just a kind of spirit-trap. Interesting.

"I have work," Kaiba stated shortly. "Building any kind of deck is time-consuming, and you're looking to complicate matters even further."

"Nii-sama…" Mokuba sighed in exasperation and leaned against his older brother. Kaiba automatically put an arm around Mokuba's shoulders, but made no move to change his answer.

"I don't think I've met Bakura-kun. Am I likely to do any better if I ask him?"

Joey and Yugi exchanged glances.

"He might like you."

"Tell him you're a thief," Joey added. "That'll probably work."

"Oh?"

"He's got a hitchhiker too. Former tomb robber."
"Well, isn't that interesting…” Riku murmured. Kaito had to agree.

"I guess I'll have to look him up later, then. I think I'll forget to mention that I always give back what I steal, though…” *In fact, probably best to leave out the specifics of Kid altogether. An unconventional thief can still be called a thief.*

Joey snickered. "You do that. Meet us after school tomorrow and we can introduce you then."

Kaito nodded, and the rest of the time before and during lunch was mostly filled with idle talk, getting to know each other beyond 'Hey, some of us survived a potentially deadly situation together!'. Alix and Joey did most of the talking, plying Kaito and Riku with questions about themselves and stepping around issues that were obviously not open for discussion.

For most of lunch, Riku seemed satisfied to let Kaito take the majority of the spotlight, though as time passed he seemed to relax in their company. Kaito talked mostly about magic and his life as it had existed before he became Kid, making exception for a few stories about Hakuba. Since the blond detective wasn't there to defend himself, and stories were best told when the subject was present to turn beet red and sputter, Kaito decided to go easy on him for the time being.

Easy being a relative term, of course. The idiotic Holmes cosplay outfit that Hakuba had worn when he'd first arrived in Japan was fair game for mocking at any time. And then there was his complete and utter lack of casual clothes... and the time Kaito had taken the cricket-chirp sound mechanism out of a kid's toy, set it to go off at random, and snuck it into the lining of Hakuba's school bag. He wasn't even sure if Hakuba had ever actually found it, because a week into the prank Hakuba had gone back to England without warning or explanation, and a little while after that Kaito had met Riku.

In return, Alix regaled them all with stories both from growing up in Louisiana as the youngest in a long line of security specialists, and a few of the more entertaining (read: embarrassing) stories from her last few weeks of working under Kaiba Seto. Such as the incident a few days ago, when Joey had been running an errand for Mokuba only to be nearly bowled over by a half-hysterical plumber who had burst out of one of the bathrooms, desperately brandishing a plunger and shrieking about mutant alligators in the plumbing. The head of site security had ended up having to sort the whole mess out, which had proved no easy task.

"Apparently," Joey broke in dryly, "one of the absentminded scientist types from R&D managed to drop one of the latest miniature-hologram-prototype doohickies down the sink. Understandably, the guy who got called to clear the clog was not expecting to come face-to-face with a Two-Mouth Darkruler when he tried to look down the drain. Of course, it took several hours of calming the guy down, rounding up everybody working on the floor, tracking down the person who called the guy out in the first place, getting a face full of hologram myself, holding tools, parts, getting squirted with dirty water and stuff I'd rather not think about, and finally pulling the gizmo out only to have said absentminded scientist cheerfully announce 'Oh, so *that*'s where that got to!' in order to figure it all out in the first place…”

Mokuba cheerfully took over at the telling of the compensation that Joey had demanded of him in addition to double overtime. Taking shameless advantage of the tendency Kaiba had acquired to reflexively start eating any sandwich his brother handed him rather than risk the consequences of failing to do so, Joey convinced Mokuba to hand him a whipped cream sandwich. The security footage of the look on his face when he'd absently tried to bite into it had mysteriously gone missing, but Joey maintained that being assigned to patrol R&D for his four successive security shifts had been worth it.

Mokuba also volunteered a story from before either Alix or Joey's time. Apparently, the staff on one
of the floors had gotten together to set up a surprise birthday party for a matronly, well-liked receptionist. Not daring to consult higher management for something so frivolous and figuring that it should only take a few minutes anyway, they had secretly set up in a conference room not scheduled for use that day.

Unfortunately, the conference room they chose happened to be the same one where another employee had left a piece of equipment Kaiba was working on after a presentation. The CEO had walked into the darkened room to pick up his prototype, only to register lights flaring on and a group of people coming at him, the foremost carrying something between them, and the start of a shout. Sheer reflex had sent one foot up in a kick that connected perfectly with the mystery object, launching it out of their grasp and toward the ceiling, and in the next instant he had been under and then on the other side of the heavy conference table in a defensive position.

Several seconds of mass panic, confusion, and airborne boysenberry pie filling later, the various occupants of the room had frozen into a tableau of sinking realization as the awareness of exactly what had just happened gradually percolated. After several more seconds of frozen, staring silence, Kaiba had eventually straightened, and, deliberately, crossed several steps to retrieve his prototype before turning and walking equally deliberately to the door. Where he had paused for a moment and, with dignity, recommended that next time, they should book a room through proper channels.

Alix found this story hilarious. "Wow, boss, maybe you really don't actually need a bodyguard. I don't believe that pie will ever again menace the populace."

Kaiba glared briefly, then returned to finishing his lunch in stolid silence. Kaito'd noticed that this seemed to be routine for the other boy, given the way that his entourage seemed to blithely ignore any and all threats or attempts to control a given situation.

Undaunted, she continued, "And I am certain that the staff on that floor have an entirely new appreciation for the formidable nature of their CEO."

"Kaiba Seto, master of pai-jutsu!" Joey grinned madly.

"Then you must be even higher ranked than he is, Joey-kun." Riku broke his silence with a sly smirk, taking the others by surprise. "The way you eat, pies probably flee when they see you coming."

Joey's jaw dropped at the unexpected contribution, but he quickly recovered. "Whoa! Would you look at that. Looks like he's not just a clone of Kaiba after all!"

"Shut up, mutt."

"Nah, he's just shy—Hey!" Kaito protested as Riku flicked an ice cube at him.

"Again, why do I put up with you? Forget Sora, you're worse than Kairi."

"Who's this?" Alix asked, leaning forward.

Riku shrugged, looking like he hadn't entirely intended to mention the other two but nonetheless not too distressed by the slip. "My best friends as a kid."

Kaito eyed Riku. *That kind of phrasing had better be because you're pretending to be thirty rather than because you're afraid of meeting up with them again. You do look pretty relaxed right now, though, so I'll give you the benefit of the doubt.*

"Don't just leave it there, tell us about them." Alix grinned. "It's your turn for a story, chere — I
already told y'all about when I stopped a purse-snatcher with a bowl of soba noodles and wasabi, and Kaito-kun told us about the cricket-chirper he snuck into the lining of his friend's schoolbag. What've you got for us?"

Riku smiled faintly. "You're really a lot like her… which means I'm not about to get out of this, am I?"

"Nope!" came the gleeful reply. "Talk."

"All right, all right…" Riku looked into the distance briefly. "The three of us grew up by the beach, with an islet not too far offshore, so all the kids had rowboats. Sora and I tended to compete for bragging rights on all sorts of things, and when we'd boat-race Kairi would pace us on foot from the beach. I usually won, but there was one time when I was eight…"

A real smile spread across Riku's face. "I don't know when or where he got it, but halfway in Sora pegged me in the head with a starfish and pulled ahead when I was distracted. It fell back into the water before I could throw it back, but I managed to grab a flounder and smack him with that, and then he started splashing me, and… it kind of went downhill from there. And then, after the water war finally died down, we looked up to see Kairi sitting on the edge of the bridge we'd designated as the finish line for the fastest, prim as you please and with this smug little smile to add insult to injury. She didn't let us live down that she'd beaten both of us for a week."

Alix laughed. "I like her. If you still keep in touch with her, bring her by for a visit sometime."

"Gaudet-san, I'd be scared of what she might pick up from being your company," Riku responded dryly.

"You should be." Kaiba ignored the way all heads turned in his direction, but Kaito suspected the CEO's sharp eyes still caught the brief thumbs up that Mokuba flashed Alix's way. Between the comment and the reaction, Kaito figured that for Kaiba's rather skewed baseline of evaluation, this was relatively relaxed enough to satisfy his keepers. Which said it all, really.

He'd also decided that he wanted to keep Kaiba from getting anywhere near Hakuba for the time being. No one acted this cold around people who obviously cared about him without hiding some nasty scars. Hakuba didn't need to have to deal with that kind of thing.

As lunch wound down, Kaito saw Alix and Yugi exchange glances. "So, Yugi, since you seem to have free time today, how do you feel about an extra self-defense lesson?"

Yugi smiled. "Sure! You know," he added, "you should spar with Riku. He's even got a sword, so he'd be good at hand-to-hand, wouldn't he?"

"And if that isn't manipulation, I don't know what is."

"I wanna see that!" Joey interjected, grinning. Riku looked torn between amusement and wariness, but eventually he shrugged.

"If you'd like, Gaudet-san. It's been a while, but…"

"Sure thing. I'm always open to new blood," Alix responded, her smile showing more teeth than was strictly necessary.

Kaiba sighed. "If you lot are going to be using my gym, I'd better stay and make sure you don't wreck it."
Yugi smirked, looking rather like his hitchhiker.

And manipulative on multiple fronts at once, even. Getting to see Riku in action and keeping Kaiba out of his office at the same time… I play mind games sometimes, and I'm good at them, but half the time I win because the other side doesn't always know that I'm playing. You'd know, and you'd be a challenge, at the very least. If this is you operating on spontaneous ideas, I would really hate to try out-thinking you.

…Not that it wouldn't be fun…
Kaito had to hand it to Kaiba. Not only did Kaiba Corp. have a private gym for employees to use on breaks or days off, said gym took up an entire subterranean floor, complete with locker rooms and showers. Mokuba and Joey rummaged up some new workout clothes from a spare locker for their visitors, and they met up with Alix at the edge of the large, matted sparring area.

"Ready, Riku-san?"

"If you are." The pair moved to the center of the mats, while the others sat down outside of range. "What are the rules?"

"Ten-count pin, no attempting to cause serious damage, and surrender is an option."

Rather than replying, Riku nodded shortly and dropped into a ready position. Alix quickly mirrored him, and Kaito settled down to watch.

Several minutes of nothing more than circling and looking for weaknesses passed, until Riku finally lost patience and made the first move. Alix ducked out of the way, staying just far enough out of reach to keep him from being able to grab her without overbalancing. It quickly became clear that the size discrepancy between the two made a decisive win virtually impossible. Alix lacked the mass to pin Riku for any length of time, and Riku couldn't keep hold of her smaller, more agile form.

The match eventually ended in a draw, which elicited complaints from Kaito and Joey for ruining the bets on the winner between them and the handful of employees who had been there when they'd arrived. From their position on the floor, the exhausted combatants rather ineloquently told their audience to shut up.

Afterwards, Alix gave Yugi his promised self-defense lesson, with Mokuba joining in while Joey got shanghaied into playing target for teacher and students. Kaiba had retrieved his briefcase after lunch, but oddly enough seemed content to watch from the sidelines for a while without simultaneously working on his laptop. He kept one eye on the lesson and the other on Kaito and Riku, who had both joined in on the warm-ups and stretching and then opted to observe once they realized Alix had barely moved beyond the basics of how to fall. Yugi hadn't been joking when he said he'd only just started learning.

Kaito watched Alix's teaching style for a little while before his attention started wandering again. Almost unconsciously, his gaze strayed to the area of floor covered by padded mats. He'd had no time to do anything physical during the week they'd spent at home, not counting his run through the alleys at the first heist. It hadn't mattered so much at the time, since all his energy had been dedicated elsewhere and then he'd been running on adrenaline. Now, however, he could feel the manic edge of energy he always got whenever he teetered between exhaustion and complete burnout, and he was itching to move.

Riku followed Kaito's gaze, and smirked when understanding dawned. "Even though neither Gaudet-san nor I could go all out against each other, it felt good to fight again," he murmured. "Yugi-kun asked what you could do this morning—here's your chance to show off to an audience."

Kaito gave him a sidelong glance. "What makes you think I want to do that?"
"I've seen you at your night job... and before you protest that being Kid is different, I have two words for you: Tropical Land."

I suppose arguing 'habit' is not going to help my case.

Still, audience or not, it felt like weeks since he'd last done a tumbling routine for a reason other than fighting for his life...

"Go burn off some energy before you explode," Riku commanded quietly, and Kaito realized he'd started bouncing on the balls of his feet while he'd been thinking.

"Fine, fine..." Glad that he'd chosen a workout outfit from Kaiba's locker room stockpile that promised a full range of movement, he padded over the edge of the mats.

Start out slow...

First a handstand, then hand-walking, a forward roll and handspring, a front-flip, some back-flips... Muscle memory and declarative memory rose up in his mind, and as half-forgotten music echoed in his ears, he closed his eyes and danced to the beat of his mental symphony.

Some things you never really forget. Some things, you choose not to. Kaito hadn't had a coach in years, not since he'd been eight and the collapse of his world had included a lack of finances to continue lessons with any sort of regularity. He'd managed, though—a wall became a balance beam, a grassy field served as a mat—and he'd had one more way to keep the memory of his father and the time when he'd still been alive, real.

The floor had always been his favorite, full of movement and energy, and he'd practiced old routines and invented new ones as the years went by. Not quite as impressive as it could have been if he'd had the extra give and spring of a real floor, but he'd learned to compensate for the lack years ago, albeit with plenty of bruises along the way.

Far too soon, he felt himself begin to waver. A single night's rest couldn't make up for several weeks of sleep deprivation. Reluctantly, he finished with the routine with a handstand, collapsing with a graceful roll to lie flat on his back, watching the ceiling. A moment later, he heard the sound of clapping. Raising his head, he realized about half of his spectators had decided to applaud his performance, including Mokuba, while the rest of the conspirators had settled for watching with amusement. Kaiba, unsurprisingly, still kept his impassive expression.

Kaito waved in acknowledgment, let his head briefly drop back to the floor, then hoisted himself upright and rejoined the others.

"I hurt just from watching," Alix announced without preamble. "The human body was not made to bend like that."

"That was cool, though," Yugi added with a smile. "Where did you learn all of that?"

"A lot of different places, growing up. I tended to take the basics and improvise."

"Good thing, too," Joey commented. "You need that kind of flexibility for the stuff you do."

...And I can't tell if you're referring to my magic tricks, or my pickpocketing skills.

"Yeah, that's part of why I practice a lot. If you lose your edge in my profession, bad things happen." Any of my professions.
"Speaking of which," Kaiba interjected, standing up with briefcase in hand, "Some of us still have jobs to do."

"All right, Nii-sama," Mokuba sighed. "But I want you home by five tonight."

"Consider me ransomed," Kaiba replied dryly. "You can see our guests out. A… pleasure meeting you again, Kuroba-san, Riku-san." Inclining his head briefly, the CEO turned and headed for the elevators.

Once Kaiba had gone, Joey yawned and stretched expansively. "Well, that was fun. Alix-kun, you headed back to work, too?"

"That's what the boss pays me for. Yugi, I'll see you later this week for another lesson, all right?"

"Sure," Yugi agreed with a smile. "See you then." They exchanged goodbyes and parted ways to change in the locker room, and as the five boys headed back to the limousine Yugi asked, "Mokuba, did you want to come back to the shop for a while?"

"If it's okay with you. I'm ahead of schedule for my part in the R&D group I'm working with right now, so Joey doesn't want me hanging out in the labs."

"Damn right I don't," Joey retorted as they entered the limousine. "The last time that happened, you caused three explosions in one day."

"It wasn't my fault!" Mokuba protested. "The experimental equipment was faulty, and it took that long for me to find and fix the problem."

"My point still stands."

"Yeah, well… I guess at least this way, maybe we can meet Hakuba-san."

Kaito nodded. "If he has the shields for it, sure. He's a quick study, but I have no clue what kind of time frame to expect for this kind of thing."

*And I'm really not happy about the whole not-knowing part, not for something so important.*

Yugi looked thoughtful for a moment. "It's difficult for me to say either, since all I have to go on are some of Grandpa's stories, but… judging from what happened when Joey asked him for a crash course in Duel Monsters?"

Joey winced theatrically at that, though the crooked grin tugging at his mouth was not unfond. Yugi shot him an amused look before continuing.

"I'd say he's probably been through some very intense, practical training. He should be fine in a low-stress environment by now. If he can't handle at least the few of us when we're all pretty calm and friendly, I will be very surprised." Yugi smiled reassuringly.

"I hope you're right."

As it turned out, the Conspirators found Solomon and Hakuba in the Motou's living room, talking comfortably over what looked like a game, but unlike anything Kaito had ever seen before: A hexagonal honeycomb grid for a board, with a handful of plastic pyramids situated on or near the playing field. He wasn't sure, but it looked like Hakuba controlled the three sizes of translucent blue pyramids, while Solomon manipulated the red ones.
The game, however, was less important than Hakuba, and Kaito quickly refocused his attention on the blond. Despite the sudden appearance of five other people, Hakuba looked calm and self-controlled, having risen politely at the arrival of people he didn't know. He seemed the same as ever, until he put down the mug of whatever he'd been drinking and Kaito realized the other boy now wore a pair of pale leather gloves.

That's… different. I wonder if that's what Solomon-san asked his friend to send him. Overnight shipping, depending on where it was coming from…

"Saguru-kun," Solomon began with a smile, interrupting Kaito's musing, "allow me to introduce you to Yugi, Joey, and Mokuba-kun."

Wh— Saguru-kun?

Kaito managed to keep from staring, but only just. He could understand Hakuba letting Aoko call him that when they'd become closer friends after Kaito himself disappeared… but Hakuba had known Solomon for less than 12 hours, and he wasn't objecting to that level of familiarity. If anything, his smile seemed a shade self-conscious, but that was all. It was bizarre, to say the least.

But… not necessarily bad, either. He'd been working to get Hakuba to loosen up for the last year, after all, he shouldn't be so thrown off-balance when the blond seemed to have finally hit a breakthrough. Even if it wasn't because of him.

"It's nice to meet you." Hakuba bowed slightly. "Solomon-san has been telling me about you."

"Nothin' bad, I hope," Joey answered with a grin, taking over three-quarters the couch but leaving enough room for Mokuba to perch on one end. "I was innocent, I promise."

Solomon snorted. "Of which incident?"

"All of 'em, obviously."

"You're a lot of things, Joey," Yugi said absently, examining the ongoing game of pyramids on the coffee table with intense interest, "but innocent isn't one of them."

"Well…"

Smirking at the banter, Kaito stepped closer to the game board as Hakuba sat back down. Before he could start figuring out the game, however, the unexpected scent of coffee wafting from Hakuba's mug distracted him.

"Hey, shouldn't you be drinking tea?" He peered curiously at the mug, which bore the inscription: "There is a fine line between genius and insanity. I have erased this line."

"No, tea is soothing and I wish to be tense. It helps me concentrate." Hakuba gestured at the game on the table in explanation. "Solomon-san has been having me practice multitasking and focus."

"Okay, but you're destroying a long-held stereotype." Kaito leaned against the high arm of Hakuba's chair, noting Riku as he moved to hover unobtrusively behind them both.

"How will I ever survive?" Hakuba responded dryly, to snickering from his audience. He glanced at the board briefly, and moved one of the small pyramids to an adjacent hexagon.

"Oh, good move," Yugi interjected, still absorbed by the game. "Do you play strategy games a lot?"
Hakuba nodded. "I usually play chess, so this requires a bit more concentration from sheer oddness factor, but it's interesting."

…You know, if I hadn't seen you last night, I would never believe right now that you could have been in such bad shape. Solomon-san must have been able to really help you a lot.

"So, have you been playing games all day?" he asked with deliberately casual cheerfulness.

"No, in point of fact," Hakuba said mildly as Solomon studied the game. "Solomon-san first caught me up on what I missed last night while I was indisposed. We also spent quite some time establishing the basics of blocking things out, which is relatively simple, and then added games for complexity."

"The more pressure one's mind is under, the more difficult stability becomes," Solomon agreed, placing a small pyramid from his stash onto the board. "Pushing the limits in this manner is significantly easier and safer than the alternative."

"Right. And the gloves?"

Hakuba's gloved hand froze for a split-second above one of the pieces, before exchanging the places of two pyramids next to each other with deceptive nonchalance. Rather than look at his audience, he rested his chin on his hands and watched Solomon assess the board.

"Strong enough emotions leave a temporary imprint on objects, and I have the bad luck of… picking things up… far more strongly through touch. There's no real way to guard sufficiently against potential encounters without succumbing to mental exhaustion, at least for now, so…" he gestured eloquently with a hand. "Gloves."

*If a fading imprint left behind on something can be that bad, I'm not even going to ask what running into a person unprepared would be like.*

"Okay, gloves are good."

"But not as good as Inverness, I've heard," Joey interjected with a sly grin, diverting the conversation.

Hakuba turned to give Kaito a baleful look. "Kuroba-kun, what have you been telling them?"

"I don't care what your reasons were for wearing that costume when you first showed up in Japan, there were better ways to do it. The thing was ridiculous."

"That was rather the point," the blond countered, placing a final pyramid on the board to complete an unbroken five-piece line across the grid. This apparently won the game, because Solomon shook his head in resignation before clearing the board and placing the first piece for another round. Hakuba continued, "I thought it best to give a first impression which could be underestimated. People make more mistakes that way."

"How very… Poirot of you," Kaito responded after a moment's thought.

"Who?" Mokuba asked, confusion evident in his expression.

"A temperamental Belgian detective written by Agatha Christie, who sometimes played up his behavior quirks so that suspects would misjudge him," Kaito supplied.

"My stratagem worked a bit too well, I'm afraid. Inspector Nakamori and his subordinates failed to take me seriously until—" Hakuba paused for a split-second, recalibrating to hold a conversation in a
world where the Kaitou Kid didn't exist and whose absence from common knowledge would blow the secret of other worlds wide open "—I managed to assist in solving several cases. Besides… you, of all people, should understand the various advantages of an outlandish outfit, because Kid can't claim to wear anything else."

"Um, not to sound like a broken record, but who?"

Hakuba glanced at Kaito again, raising an eyebrow. "You mean to say that you found the time to disparage my choice of attire during your little lunch-and-a-kidnapping excursion, but entirely neglected to mention your obsession with the Kaitou Kid?"

"There were other stories." Kaito shrugged, then grinned. "It's far more entertaining to rag on your fashion sense."

"Oh, obviously. Why did I ever doubt?" Hakuba turned back to Mokuba, who had been watching their exchange. "The Kid is a somewhat mad Arséne Lupin analogue: a gentleman phantom thief, who sends riddle-notes to the police predicting his next target, turns a theft into an amalgam of game, public performance, and challenge, and returns what he steals after getting away. His trademark apparel is a white suit, top hat and monocle, with a cape that can be turned into a hang-glider at need — his favorite method of escape. Although impostors occasionally subvert his identity and property destruction appears to be fair game, the Kid has never killed, or even injured, a person. No one chasing him is quite sure exactly what his motives are, or even if he has one."

Despite Hakuba's deliberate mention of Kid's official track record, Kaito couldn't entirely suppress the creeping memory that arose in his mind of silk sliding against skin, when Nightmare's weight pulled his glove off his hand. Having ordered the stress of the last week to take a hike for a while, he had hoped it would work for more than a few hours' peace of mind. Being told that it wasn't his fault didn't help much, so he pulled out a tried-and-true coping mechanism: a Cheshire-cat grin and a blithe comment.

"Hey, you forgot the fangirls."

Mokuba smiled as the older boys snickered. "I can see why you'd like him, Kaito-kun. Is he a story character too?"

Offered the easy way out on a silver platter, and realizing that Hakuba seemed to have purposefully introduced Kid into the conversation at a point where a glaringly large portion of Kaito's life could be discussed in a self-contained context, Kaito decided to take advantage of it and nodded. "My dad came up with the Kid before I was born, and wrote a bunch of capers before eventually putting them in storage. I found the archive a while back, and decided to try my own hand at it. Since Hakuba's a detective back home, he's had to put up with me running ideas by him for plausibility."

"More like implausibility," Hakuba muttered. "No one should be able to flat-out break the laws of physics in a halfway-believable manner."

Kaito blinked. Bend, he had become aware of, particularly when it came to playing the odds. But break?

Hakuba always tended to be keenly precise when it came to using words…

"You'd be surprised what the Shadow Realm can pull off," Joey countered, sitting up on the couch with an intrigued expression. "What kinds of things has he done?"

"It's probably bad when I want to know that too, and I'm the one who's been living these so-called
fictional events.

Kaito wasn't sure, but he thought he heard a faint: *Oh dear:* whispered in the back of his mind.

"Well," Hakuba said slowly, as Joey's gaze came to rest on him, "let me think. Despite all claims that the Kid is simply a sleight-of-hand magician, there was one heist where a gun-fired suction cup managed to support all of Kid's weight long enough to climb two stories up an attached rope. In another, he appeared out of nowhere atop a flagpole at a baseball game. Multiple cases of changing clothes too fast for the eye to follow, both of himself and of other people. And the first… scenario I proofread… the Kid not only went from full disguise to his trademark suit in the time it took a smoke bomb to dissipate, but he jumped up an entire floor as well."

Joey gave a low whistle. "No wonder you need Hakuba-kun as a proofreader, if you're trying to write this guy as a character without connections to the Shadow Realm."

Yugi nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Your own connection, no matter how faint until just recently, has probably made your idea of 'normal' different from most people's definitions. And if you're not even aware enough of it to compare…"

"You end up with a phantom thief who can do things that the average person simply can't do."

Listening to Hakuba's list and the ensuing commentary, Kaito realized that he wasn't sure _how_ to react. The news that all the things he'd grown up thinking were normal, that anyone could do if they tried, might _not_ be… he settled on feeling numb and buried it behind another smile.

"Well, I hate to leave the party, but I have an appointment with a dragon… Why don't you tell them about the Holmes fanatic that started showing up to chase the Kid, Hakuba-kun?"

Hakuba gave Kaito a look that plainly asked, _Why do I put up with you?_

Kaito simply grinned back and made a graceful exit to the study, discovering when he went to shut the door that Riku had silently followed him. The younger boy seemed determined to keep him company, so Kaito shrugged and sat in the nearest chair instead, slouching to let his head rest against the top.

_I'm still not big on having voices in my head. Is there any way to get you out here without crushing furniture?_

:Yes. Our manifestations can be tempered by our summoner's will easily enough.: 

Which implied that if he thought small… he pulled Méraud's card from where he'd returned it to the top of his deck, and concentrated.

"Luster Dragon." He wasn't sure if a matter-of-fact tone would make a difference, but apparently it worked well enough. Méraud still seemed to dominate the room, but rather than towering over even Riku's height, she appeared closer to the size of a very large dog, sitting on her haunches with her tail curved around her feet. Kaito noted with interest that while he felt a bit more tired, it was nowhere near the level he had experienced on Himura's world or in the corridor. Not that he had energy to spare…

"So. Care to explain your earlier comment?"

Méraud ducked her head slightly, looking faintly apologetic. :I'm afraid I simply assumed that you had some idea of what you could do. Being what I am, with the connection to the Shadows that I hold, I failed to realize that someone could use them so naturally and yet be entirely unaware of their
presence.: While the words still seemed to be entering his mind without much input from his ears, the physical presence of the dragon helped make the conversation feel marginally more normal. As normal as a conversation about magic with a mythical creature could be, at any rate.

"How much of what I do is actually sleight-of-hand?"

:From what I have seen, watching you these last few weeks? A great deal of what you consider ordinary sleight-of-hand incorporates Shadow manipulation to some degree, certain tricks more so than others.:  

"...Oh." There wasn't really much else to say.

"Is that really so bad?" Riku asked quietly. "Your abilities haven't changed, only your awareness of them."

"I just..." Kaito shook his head. "I always thought I was doing dad's magic."

:The simpler tricks, certainly. As for why you augment your more complicated feats with the Shadows... this is merely conjecture, but did you teach yourself from some sort of notes?:

"...Yeah. My dad's old notebooks." His mother had almost put them away, probably into Kid's secret room, but Kaito had fought to keep them. He'd spent hours in his room, poring over each description, each precious piece of his father's legacy. And he'd stubbornly learned them, one by one, practicing and failing over and over, until something suddenly fell into place...

:From what I know of magicians... most leave out a vital component in their illusions — if they ever write them down at all — so that no one can learn them without their consent.:  

...and he figured out how to make the trick actually work. Never exactly the way the instructions seemed to direct, but always close enough, and he'd assumed he'd misread them, or that it was some sort of test. Not that it mattered any more by that point, because he'd figured it out and could move on to the next illusion. It had eventually become almost a game to try to tease out the real meaning from in between the lines, and he could almost see his father's teasing grin when he was stuck and smile of paternal pride when he figured out the trick.

He'd always been so proud when he succeeded, he'd never thought to question the click of something indefinable sliding into place in the back of his mind right before each triumph. And it only made sense that he could always do the tricks perfectly once he'd figured them out. Always, unless he was too tired, but he'd figured that it was because it was harder to concentrate properly then, and it hadn't happened to him since he was fourteen anyway. It was true that that had never really happened with the tricks his father had taught him himself, but that was only to be expected, since he'd known them for longer and had the best teacher in the world for them, right?

And... even if his father had left something out, because now that he thought about it of course he would, he was the best and craftiest of magicians and wouldn't neglect something so basic... Kaito had been the closest to his father out of anyone in the world, right? He'd even been learning some magic from him already. Surely he would have the best chance of knowing him well enough to figure out what he'd left unwritten. His father had probably planned to teach him out of those notebooks himself someday, right? Hadn't he spent enough time scrutinizing every line for hidden clues left for him to figure out what he was really supposed to do? It couldn't have been just because of the Shadows that he had been able to learn what his father left behind, it couldn't possibly be that he would have failed utterly without them to break the rules for him, it couldn't...

It wasn't until he felt Meraud's even, sympathetic gaze and Riku's hand tight on his shoulder that he
realized he'd been speaking aloud.

"I cannot say how much of that is true, and what you might have been able to learn without the Shadows. But I can tell you that they are there now.: She was silent for a moment, allowing him to regain some composure. :It seems most likely that you unconsciously accessed them to replace or compensate for whatever was missing or altered. If you began very simply and worked up to the more difficult tricks, your subconscious control would have also developed along the way while you remained unaware of the difference. I can imagine no other way to explain how you managed to successfully bend the shadows on your first visit here to reach Mokuba in time without being aware of what, exactly, you were doing.:"

"Wait — you're saying even that was the Shadows?" It was nothing more than an edge of extra speed, a twist of will to push himself just enough to stay one step ahead of his pursuers if they got too close for comfort, always there to reach for whenever he needed to get from here to there right away… Oh.

"You wear the Shadows like a second skin, Kaito-kun. The faint blurring of the world as you change clothes in a mere moment, the extra push to make it to that handhold that mundane momentum would have left just beyond reach, the added impetus to grab a second-floor balustrade and the leverage to flip into a sitting position atop it… When you need them, you call, and they come, though they are subtle enough that I suppose it's understandable you haven't noticed their presence before. There's never been a reason for it to occur to you to look.

"So far you've had the good luck of never trying to do something beyond their capacity when your life hinges on the outcome,: Méraud added, and something in her tone as she finished speaking caught Kaito's attention. He wasn't entirely sure he hadn't imagined it, but he could have sworn her voice had changed subtly as she'd said 'your life'.

Apparently he'd managed to use the Shadows to do anything he'd needed to do… until it wasn't a matter of his life or death anymore.

Horrible suspicion arose to meet with the guilt he'd been trying to suppress and ignore for the past two days, and all other thought processes temporarily ceased as Kaito's mind filled with the memory of Connery's fingers slipping through his grasp filled Kaito's mind. He felt Nightmare's inexorable fall as it pulled his glove off, relentless despite the way he attempted to reach for Connery the way he reached for anything else just beyond his fingertips… The muted thud of flesh and bone against concrete sounded in Kaito's mental landscape just before the scene reset abruptly and then Connery was falling again… and again… and again…

Kaito abruptly came back to awareness with a slightly strangled sound, more than a gasp but not quite a sob, and found himself being shaken.

"Kaito-kun! Snap out of it!" Riku's voice, sounding quite worried, and oddly echoed by Méraud saying the same thing, half a word behind.

"I… I could have… If I'd…" All attempts at coherency were swamped by the giant bubble of riotous emotion welling up in Kaito's chest, but when he reached out and helplessly curled his fingers around thin air in echo of the grip they had been locked into in his memory, Riku seemed to somehow understand, judging by the quiet, heartfelt curse that reached Kaito's ears.

"It's NOT your fault." A firm hand grasped Kaito jaw and forced him to look up, meeting Riku's penetrating gaze. "Everything we've learned about these Shadows indicates that they're for little manipulations of stuff that's around you, not reversing the laws of physics when it comes to another person."
"But…" As much as Kaito desperately wanted to believe that was true, he still found himself wavering.

"Méraud-san, how much weight could the Shadows support?"

:Not much on it's own, perhaps five Newtons—that is, about twenty pounds,: she amended hastily, :if that. They're suited to more subtle adjustments, not tangible force. And in worlds where it's harder to draw on the Shadows at all…:

A sigh. "Get Hakuba-san. Please," Riku added as an afterthought to the command, still not looking away from Kaito.

Kaito immediately ducked his head and curled around bent knees, unable to suppress a shudder. "Don't want him to… not if I could have held him, and didn't… I don't want Hakuba-kun to know I killed Nightmare."

"…I'm going to blame that entirely illogical statement on sleep deprivation and possibly an overactive guilt complex — heaven knows we're too much alike," Riku replied as in the background Méraud's claws fumbled with the doorknob. "Kaito-kun. In the entire time you've known Hakuba-san, has he ever lied to you?"

It took Kaito a moment to think, but then slowly, reluctantly, he shook his head.

"He's not about to lie to you for your peace of mind, then. Furthermore, he's a detective. Death scenes are his specialty. If anyone could give cause of death it would be him, and if he says it wasn't your fault you have to believe him, right? Not to mention he'd be familiar with your native laws of physics, and would be able to determine whether or not anything you could have done would have made a difference."

The litany of words was oddly reassuring, and Kaito felt somewhat calmer when Hakuba followed Méraud into the room. Somewhat. The fading panic had left behind a frozen, dead weight that seemed to constrict his ribcage. Rather than meet the blond's eyes, he stayed curled up in his chair for what little feeling of comfort existed in presenting the world with a smaller target.

Riku turned on Hakuba as soon as the detective had shut the door behind him. "Would twenty pounds of force have been enough to hold up a fully-grown man?"

Hakuba paused and blinked at the apparently random question. "Eh… no. Not by a fair bit, in fact. Why the sudden interest in physics?" Taking in the scene, he approached Kaito's chair with a concerned expression. Funny, that. Hakuba didn't usually show much emotion. He stopped slightly more than an arm's length away, though, so that was normal.

The other objection to Riku's attempt to exonerate him forced its way past Kaito's lips. "But I was anchored. If I wasn't about to go over the edge, why couldn't I hold onto him?"

Despite the personal upheavals of the past few days, Hakuba's impeccable detective skills remained intact. Combining Kaito's behavior, Riku's question, and Méraud's presence with the implications of Kaito's last statement, he came up with an answer that prompted a low growl from his throat.

"What brought this up?" he snapped at Méraud. She mantled slightly in response, but answered calmly.

:Kaito-kun subconsciously manipulates the Shadows. When I told him that their help is what allows him to safely do what he does, he apparently came to the conclusion that because he could use the shadows to protect himself… he should have been able to do the same for Nightmare."
"He seems to have equated the fact that he failed with the idea that he didn’t try," Riku added, speaking over Kaito’s head.

Hakuba shook his head in exasperation. "Idiot magician. With twenty pounds of force — maximum," he added, glancing at Riku for confirmation, "at your disposal, even flat against the catwalk it’s a miracle that you didn’t dislocate your shoulder or get pulled over the edge entirely. You would have had no way to brace yourself, and Connery weighed at least half as much again as you do. And…"

He paused for a moment, regarding Kaito thoughtfully with the expression that Kaito absently recognized as the one he wore when some new piece of information had just solved a puzzle for him.

"…That reminds me. I noticed something rather unusual that night, after Riku left." He glanced over at Méraud. "Though the way Connery was holding the glove showed that he'd fallen from a grip on his hand… his shirt cuff was rumpled and stretched, as though he had slipped through a grip on his sleeve"

Méraud nodded solemnly. :If the Shadows were trying to help him hang on…:

"Which means, if you hadn't noticed, that you did try to save him with everything you had," Hakuba continued, crossing his arms. "Made a damn good effort at it, but there wasn’t anything that could be done, even with you being you."

The cold pressure in his chest loosened slightly, and Kaito took a deep, shuddering breath.

"By the time you faced Connery in that warehouse, other factors beyond your control had taken him beyond your reach."

One of Riku's hands gripped Kaito's shoulder almost tight enough to bruise. "You did more than most people could have done. Let it go."

There was a long frozen moment in which Kaito couldn't seem to think properly.

He'd failed. But he had tried, he had done all he could.

And then memory welled up, unbidden, of the moment before the repeating loop that had played behind his eyes of when Nightmare had fallen.

That one moment when he'd had the man in his grip, long enough to tell him to grab on with his other hand. Long enough for him to refuse, clinging blindly to the jewel instead.

If what they were telling him was true, and it was improbable that he'd been able to hold on at all.. perhaps the Shadows hadn't failed him completely. Maybe they'd held just long enough for him to wrest the time for that abbreviated conversation from the laws of physics, to make the offer he might otherwise not have been able to.

Nightmare hadn't taken it, but Kaito had been able to give him the chance, at least.

Something eased, a phantom hand in his mind that even now had still been locked into an empty grip finally relaxing.

…All right.

Kaito nodded, exhaling slowly and consciously letting the guilt in his mind dissipate with it. "I did try."
And he made his own choices that led him to his fate:

Kaito nodded again, eyes slipping closed as a tension that had been in his muscles for the past two
days finally drained away. He massaged his eye sockets briefly and then forced his eyes open again,
not wanting to succumb to sleep just yet.

_Not when my current track record for highly disturbing nightmares is two nights out of two._

:I believe it would be best to resume this discussion of the Shadows at a later time. You're exhausted,
Kaito-kun.:  

"Unsurprisingly, sleeping in a chair is not conducive to rest." Hakuba added dryly before Kaito
could respond.

"_Kaito-kun…_" Riku drew out the name, eyes narrowing in annoyance. "How much did you actually
sleep last night?"

"Um…" Kaito ducked his head guiltily. Staying up until the only option left was to pass out from
exhaustion only sounded like a good idea when he didn't have to tell anyone else about it.

Risking a quick glance upward, he found himself facing disapproving glares in triplicate from the
dragon, detective, and islander.

_They look waaaay too much alike considering Méraud isn't even the same species._

"I was in bed until after you fell asleep…” he answered Riku, but the other boy looked decidedly
unimpressed.

"And apparently left it as soon as I was unable to notice."

Hakuba sat down in the study's other chair and leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "I
wasn't particularly in a position to think about it this morning, and Riku obviously didn't know, but
you seemed to think it advantageous to sleep just outside the study, in a chair of all things. Why?"

"I…"

Kaito couldn't think of a good comeback, which was bizarre. He usually had a blithe response for
everything. The lack of a satisfactory answer to two questions in as many minutes was probably part
of why, after a few moments, Hakuba's level stare intensified.

"Kuroba-kun…” Hakuba's brow abruptly furrowed, gaze raking Kaito's face. Kaito couldn't entirely
suppress a flinch — the blond's expression mirrored Kaito's memory of the dream-Hakuba's
searching look from just before he'd died. "How much sleep have you _had_ recently?"

Kaito looked down, deliberately keeping his hands from self-consciously covering his face or
rubbing at his eyes again. He'd hidden the dark rings revealing his semi-chronic sleep deprivation
from the past few weeks before his mom had woken up yesterday by making strategic use of his
disguise kit, but there was no telling how much his face had smudged in the intervening day and a
half. And now that Hakuba was actually_looking_…

"You don't want to know."

"I do, actually, or I wouldn't be asking." Calm, collected, and utterly unyielding as he waited for an
answer. "Now that you've stopped being your infuriatingly charismatic self, I can actually see how
terrible you look. "
Blasted detectives.

After another few moments of silence, Kaito mentally threw his hands in the air. He'd already been ganged up on once, no one looked willing to give him a break, and he was too exhausted to try bluffing his way out of the situation. "All right." He sighed and looked up at the ceiling to perform some mental calculations. "In the last week and a half… fifty-two hours?"

"You actually took mid-terms on no sleep?" Hakuba demanded, sounding appalled. "And then a heist?"

"Mid-terms and the heist was why I couldn't sleep," Kaito muttered, looking at the floor. "Not if I wanted decent grades this term, and then trying to figure out how to deal with Nightmare…"

"And then Friday night you had your own nightmare to deal with," Riku added, frowning.

"…Quite. But that only gives you more reason to have tried to sleep last night, which brings us back to the matter of the chair."

Kaito met the blond's gaze wearily. *What was that English idiom? 'In for a penny, in for a pound'?* "It was better to watch you be alive than risk seeing you dead."

Hakuba paused. "The nightmare still bothered you that much?"

"It felt more like a memory than a dream." Kaito grimaced. It still did. Even his nightmares usually faded after a day or so, but he could still recall everything his dream-self had experienced in this one with perfect clarity.

Hakuba rested his chin in one hand, thinking. "Have you ever had a nightmare like this before?"

Kaito shook his head. "Not before Friday."

"Very odd…" Hakuba gave Kaito another scrutinizing look. "Did your strategy work?"

"…Partly. You woke me up out of the beginning, this morning." With some effort, Kaito dredged up a smile for his audience. "It's just a nightmare. While I don't usually have ones that seem this real, it's not like I've never had them before. I'll get over it." If he said it aloud, maybe he could convince his own subconscious of the idea.

"And if I believe that, you'll sell me Cleopatra's Needle, cheap," Hakuba retorted wryly.

Kaito couldn't stop a faint snort of disdain. "I can sell most people the same one three times, and convince them that they've got the complete set."

"Then it's just as well you're dealing with us, then, isn't it? Kuroba-kun…" Hakuba sighed, shook his head. "You need to sleep. You can't function on fumes."

"I've been doing it so far," Kaito objected. "I'm sitting here talking to you, aren't I?"

"You've been managing, barely. Your mental equilibrium is shot and you're in no shape to face surprises of any sort. And even if you can function now, raw as you are, eventually the sleep debt is going to catch up to you."

…I'm good at running.

He looked down, hands curling in the chair cushion. "I don't want to see it again."
"Staying awake until you pass out won't prevent that, as you seem to have proved last night. You need to sleep. And I think I know something that might help…"

Kaito glanced back up, raising an eyebrow. "Dreamless sleep potion?"

Hakuba snickered, while Riku looked vaguely confused. "Something like that, actually. Solomon-san has a vast and varied amount of interesting recipes… several of which came up in his stories this afternoon."

"Given what I know of him, I'm not surprised." It fit the mental picture of Solomon that he'd created almost too well.

"You do like green tea, don't you?"

Kaito smirked faintly. "Not as much as you do, but yeah."

"Good. I'll be back in a bit." Hakuba stood and left the room, closing the door behind him, for which Kaito was grateful. Even natural performers eventually reached their limit for dealing with people, and for the moment Riku and Méraud's unobtrusive silence was about the limit of what he could tolerate. Hakuba had been right when he'd used the term "raw".

Kaito let his head fall against bent knees and closed his eyes, waiting for Hakuba to come back. Trusting Hakuba to help was a new but not entirely unwelcome experience; Kaito just desperately hoped that whatever idea Hakuba had would work.

After a while Hakuba returned bearing a bowl of tea. "Drink."

Kaito flashed a wry smile. "Yes, sensei." Taking a deep breath, he downed the entire thing in one go, ignoring the way it burned faintly at the back of his throat. He could feel himself begin to relax almost immediately and yawned, blinking. "How long till I'm out?"

"I estimate you'll have just enough time to make it upstairs and into bed," Hakuba responded, retrieving the bowl from Kaito's unresisting fingers.

"…Right." Kaito uncurled and pushed himself upright, then promptly staggered into Hakuba as exhaustion and whatever had been in that drink ganged up on his equilibrium with a lead pipe.

Hakuba caught him and slung Kaito's arm over his shoulders, shaking his head. "On second thought, given your current condition… Yuushi-san, could you get his other side?"

:I believe my size may be better suited for that,: Méraud interjected, snaking gracefully beneath Kaito's other arm before Riku could move. :Riku-kun is rather taller than both of you:.

"Right. My apologies, I'm still adjusting to the idea that you're solid enough to help get him into bed."

Kaito could feel himself fading fast as they helped support him out the door, navigating the living room furniture and a round of 'good nights' from the others until they reached the bottom of the stairs. Stairs, when he was currently reduced to a groggy shuffle. Kaito glared at the offending incline. "As of this moment, I loathe steps," he declared.

"Would you rather I carry you?" Riku asked from just behind them, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Gah! No." Kaito forced his legs to work through sheer force of will. "Shoulda told me to drink after you got me upstairs," he groused as they ascended, Riku following behind.
"I didn't think it would hit you this hard," Hakuba admitted. "Of course, I should have guessed you'd have no tolerance in this state…"

"What was it?"

"Solomon-san's special tea."

"…Special. Do I even want to know what's in it?"

Hakuba grinned, the first real amusement Kaito'd seen from him since they'd left home. "The pot contains a quarter of a bottle of brandy."

Kaito blinked owlishly, half in disbelief and half to stay awake a bit longer. "An' what else? This isn't drunk." He'd been six when he'd accidentally found his dad's stash of sake, and being insatiably curious, he'd investigated without knowing any better. His parents had agreed that an untreated hangover would be consequence enough. They'd been right.

"The rest of it, I don't know. Some herbal additives. It's supposed to suppress nightmares without suppressing dream sleep."

Kaito considered that. "I didn't know that was possible."

"Yes, well, I rather think it's probably not entirely a scientific method, if you get my drift," Saguru replied, nodding towards Méraud as they finally reached the guest room.

:That is likely,: she agreed.

"Oh. Cool…" Despite his best efforts, Kaito couldn't fight the effects of the tea any longer. He slumped sideways, Méraud's presence vanishing from beneath his arm as the darkness pulled him under.

Chapter End Notes

This version of Kaito does know how to perform on balance beam, despite that being equipment used for girls' routines. It's easier to pretend a wall is a balance beam than a pommel horse, and when you're the one watching competitions and mimicking performances to make up your routines... Kaito's built for agility and grace rather than strength, anyway. He'd look better on beam than rings or the single bar. As an additional note, gymnastics is part of why Kaito is relatively short and slender, and able to pull off crossdressing disguises.

The game Saguru and Solomon are playing is called Hextra and is played with Icehouse pieces, made by LooneyLabs.

The mug-quote comes from Oscar Levant, while the tea-stereotype quip is mangled from Buffy. Cookies if you can pinpoint the episode and/or the characters speaking.
As Kaito slumped into unconsciousness, Riku hurried forward to catch Méraud's share of the weight. Hakuba might be more rested than Kaito, but under the circumstances that wasn't saying much... and while the magician was whipcord-thin, Riku knew from experience that he was heavier than he looked. Together, the pair dragged Kaito the last few feet across the room and wrestled him into bed. Hakuba stepped back and smiled faintly as soft snores began to drift up.

"Stubborn idiot."

"But a likeable stubborn idiot," Riku added, remembering Kaito's own description of him less than two weeks ago. It felt like longer.

"Mm." Hakuba sighed, running a hand through his hair. "He'll be out for several hours, hopefully more."

"Good. He needs it." Riku sat on the edge of the unoccupied bed, watching the blanket over Kaito rise and fall gently. "Going that long on so little... it'll take days before he even makes a dent in that level of sleep debt."

"Quite. And it will likely take the same amount of time before he even approaches the realm of normal again. For him, that is. God knows where that falls as compared to the rest of us."

"...Apparently, on a scale of black to white, the color blue."

Hakuba snorted. "Yes, Solomon-san mentioned that earlier today." He paused for a moment, eyes drifting from Kaito to Riku with an unusually hesitant expression. "He also said something that struck me as odd... you went by a different name the last time you both came here?"

Riku was abruptly reminded that for all the information Hakuba did have about what was going on, there was at least as much he still didn't know.

"...Yeah. I guess I owe you a better explanation of who, exactly, I am... and what Kaito-kun and I are trying to do."

"I wouldn't want to presume—" Hakuba began hastily, but Riku shook his head.

"No, it's okay. If you're going to know, you should know the whole story." Riku resettled himself more comfortably on the bed and gestured for Hakuba to seat himself on the other half. He stared contemplatively into the distance as Hakuba sat crosslegged across from him, then sighed. "You know, I already told this to Kaito-kun once, and I still don't know where to begin."

"Well, if I were to summarize what I already know..." Hakuba ticked off on his fingers. "Your name is Riku, but you went by Ansem as recently as a few weeks ago; you're from another world; you
travel between places by way of the Darkness that is somehow involved in defining the boundaries of the universe and is the home of creatures called Heartless, source of the most disturbing experience I've had in my life; magic exists, in a variety of different forms; and you and Kuroba-kun are attempting to stop a group of people he considers more dangerous than the snipers who occasionally attempt to assassinate him, though I don't know any details."

"That's because they are," Riku stated flatly. "I'll... tell you more about that later. You asked about my name first. My name is Riku. Ansem... was the name of the monster whose form I currently can't escape."

Hakuba managed to keep his jaw shut, but the abrupt widening of his eyes betrayed his shock. "What?"

...He'd definitely been hanging around Kaito too long if he couldn't help but feel slightly amused at managing to disconcert Hakuba. That made two of them feeling off-balance now. It had been a long day, and while it had been nice to remember some of the good times with Sora and Kairi for a while, now the memory of what had been lost stole back again as a dull, cold ache.

"This face, this body, belongs to a man who embraced the Darkness. In doing so, he became a Heartless." As Hakuba paled, Riku quickly repeated the explanation he'd given Kaito of how the Darkness created Heartless and Nobodies from a person's triad of body, heart and soul, taking the time to emphasize their common purpose and consequent danger. Hakuba had the rather unique opportunity of being able to learn exactly what he was trying to get into before it was too late, and Riku planned to take advantage of that. Not that Hakuba seemed likely to change his mind, but it couldn't hurt.

He also, more reluctantly, explained the difference when one was consumed by the Dark, and when one chose it as Ansem did.

"He kept his mind and gained the power of Darkness, but he wanted more. Each person has a heart. So does every individual world. But the greatest source of Light and Darkness is the heart of the entire universe, Kingdom Hearts. He thought I could help him open that door, and the promise of power convinced me to open myself to his influence..." Riku trailed off, closing his eyes. No matter how many times he had to tell the story, this part would never get any easier.

"He... possessed me. Somehow his magic and Darkness interacted with my own and... remade me. To look like him. Eventually Sora—my friend from back home, he's been the one protecting the worlds from the Heartless and Nobodies—defeated him, and when I regained myself I had my true body again. But Ansem's... I suppose you could call it his ghost... remained, and then I wasn't strong enough during a fight and reached too far into the Darkness.

"It changed you again?" Hakuba hazarded, regarding Riku with wary curiosity. "To what you—he—had been before."

He nodded. "With no way back, this time."

"...But Kuroba-kun wouldn't have just taken that at face value—he's spent enough time behind a mask to recognize one anywhere, even one so unintentionally thorough as your own." Hakuba's lips quirked ruefully. "He started poking, didn't he."

Riku could help but smile at the memory. "He figured most of it out on his own, and then I told him the rest. And yes, there was at least one instance of amateur psychotherapy that was not unlike debridement..."
Riku suppressed an involuntary shudder. He hadn't meant to use that word, linked too closely as it was with the memories of the one he had learned it from. Only Ansem's Heartless would use a term for the removal of decay or debris from a wound to describe how he had cast off his body because it inconvenienced him when he opened himself to the darkness. But this, while psychological rather than physical, seemed truer to the word's actual meaning: it had hurt like crazy until it was over, like feeling the emotional wounds torn open again while he was forced to face them, but afterwards he had felt better than he had for a very long time. And he thought that maybe, now he had a chance at starting to heal.

He was pulled from his thoughts when Hakuba snickered quietly, glancing over at Kaito. "That is a far, far too accurate description of his methods."

"You, too?"

"You could say he took an interest."

"He's good at that." Riku paused for a moment, then continued. "Before I met him, I'd accepted Ansem as my true name and tried to put the memory of being Riku behind me. Kaito-kun... wouldn't let me. He's a lot like Sora, really, but less naive. He's seen more. Been hurt more. But Sora saw a lot last year too, and they're both still insanely optimistic about the universe in general and refuse to give up on people, either."

"Sounds like a good friend," Hakuba said quietly.

"He is. We grew up together, and not many people would be willing to put up with a... a loner with a tendency to brood, to be honest, for very long. Sometimes he can be a bit of an idiot, but he wouldn't be Sora, otherwise."

"How long have you known each other?"

"All my life." Riku waited a beat, then deadpanned, "Sixteen years."

The muscle under Hakuba's right eye twitched. "You're enjoying this."

"Only a little."

"Sixteen."

"Yes."

"...Sixteen."

"Yes," Riku repeated patiently, a faint smile playing across his lips.

"You and Kuroba-kun keep changing the definition of 'impossible' on me. It's highly disconcerting, and I have the horrible feeling that you aren't done yet, either." Hakuba frowned. "You fight the Darkness, but also control it; your body is your own, but not your face; you're younger than I am, but you look twice my age..." He threw up his hands. "You're a bloody mess of contradictions."

All amusement vanished in an instant. "Yes, I am," Riku responded, voice painfully even, "because I thought the Darkness couldn't touch me, and I was wrong."

Hakuba cocked his head slightly, an unspoken invitation for Riku to continue.

"I accepted the Darkness because I thought it could give me what I wanted..."
Strength enough to find her, warmth of family lost too soon, to brave the Darkness between the stars to find her watching-place and if she was proud of who he'd grown up to be... Strength enough to see the universe beyond a too-small home, when childhood dreams had been abandoned as much as they ever could be... to find Kairi when she, at least, had still needed him...

He swallowed down the memories. "You're not going to have much problem with that, given your reaction to the corridor and the Heartless. But even if you're not seeking its power, the Darkness doesn't need to be within to be able to eat away at you, to wear you down until there's almost nothing left and twist the remnant into something unrecognizable. Aside from the additional strain of the corridor, your first encounter with the Heartless was likely the easiest it's ever going to get. There are much stronger Heartless out there, not to mention how Nobodies are more dangerous because they can think... and the mastermind behind all the current trouble is the Nobody spawned when Ansem became a Heartless."

"...You don't do anything by halves, do you?"

Riku couldn't entirely suppress a bitter snort. "No. Unfortunately."

"He's the one you and Kuroba-kun are bound and determined to stop, then?"

"He and what remains of his colleagues," Riku confirmed. "Unless Sora's been busy while I've been —distracted—" first by Kaito himself, and then by Kaito's predicaments "—approximately half a dozen Nobodies with intact memories and senses of self are still actively seeking a new route to Kingdom Hearts. Xemnas, Saix, Xaldin, Luxord, Demyx, Xigbar... Axel."

Though Axel was hopefully causing more trouble for the Organization than for Sora, now. The firedancer's reluctance to destroy Roxas in DiZ's virtual world, even when it was to his advantage to do so, was inconsistent with a Nobody's true nature. Riku couldn't be certain, but he suspected—hoped—that as Sora and Roxas had reunited, whatever bond Axel had previously made with Roxas had served to connect him to Sora, as well... and Sora had enough heart for a dozen souls.

Relegating that train of thought to the back of his mind where it belonged, Riku slid off the bed and moved to the guest bedroom's closet, pulling out the cloak. He'd been wearing it when they'd left Kaito's world, but he'd remembered Kaito's initial admonition to blend here and left it off in favor of the less remarkable outfit taken from Kaito's disguises.

"This is their symbol. If you ever meet a humanoid wearing one in your world, don't ask questions. Run. You have a strong heart, and it would be to their advantage to turn you into a Heartless."

"I'll just have to go and find myself a different dragon to turn, then, won't I? A pity you aren't more amenable, we could have done so much with you in our ranks..."

The voice flashed through Riku's mind without warning, and was gone almost before he could recall where it came from. When he remembered, however, he was hard pressed to bite back a curse. Xigbar. He'd let the sharpshooter go over two weeks ago, and hadn't remembered to check again to make sure the Nobody hadn't found another dragon somewhere. Himura's world had dealt with Xigbar without needing their help, but he couldn't help being afraid that some other world might not be so lucky. No matter what he'd told Kaito, Sora couldn't be everywhere at once. All it would take was several members acting simultaneously...

"Though for some reason, you have one also."

Riku blinked, thoughts interrupted by Hakuba's voice, and refocused to find the detective regarding
him and the cloak thoughtfully.

Hakuba continued, "The shrouded form erases individual identity, while simultaneously establishing a group unity. Within that lies a kind of disguise... and resonance."

...The blond was far too intelligent for his own good, picking up on things that Riku hadn't meant to let slip yet, if at all.

"It was a reminder of where I'd come from," he admitted, replacing the cloak in the closet, "and where I was trying to go."

"Forgive me if I'm wrong, but you've said your friend Sora is the one who defeated Ansem, and is now facing a group of individuals with similar intents. If they are as dangerous as you've described, how on earth has he managed it?"

"He has allies. Anyone he meets essentially becomes his friend, and willing to help him. ...He also wields a keyblade, a rare weapon which is unparalleled in its effectiveness against Heartless and Nobodies."

So long as you remained on the path it had chosen you to follow... No. Don't think about it.

"Keyblade?"

Riku sighed, leaning back against the closed closet door. "A weapon that can be given form by those chosen to wield it and influenced by those with strong hearts. The strength of a Keyblade depends on the heart of its wielder, but it also truly is a key, with all the powers you would expect from one of mystical origin. It can lock or unlock pathways, doors... hearts. Two Keyblades working together locked the door to Kingdom Hearts after Ansem found it, forcing Xemnas to seek a second way."

"...I see." Hakuba rubbed his forehead, brow furrowed. "I believe I may have reached my limits for absorbing absurdly improbable truths." He uncurled from his position on the bed and stood, then looked up at Riku. "I could use some of Solomon-san's unadulterated tea. Coming?"

Riku blinked back his surprise. They were both Kaito's friends, and seemed to have forged an understanding over mutual concern for the magician's well-being, but beyond that... he wouldn't have blamed Hakuba for wanting to unwind alone.

"All right."

They returned downstairs, passing through the living room where Joey was regaling Solomon with the events of the Conspiracy's latest venture, occasionally supplemented by input from Yugi or Mokuba. They'd gotten all the way up to 'pai-jutsu,' and Riku chuckled at the memory as they went past.

In the kitchen, Riku sat at the table and watched as Hakuba poured tea the ease of long practice, then slipped into the seat across from him. They drank in a mutual silence more comfortable than awkward, Hakuba looking contemplative while Riku stared into his mug, grateful that the blond had refrained from asking more questions about who he had really been and what his life had been like before.

As the silence stretched on, however, Riku's mind kept turning back to Xigbar and what the Nobody could be up to. He'd just gotten up the momentum for some spectacular brooding about Xigbar's potential movements when Solomon's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Saguru-kun?"
Hakuba exchanged a surprised glance with Riku, then picked up his mug and exited the kitchen. Riku followed a moment later out of curiosity, and found that Joey had apparently finished storytelling. Joey and Mokuba were standing up, and Mokuba smiled at Hakuba.

"Motou-san said it would help develop your shielding if you could get a hold of a violin... Mine's been collecting dust for a while, if you want to borrow it. You could even come home with us and take the limo back, if you wanted to get it now." He smiled hopefully.

Riku couldn't tell for certain from his position behind Hakuba, but for a moment the detective's hands seemed to tighten on the mug he was holding before he could suppress the reaction.

"That's... very kind of you," he managed, and Riku realized with surprise that if anything, the blond was fighting down a faint blush of embarrassment. "If you're certain you don't mind..."

"Nah, this is the kind of thing Niwa-san gets paid for," Joey assured them. "You can bring Riku-san too, so you're not riding back alone."

Hakuba glanced back at Riku, who nodded. He at least knew Hakuba to some extent, better than any of the others did. He could understand why the detective might want a more familiar face around, and Kaito would want him to keep an eye on the blond anyway.

The added bonus of being away from Solomon and Yugi's too-sharp eyes while Kaito wasn't around to act as a buffer was simply a... nice coincidence.

"I don't mind."

"Splendid!" Solomon declared, directing a smile towards Hakuba. "Between music and Duel Monsters, you should have a solid base for your shields to anchor in."

"I can only hope," Hakuba agreed.

"Well, we'd better get going." Joey grinned. "Places to go, people to see."

"Only if you count homework as 'people'," Mokuba countered with a wry smile. "It's almost exams for you, and I have a book on international business to finish..."

"Hey, I'm caught up from New York, but after hearing proper mangling of the language back home, formal English translations lose their appeal."

Yugi shook his head with an amused smile. "See you tomorrow, Joey. Take care, Mokuba-kun."

Solomon added his own farewells, and Riku and Hakuba were quickly whisked off to the Kaiba mansion. Riku didn't pay too much attention to the ride over, choosing instead to watch the city fly by outside the window. He let the conversation go by without really listening, though in the back of his mind he registered Joey's easy laughter, Mokuba's quieter chuckle, and... a faint amusement, at most, running through Hakuba's responses.

At the mansion, Riku waited with Joey and Hakuba in an absurdly grand front room while Mokuba retrieved the violin from the depths of the house. When the dark-haired boy returned, he held out the instrument's case to Hakuba with a winning smile and puppy-dog eyes that put any of Sora or Kairi's attempts at begging to shame.

"Do you think... you might like to try it before you go? I don't know anyone else who plays..."

Standing beside Hakuba, Riku was surprised to see the detective's eyes flare almost imperceptibly
with what in almost anyone else he would be tempted to call concealed panic. But that didn't make
any sense, when it was only music... Riku'd never met a musician who didn't enjoy the opportunity
to perform. He made a mental note to figure out why Hakuba was so twitchy about the subject once
they were away from here. While Mokuba's pleading expression had gained an edge of hesitancy, he
seemed unable to give up on the request altogether.

"I..." Hakuba hesitated, but one of the detective's more obvious character traits was a set of manners
that must have been bred into him from the cradle, and then some. In a conflict between personal
preference and decorum, etiquette won hands down. "I'm afraid I'm rather out of practice, but since
you are being kind enough to leave it in my hands in the first place..."

Hakuba carefully accepted the case from Mokuba and laid it open on the nearest available flat
surface; in this case, an intricately carved, dark mahogany coffee table that looked more expensive
than all of the Motou home's furniture put together. With a few deft movements he emptied the case,
settled the violin on his shoulder, took a deep breath, and experimentally drew the bow across its
strings.

At the pure tone that filled the air, something seemed to relax in the blond and he closed his eyes.
Slowly at first, then with more confidence as the familiar movements fell back into place, he played a
short and simple piece twice through. The second time sounded almost exactly the same as the first,
barring a few added flourishes and a drawn-out final note, and Riku privately came to the conclusion
that Hakuba 'out of practice' was better than most musicians in top form.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, Hakuba lowered the instrument and opened his eyes to acknowledge
his audience.

In addition to a short but enthusiastic round of applause from all three of them, Mokuba gave Hakuba
a brilliant smile. "That was the theme from that British Sherlock Holmes miniseries, wasn't it? Nii-
sama's let me watch a few to practice my English, and that sounds like the opening..."

This time Hakuba did blush, his usually pale complexion tingeing pink. "It was the only thing I could
think of that was relatively short and simple."

"Well, it was good." Under his breath but still audible, Joey added, "Out of practice. Ha!"

"Thank you..." Hakuba didn't quite seem to know what to do with the praise, and busied himself
repacking the violin. Taking pity on the blond, Riku bowed to the other two.

"It's been good getting to know you better today, but we shouldn't take up any more of your time."

"All right..." Mokuba said reluctantly. "Thanks, Hakuba-kun. Keep the violin as long as you need
it."

Hakuba nodded, cradling the case in his arms, but he remained silent on the way out to the limo. He
seemed content enough to remain so for the first several minutes of the ride back to the game shop.
Riku, occupied trying to find a polite way to ask about Hakuba's music sensitivity, nearly missed it
when the other boy finally spoke up on his own.

"Do you... would you, when we get back, not tell Kuroba-kun about this?"

"Why not?" The question slipped out on reflex, and Riku regretted it immediately, unsure how
Hakuba would react. But the blond just looked down at the violin case contemplatively.

"Music has always been private. ...Personal."
But to master the semi-chaotic mess Riku had made of his emotional equilibrium, Hakuba had apparently been willing to share such a closely guarded talent with Solomon, and then by extension Mokuba, to gain access to an instrument. And then Mokuba had obviously not considered any more than Riku had that some musicians might not appreciate their talent being common knowledge...

"I won't tell him."

"...Thank you." Hakuba paused, seeming to search for something to say, then added, "Do you play?"

"No. I don't have much talent for music." She had, though, gentle and bright as butterfly's wings, playing a dance for no other reason than to celebrate the day...

"It's... soothing. Relaxing. However, I'm... unaccustomed to an audience, beyond my original teacher or occasionally my mother."

Riku nodded, and they lapsed into silence again, but Riku's mind kept turning back to Kaito, Hakuba, and the dance of secrets that seemed to lie between them.

"...You don't have to hide from him, you know."

Hakuba glanced over, unable to hide his surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

"Kaito-kun. He won't use things like this," Riku gestured at the case, "against you." His lips quirked slightly. "Of anyone, he understands personal. But he also likes to know his friends."

"Yes, well..."

"I won't tell him... but I think he would like it if you did."

Hakuba looked down, eyes shuttered. "I'll think about it."

"Good enough." Riku gave a one-shouldered shrug.

"...You've been around him too long. You're picking up his traits."

Riku blinked. "I am?"

A slight smirk graced Hakuba's face. "Poking at people's armored walls."

"He is good at that, isn't he? I guess he's catching."

"Yes, he does have a penchant for leaving things decidedly altered from the way he found them."

Riku leaned back into his seat with a sigh. "A good thing, too. I wouldn't want to go back to where I was before I met him."

"No. I wouldn't either."

"Has..." Riku hesitated, then decided to ask anyway. "Has he changed at all? Since he left?" Of anyone, Hakuba would know...

"Aside from being strung tight enough to snap?"

Riku couldn't entirely suppress a wince at the raw honesty in Hakuba's question. "Yeah, besides that."
"It's... hard to say. I'm not entirely sure what's changed and what he's simply never shown before."

Riku nodded slowly. "The way I met him... I suppose there was nothing for him to hide. Not the way I saw him hiding from... almost everyone, really, once we got back to Tokyo."

Hakuba rested a chin on his fist, eyes distant, as he sought the right words. "It's always been walls... laughter-wrapped tripwires. He made everything a challenge, a puzzle, a game... but if you ever looked beyond that, got an inch behind the mask, there'd be nothing to be found, just you flat on your back, staring at the sky and wondering what happened.

...Because everyone and everything would be safer that way, if you were playing ghost among the rooftops.

Riku shifted in his seat, wondering absently if Niwa could hear any of this through the closed divider separating driver from passengers. Probably not, or Hakuba would have waited to make his initial request in the privacy of the study, or the guest bedroom.

"You only knew Kaito-kun after he become Kid, though, so it would be hard to say how much of that existed before."

"I would say most of it, though that's only a guess. From what Aoko-kun's said of him, it simply wasn't... focused, before."

Amazing what discovering that there was someone to blame, someone just out of reach, could do to one's motivation and concentration...

Riku sighed, considering the implications of what Hakuba had told him. "He was trying to be known of, and liked well enough, but not known, wasn't he? Keeping everyone at arm's length, because if no one could get close... then no one would get hurt." On either side, Riku knew. He and Kaito really were far too much like each other...

"Yes. Even before Kid, and the snipers... when the most important person in his life was simply gone one day..."

...to watch you from the stars, so be strong...

Riku ruthlessly shoved the stomach-twisting memories back into their boxes and slammed them closed. Don't Think About It. Not here, not now.

"I'd imagine it breaks something inside, especially in a child," he murmured, carefully keeping his voice steady and not looking at Hakuba. "And then... there's always something left vulnerable, no matter how many shields are put up to hide it. If anyone ever managed to slip through..."

The threat of further loss would be more than capable of causing nightmares like the ones Kaito'd been having.

And there was no question who had managed it.

Hakuba's thoughts apparently traveled along the same lines, because after a long pause he ventured, "I'm still uncertain how... I... managed to trigger such a reaction.

"Well..." Riku couldn't claim to know all of what went on in Kaito's head, but from what he had seen... "Part of it is because you know who he is. You can't prove it, and up until recently, he'd never have admitted it... but you know. And that means he can't keep you out as well as everyone else." Certainly not as well as Aoko, or Nakamori, or Conan.
"Mm." Hakuba looked thoughtful, but after a while it became apparent that he didn't intend to reply further, and they traveled the rest of the way to the Motou's in contemplative silence.

The rest of the afternoon and evening went by uneventfully. Hakuba disappeared into the study, Solomon busied himself with matters related to the game shop, and Yugi seemed to be alternating between reading a schoolbook and working methodically through a book of games and puzzles.

In the absence of any immediate need for his presence, Riku gave in to the plan slowly forming in the back of his mind and went up to the guest room to nap until dinner. While he'd had the last two weeks to recover instead of digging himself deeper, Kaito wasn't the only one with a sleep-debt. And there'd been that one night when he'd been on Kaito's laptop, perusing the Internet, and simply forgotten to go to bed...

After dinner, Hakuba pulled Riku into watching a Duel Monster's game between him and Solomon, with Yugi acting as commentator for Riku's sake. Apparently extra people around taxed Hakuba's concentration skills more, and the blond was almost scarily single-minded in his determination to master his empathic gift.

To his surprise, Riku enjoyed watching the game more than he'd anticipated. The level of strategy required was oddly fascinating, and though Hakuba lost to Solomon, it was by a narrow margin. A second game against Yugi left Hakuba more soundly defeated, and looking worn despite his best efforts to hide it. Solomon promptly packed Hakuba off to the study to get some sleep, and he and Yugi went to bed not soon after. Riku went through the same motions with the pair and shut himself into the guest bedroom, but he ignored the bed.

Instead, he went to the closet and pulled out the black cloak for the second time that day. He didn't want to wear it, but it was still the only thing he owned, and he had some pride. And if, by some minuscule odds, he ran into either Mickey or DiZ while on his brief trip alone, he'd rather avoid any questions as to what had happened.

Still...

He slipped into the cloak, and very deliberately left the hood down. He might not be of the Shadows, like Kaito, but he wasn't a member of Organization XIII. That was... important.

Flipping off the light switch, Riku stood in the darkness and closed his eyes. Stretched out, seeking the darkness-in-light of Heartless in a world, near the strangely blank sense that denoted a Nobody's presence. He would find Xigbar, see if he was a threat, and either take him out or find Sora to wind up, aim, and fire in the Nobody's direction...

A twist of will, and a portal into the darkness beyond opened noiselessly.

He stepped through.
**Surprise...**

Chapter Notes

We've finally hit the place where AU events throw a wrench in canon, so prepare for a bumpy ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Riku exited the darkness corridor, it took considerable self-control to not turn right around and flee through another portal from the biting cold that instantly sought to chill his blood. Growing up on a chain of tropical islands had left him with no tolerance for freezing temperatures, and his cloak provided minimal insulation against the mountain wind whipping across the snow-covered plateau.

Unfortunately, the sense of darkness emanating from the nearby summit of the mountain left no doubt about where the Heartless and their master were located. Pulling the black cloak tighter around his tall frame but stubbornly leaving the hood lowered, he began tramping uphill through the undisturbed blanket of snow.

He was going to get Xigbar for this. The Nobody could have at least had the decency to try and take over a world from one of its temperate zones.

At least it wasn't snowing. And his boots were waterproof.

He was **still** going to get Xigbar for this.

After several minutes hike up the mountain, Riku discovered that if walking in foot-deep snow was a trial, fighting in it was infinitely worse. At the upper edge of the plateau, a swarming mob of airborne Heartless proved that despite the claims of that one comic he'd found on Kaito's world, there **was** such a thing as overkill.

He **could** fight, and did, quickly dispatching the first half-dozen Heartless attracted to his presence, but the snow slowed him down and slipped beneath his coat, to be melted by what body heat hadn't already been leeched by the wind. The last thing he wanted to do was become embroiled in a mêlée with no end in sight, and escaped beyond them to a higher part of the mountain as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, this was not much of an improvement. While the Heartless seemed uninterested in following him, he found his new path infested with small packs of Nobodies who were more than willing to attack him for his heart.

By the end of the third fight, against an entire gang of Xigbar's trademark Sniper Nobodies, his temper had frayed from extremely annoyed to quietly seething. A lucky shot from one had forced him sideways into a massive snowdrift in order to stay free of holes —*Kaito'd kill him if he came back in less than one piece, and he'd run out of accelerated-healing potions ages ago and hadn't seen a mooogle to get more in even longer*—and effectively soaked what few dry patches he'd managed to keep.

He despised cold. And snow. And wet. And whatever had brought Xigbar here in the first place, and Xigbar for coming—
Riku's internal rant ceased abruptly at an inhuman roar that shook the mountain. A few moments later, a huge shape shot up from behind the next ridge, shedding snow as it gained altitude.

He stared, frozen.

...Xigbar'd found a dragon.

Riku watched in half-awed, half-horrified silence as the dragon hovered for a moment, casting its shadow over sun-bright snow. Serpentine, predominately blue, with burnt-gold horns and fanlike wings, the creature's grand majesty was spoiled by glowing yellow eyes and the iconic mark of the Heartless on its lower jaw.

He was too late. It was all going wrong...

As the realization sank in, cold seeping from his bones to the pit of his stomach, the dragon seemed to reach a conclusion and shot away, down the mountain slope. Following its trajectory, Riku realized that the dragon's flight path was headed directly for the sprawling city situated not far from the mountains.

He didn't even pause to think. Concentrating on the largest structure in the distance, the ornate palace at the edge of the city, Riku stepped through a portal that dropped him in a stone-paved outer courtyard directly in front of the palace entrance. Unfortunately, the pair of guards standing alertly on either side responded to his unexpected appearance by drawing their swords, and he had to stop himself halfway through summoning his own. Having Souleater in hand would ruin what little chance he still had for getting inside without a fight.

"Halt!" In the name of the Emperor..." The younger guard's voice wavered, pale face belying his attempts to hide his uneasiness over Riku's impossible arrival.

No time, no time, no time...

He'd rather not have to go through them to talk to a person with any authority, but he would if they kept delaying him. Now that the dragon was coming, Xigbar might appear at any moment to watch the consequences of his meddling. And where Xigbar went, Nobodies followed; Riku wasn't fast enough to stop them all before more people died...

"I have urgent business with your Emperor," he declared, vaguely aware that his soaked appearance wasn't doing him any favors, nor was he personable even at the best of times.

The older guard, eyes narrowing in a worn and weather-beaten face, glanced at his partner and jerked his head towards the grand doors. The young man needed no further instruction, and darted beyond them while the older one blocked Riku from following, sword raised.

"I know not how you got this far, but if you be a peasant then the Emperor is too busy a man to be bothered with your trifles, and if you be an enemy I am sworn to defeat you. You'll get no farther!"

"I am not a peasant, and I am not your enemy!" Riku snarled, smoldering temper at its breaking point. "I have news of an imminent attack on your city and your precious Emperor."

"Other messengers came in time, and Shan-Yu was defeated. Be gone!" the guard countered, punctuated the command with a swipe of his sword.

Riku gave up. "I have no idea who Shan-Yu was, but I don't have time to argue with you about this." He summoned his sword and shifted into an aggressive stance, voice dropping into Ansem's more threatening bass. "Move."
The guard was saved from making a decision by the arrival of another man, young but with an air of experience the missing guard had lacked. Soldier, the battle-hardened part of Riku's mind whispered. Dangerous. "From where I stand, the only threat to the Emperor that I see is you."

Riku didn't even have time to respond to the newcomer's statement before the man had rushed forward, sword drawn and aimed at Riku's heart. He blocked without thinking, saved by instincts honed razor-sharp from a year of fighting creatures who could and did travel faster than humanly possible.

"Look, I need your Emperor's help," he growled through their locked swords. "A dragon Heartless and the one who changed it are on their way. It would be idiotic of me to harm the man who can order that something be done to stop them!"

"The last man I fought with golden eyes and power tinged by darkness," his opponent hissed, "controlled the Heartless himself and sought to take the Emperor's place."

...So much for that idea.

The man broke away and swung again, forcing Riku to back up in order to dodge. Riku countered with an onslaught of his own, but despite his attempts to end things quickly the soldier held his own and they were forced to go back and forth, neither gaining the upper hand.

Frustrated, Riku finally launched into a series of brutal blows, forcing the older man backwards as he shouted, "It would make things much easier on everyone if you would just stop fighting!"

"Deep freeze!"

There was no time to react. Even if there had been, the voice kept Riku frozen in place as a wave of frost knocked him to the cobblestones. A quacked cry of "Fire!" followed, and the ensuing fireball scorched his hair but defrosted his frozen clothes enough that he could scramble to his feet and turn, heart in his throat.

It couldn't be. Not like this.

Sora stood glaring at him from a short distance away, keyblade out and at the ready. Riku peripherally registered how Donald and Goofy flanked the younger boy, a faint wisp of smoke still rising from Donald's staff, but his eyes remained transfixed on Sora's face. The younger boy took a threatening step forward.

"Ansem—Xehanort's Heartless—Whatever! You! I thought we already got rid of you, but if we have to we'll defeat you again!"

The words washed meaninglessly past Riku as he stared, utterly frozen, at his worst nightmare of the past months now come true. Kaito had managed to convince him that he would never see it come to pass—that Sora would never turn on him as an enemy—

Riku had thought he'd known pain when he'd watched Sora take a different path, one that had seemed to lead away from him and Kairi.

That was nothing compared to this.

Something twisted in him at the sheer wrongness of that ice from a face that could match the sun for warmth. Rage and hatred did not fit Sora's personality, but the distaste that shifted the Keybearer's features to the antithesis of friendliness was far worse, backed as it was by the implacable determination that Riku knew meant that Sora would not relent until his enemies were utterly
eliminated. There was no room for compromise, much less forgiveness, in that frown.

He felt his mouth fall open to utter something, anything, even if it was useless, anything to blunt that accusing gaze. Words jostled each other into crowded silence: apologies, explanations, a plea that he hadn't meant to do it, he'd tried to fight off Ansem, he had, he'd been trying to help all along! Desperately he reached in Sora's direction, hand turned up beseechingly, trying to express where words were failing him that if Sora would only believe him—

The way the soldier hadn't believed him. Riku's eyes widened in shock as he belatedly remembered their current amber color. Awareness of the world rushed back to him, bringing with it the full realization of how this must look from the outside. He... had forgotten that part of his situation more thoroughly than he would have thought possible in his time traveling with Kaito. It simply hadn't mattered to someone who had never known him differently, had never seen another's will present behind his face.

This was very, very different. What must Sora see? What could Sora see, except that the man—no, the monster—responsible for making his best friend betray them and nearly destroying the universe had returned when they had thought they were safe, and was now attacking near what had to be the heart of this world. What could he say? That they should ignore what it looked like? That he was really Sora's lost best friend, not his worst enemy? That it was really just a misunderstanding that he'd been trying to fight his way toward the ruler of a beleaguered world, through a warrior who was probably one of this world's foremost defenders, no matter how much it looked like the villain was up to his old tricks?

Sora was trusting, not stupid. Any attempt he made to protest in the face of the damning circumstantial evidence would be taken as a blatant lie at best, an insult at worst.

If only he'd had time to explain, time to introduce himself, to prove that he was who he said he was - but they were already moving to attack the armed, dangerous enemy before them. If he could only talk to Sora as himself—but he would have no chance to find out if Sora might be willing to listen to and forgive Riku when all they could see was Ansem. They would be on the alert now, and there was no chance that he would be able to so much as show his face before the Keybearer's defenders attacked. They were good friends to defend him so unwaveringly, but the thought gave no more comfort than ash sifting through his grasp when it meant that there was no way he would ever be able to get through to Sora, much less be believed long enough to find out if he could be forgiven for his mistakes.

The situation had slipped so very far out of his grasp that anything he could do would only make it worse. They would not let him talk; the duck, glaring, was already preparing his next spell, the knight's shield was raised solidly against him, and they would clearly interpret any attempt to speak as hostile, a lie, or both. There was no way he could avoid all their attacks, and he knew with bone-deep certainty that they would not stop once they began, just as he knew that he would not be able to take another attack from Sora, a vulnerability that had nothing to do with the physical. And he could not fight back. Not when the mere thought of raising a blade against Sora again tried to stop his lungs, and certainly not when even trying to defend himself would cement in their minds that he really was the enemy they took him for.

The worst part was that he couldn't blame them. He wouldn't trust anyone who wore this face either, and he almost laughed at the pain of the irony. One more thing that bastard had stolen from him.

Riku set his teeth, pulling back his hand from its futile gesture. He gave one last helpless, pained glance toward Sora, keenly aware that all he could do now was cut his losses and leave before he did any more damage. The Keybearer was regarding him with faintly furrowed eyebrows, but before
anything else could be said, a miniature red dragon popped up over Sora's shoulder.

"Hey, gimme some of the action, Sora! One, and two, and three!"

A stream of fire completely out of proportion for such a small lizard flew in Riku's direction, and the duck enthusiastically added his own fireball. With no hope to dodge, Riku resorted to the only option left to him, summoning a portal and stumbling backwards into it, away from Sora and the mess he'd made of things and the fireusing jerk and dragon...

The portal closed behind him.

When Mushu's fire dissipated, Xehanort's Heartless had disappeared. Sora frowned, gaze raking the empty space as if staring hard enough would bring him back.

"What was that all about?"

Donald quacked irritably, stomping over to the Heartless's last position as if hoping to find a trail. "What do you mean, what was that all about? He's back! How dare he come back from the dead!"

"Gosh, Sora," Goofy added, sounding oddly worried. "I think he's right. It looked like Xehanort's Heartless was trying to hurt Shang. What if he was trying to turn him into a Heartless?"

"No." Sora turned to see Shang leaning on Mulan, looking exhausted. "He said he was trying to get to the Emperor."

"Well, that's even worse!" Donald sputtered.

"Why would he want the Emperor?" Mulan asked, looking worried.

"He... he claimed that someone turned a dragon into a Heartless, and it was coming here..." Shang's brow furrowed.

Sora blinked. "That's... weird."

"Who cares what he said?" Donald demanded crossly. "How did he come back?"

"Yeah, I thought Kingdom Hearts destroyed him," Goofy agreed.

Sora frowned again. "He didn't have a body of his own because he was a Heartless, right? That's why he had to possess Riku last time. What if...what if he didn't actually get destroyed and possessed someone else's body again?"

"Gawrsh. You think he might've done it to Riku again?"

"No... Riku's smarter than that. He wouldn't let him trick him again," Sora declared with certainty. A sudden thought struck him, and he brightened. "But maybe Riku's looking for him again now, to get rid of him for good. I bet he thinks it's his job to take care of it, and he doesn't want to come back until he can say he made up for not being able to stop him before. That's why he won't let the King tell us where he is. Hey...maybe he's that "mutual friend" that box the King gave us at Hollow Bastion was from! Remember? The one with the picture and the ice cream in it, the one we thought came from Hayner and the other kids in Twilight Town—maybe that was Riku! He still wants to help us, but he thinks he has to finish what he's doing before he can come back for good."

Not that Sora didn't still wish that Riku could understand that he didn't care. He'd much rather
confirm that his best friend was really okay and then take Xehanort's Heartless and the rest of Organization XIII down together, but... Riku'd never seemed to be very good at figuring out that sort of thing.

"We can take care of it just fine," Donald groused. "It's the Keybearer's job! Does he think we're not good enough to finish the job?" He glared accusingly at Shang and Mulan, as if daring them to say anything.

"It's not that..." Sora tried to explain patiently. "Riku always tries to do things his way. He's not... he's never been good at accepting help."

"If it's your mess, you clean it up." The phrase floated through Sora's memory in Riku's familiar voice, though he couldn't say exactly where it had come from.

Mulan interrupted his thoughts before he could pursue it any further. "Maybe you're right, but none of this explains what that man was hoping to accomplish here..."

"If he was telling the truth about the dragon, he must have been trying to get a clear path to the Emperor," Donald grumped, crossing his wings.

"Wouldn't it have been easier to just let the dragon do it?" Goofy asked.

"He must have been afraid that the dragon on its own would take too long and we would get here first to stop it. Which we did!" the magician noted, puffing up proudly.

"I guess it coulda been like that..." Goofy said uncertainly. He looked about to continue, but all conversation was cut short by a deafening roar.

"...It seems there really was a dragon after all," Shang managed as Mulan hurried him out of harm's way, leaving Sora, Donald and Goofy to defeat the massive Heartless.

There was no more time to think as Sora raced forward to take on the dragon, but he couldn't shake the sensation that he was still missing something...

Chapter End Notes

The box that Sora mentions, which was originally given by Riku right before the Land of Dragons, changed hands between Riku and the King during their meeting in Inuyasha's world.

Credit goes to Snickerer for a significant chunk of the trip through Riku's mental processes.
Don't Panic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Riku stumbled out of the Darkness corridor as soon as possible, trying to escape the Dark that seemed to be clinging to him now, taunts and promises he'd thought buried for good whispering through his mind once more. They hadn't been this bad since... since he'd won at Castle Oblivion, binding the echo of Ansem deep within his own heart.

Embracing the promise of daylight, Riku stepped out into a world—and promptly walked into pain and fire.

Caught utterly off-guard, he bit out a curse even as he dodged away, reflexively throwing dark flames towards the source of the attack.

He was rewarded with a masculine yelp, and when his vision cleared, he saw a dark-haired boy in tunic and armguards sprawled at the base of a tree, eyes unfocused.

Riku blinked, trying to figure out what happened, then realized with horror that he'd just attacked someone... and that same someone had seen him come out of a portal. He darted forward, throttling down automatic panic. If he could knock the other boy out properly and be long gone before he awoke, there wouldn't be any awkward questions about how he'd appeared out of nowhere... the secret of other worlds would be safe here, and a headache never killed anyone. Maybe he could do something almost right, for once.

Riku knelt as he reached the tree, Souleater materializing in his waiting hand, and knocked the sword's hilt sharply against the boy's head. Golden eyes slid shut with only a faint sound of protest, and Riku checked to make sure that the boy was only unconscious, only to freeze at the nasty red burn on the left side of his face.

Oh no. So much for no loose ends. There was no way he could just leave the boy to wake up with an inexplicable injury, especially one that serious. What if it didn't heal properly? This boy would be stuck with it for the rest of his life. He had to get some sort of help, but trying to find a local healer had the potential to be a profoundly bad idea. If he could knock the other boy out properly and be long gone before he awoke, there wouldn't be any awkward questions about how he'd appeared out of nowhere... the secret of other worlds would be safe here, and a headache never killed anyone. Maybe he could do something almost right, for once.

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Oh no.

So much for no loose ends. There was no way he could just leave the boy to wake up with an inexplicable injury, especially one that serious. What if it didn't heal properly? This boy would be stuck with it for the rest of his life. He had to get some sort of help, but trying to find a local healer had the potential to be a profoundly bad idea. Again Riku regretted that he was out of potions. He did have plenty of crystals from his travels — maybe he could go back to Twilight Town and have the moogles there synthesize one, and come back and use it before the boy woke up. If he didn't have the right crystals... well, he'd worry about that if it happened. Riku began to straighten — and something struck a glancing blow to the side of his head.

The world lurched, and then there was an impact to his entire left side. Riku blinked, and as the world in front of his face registered wondered muzzily what he was doing lying on the ground, staring at a teapot that was resting incongruously in the grass next to him.

Not to mention why there hadn't been any follow-up attacks from whatever had first hit him.

He was still at a loss when a calm, slightly gravelly voice reached his ears. "I am sorry about that, but would you mind explaining to me what you are doing here and why you just attacked my nephew?"

Riku blinked dazedly, struggling to sit up. "...Nephew? Sorry, didn't want to hurt him, but couldn't afford any questions about—" He stopped dead, adrenaline clearing the fog from his brain too late as
his eyes focused on a balding, grey-bearded man sitting comfortably on a rock a short distance away.

The old man regarded him mildly, despite the fact that he'd evidently been there the entire time.

*Please let him not have seen me come out of the—*

"What *was* that black thing that appeared right before you did, anyway?" The old man asked in the same conversational tone, showing no signs of discomfiture. "I've never seen such a method of travel before. At least, that's what I assume it was."

—*Erk.*

Riku froze, staring at the old man. The boy had been bad enough. But this man had obviously had a much better view, and, worse, seemed uncomfortably sharp. He wouldn't just let this go without explanation. And Riku somehow doubted that knocking him out would help in the slightest, should his conscience let him even consider walking over and hitting an elder who hadn't done anything but sit there and talk reasonably.

...Maybe he could still talk his way out of this.

"Have you ever heard of something called magic?" He asked carefully, summoning every bit of control he possessed and ruthlessly quelling his emotional turmoil. Damage control first. Then he could go and get the potion, and *then* have his breakdown in peace.

The old man regarded him, brows raised slightly. "You're not talking about Bending, are you."

Riku could hear the subtle inflection in the way he pronounced the term, not unlike that with which people who knew about them spoke of Heartless, Nobodies, and Keyblades. He could also hear that it was not a question.

*I don't think this is starting off very well.*

"...No," he replied carefully, shoving his nerves back down. "It's... a power that's quite rare, in most places. And most of the people who have it try to keep it a secret, because otherwise they can be in danger from those who fear it." He had to tread carefully; he had the distinct feeling that lying to this man would not be a good idea.

"I see," the old man said, with just a hint of sympathy. "I can understand why you might feel that that would be necessary."

Riku let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "That's why I thought that it was important to get away before anyone could ask questions I wouldn't be able to answer. If your nephew was knocked out, he might think what he saw was a dream, and the secret would still be safe." *If it weren't for the burn,* his conscience reminded him, but he pushed it back to the back of his mind. *One crisis at a time. Get through this first.*

"Hm." The old man nodded briefly. "I see. So you come from far away?"

"Yes," Riku admitted. There didn't seem to be a way around it.

"Is there any particular reason you risked using this important secret to come here, then? Are you looking for something, maybe?"

Riku hesitated. "...No. Not really. It was more that I needed to... not be where I was." Something inside him trembled, and he forced it still. *Not yet. Please, not yet. Just a little longer.*
"Ah." The old man tilted his head slightly. "Will there be anyone coming after you by the same means, then?"

Riku blinked. "I think I can safely say that that will not be a problem. Although..." He hesitated for a moment. He'd been right. This man was worryingly quick. But it would only be fair to let him know, since he knew this much already, and there were no guarantees of safety anywhere...

"If you ever do see anyone using the same means to travel, do not stay near them. Get yourself and anyone you can away as fast and far as you can. Especially if they're wearing what I am wearing now."

He looked down at the material of his cloak for a moment, his mind pulling up the echo of his warning to Hakuba from the conversation that had reminded him of Sora in the first place—No! Don't think about that. Not yet!

"It's interesting you should mention that," the old man said, still in that innocently conversational tone. "I've never seen clothing like that before, even though I have spent years traveling the world from pole to pole. Nor have I ever run across anyone with a power like yours before, or even heard any mention of such a thing from any texts or sages."

Suddenly not at all innocent or casual, the old man's intense gaze pinned Riku consideringly. "There is dark skin among the Water Tribes and Earth Kingdom, though it is rare to see a shade as dark as yours. And while it is rarer still for young people to have white hair, there are occasional stories. But eyes of your color are found only among the royal family of the Fire Nation... which I know for a fact that you do not belong to. There has never been any record of anyone with all of those features together. And yet you do not seem concerned others might find your appearance strange. Just how far away are you from, exactly?"

Riku couldn't breathe.

He'd messed it up again. First Kaito, who'd almost died due to his failure to pay attention, then Hakuba, whose mind and nerves he'd scorched raw, now this boy who he'd attacked for nothing worse than being at the wrong place at the wrong time, and he'd failed, failed utterly to keep the existence of the other worlds secret in a simple conversation, right after he'd managed to single-handedly destroy any chance of ever being able to talk to Sora again—

No—

It was all too much at once, and everything he'd tried to suppress until later slammed back into him, his mind whiting out for a moment of sheer howling anguish. He'd been given back hope against all reason only for his own actions to put it wholly beyond his reach.

Riku became distantly aware that his breathing was fast, and far too shallow, and even when he tried to force himself back under control he couldn't stop gasping for air he just couldn't get enough of, even when it was letting this stranger see that he was vulnerable...

"If it is any help," the old man's voice, suddenly filled with undertones of concern and iron and nothing of the laziness that it had held before, cut through the ringing he hadn't even realized was filling his ears, "you have my word that I will not speak of any of this without your permission."

Thoughts still in a disjointed whirl, Riku grasped almost desperately onto the solidity of the uncompromising honor in that promise. Not everything was lost just yet. The man might not be an enemy. He hadn't failed completely. He hadn't. There was still a chance...
Something hitched in his throat, and he doubled over, coughing violently. But after the fit passed he could breathe again, steadily if still slightly ragged. When Riku could lift his gaze again, the old man was still watching him. After a moment, he shook his head and sighed, and his expression softened. "You can call me Mushi," he said gently, giving a reassuring smile. "Come on, sit over here, have some tea, and tell me what's wrong, and maybe we can work something out, hmm?"

It took a moment for Riku to remember how to stand up, but he slowly got to his feet.

"Oh, and bring the teapot with you," Mushi added.

Riku stared blankly at the teapot at his feet for a moment before bending to pick it up and carry it over to Mushi. The old man took it graciously, smiling a little to find that the top had stayed latched on and it was still mostly full of water. Watching him, it occurred to Riku that Mushi was really rather like Solomon.

What was it about wise old men and tea, anyway?

It wasn't until he noticed the concern in Mushi's eyes that Riku noticed himself laughing without intent or reason, and that he couldn't stop. He was vaguely aware of Mushi guiding him to sit down on the rock, and the sudden pressure when the old man took hold of his shoulder where it would not be threatening or invasive, and he absently wondered if Mushi was accustomed to dealing with defensive teenagers. The thought seemed absurdly funny, and he kept laughing as the old man simply sat beside him in silent reminder that he wasn't alone. Riku clung to the sensation of his firm grip like a lifeline against the sudden drowning sense of unreality.

He had no idea how much time passed before the laughter eventually died away, but it finally trailed off into a final broken chuckle, leaving him exhausted and cold and shivering slightly despite the afternoon sun.

Mushi seemed as entirely unruffled as he had been when Riku had first seen him. "Better?" He asked gently, and when Riku nodded, the old man handed him a cup of hot tea. Riku smiled at the gesture, thankfully feeling no urge toward another fit of laughter. He was grateful for the cup's warmth as he cradled it in his hands, even more so when the old man's kind but firm gaze compelled him to actually drink it.

"...Thank you," he managed, after a few more minutes.

Mushi smiled. "You're quite welcome, young man." He studied Riku face for a few moments, then added, "When you feel up to talking, I have it on good authority that simply relating one's situation can help put things into their proper perspective."

Riku tensed slightly out of reflex, then forced himself to relax. Mushi had already promised to not say anything, and absurdly enough, he believed him. The old man already knew enough to be a threat if he wanted to be. If he was going to trust him, he might as well do it properly. Besides, he really did seem concerned, and Riku found he was suddenly tired of holding everything inside for fear of burdening those he was close to. Most of it wouldn't matter, or even have any significance to Mushi, and that thought was strangely reassuring.

"I..." his breath hitched slightly, but all of his emotions seemed somewhat numb at the moment, the throbbing pain dulled to an almost-manageable ache. He took a deep breath, swallowed, and tried again. "I just lost whatever chance I had of reconciling with my once-best-friend. The next time he or his friends see me, they're going to try and kill me even if he doesn't..."

Once he started talking, he couldn't seem to stop, words tumbling over each other as they rushed
from his mouth, monologue broken only by the occasional pause for breath or more of Mushi's tea. The old man kept both cups full and hot the entire time Riku spoke, nodding occasionally or making an encouraging noise if Riku hesitated. Everything from the past year and a half—worries, hopes, fears, betrayals false and real, pain, regrets, failures—spilled into the open in disjointed spurts, until there simply wasn't anything else to say, and he trailed into silence.

Mushi regarded him gently for a few moments. "...You're not as old as you look, are you?"

Riku gasped a laugh at the sheer absurdity of the non sequitur. "You're as bad as Kaito."

"I shall take that as a compliment," the old man countered, eyes glinting in amusement. "As for your situation... forgive me for being blunt, but you're harder on yourself than my nephew, and that is no easy feat. You cannot be much older than he is, and you have been thrown into situations that demand far more than any boy should be forced to give. Given the situation, you've done remarkably well for yourself—made mistakes, certainly, but nothing irredeemable. Do you really believe that you fail at everything?"

"...Yes. No. Maybe." Riku lowered his gaze, absentmindedly watching the mesmerizing swirl of the tea in his half-full cup as it rippled toward the rim at a twist of his wrist. "Perhaps not as badly as I thought," he admitted with a sigh. "But still too often. I mean... I've told you how things have been going with my friends. I keep doing things wrong for all of them, even when it comes to the big things. Most of these problems wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been there."

"But they are still your friends, are they not?" Mushi quirked an eyebrow.

"...Yes," Riku admitted reluctantly. He'd failed even at his half-hearted attempted to dissuade Kaito; the magician was amazingly tenacious about not letting him stay alone anymore. It wasn't until Mushi chuckled that he realized that he'd said that aloud.

"The strange outfit and the fact I met him on a roof should've told me I needed to be more careful!"

"The precedent definitely should have made me more careful about Hakuba."

"Because you should obviously have known that he was going to come after you even when he managed to convince the friend who had known him longer that he had nothing of the sort in mind," Mushi nodded solemnly.

"I—but—but he wasn't even supposed to know about the portals in the first place! It's my fault he did..."

"So you shouldn't have tried to the best of your ability to help your friend when he was having an inconvenient crisis."

It took Riku a few moments to process that. "What? No! But Hakuba didn't even know about the portals until later, until he made us tell him how we'd gotten there! I shouldn't have told him..."
"Ah, so you mean you should have made your mutual friend either lie to someone important to him or betray your secrets."

"What—but—I—no—" Riku floundered for a few seconds before giving up. "I still should have sent him home instead of hurting him."

"Isn't that what you were trying to do?"


"Don't worry. Li will be fine. You weren't actually trying to hurt him, and it's hardly the first time someone's hit him over the head. I doubt that it will be the last, either - you're far from the only one to think that doing so can save a great deal of trouble."

Riku winced. "That's not what I meant," he said unhappily. "I'm still not proud of knocking him out, but when I first got here...that was an attack! And he hadn't even done anything!"

"I can assure you that in my experience, it is very rare for my nephew to have really not done anything." Mushi actually sounded amused.

Riku stared at him, bewildered. "How are you so calm about this? I attacked your nephew!"

Mushi shrugged. "You said you didn't mean to, and I believe you. And you've explained your reasons."

"But...but...how do you not understand?" Riku stared helplessly, unable to articulate why it seemed so wrong to him, one hand fruitlessly attempting to trace the shape of what he could not put words to. The overwhelming flurry of thoughts that had been dizzying him seemed to have vanished, leaving him with only the baseless certainty that something wasn't right.

"Understand what?" Mushi met his eyes squarely, with no hint of ridicule.

"It's..." Riku wrestled with the words that wouldn't come, feeling almost like a storm had swept through his mind and the pounding rain had left nothing in its wake, and finally gave up. "What I did wasn't right."

"And you know that," Mushi agreed.

"But that doesn't mean it didn't happen!"

"Would you blame any hunted creature for trying to defend itself when it felt threatened? Whether by trap, or by fire?"

"...Huh?"

"Tell me, what is it about having made a mistake that's bothering you so much?" Mushi tilted his head slightly.

"I..." Riku trailed off, and actually thought about it. It wasn't just that he'd hurt Hakuba or Li by accident. Hurting them by accident would have been dropping a log on their foot. What he'd done had been intended to hurt, even if he hadn't intended to direct it at them in particular. "I didn't mean to," Riku said slowly, realization dawning, "but I... I treated them like enemies, when they weren't."
"So it's your fault they triggered the instincts that have been keeping you alive for the last year or two."

Riku's mouth worked, but no sound emerged. Very, very belatedly, he realized that Mushi had returned to that terrifyingly conversational tone of voice.

The old man regarded him fondly and with perhaps the slightest touch of exasperation. "If I let you keep talking, you're going to convince yourself that the answer to that is yes, aren't you?" he asked dryly.

Riku had no idea how to respond to that, either, and Mushi chuckled and refilled both their cups with hot tea. "The fact that you are worried about what your reflexes do when you don't mean it means you still care about things other than fighting, and that's what's really important."

Riku blinked. "Well, of course. The things I care about are the only reason I was fighting in the first place."

"And you haven't lost sight of that. That's more important than you realize, and that's why I don't think you need to be worried."

Riku became aware that he was staring at Mushi and promptly closed his mouth. The old man regarded him with a warm glint of humor. "Your only real problem seems to be a tendency to not pay quite enough attention to what's going on around you, but I can assure you that that is far from uncommon."

Riku sighed and looked down. "Maybe. I just... I wish I could do something without everything turning out all wrong. I was trying to help Sora, that time I reached too far into the Darkness. I wanted to be his friend again, to make up for what Ansem made me do. But instead I can't even talk to him now. Looks like that bastard got the last laugh after all."

This time Riku did give in to the impulse to laugh at the irony, a quiet, mirthless chuckle far emptier than the fit that had seized him earlier. "For that matter, I was trying to help this time, too, to stop that dragon they got their hands on because I didn't pay enough attention." He paused, and snorted. "Didn't even manage to do that, either. Though I suppose I did at least get Sora angry and pointed at it. Not that I even really needed to. If I trusted him to do his job, I wouldn't have gone meddling and turned everything else into a disaster."

"There is no shame in trying to help a friend," Mushi informed him firmly. "It wasn't as though you could know how things would turn out any of those times. Unforeseen circumstances can make fools of anyone, even those with far more experience than you to guide them. People just aren't very good at perfection, no matter how hard some of them may try." His eyes darkened slightly with memory. "And to struggle for it anyway can cost more than is wise to sacrifice."

Mushi took another sip of tea before meeting Riku's gaze again. "All you can do is your best. Better than to be paralyzed with fear of what might go wrong, or throw away who you are in an attempt at the impossible. I believe you have already seen where that leads. A mistake is simply that, something to be learned from, not a moral failing of the soul."

Mushi's gaze went distant and slightly wistful, and he didn't even seem to notice when his gaze strayed back to the tree his nephew was lying under. "We all make our mistakes, whether in word or deed. All we can do is live with them, and try to make up for them as best we can. Besides," he added a few moments later, cheerful tone returning, "I do not truly believe the situation with your best friend is as hopeless as you seem to think."
Riku stared at Mushi, who simply smiled.

"If he still sees you, yourself, as a friend, as you said he still does, then there is still a chance. And as long as there is still a chance, you have not lost yet. While it is true that a direct approach is unlikely to accomplish what you hope...you will reach him somehow, if you can just remain patient. It may not be easy, and you may have to watch for that chance very carefully, but I'm sure that you will be able to find it. Just because it's especially difficult to get to him now, it doesn't mean that it will always stay that way. You're not the one he really thinks of as an enemy, after all." Mushi regarded him consideringly for a moment. "You could always try leaving a note for him. If he is your best friend, I'm sure he'll be happy to hear from you."

Riku sighed. "Maybe, but... if I tell him why I'm not coming to see him in person, that friend of his will probably tell him that it's so ridiculous it must be a fake. And if I don't tell him... that'll just make things worse, because I'll have to explain both what happened and why I didn't tell him earlier."

Mushi raised an eyebrow, but merely replied, "If you're sure," and took another sip of his tea. "If nothing else, you can always try being persistent. If you're patient, and are very careful not to do anything that might be considered threatening, even the least observant of boys will eventually have to notice that you're not trying to be his enemy."

Riku ran a hand through his hair tiredly. "Does that work?"

"It works on my nephew. Slowly," Mushi grinned.

Riku found himself smiling back, and gave a tired laugh. "I'll keep that in mind if I can't think of anything else, then."

"You'll manage." Mushi smiled at him.

Riku found that oddly enough, he believed him. He let out a long breath, surprised to find tension he hadn't even realized was there dissipation. But it really did make a difference, the renewed hope that he could fix his mistakes. Even if it might take a while, as long as it could be done...

And here was as good a place as any to start. "I want to say I'm sorry again for hurting your nephew."

Mushi waved it away. "Don't worry, he'll be fine! I told you, I can't say that I'm surprised you hit back, given how you walked right into the middle of his Firebending practice."

"Firebending," Riku repeated, very carefully.

"Mmhmm." Mushi nodded cheerfully.

Riku looked at the wisps of steam rising from the cups and from the spout of the teapot in the old man's hands. The teapot had been only warm when he'd carried it over earlier, and there were no coals near the rock they sat on.

"...You mentioned earlier that only the royal family of the Fire Nation has eyes this color," Riku said slowly, eyes narrowing slightly as he remembered. Mushi nodded again, still smiling.

Riku stared at him for a long moment as the old man drank his tea without any sign of concern.

"You," he declared solemnly, "are far more dangerous than you act."

"I am?" Mushi blinked at him, the picture of innocence.
"Smarter, too," Riku informed him. "You and Kaito really need to stop doing that."

Mushi chuckled. "I think I might like to meet this Kaito someday."

"...You will forgive me if I say that seems like a terrifying idea."

"If you say so," Mushi grinned, and for a moment Riku almost thought he caught a ghostly hint of fangs. But no, that was ridiculous. Just because he'd walked straight from one fire-user's attack into another didn't mean there should be a dragon here to match those he'd left behind. He must be confusing the odd sense of recognition with something else.

Really, he insisted at the part of his mind that remained unconvinced. Even though dragons traditionally tended to be old and wise and cunning and associated with fire. They were bad-tempered recluses like Himura's master, not personable old men who gave tea and advice to random strangers... weren't they?

He cut off the train of thought before it could go any further.

"I... I should be going." Before he was missed, and Kaito tried to follow him using untrained skill.

"You are feeling better, now?" Mushi gave him a kindly smile.

"I think so." Riku still had his doubts, but the mind-numbing pain had soothed beneath the reintroduction of options, and the possibility of hope. The whispers of the Dark... He'd deal with them, too. Somehow. Later. "Thank you again, for... everything."

Mushi nodded in acknowledgment. "It was my pleasure to meet such an interesting young man as yourself. Should you ever be in need of a friendly ear some other time, feel welcome to come in search of me again... Though if you do, wait until it's unnecessary to knock my nephew out before showing yourself, please." Golden eyes closed partway in good-natured amusement.

Riku chuckled. "I'll remember." He rose to his feet, waited briefly for the pins-and-needles sensation in his legs to fade to a bearable level, then turned to Mushi and handed over his teacup with a slight bow. The old man accepted it with a gracious smile.

"Good luck to you on your journey... Things will get better, eventually."

Riku sighed, and gave Mushi a wan smile. "...I can only hope."

---

Zuko surfaced from the depths of unconscious slowly, the journey to full alertness inhibited by the ungodly headache throbbing through his skull.

"Ah, I see you're awake, Prince Zuko."

"Uncle?" He opened his eyes and gingerly turned his head towards the source of the voice. Iroh sat on the ground nearby, watching him and calmly drinking yet another cup of tea. As usual...

A moment later memory intruded and he jerked partially upright, only to groan and drop back to the ground, his head in his hands. Sudden movements and migraines did not mix well. The worrying question remained however, and as he waited for the spike of pain to recede he asked urgently, "What happened to the assassin?"

"What assassin?"

Zuko carefully turned his head to give his uncle a look. "The one that appeared out of that... that
"Hm, that knock on the head must have been worse than I thought if you've been hallucinating." Iroh shook his head slightly and took another sip of tea, a model of tranquility.

"...What knock on the head?" Zuko ventured uncertainly. One of his hands gingerly explored the back of his scalp, and was rewarded with the discovery of a painfully swollen area. Thankfully, he didn't find any blood, nor did he feel the nausea he'd come to find accompanied a concussion.

"You were a bit too careless while you were training and had a rather painful-looking encounter with a tree over there. I think you even left a dent in the bark."

"But... but..." Zuko glanced between his uncle and the aforementioned tree helplessly.

"Yes, nephew?"

"I wasn't anywhere near that tree!"

"Oh, my, it seems to have affected your recent memory as well. It must be very serious indeed!" Iroh regarded him with concern.

...Zuko was distantly aware the he was gaping in a manner completely un-befitting a prince. The knowledge didn't help.

"Now just stay very still, and I'll go find some tea that's supposed to be good for this sort of thing..." Iroh meticulously set the teacup on a nearby flat rock and rummaged briefly through his pack. "I keep telling you that you need to pay more attention to your surroundings, nephew," he added as he dropped some tealeaves in hot water to steep.

Zuko stared at his uncle in utter bewilderment, trying to insert sense back into the universe. "I..."

Iroh walked over and gently propped Zuko up in a reclining position, then set the teacup in his hands. "This should help with your headache, Prince Zuko. Please don't try to get up."

After one last glance between Iroh, the tree, and his tea, Zuko gave a resigned sigh and gave up trying to understand. It wasn't as though it usually worked anyway.

"Yes, Uncle..."
The Road Less Traveled

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Blackness, welcoming and empty, the guardian against uninvited dreams...

No, wait. That's the inside of my eyelids.

Kaito yawned and stretched languidly beneath the covers, letting the comfortable fog of sleep recede as awareness slowly crept back in. He hadn't felt so rested since... restarting mental processes paused uncertainly.

Bad question to ask. Moving on...

He blinked fully awake, pausing in surprise as his eyes opened to darkness mitigated only by the faint light of the city that slipped through the room's closed blinds. The sun had apparently gone down while he'd been sleeping. Turning his head, he found the clock on the nightstand and discovered that the time had just passed three in the morning.

...Which was odd, because even in the pre-dawn silence he couldn't hear Riku at all, either the mild snores of sleep or even simply regular breathing to denote his presence. Propping up on his elbows, Kaito focused on the other side of the room and realized that the bed was still made, with no signs of occupation past or present. Riku didn't seem to have bothered to go to bed at all.

Well, then.

Kaito slipped out of bed and ghosted through the rest of the house, wondering what Riku could possibly have found to occupy his attention. Under the circumstances, there didn't seem to be many options besides a book or a bout of moody rumination, but Kaito'd thought that Riku'd been doing better... or maybe his own problems of the past few weeks had simply kept him from noticing. Distraction didn't even begin to cover it.

Speaking of distracted—Kaito paused as he approached the closed study door, straining futilely to hear anything through the solid barrier. Even as the effects of Solomon's tea faded slowly away, the nightmare's memories continued to linger far too clearly for his peace of mind. After a few moments' vacillation, Kaito silently crept forward and cracked the door, trying to cultivate a sense of internal calm, quiet, and safe-at-rest. The last thing he wanted to do was wake Hakuba, and have the blond ask why Kaito felt compelled to check on him in the middle of the night when all sane folk were asleep. One embarrassing situation due to the irrational need to confirm that the detective remained alive and intact was more than enough.

Listening through the quiet of the night, Kaito's ears caught the sound of Hakuba's quiet breathing. He smiled faintly at the sound and moved on.

To Kaito's surprise, however, Riku was nowhere to be found. Instead, after confirming that all of the rooms in the house were conspicuously lacking the islander's presence, Kaito quietly raided the fridge for leftovers from dinner while he pondered what could have caused Riku to go traveling alone. If the younger boy had been inclined to brood, any of the empty rooms should have sufficed, and if not... Kaito wasn't aware of any pressing obligations elsewhere on Riku's part.

Unless something had come up while he'd been asleep...
Given the time lapse, it was a viable possibility, but it still meant that Riku was offworld for some reason—and the only reason Kaito could think of was trouble with the Heartless or Nobodies—without backup. And Kaito couldn't follow.

:Would you like to fix that?:

Kaito blinked at Méraud's voice in the back of his mind. Solomon's tea had definitely left his thinking, if not his memory, fuzzier than normal, if he hadn't thought to ask Méraud about this already.

"Yeah..." Since he wanted to save his energy for traveling, Kaito opted to talk to thin air rather than summon Méraud. It helped him differentiate between his own thought processes and what he wanted to communicate. "We got interrupted yesterday, didn't we?"

:...Yes.:

It was amazing how much wry humor could be packed into a single word.

Kaito smiled sheepishly down at his bowl of rice, recollection of the previous afternoon clearer than it had been the first time around.

"I'm doing better now."

Nightmare's death was still there, prominent in his recent memories, but guilt had softened to a faint regret over the man's choices and a quiet byt determined interest in Kenta's future.

:That's not very difficult, given your previous state.: Amused warmth brushed against his mind.

"...It's been a bad week."

:So I observed. I had wished to help in some way, but...: A sigh. :Your human minds are so very odd, and it has been a long time since I came in close contact with one. Dark Magician or the Blue Eyes are far more accustomed to your manners of thought, but you have no bond to them.: "I'll work it out." Somehow. "You can help plenty by explaining what I have to do to catch up with Riku."

:Of course. The concept is not so very difficult, when you understand the nature of the Shadows. It is not, however, something to be attempted lightly.: "Dark Sage mentioned that, I think... that it's really easy to get lost if you aren't careful."

:Yes. You see... The Shadows are everywhere, a single mass between what you call 'existence'. Consequently, they touch ALL existence: not only every place, but also at every time. Since the normal rules of time and space, as you know them, do not apply to the Shadows, all you need to know is where you want to leave to. ...'Where' just happens to involve more variables and precision than what inhabitants of four-dimensional space-time usually consider necessary.: Kaito considered the implications of that for a moment. "So if you're fuzzy on the specifics when you try this, you're aiming for a patch of space-time rather than a definite point. ...No wonder it's so easy to get lost."

:Yes, I have known some who drifted out of time because they lacked the ability to precisely describe, and so envision, their intended destination. If you do know where you want to go, however, and have the ability to open the paths, it is quite simple.:
"For a given definition of simple."

"You have already instinctively used the Shadows, to pull time and space that you know closer together, when you act as the Kid. To open a portal you merely pull harder, to the Shadows beyond, and then again to the other side. She paused, sense of presence dimming for a moment, then continued. Dark Sage suggests that the two are not unlike the difference between bunching a doubled cloth to bring two places closer, and piercing through both layers to reach the other side.:"

"Well, except that your exit could be any other place on the cloth, once you'd made entry, right? And no matter where you're going, there's no intervening space... but there's still two rips in space, made in really close succession. ...It's possible to only make an entrance in, and not out, isn't it?"

"Indeed. If anything, Méraud sounded faintly amused. The first is always more difficult than the second, because the level of the Shadows is always lower. With practice, you can use the momentum of the first to... punch through, I believe you could say, to the other side in no time at all. ...So long as you have your destination in mind.:"

"...Yeah, we keep coming back to that. How, exactly, am I supposed to make sure I don't get lost?"

"That depends on you, I suppose. For a place, a well-detailed mental image may be enough. People are more difficult, since appearances change around the soul, but heat signatures are unique enough that you could navigate by them.:"

"...Méraud, my ability to see is limited by the color spectrum."

"Oh. I'm sorry, it's so difficult to remember that you're only human. You feel..." She trailed off.

"Yes?" Kaito prompted the silence.

An impression of a sigh accompanied a sense of faint melancholy. ...The feel of your mind, such curiosity and determination and the echo of the Shadow's presence, is very much like that of my younger brother, Nilam. He... left, a long time ago, to explore the deep Shadows beyond the Shadow Realm. There is much that we do not understand about them, for while they may be interconnected, they are not homogenous by nature. However, traveling the Shadows for themselves is quite different from using them as transport across reality with a destination in mind... and they need not be actively malicious to be dangerous.

"He never came back? Did anyone try to find him?"

"The Shadows outside our own Realm obscure any abilities I have known to seek and find others within them. Nor do I know of a way to travel through the Shadows to other Shadows unless you wander aimlessly, for how can you describe and differentiate that which is by nature undefined?:"

...I'm sorry."

"It's been a long time. But we have strayed from our topic. Méraud added, tone lightening considerably. Perhaps a different model... how does Riku-san find his destinations?:"

Kaito thoughtfully scraped the last of his rice from the bowl and stood to rinse his dishes in the sink. "Well, he hasn't talked about it much, but from what I remember... it has a lot to do with emotional connections that he's formed with people or places, among other things." Kaito's lips quirked. "Navigation by heart."

"How apt. An empathic sense of orientation may work well in this case, given your intended scope of travel, though a visual image should also have a role in destinations you have previously visited."
Your subconscious mind should help define parameters that your consciousness may not consider.:

"...No offense, but that sounds less encouraging than you probably intended it."

:I never claimed to be a very good teacher.; Méraud reminded him. :Do you think you understand how to tear rather than bend the Shadows?:

Kaito nodded, strolling from the tiny kitchen to the more open, comfortable living room and flipping on the light. "The concept makes sense. We'll see how good I am with the actual application."

:To make things simple, then, why not try to open a path right back into this room? You will have no better-defined destination, and if you succeed, the evidence will be obvious.:

Kaito cocked his head thoughtfully, pivoting on the balls of his feet to absorb the room in detail. "Right. Here goes..."

He closed his eyes, hand reaching out in instinctive echo as he sought out the familiar presence of the Shadows around him.

Now that he was looking and had a name for the blend of ghostly sensation that had always accompanied his better tricks, it didn't take long before he managed to touch here and twist there until he felt the brush of possibility open up before his mind, and all that was left was to reach out and pull with a sharp tug of will instead of a guiding influence and—

Kaito opened his eyes and remained silent for a long moment, gazing steadily through the Shadow-edged tear in reality before him. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the second rip, the window that was allowing him to stare straight ahead and yet see himself in profile from several feet away.

There was no helping the deadpan comment, there really honestly wasn't.

"...The cake is a lie."

:The... what?:

"Sorry, gaming reference. That one was pretty good for maintaining manual dexterity, too. So if I walk through this..."

Kaito took a step forward and blinked at the abrupt change in perspective, before a manic grin spread across his face with a will of its own.

"Wow." He bounced lightly on his feet, a noticeable level energy drain being accompanied by the rush of adrenaline he'd long since learned to anticipate and make use of at the height of a heist. "It works!"

He'd have to get better at this fairly quickly, though, or every few rips outside of this world he was going to crash, and crash hard.

:It will not always be so easy.; Méraud cautioned. :The Shadows are very present here, for obvious reasons. You must be careful not to exhaust yourself, or to become careless in your aim.:

Kaito nodded absently, already absorbed in examining the Shadowrift more closely. He ran a hand cautiously along the edge, smiling as fringe-tendrils tickled across his palm and fingers. Hidden behind and between them, however...
"Two rips in space. When two things exist next to each other in physical space, there's always a gap between them, no matter how miniscule. If you weren't paying attention... you could fall through, couldn't you."

:Yes. And you may have already guessed, but... to open a path solely from within the Shadows is both easier and more difficult than when based within reality. Easier, of course, because the Shadows are directly at your fingertips; complicated, because your foundational frame of reference then exists only your memories and mental landscape. It would not be difficult to simply... slide out of synch.: 

"...I'm sensing a theme here."

:I warn you so that you will be mindful of the pitfalls as you develop and hone this skill. There are reasons why not many even among Shadowchildren have ever used this ability... and even fewer, for very long.: 

"Cheerful thought."

Mostly irrelevant, though. He needed to learn this—not just for his own sake, though he looked forward to being able to travel independent of Riku when convenient or necessary—but to get Hakuba safely home. The blond's opinion on the matter was... not quite irrelevant, but close. Someone needed to be home to look after Aoko, and as much as Kaito wished he could be there, keeping an eye on her, Riku needed someone to support him too. Kaito was currently the only one available and qualified for the job. Hakuba could take care of things back home, and he would be better off in the magic-dampened atmosphere there instead of traveling between the stars.

He sighed. "All right, let's try this again." He eyed the two portals critically. He could feel their distortions in the fabric of the world, pinned open by his Shadows.

He reached out and released the Shadows with a twist of will, feeling them slip away back to their unseen source. And the portals both closed without a sound, like curtains falling back into place when their fastening cords were pulled undone, leaving no trace of their presence behind.

:If you have a familiar destination in mind, you might try opening a path back to your home. It would not be more difficult than any other place outside this room, though you might need to rest briefly before trying to return.: 

Kaito nodded. "I'm going to have to manage it sooner or later; might as well start as soon as possible. I've got a few hours before anyone would miss me, anyway... since I don't think I want to start playing with trying to arrive back here a few minutes after I left, when I'll have my hands full just trying to GET back."

:Yes, quite. Perhaps your room at home?:

"Yeah..." The process was easier the second time around, now that he had a better idea of what he needed to do, and Kaito spared half a thought for taking advantage of the visit home to give Aoko a call and at least let her know that he knew about Kenta. He owed Kenta that much, at least, what with... everything.

When the Shadowrift opened this time, the light from the Motou's living room spilled through the portal to illuminate the familiar furnishings of Kaito's room back home.

:Well done.: 

"You know, even knowing what I'm trying to do, that's pretty bizarre." Kaito learned through the hole, mentally reminding himself to not try and rest his hands on the thin air around it as he did so. In
the dimness, his gaze caught on the red digits of his alarm clock. "Wait a minute..."

The small numbers read: 7:41 pm.

He stepped through completely and made it to the light switch, then found his cell phone where it lay charging on his desk and checked the date.

"...It's Sunday. Again." The full dark of after sunset, to be sure, but not the pre-dawn of early Monday morning.

The worlds may not necessarily be temporally parallel, but you seemed to arrive in Domino City at similar time to when you left Tokyo. A more likely scenario is that you colored your destination time with a desire to speak with Aoko-san, and the sooner the better.:

Kaito whistled under his breath. No wonder people drifted so easily. "I'll take this, this time. The less times I have to try to get here, the better off I'll be when I try getting back."

In theory, he could just leave the rift open, but he didn't trust one of the Motou's to not wake up early and find the portal in their living room while he was busy talking to Aoko. Their discovery of a parallel Japan would lead a multitude of things that if perhaps not necessarily bad would still be time consuming and less than pleasant.

Returning to the other side briefly, he grabbed his Duel deck and his shoes from the guest room and turned out the living room light on his way back. Closing the portal was easy enough, but when the Shadowrift vanished this time Kaito staggered slightly where he stood from surprise. He'd known the Shadows were dampened here, but still hadn't entirely expected the loss of the open connection to Domino's high density to feel like being wrapped in thick cotton. If he concentrated, he could still sense their presence, but with nowhere near the ease of before.

He sighed faintly. Since there was nothing he could do about it, he'd just have to learn to compensate. Eventually.

In the meantime, he'd settle for a shower and a change of clothes.

Twenty minutes later, hair still damp, Kaito settled onto his bed with his cell phone and hit the only speed-dial he had besides Mizuki's cell number. The phone rang several times, before Aoko's slightly breathless voice answered.

"Kaito?"

...Not even two days, and she'd been waiting for him to call. Two days, after six weeks without a word, two weeks back, and another abrupt departure.

_Probably waiting for proof that unlike last time, I haven't effectively dropped off the face of the planet. Again._

Because for some obscure reason, despite their slow—necessary—creeping—estrangement of the past months, she still thought their friendship was worth holding onto.

Kaito smiled into the phone, keeping his tone light. "Hey, Aoko, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine. ...How are things with the show?"

"Same old, same old. I'm getting worked to the bone, but it's worth it."
"That's good. I'm glad you're having fun." Kaito winced at the slightly wistful tone in Aoko's voice. "Where are you now?"

Kaito opened his mouth, the lie of 'Kyoto' rising easily to his lips, but then stopped. He's promised himself over a year ago that he'd only ever lie to Aoko to protect her when he couldn't creatively bend the truth.

"I'm in Tokyo right now," he admitted, purposefully interpreting the question to refer to him rather than the show. "I forgot some stuff back home"—nothing big, just Hakuba's safety, equilibrium and general well-being—and on my way here here remembered Hakuba-kun mentioning yesterday that you were taking care of Kenta-kun now. So I figured I'd call and ask how things were going with that."

"Oh!" Aoko's tone instantly brightened. "Yes, we have temporary custody of Kenta-kun right now, at least until all the legal ramifications of Connery-san's death are worked out. After that... we'll see. Daddy's more of a softy than he likes to admit, and Kenta-kun's an adorable little boy, even if a little... subdued... right now."

"...He's lost a lot."

"I know. But some good did come of it," Aoko continued, smile evident in her voice. "Kenta-kun hasn't had many friends his age, and Saguru-kun gave me the number of another girl who has a ward. We actually only got home a little bit ago from meeting Ran-chan and Conan-kun."

"Conan-kun?" Kaito managed to barely stifle his recognition of the name, though not his surprise, during a brief moment of panic.

If Conan ever ran across Kaito because of Ran and Aoko's friendship—the girls were going to get along well enough to warrant house visits, and Kaito featured in at least half of the pictures denoting Aoko's childhood—the miniature detective would know.

...And even though Hakuba seemed to have thrown his lot in with Kaito, Conan had only ever seen the Kid. Oh, he'd honored the game, ever since he'd accepted Kid's challenge that second meeting on the Suzuki corporation's yacht, and never tried to chase Kid down outside of a heist... but that didn't mean that if he did find out, he wouldn't try to capture Kid like he'd promised to do that same meeting.

All of that flashed through his mind in a split second, as Kaito quickly covered for the brief panic by commenting. "That's a pretty unusual name. Were his parents American?"

"He seems full Japanese, but according to Ran-chan his parents live in America. He certainly lives up to his name, though—I think he loves Sherlock Holmes almost as much as Saguru-kun does."

Understatement of the year.

"So did they get along?"

"Yeah... I told Ran-chan about Kenta-kun's history before we met up, and she told Conan-kun about what happened to Connery-san. Conan-kun was really good about not prying too much, and Kenta-kun really enjoyed spending time with him. They spent most of their time talking about detective work: how Kenta-kun wants to be a policeman like Connery-san was, and the mysteries Conan-kun's solved before now with some of his other friends from school. I think he'll be really good for Kenta-kun as a friend."

Kaito frowned pensively. If Kenta wanted to be a cop like his father, that opened the doors to all sorts of unpleasant possibilities in the future, if Kenta ever found out that Connery wasn't as... good...
as his son thought he was. Although if Kenta could be introduced to the reality of police work through Conan and his little gang, to see the faults of humanity and have the benefit of of a support structure like that in the intervening years... he might be strong enough by then to make that discovery and not shatter along with his perceptions of the man. Kaito was hardly in any position to mentor Kenta, but Conan, as a grade-schooler with a teenager's—a teenage detective's, no less—perspective...

"...Kaito?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry, Aoko. Something just came up. I've got to go, okay? I'll call you again soon."

"Oh. Okay..." She didn't try to hide the disappointment in her voice. "Take care."

"You too. Say hi to Kenta-kun and your dad for me."

"I will."

"All right... Bye."

Kaito hung up the phone and sighed. Conan was in an unprecedented position to help Kenta in ways that Kaito couldn't, but wanted to have happen... but for Conan to be able to do so, he had to know about it first.

...Somewhere, the gods are laughing themselves sick over the irony of a thief asking a detective for a favor.

Conan would not react well to receiving a personal note from Kid, never mind that all of this couldn't be relayed very well through a note—or even a phone call, if Kaito was feeling absurd enough to try it and thought Conan would believe it— anyway. And relaying the situation through the girls was utterly out of the question.

...If I'm going to pull this off, I'm going to have to visit the miniature detective in person.

Great.

Chapter End Notes

"The cake is a lie" references the game Portal, in which the player has a gun that can make portals, with some limitations.
Surprise Visit


Pockets filled with Random Useful Stuff™ for any contingency.

Monocle.

...If this were a movie, I just finished the Dramatic Montage.

Preparations complete, Kaito stood in the middle of the Kid lair and took a deep breath. He would probably regret going this way when he wanted to go back to Domino City, but right now he wanted an instant exit from the Mouri Detective Agency more. The Mouri's apartment above the agency was small when it came to maneuverability, and Conan was damn fast with his tranquilizer watch. Better not to risk there being no easy escapes. So long as he kept the rip small, he'd be able to stand in front of it and hide it from view, then depart under cover of the low-power flashbomb currently hidden just inside his sleeve.

Reach out, and feel, and gather... More difficult this time, Shadows faint and less responsive than in Domino... Kaito focused on trying to find Conan—out-of-sight—right-now—and with some effort, pulled.

And staggered.

Again.

Apparently, it's impossible to gain any sort of asset without receiving a corresponding set of liabilities.

In this particular instance, opening a rip from home felt not unlike practicing a full gamut of Tai Chi katas, or perhaps running a full marathon with ankle weights.

Stifling a slightly irritated yawn, Kaito turned his attention to what was presumably a Shadowrip, the opening barely visible beyond Shadowy edge-tendrils forming a vague, fuzzy line in the air in front of him. Not really thinking much about what he was doing, he reached out and experimentally brushed the edges of the rip -wider-, until he could see through to the other side, then paused.

Okay, so... once created, a portal's size is variable and doesn't take much effort to change. I can work with that.

Kaito peered through and found himself staring at what looked remarkably like... the inside of a shower curtain?

From beyond the waterproofed curtain he could hear faint sounds of movement, and then a recognizable (if slightly muffled by what was presumably a closed door) female voice called, "Don't forget to brush your teeth, Conan-kun."

"I won't, Ran-nee-chan." A drawer opened and closed, and a few moments later the distinctive sound of bristles-on-teeth echoed in the tiny room.
Motivating circumstances for the visit aside, some opportunities were too good to pass up. Kaito carefully expanded the portal to permit his passage and silently stepped through, then narrowed it into a hair-thin line approximately his own height.

Then, not bothering to stifle a full-blown grin, he reached out and dramatically swept the curtain aside.

"Ack!" The diminutive Detective of the East spun around with a squawk, toothbrush hitting the floor and toothpaste foam flying as he stopped his momentum with one hand against the sink, the other bringing Kaito into his watch's sights. When he realized what he was looking at, however, he froze, mouth dropping open. It was a fabulous picture, one Kaito planned to treasure in his collection of amusing memories for a long time to come.

"Close your mouth, detective, it's unattractive."

"What. The. Hell?"

Kaito let the grin fade. There were more important things to do right now than bait Conan, no matter how easy of a target he was. "My apologies for the lack of notice, but there is a matter I need to discuss with you."

Still keeping his watch trained on Kaito, Conan half-turned and spat into the sink again, wiping droplets of toothpaste from his face. Dignity nominally regained, he fixed a glare on Kaito fit to melt steel and growled, "Start talking."

Sharp and biting as the other boy's tone sounded, Kaito could hear a faint undertone of worry edging the words. Not too surprising, really, given the uncharacteristic nature of this visit... Best to get straight to the point, then; he didn't think testing Conan's patience was a very good idea at the moment.

"You recently met a boy named Kenta."

Conan's eyes narrowed. "Yes. His father died a few days ago. During your last heist." The detective's voice had gone flat, and as Kaito hid an internal wince behind Poker Face he could see the calculations already stirring in the other boy's mind.

"...Yes. He idolized his father. Will even more so, now that the man is gone."

The detective gave no outward sign, but Kaito could tell he was trying to figure out where this was going. "And? Kenta said his father died stopping Nightmare from stealing the heist."

"He believes so, yes." Kaito lowered his head slightly, absently aware that the angle would render the monocle opaque. "It will seem he did a remarkably effective job when it becomes clear that Nightmare has ceased his activities."

Conan frowned. "Why? Because—" he stopped suddenly, and Kaito could almost hear the progression of his thoughts as the boy's expression slowly darkened. Nightmare wouldn't be stopped by something so simple as the death of a policeman, not after all the other people he'd killed. It would have to be something more... like having been stopped permanently.

And there had only been one body at the scene.

Conan quietly bit out a curse entirely inappropriate for his apparent age. "He might never put it together, especially if the police don't, but if he goes on towards becoming an officer and then does..."
Not all minds were as flexible as theirs, to face the world inverting on you and still be able to carry on, functioning and relatively intact.

"Quite. And I don't believe in depending on coincidence or best-case scenarios." While law enforcement couldn't keep up with him, Kudou, or Hakuba—or even Hattori—the police were hardly idiots. Given enough time...the odds that there would never be speculation in Connery's file linking him to his alternate identity, or that Kenta would never figure out the truth, were thin even by the standards of those who survived by beating the odds.

A faint snort. "Not in your line of work."

"No. Nor in yours, I would think."

Conan shrugged. "True. So, what... you want me to make sure he could handle learning about his dad when he gets older?"

"Straight to the point... but yes. He still thinks in the terms his father taught him, the black and white of chess pieces and heroes and villains. He needs to learn that the world works in shades of gray, first, and the reality of what the work of a police officer is like. And there are few people I would trust to teach it."

"Your trust in me is heartwarming, Kid." Despite his sarcasm, Conan seemed to have relaxed slightly.

Kaito allowed a hint of a smirk to spread. "The house of traps aside, you have more experience looking after grade-schoolers than I do." He shifted his weight. "Just... keep an eye on him. He can use a few friends who understand the aftermath of murder. And if he continues wanting to follow in the footsteps of the hero he remembers... there are worse ways for him to get his start."

"...You have a point," Conan sighed. Kaito wasn't sure if the sigh was over the subject matter, or that the detective was being forced to admit the point to...well. At least this way he may have a chance of being prepared for what he may have to face."

"And he will need to have someone to look after him."

"Who understands him better than his caretakers, I presume." A half-hearted groan. "I didn't ask for this..."

Kaito shrugged, cape fluttering faintly. "Neither did he. Neither did"—I—"...well. At least this way he may have a chance of being prepared for what he may have to face."

Conan gave him a long, thoughtful, assessing look, enough that Kaito knew his pause hadn't gone unnoticed, but finally nodded. "All right, I'll do it... for Kenta-kun."

_Not for you_, hung unspoken in the air. Detectives didn't do favors for thieves, after all.

"Ekoda's not exactly next door," Conan continued, "but Ran and Aoko-san did hit it off..." He grimaced. "Almost too well. They're going clothes shopping this weekend for Kenta-kun and I'm positive I'm going to get dragged along."

Kaito inclined his head slightly, allowing himself to relax as much as he dared. "Thank you."

"If I weren't sure you couldn't do it yourself..." Conan grumbled under his breath.

Kaito stilled for a moment, all too aware that with Conan, a reflexively blank expression was as good
as admitting that a comment had struck home. "I'm afraid not, detective. It's beyond my power to return a life stolen by the oldest thief of all."

Nor the other life lost, shattered in blood and tears and broken dreams.

Conan looked away. "Of course. One can only return what one has, not what's been lost."

*Love and magic and wit and laughter—*

"...Quite. Likewise, with what you can give."

Such as a surrogate big brother and support network capable of holding Kenta up and keeping him intact when the world dropped out from under him for a second time.

Conan sighed again. "Which is why you came to me."

"Excellent deduction as always, detective." Objective accomplished, there was no reason to stay any longer in the point-blank range of the boy's anesthetic darts. "Enjoy your evening."

"Hey—!"

Conan's surprised exclamation cut off as Kaito dropped the flashbomb and vanished backwards, releasing the Shadows to seal the rip before Conan could recover and investigate.

*Sorry, Kudou-kun... this is one magic trick where you're not going to find the evidence to show how it's sophisticated sleight-of-hand.*

Kaito's thoughts were summarily interrupted by a jaw-popping yawn, as he abruptly came down from the adrenaline rush that always accompanied facing off with Conan.

*...Sleep first. Then the Motou's.*

Leaving the Kid suit and additional equipment behind in the hidden room, Kaito prepared for bed and fell asleep again almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

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After leaving Mushi's world behind, Riku didn't travel back to the Motou's home immediately, but made a detour to Twilight Town instead. He'd previously chosen to avoid worlds where Sora might be, rather than visit one of the moogles that followed the keyblade's chosen in his journeys and risk crossing paths with the younger boy again, but now... Riku'd be a fool if he continued to travel without any kind of accelerated-healing potions after the universe made him so clearly and repeatedly aware that it would be a good idea to have some on hand.

Sora wasn't likely to return to Twilight Town again, at least not at the moment, and Riku was already familiar with the town. Not to mention that the moogle in charge there knew him from past dealings over the previous year, though Riku hadn't restocked in... too long.

The moogle didn't comment on Riku's extended absence, merely accepted the bag of crystals and shards and examined the contents with a professional—albeit squinty—eye.

"What do you want to synthesize, kupo?" the craftsмoogle inquired, the little growling squeak typical of its race punctuating the end of the question.

Riku had long since given up trying to figure out how moogles managed to create potent healing potions, among other useful things, from various kinds and qualities of crystallized matter. He was simply grateful that they could.
"As many elixirs as you can manage from all that."

There was a few moments silence as the white-furred creature critically assessed his available materials, then nodded. "You're low on some things, but we can manage a few. This won't take long."

True to the moogle's word, Riku shortly received a handful of fair-sized vials filled with translucent green liquid, along with the bag of leftover crystals.

"Thank you."

"Mind you don't break any, kupo. Come back again."

Riku nodded absently, already storing the precious vials in several inner pockets of his black cloak as he walked towards the nearest alley. Moogles would theoretically do business with anyone, but he didn't want to push his luck by using a corridor where they could see. Moogles DID know about other worlds and traveled between them; they would understand the implications of a person capable of traversing the Dark without a ship. Even if said implications were technically untrue...

...Appearances were everything.

Riku sighed as he entered the corridor, wondering how he was going to explain to Kaito that trying to catch up with Sora again was not currently a good idea. As helpful as talking with Mushi had been, Riku still had his doubts about the old man's advice in practical terms. Of course, given how distracted Kaito was at the moment, maybe he could put it off for a while, at least until they were ready to move on again.

It all depended on how things were going back at the Motou's, really. Enough time had passed that Kaito had probably woken up by now; knowing the magician, he'd probably be itching to learn more from Méraud.

Hopefully, the older boy had enough common sense to wait until after breakfast before trying anything.

Riku paused and re-ran that thought through his head, taking into account Kaito's behavior over the last few weeks.

...Maybe if he was really lucky, Kaito hadn't woken up yet.

The portal dropped Riku back in the Motou's guest bedroom. Morning sun leaked through the closed blinds covering the window, allowing Riku to see that Kaito's bed was unmade and empty, with no sign of the magician.

Shedding the black cloak again, Riku hung it in the closet and headed downstairs to see where everyone was. The clock on the nightstand proclaimed the time to be just past eight in the morning, which meant Yugi had certainly gone to school already, but the other three should still be around. He followed the sound of water running to the kitchen, where he found Solomon washing dishes in the sink and Hakuba finishing breakfast at the table, back to the doorway.

"Good morning. Where's Kaito-kun?"

Hakuba glanced over his shoulder at the question, and Riku only had time to register an unexpected frigidity in the blond's eyes as they took in his presence before the detective turned away and stood from the table.
"Gone." If Hakuba's expression had been cold, his tone was downright glacial. "Thank you for breakfast, Solomon-san."

Movements precise and carefully composed, Hakuba placed his dishes next to the sink and brushed past Riku without looking at him again. A few moments later, Riku heard the study door click shut, the soft sound as disquieting as if the door had been slammed.

Riku looked to Solomon in utter bewilderment. He'd thought he'd reached a kind of understanding with Hakuba yesterday, but now...

What had happened?

Solomon had turned to watch Hakuba leave, and now he sighed and dried his hands on a towel.

"Saguru-kun woke up this morning from a nightmare caused by the block against his childhood memories having dissipated. And despite it being just before seven in the morning, Riku-san, neither you nor Kaito-kun were anywhere in the house."

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: Kaito's mention of 'Dramatic Montage' is homage to the TVTropes wiki. Vathara used them in fic before I, but said fic reminded me that Kaito is prime material to be a troper. Beware that if you investigate what being a troper means, TV Tropes Will Eat Your Brain. Honest.
"I'm sorry to hurt Aoko, but we are invisible."

"We? Kuroba, whoever took you, whatever happened, it shouldn't have. Come back with me. We can't make this right. Come back with me. We can help you." Hakuba lowered his gun a fraction, reaching out with his off-hand towards Kaito, face a mixture of pleading and concern.

Something roused in the back of Kaito's mind. He watched, mesmerized, as Hakuba took a tentative step forward to the edge of the stairs, hand still outstretched. Then, footsteps echoed on the stairs below—

and whatever possibilities there might have been—

Beep!

Kaito jerked awake, eyes flying open in response to his alarm clock’s welcome intrusion into his dreams.


Smack.

He sat up and swung his legs out of bed in one smooth motion, switching the alarm clock from snooze to off and not bothering to silence a curse of frustration. He'd had nightmares before—usually involving the death of his mother, Aoko, his father or himself in some way or another—but this was getting ridiculous. Not only was the focus on Hakuba, which was unusual right there, but if he discounted the night's sleep assisted by Solomon's tea, then he'd had the same damn nightmare every time he'd slept since the opal earring heist.

...And while he'd woken up in the middle of it, again, the rest of the dream was now unrolling itself across his mind's eye with eidetic clarity.

Kaito prepared to leave home once again, gathering his scattered things from around his bedroom in record time as he tried to escape the memory of empty blue eyes, never mind that they were set in a face five years too old to be the one he knew now. Without bothering to consult the faint sense of presence in the back of his mind that he was beginning to recognize as Méraud, Kaito reached out for the resonating sense of detective-rival-friend-alive-NOW and pulled.

The irritating fatigue that accompanied the portal opening warned Kaito that by the time afternoon rolled around he was going to want yet another nap, and breakfast was starting to sound extremely good, but he cared less about that than the fact that he could now access the Motou's study. Hakuba sat in a chair with his back to him, hunched over and utterly focused on something Kaito couldn't see, but the blond was still unquestionably alive. A split-second later, since the study's wards didn't block rooms connected by holes in reality, Hakuba seemed to register that there was someone behind him and whipped around in surprise, rising to his feet.

Kaito grinned at Hakuba and stepped through, letting the Shadows close behind him. It wouldn't be as hard to open another one here, in Domino.

"I'm a living Portal gun!"
The surprise drained out of Hakuba's eyes in an instant as he recognized Kaito. However, rather than be replaced with amusement at the quip, cold reserve came to the forefront.

"...Congratulations." The word should have been capable of giving instant frostbite.

Hakuba turned and sat down again, giving Kaito a brief glimpse of the 5x5 Rubik's cube the blond had been solving before the chair hid it from view. In the brief, half-stunned silence that followed, Kaito heard the cube clicking sharply as blocks rearranged at an insane rate of speed.

Kaito stomped down on stung confusion over Hakuba's behavior and kept the grin pasted on his face, hoping the blond wasn't picking up any of his stronger emotions. Whatever he'd missed that had caused Hakuba's abrupt change in attitude was a good thing, really. If Hakuba had decided that he'd had enough of Kaito and Riku, then he'd be more willing to go home. And no matter how nice it was to have him around, present and tangible, to counteract the lingering dream-memories and convince his subconscious mind that *Yes, the stubborn blond was still alive...* Hakuba was still better off back home rather than trying to tag along.

"Anything else, before you leave again?" This time the controlled tone wasn't icy, simply... flat.

"...Yeah. Since I've figured out how to travel now, I can take you home after breakfast if Solomon-san thinks your shields are good enough."

Hakuba didn't respond, and Kaito couldn't see his face to gauge a reaction. After letting the silence hang in the air for a short while, Kaito gave up and retreated to the kitchen.

Riku was already there, eating breakfast, and waved for Kaito to join him. "I thought I heard the study door. Was that you?"

Kaito nodded, filling a plate from the food available on the table and taking a seat. "I can travel through the Shadows now, for the most part; I wound up coming back by way of the study."

"Did you talk to Hakuba-san, then?" Judging by Riku's look of concern, he'd probably already been on the receiving end of Hakuba's attitude.

Kaito ate a few bites before he replied, "If by 'talk,' you mean 'be given iceburn,' then yes. If he's got the basics of shielding down well enough, I figured I'd take him home today. He should be happier when we're out of his meticulously styled hair."

He wasn't going to ask if Riku knew the reason behind Hakuba's abrupt change—easier to pretend it didn't bother him, and let it lie until it didn't matter anymore.

Riku gave Kaito a long, incredulous look, before his expression twisted into one of exasperated anger and he slammed his palm onto a bare patch of tabletop. "What is *wrong* with you? I won't even pretend to know what's going through your heads right now, but you're both so damn focused on keeping your own masks intact, you can't see each other!"

Kaito stared.

Riku took a deep breath and slowly exhaled as Kaito stopped himself from shifting uncomfortably. If Hakuba wasn't willing to go home, that would make things... complicated. And Kaito desperately wanted *something* in this entire mess to be simple for once.

Riku continued in a quieter voice, "Either you're too blind to see that he's trying to shut you out because he's hurting... or you just don't *care.*"
One of Kaito’s hands, hidden beneath the table, involuntarily clenched into a fist. "He’s safer back home."

In response, Riku leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "So are you. This was never your fight, but I let you come along anyway, because you wanted to. I didn't take you home even after you damn well nearly died from one of the Darkness corridors, Kaito-kun."

Kaito looked away, jaw working. When Riku put it like that, there wasn’t anything he could say to that without sounding hypocritical.

He spent a minute trying to think of a decent response, until his thoughts were abruptly interrupted by Riku standing and hauling him out of his chair by the back of his shirt, heedless of his knees banging against the table.

"Oi! What're you—"

Kaito’s protests fell on deaf ears; still gripping his shirt, Riku marched him into the study and forced him to sit down in the empty chair across from the chair facing the study door, which Hakuba currently occupied. The detective had looked up in renewed surprise at their abrupt entrance, hands freezing on the Rubik’s cube, but he then just as quickly returned to a carefully neutral expression, eyes guarded behind the emotional equivalent of bulletproof glass.

Kaito noted absently that Hakuba didn’t seem to be affected in the least by Riku's anger. Either Hakuba’s drive to practice had really paid off, or it was a side effect of his recent return to distance and then some.

Riku let go of Kaito’s shirt but kept his hand resting on Kaito’s shoulder while he looked at Hakuba. "This has gone far enough."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You've both forgotten that you decided to trust each other. You keep expecting to go back to the same old song and dance, so you are, and you aren't even fighting it! I won't let you two self-destruct like—" Riku paused for a fraction of a second, "—I won't let you keep doing this. Talk."

In the renewed silence, thief and detective exchanged discomfited glances. Kaito was half-surprised that Riku'd gotten any reaction out of Hakuba at all, but the rest of him was torn between not wanting to have this discussion and not knowing where to begin if he decided to try anyway.

Riku sighed, hand leaving Kaito’s shoulder. Kaito glanced up to see Riku massaging his forehead with it. "Start with something simple. Will you tell us what went wrong since last night, Hakuba-san?"

"You're just going to send me home," Hakuba responded coolly. "I see no point in rehashing irrelevant matters."

"I told you before we left why I didn't want you coming along, Hakuba-kun," Kaito countered with deliberate calm. "Even if you have shields now, there no telling what we might run into, and if they break..." His jaw clenched.

You'd be a sitting target for whatever had gotten through in the first place.

"As you say." The blond's indifferent tone was compounded by the fact that he returned his attention to the oversized Rubik's cube, setting the last few squares to solve it and then breaking the colors up in order to begin again from scratch.
"Why do you want to come so damn much?" Kaito demanded quietly, voice falling into the steel-edged tones that typically only made an appearance when he was Kid and angry enough to drop Kid's deliberate purr. "There's no telling how long we'll be gone, and if you're caught by a Heartless or a Nobody, you'll be worse than dead."

"But it's all right for you? Or do you have some type of protection that makes you as immune to them as you seem to be to gravity and everyone else's worry?"

"I won't feel like I'm standing in a black hole if they manage to hit me when I'm fighting them," Kaito shot back, ignoring the rest of Hakuba's response.

"...I suppose I am a liability. But you don't have to cloak it in worry for my welfare, Kuroba-kun," Hakuba continued, what emotion had crept back into his voice fading away again. "I understand the situation quite well."

"Your welfare is what I'm worried about, you idiot!" Although despite his best efforts, Kaito's worry was expanding to encompass Hakuba's current state of mind. He didn't want to have to deal with this... he just wanted Hakuba home.

"Sending me home won't save me, you know."

Caught off guard, Kaito blinked at Hakuba and managed: "...What?"

"What will I do? No thief to chase, no magician to spar with... I'll have to go back to solving murders to keep myself sharp." Hakuba looked down at his gloved hands. "The gloves and shields should be sufficient, but should they break..."

Kaito closed his eyes briefly. Criminals were not the same as Heartless; if one broke Hakuba's shields the blond still had a better chance of remaining functional. "You'll have to go home sometime, regardless. At least with murderers you know what you're dealing with, and can throw them through a wall."

"Assuming I don't go into a coma like the last time."

"...Last time?" Kaito cocked his head, hoping that his suspicions were wrong.

Hakuba answered after a moment's hesitation, gaze fixed on the cube as he solved it for a second time and began breaking the colors apart again. "I awoke this morning from a nightmare—a memory, of the first time my... abilities surfaced. I was six years old... A woman kidnapped me because my father had arrested her son for his crimes. Her hatred and insanity were in my head. I... ran away. Inside my mind. And I didn't wake up for some time."

"...The hospital. And when you did wake up... you'd blocked it all."

"Everything. Even memories. My parents told me I'd been kidnapped, but no details."

"And then your mom took you to England, and you were so busy adjusting to an unfamiliar routine that eventually you just... forgot you'd forgotten." Though the need for control had obviously stayed, buried beyond conscious recall. "...But why get mad at me when I didn't know about the nightmare?"

"Because you forced your way past the walls I put up, and now you're dropping me. Like everyone else." Hakuba finally looked at Kaito again, face impassive. "If you're going to walk away again, you could have had the courtesy not to break in in the first place."
"I could say the same to you, because I sure as hell hadn't planned on letting you close enough to see anything when we first met—" Kid-Dad's death-Pokerface-Deliberate target-Still searching"—and then you did anyway! I'm not dropping you, damn it," Kaito added, voice rising, "I can't lose anyone else!"

"Neither can I!" Hakuba growled back, dispassionate mask cracking slightly.

"I've survived this long, I'm hardly going to die now!"

"Yes, I forgot, you're immortal," Hakuba replied in a biting tone.

Kaito gave him a darkly amused smile. "I am a ghost."

From the moment he'd stepped into a dead man's shoes and chosen to finish his last work, despite knowing only anonymity protected him from following Toichi beyond the grave, he'd played the phantom... And as time had passed the teenager had dwindled, first into the roles of Kid and class clown, two sides of one coin with no place for the intermediary, and then out into other worlds...

Why had he followed Riku, that first night? Because he'd cared so much about places he'd never heard of, or because he'd couldn't let pass an opportunity to be that balance of himself again, just for a little while?

"Bugger that." Hakuba's voice startled Kaito out of his thoughts. "You're flesh and blood, even if you're doing your damnedest to fade out of everyone's lives. You've been incredibly lucky so far, skill or not... but luck runs out, even your ability to beat the odds. And you just want me to go home and wait for you, and hope one day you'll turn up at school again... Wait and lie to Aoko-kun that I don't know where you are, and I'm sure you'll be home soon. Wait and watch her try and smile while she's breaking apart inside..."

Kaito's lips thinned, the only outward sign he allowed that Hakuba's words might have struck home. Hakuba had no idea—admittedly because Kaito had never let it show, but that was beside the point—how much it hurt to have to leave Aoko in the dark and let the distance between them grow.

But I swore when dad died that I would never do to a girl what he had done to mom, so until this is over... I can't.

"Would you rather she be waiting for both of us, alone?"

"...Why do I even bother? It's obvious you won't change your mind." Any of Hakuba's defenses that might have been lowered during the conversation returned so completely that in an instant, there was no emotion at all in his face. It was as if someone had flicked a switch, and a human being became an automaton. "Since you seem done with breakfast, shall I go back? I have a great deal of work to do."

He gave Kaito one of the perfectly empty smiles that he'd first brought over with him from England, the ones that had made Kaito want to know what went on behind the detective's immaculately cultivated exterior in the first place.

"By the time you come back... if you come back... I shouldn't care anymore. I'm good at shoring up the walls."

Over his smile-that wasn't, Hakuba's eyes were almost as empty as his counterpart's in the dream.

:Kaito-kun.: Méraud's quiet voice stopped Kaito before he could begin formulating a reply. :If you send Saguru-kun home like this... if you turn him into a treasure to hide behind a glass wall rather
than a friend whose choice to come with you is equally as valid as your choice to follow Riku-kun...
You will be losing him, in any way that matters.:

...Damnit.

Hakuba set the Rubik's cube aside on the nearby table. "I just have a few things to gather, if you're ready to leave..."

Kaito closed his eyes again, this time against the sheer lifelessness in Hakuba's voice. "No. Stop. I'm sorry. I'm being—" a hypocrite of spectacular proportions "—an idiot."

...This isn't what I wanted...

When he opened his eyes Hakuba hadn't moved any further, but the detective didn't say anything either, simply watching him. Kaito took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

"I... I'm sorry. I've been getting wrapped up in my own problems and..." Kaito trailed off briefly. "I've been ignoring too much else. It's... not fair for me to bring you into a situation you didn't ask for, and then try to shut you back out again."

No matter how much I still want to. When the number of people you actually give a damn about is maybe half a dozen, you get really touchy about the prospect of losing one.

Hakuba spread his hands slightly, palms up. "I don't want to be left behind. Not after everything that's happened, not when you don't know when or even if you'll return."

"Mmm."

"...You're not the only one who has nightmares, you know," Hakuba added quietly.

"I know. But at least mine used to fade after I woke up," Kaito grumbled, unable to squash a hint of bitterness.

He leaned back in his chair with a resigned sigh, because at this point... he obviously wasn't going to win this one. Not without losing the tentative friendship he and Hakuba had, anyway, which defeated the whole purpose of trying to protect the detective in the first place.

"...All right. If you really don't want to go home... I won't force you."

"I'm not leaving. Not unless I have to."

The small portion of Kaito's mind that he'd been trying to ignore as it worried about what he'd wind up doing if he had another nightmare after Hakuba'd gone home, betrayed him by relaxing.

"...Blasted stubborn detective."

"I have to be, to go head-to-head with a blasted stubborn thief."

Kaito cracked a smile. "Just so long as we're clear on the fact that if anything happens to you, I will follow you into the afterlife and drag you back."

The corner of Hakuba's mouth twitched upward, frost melting away as Kaito's sincerity about finally accepting the detective's company seemed to sink in. "Likewise."

"All right." Kaito paused for a few moments, switching gears from trying to convince Hakuba to go home, to instead planning the best way to keep the blond intact when they left.
"If you really are going to come along... guns run out of ammo, and you hardly need to tempt fate by fighting Heartless hand-to-hand, even with gloves. Can you use anything else?"

"Well, I'm fairly advanced in staff fighting."

Kaito raised his eyebrows. "Somehow I'm not surprised, even though that's not on record anywhere. Why the staff?"

Hakuba smirked. "Because if there's one weapon you can find almost anywhere at any time, it's a big stick."

"True," Kaito conceded with a soft snort. "Okay. We'll have to talk to Solomon-san about getting you one." Hakuba nodded. Kaito continued, "You should probably also talk to him about where your limits are, and some potential practical applications for this whole empathy thing. I know that empaths in some stories back home could project, and that'd be a good way to at least temporarily stop being a giant receptor in case a situation goes bad..."

"I'd... originally planned to do so. Before this morning." Hakuba glanced away.

Kaito smiled again out of habit, even though Hakuba couldn't really see it, but the attempt came out slightly lopsided. "I didn't think my being gone for a while would matter that much."

"I thought you'd decided to move on without me..." Hakuba tugged his gloves more securely onto his hands, eyes on pale leather. "This place is reasonably safe, after all..."

Kaito shook his head. "I'd never have stranded you with a bunch of near-strangers."

"Yes, well..." Hakuba glanced back up. "I have a bit of a problem with trust. You may have noticed."

Kaito gave him a wan little smile. "Only because it's mutual."

You expect people to leave while still living... I don't trust the people I care about to not die.

Hakuba seemed about to answer, but then pulled up short just before Kaito heard the unmistakable sound of the study door opening and closing.

"That was Riku-kun leaving, wasn't it?" he asked resignedly, trading an embarrassed look with the blond.

"Yes. He sat down behind your chair quite some time ago. I suppose he was trying to unobtrusively slip out."

"Could have been worse. He might have started applauding." Kaito sighed again. "...It's a sad day when a kid two years younger has to knock our heads together."

"Mmm. Quite."

"Hey..." Kaito turned to look at the door. "He was still gone when you woke up, wasn't he? He never went to bed last night, so that means he was gone almost... eight, nine hours."

Hakuba gave Kaito an inquiring look. "Perhaps we should ask what he was up to? It might be important."

"Yeah, if he wasn't willing to wait a few da... Oh, hell." Kaito quickly rose to his feet as memory struck him, leaving the study with Hakuba following behind.
"What is it?"

"I told him that checking up on someone could wait a few days, the first day we were home," Kaito answered, checking the guest bedroom to confirm that Riku wasn't there before heading back downstairs. "The guy is extremely bad news. If Riku-kun'd remembered, and gone by himself because we were both out of commission last night..."

"...Perhaps we should go talk to him now."

Kaito paused in the living room, gaze straying to the kitchen. "If it had been a real emergency, then he would have brought it up before having us talk. He didn't let me finish eating breakfast, though, and I'm starving—using the Shadows has shot my metabolism through the roof. Since he doesn't seem to be here right now, let me eat and then we can find out how good I am at finding Riku-kun through a Shadowrift."

Hakuba shrugged. "Very well."

Sitting down at the kitchen table again, Kaito reclaimed his chopsticks and glanced over at Hakuba uncertainly. Silence threatened to become awkward at this point, but while Hakuba had relaxed again Kaito wasn't sure what, of the questions he could ask, might be considered poking too far.

"So... if you had that dream this morning... do you remember things from before that, now, too?"

"Only a few fragments, nothing remarkable," Hakuba replied, watching in amusement as Kaito wolfed down the remainder of breakfast. "More impressions and a few broken images than anything, even of the kidnapping. There's simply... nothing else it could have been, and it correlates with what I already knew."

He lapsed into a short, contemplative silence, and then asked, "If I may ask, how, exactly, does this sort of travel work?"

Between bites, Kaito recounted a quick summary of the explanation Méraud had given him earlier, which Hakuba listened to with apparent fascination. Kaito wound down as he finished eating, then finally cracked his knuckles.

"So much for theory." He grinned, and quickly cleared the dishes and leftovers. "Want to see the real thing?"

Hakuba nodded, and Kaito leaned back against the kitchen counter. He didn't close his eyes, since that was a dangerous habit to develop given where and how he might eventually have to use this, but he did raise a hand slightly to accompany the mental reach for the resonance of Riku-friend-calm-over-ache.

Oddly enough, in the fraction of a second it took for the shadowrift to open, Kaito thought he heard a whisper just at the edge of hearing: an unpleasantly dark purr, too faint to make out any words. He made a note to ask Méraud about it, but was immediately distracted by Hakuba moving forward, eyes alight with interest.

The detective examined the rift much the way Kaito had the first time, and even went so far as to take off a glove and brush his hand against the shadowy tendrils defining the edges of the portal.

"...Fascinating."

"I know. Can you see the Shadows?"
"Mmm... No, but I presume they are the source of the faint prickling sensation along the edges of this. It's rather odd."

"And you can't even see the colors." Kaito joined Hakuba at the rift and looked through it to see a grassy park spreading out beyond. "Hm. Looks fairly out of the way, less likely for someone to see us show up. Come on, let's find Riku-kun; I can always make another one of these for you to science to your heart's content later."

Hakuba turned and gave him a Look. "...Did you just use 'science' as a verb?"

Kaito grinned, unrepentant. "Yep!"

Hakuba merely sighed and shook his head, stepping through the rift onto the grass beyond. He glanced around briefly, then turned around to look at Kaito through the opening. "...This is highly disconcerting."

"Fun, though, isn't it?" Kaito joined Hakuba on the other side and looked back into the doorway-shaped hole leading to the Motou's kitchen. Not far behind the rift, a hedge of tall bushes blocked the view of what lay beyond. Reaching out, he experimentally brushed the rip-closed- until the edges nearly touched, but without releasing the underpinning Shadows, like he'd done when he'd visited Conan.

Hakuba cocked his head slightly to one side in a curious gesture. "Is it still there?"

"Yeah, just too small to see."

The blond's brow furrowed. "What would happen if someone walked into it from this direction? Would a pinpoint-width's of matter pass through while the rest remained behind?"

Kaito opened his mouth to reply, realized he didn't actually have an answer, and closed it again.

:I am... uncertain,: Méraud's voice murmured in the back of his mind. :Nothing Dark Sage or I have studied mentions such a thing. The sole treatise we have discovered on Shadow-walking describes rifts forming on the sides of otherwise solid objects. Shadows only know why you seem to form them in thin air.: 

...Because I seem to make a habit out of the improbable?

"No idea," Kaito said aloud, "but there's no reason to find out." He let the Shadows dissolve. "Riku-kun's probably in walking distance of the Motou's, or I can do it again if I have to."

"Speaking of which, is he not supposed to be here?"

Kaito looked around. "Exact aim is really tough, and one Shadowrift-parameter that I'm trying to make a habit of is to be out of sight of people, if possible."

"Ah. Wise of you, I suppose. Behind the bushes, perhaps?"

"Yeah."

They walked in silence to the end of the tall strip of hedge. On the other side the grass continued to a small grove of trees backed by the city skyline. In the space between, Riku held a solid branch of wood in one hand with similar size and heft to his sword, traveling with intense focus along an invisible line in the unmistakable movements of a sword kata.
"...Huh."

"Is this a bad sign?" Hakuba inquired quietly.

"I don't think I've seen him practice since we met."

"I'll take that as a yes, then."

"Probably." Kaito didn't say anything more until Riku finished the kata, not wanting to distract or interrupt the other boy, but once Riku finally lowered the branch Kaito called over to him.

"Oi, Riku-kun."

Riku turned his head, acknowledging the other teens' presence. "Yes?"

Kaito walked towards the islander with deceptive casualness in his gait, Hakuba following behind.
"Practicing a kata on no sleep isn't the smartest thing to do. Where'd you go that you were gone all night?"

Riku looked faintly uncomfortable. "...I was looking for a moogle. It kind of took a while to find one..."

"Moogle?" Kaito raised an eyebrow, not recognizing the term.

"They make potions. I was out."

"As in... Drink this and you'll be magically cured, potions?"

"Pretty much. They're really useful when traveling worlds."

Kaito sat down on the grass, gesturing in invitation for Riku and Hakuba to do the same. They did.

"Okay, why have I not heard about such a ridiculously useful thing before?"

"Because I didn't have any, and I really didn't have the time to get any. We kept getting... distracted."

*Okay, true for the most part, but still...*

"Riku-kun, you had at least a month before we even got home, and two weeks where I was in school for over six hours almost every day."

One thing Kaito hadn't missed much while traveling worlds. Learning, he enjoyed. Formal learning, stuck at the speed of the slowest student in the class, left him stuck doodling in the margins, doing his homework from the previous period, or flat-out zoning after the first explanation. It didn't help that he still intended, if he could make it through high school graduation alive, to apprentice under a magician rather than attend university. Anything he really wanted to learn, he did on his own time.

"Originally? I hadn't wanted to risk..." Riku hesitated briefly, "...crossing paths with Sora. Then it was just easier not to think about it, because we didn't run into any big enemies until Xigbar... and then I got distracted by going to your world and trying to take your advice to actually relax for a while."

"Mmm." Kaito waited a moment to be sure Riku didn't have anything else to add, then continued. "Even factoring in travel by a darkness corridor, eight hours to find a... moogle... is pushing it when the easiest thing for you to reach is a person or place you've encountered before." He eyed the light stiffness in Riku's body posture. "...Did you go after Xigbar before or after that?"
Riku twitched slightly, his eyes widening in a passable imitation of a deer in headlights. "...Uh..."

"He's the only thing I can think of that would have made you go out by yourself." Kaito sighed faintly. "Riku-kun, you're training, for the first time since we met. What happened?"

Riku looked down at the ground. In the long pause that followed, his sword-stick changed hands a few times before he finally dropped it in the grass and rubbed a hand over his face.

"I... ran into Sora. At the worst possible time."

Kaito slowly sucked in a breath. "That bad, huh?"

"...Xigbar found a dragon."

Yeah, that bad.

"I went to the nearest city to warn them, but they'd fought the Heartless. Didn't trust someone with gold eyes and darkness when I tried to get to the one in charge... I lost my temper, tried to force my way through. That's... when Sora showed up."

Riku absently plucked at the grass growing near his fingers, systematically shredding the small green blades into so much confetti as he spoke.

"He and Donald and Goofy, they all think I'm still Xehanort's Heartless... that I came back and attacked one of the world's defenders. If they see me again, they'll attack first and ask questions later. Frost and fire..." Riku shook his head. "I couldn't do anything but run, so I did. The world where I ended up, I met an old man a lot like Solomon-san. We talked for a while... he helped me see a few things. Then I came back. That's all, really."

If I believe that's really it, you've got a cheap bridge to sell me, too. But I doubt calling you on it right now would do much good, either... hopefully it's something that can wait a little while.

Kaito leaned back, palms pressing into the grass. "Well... that could have gone better, but it's too late to change it now. When we catch up with Sora-kun again, Hakuba-kun and I'll just make sure to explain what's really going on before anything else happens, ne?"

He gave Riku a little smile and received a slightly wan one in return.

"Your presence might surprise them enough to make them pause, I guess."

"Good. Then barring any better ideas, we'll head after Sora-kun when we've finished up here."

"So soon?" Riku looked... not panicked, but close.

"We've probably got until at least tomorrow, because Hakuba-kun still needs to get hold of a staff, but... nothing's going to change by putting this off any further. And the sooner we talk to him, the sooner we can explain."

Riku sighed. "All right. I think I'll stay here for a while longer, though... I am out of practice."

Kaito nodded, aware of how dangerous losing an edge over the Heartless could be. "Sure. Think you could give us directions back to the Motou's? Shadowrifting doesn't give much information about the surrounding area."

Riku gave Kaito an ironic smile. "Neither do the corridors. I didn't walk here from the game shop."
"...Right. Okay, here goes."

Still sitting on the grass, Kaito reached out again, this time for the vicinity of Solomon Motou, focusing on out-of-sight and present-time and not-in-thin-air rather than worrying about an exact location. The Shadowrift opened along the side of the hedge to reveal the guest bedroom, facing the beds, in tandem with the now-familiar energy drain that left Kaito wishing it were already lunchtime.

Hakuba rose to his feet and stepped through, turning around to face Kaito from the other side for a second time. "...Well, you seem to have made a rift so close to the surface of the closet door that it appears to be a hole."

Kaito grinned, then glanced at Riku. "Want me to leave it open for you?"

Riku shrugged. "If it's not a problem for you. It's out of the way enough that people shouldn't see it, and I won't run into it."

"At this point, I don't think it'll make much of a difference... and you might as well come home this way rather than risk opening a corridor where Yugi-kun or Solomon-san could see."

Riku's lips curled faintly in a wry smile. "We're probably better off not knowing how they'd react to the unexpected presence of Darkness."

"Yeah. We'll see you a little later, then. Don't overtire yourself, and when you get back I'd really like to get my hands on one or two of those potions for my bag of tricks." He smiled. "If we're going to be in this kind of universe, we might as well take advantage of it."

Riku simply nodded with a small smile, then stood and walked a little ways away from the portal to continue practicing. Kaito joined Hakuba on the other side and they headed down the stairs from the guest bedroom, pausing in the living room.

"I believe Solomon-san is in the shop, and won't mind talking further with me when there are no customers distracting him. I don't know if you would care to join us, or..." Hakuba trailed off uncertainly.

"Nah, I'll just hang around for a while." Kaito grinned. "I'm good at keeping myself entertained."

That earned him a brief flicker of a genuinely amused smile. "I'm aware. I seem to recall being the target of more than one self-concocted method of entertainment."

Kaito simply let his grin widen further. "Only because you made such a good target."

"I'd appreciate it if you refrain from further efforts in that capacity," Hakuba informed him dryly. "It took me nearly a week to find where you'd hidden that bloody cricket-chirper."

Hakuba must have seen a faint gleam in Kaito's eye, because he quickly added, "And if you even think about pranking my actual person, I will be forced to harm you."

Kaito laughed and waved him off. "No pranks, I promise. Don't forget to ask Solomon-san about a staff—we can pay for it."

"I won't."

Hakuba went through the door to the shop, leaving Kaito to raid the kitchen for a snack and then settle on the couch in front of the TV. He didn't feel like doing much, but it would be a few hours before school got out to see about meeting Bakura and improving his deck, and the last thing he
wanted to do was try napping again after waking up mid-nightmare only a few hours ago. He'd take
the first chance he'd had to simply relax in... way too long, instead.

Switching on the TV, Kaito settled down in the couch cushions for some mindless entertainment.
The last channel watched had apparently been a children's network, because the first thing Kaito saw
on the screen was a large scale battle against the ridiculously-powered Monster of the Day™.

...A sentai show? Those are almost as ridiculous as... if they made a show where all anyone does is
play Duel Monsters, or something.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After a few hours of channel surfing, where the only interesting thing on was an extreme sports competition, Kaito'd had enough TV and headed back to the kitchen. Hakuba and Solomon had stayed ensconced in the shop the entire time, so rather than simply raid the fridge Kaito decided to go ahead and make lunch for three. Multiple portions were no more difficult than one, and doing something to help Solomon would be a nice change from the past few days, and, well... cooking was a refreshingly normal activity. These days, comforting familiarity was something in rather short supply.

When the food was ready, Kaito poked his head into the shop and found, to his amusement, Hakuba retrieving a game box from a high shelf that Solomon would have needed the stepladder hidden behind the counter to reach, while the older man rang up the purchase for the waiting customer. Hakuba caught sight of Kaito as he turned around, and smiled with faint embarrassment at Kaito's grin before approaching as the customer exited, leaving the shop empty.

"Good afternoon, Kuroba-kun. You missed the mid-morning rush..." Hakuba shrugged slightly. "I was recruited."

"You didn't have any problems with that many people?"

"No more than could be expected. I made... considerable progress this morning towards keeping people out; it's currently a matter of refinement and practical testing."

Kaito hid an internal wince at the reminder of Hakuba's earlier state, and smiled. "Well, I have good timing, then. I made lunch for us."

Hakuba smirked. "Sushi?"

Kaito glared, but without much real ire. "No."

Solomon gave them both an amused look, as if he'd suddenly solved a puzzle, but didn't comment. "Why thank you, Kaito-kun. Let me close up for now and I'll join you two in a moment."

He did so, and they ate in companionable conversation for a short time, joined partway through by Riku, who gratefully claimed the portion Kaito had set aside for him. After they had finished eating and cleaned up the kitchen, Solomon excused himself to return to the shop.

"Games don't sell themselves, you know!" He declared with a smile.

After Solomon had gone, Hakuba added, "I also have my own work to practice, if you'll excuse me."

"Same here," Kaito agreed. "I was going to steal Riku and head out for a while.. You mind?"

Hakuba slowly shook his head. "No... I'll see you when you get back."

"We'll say hi when we get back."

"All right."
Hakuba returned to the study, closing the door behind him, and Riku looked at Kaito expectantly. "What did you have planned?"

"A couple of things, actually. First I need to ask Solomon-san a question, but if I get the answer I'm hoping for we're going to need cash. Do you still have any crystals worth selling after getting those potions? And I still need to get a couple of those from you, too." Kaito added as an afterthought.

"They're both in my cloak, if you want me to get them."

"That'd be great. It's up to you if you want to grab the cloak too - I was hoping you could help me practice aiming for people over big distances, after."

"Good idea. I had enough of sitting around back in Tokyo."

...Translation, you're still worried about losing your edge, there's not much for you to do around here, and.

"Meet you back here, then."

As Riku headed back upstairs, Kaito backtracked to the game shop. No new customers had appeared yet, so Solomon immediately gave Kaito his full attention.

"Is something wrong, Kaito-kun?"

"No, everything's fine, I just had a question..." Kaito perched on the stool he'd used the first time he'd been in the game shop, learning about Duel Monsters. "Hakuba-kun is developing his shields, and has the gloves, but... he can't wear gloves all the time, and any wall can be breached. Is there any... I don't know, anything that would help act like another layer of shielding? A failsafe, if that kind of thing exists, or just anything we could use as a backup if he hits a bad situation?"

Solomon looked thoughtful, then smiled slowly. "As it happens... yes, I think I know of something that should work." He leaned back a little, opening a cabinet just far enough to tap the plaque on the base of a trophy on the shelf. Kaito arched a skeptical eyebrow.

"Chess skills?"

Solomon coughed. "No, no. The bronze." He leaned forward, enthusiasm growing as he continued to explain. "It's because of what's in it, you see. Copper and tin. Copper conducts, you know — not just electricity, but also many of the energies involved with, well, extraordinary abilities. Tin, on the other hand, holds and stabilizes. Put them together to make bronze... and depending on the shape, you can use it to do all sorts of things. If you have a loop, for example, you can use it as a barrier - it'll catch anything trying to pass through, and keep it trapped going around in circles until it gradually leaks out harmlessly."

"So it acts as a dampener," Kaito concluded, focusing on the important point.

"Hm. It might be more correct to say that the trap would function as a sort of dampener... but yes." Solomon looked at him for a moment. "The gloves I gave your friend are actually specially made, you know — there are fine bronze threads worked into the fabric precisely because of the slight shielding they help provide. Given the precise nature of Saguru-kun's ability, I suspect direct contact will help enhance the trap's effect."

"Hmm." Kaito narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "If he's already got bronze in the gloves... that should help block anything getting to him through his hands. But if they're not working for some reason, or if he loses them somehow... maybe something at his head? That's where this really affects him, right? Only if it needs to be a loop..." Kaito snorted faintly. "I don't think even I could get him to wear a
"Something with a closed circle would be most effective, yes. Maybe a circlet of wire concealed around the brim of a hat?"

Kaito chuckled. "He hasn't been big on hats since I got him to quite wearing the deerstalker. I doubt he'd be willing to wear a headband, either. But... I think I might have an idea that would work. Thanks, Solomon-san." He grinned, then headed back into the house.

Riku was waiting in the living room, cloaked in black and holding two potions and the bag of crystals. He held out the potions, which Kaito took and held up to the light. The translucent green liquid inside sloshed a bit at the movement, almost seeming to sparkle as it shifted.

"So what exactly does this do?"

Riku shrugged. "According to DiZ, they provide everything you need to heal along with something that speeds it up. Your body still has to do the work, though. This is the strongest type — that's why I only have a handful. It will still leave scars, but... it cures just about everything." Riku's hands absently brushed along his ribs.

"Definitely worth it, then." Kaito pocketed them both, then took possession of the bag of crystals. A significant chunk of the higher quality ones were missing, but there were still a few left.

"Perfect," he declared with satisfaction. "Come on, Riku-kun... time to go shopping."

"Dare I ask for what?"

Kaito grinned. "For a surprise."

Two hours later, Kaito had all the supplies necessary for his scheme except for a soldering iron, but he was ninety-nine percent certain that Solomon had one at the game shop. He pocketed the last acquisition, a length of fine bronze chain, and glanced over at Riku. "We've still got some time before Yugi-kun gets out of school. Ready to play some time-delayed hide and seek?"

Riku smiled. "Sure."

"I'll come after you in... five minutes, my personal time. You'll be somewhere by then if you don't run into trouble, right?"

Riku nodded. "I'll be waiting." Half a moment later, smoky darkness surged from the ground and engulfed the taller boy completely, then faded away into nothing.

Kaito stared at the empty air thoughtfully for a few moments. The nearby pedestrians apparently hadn't so much as noticed Riku's disappearance into a dark void.

"I didn't know he could do that," he announced to no one in particular. It had looked oddly like Riku were being consumed by the dark, rather than stepping into a path as he'd always done before. "It's just as well this entire town seems to have a built-in Somebody Else's Problem Field."

Shrugging, the magician leaned against the nearest patch of wall and pulled out a deck of cards. Five minutes wasn't a long time, but Kaito felt loathe to waste even that small interval doing nothing at all. He practiced shuffling and a few sleight of hand basics until the time was up, then ducked into the nearby alley out of habit. Focusing on not-in-thin-air and out-of-sight, he reached for Riku and stepped through the passage as soon as it opened. Kaito let the rift fall closed behind him before
anyone could notice the anomaly and glanced around to get his bearings.

He'd ended up at the back of a large hall nearly full of people, though no one seemed to have noticed his arrival. The milling crowd buzzed with an air of anticipation, everyone present unconsciously oriented towards the empty stage at the front of the room. The people themselves were an extremely eclectic bunch: men and women, gradeschoolers to grandfathers; a sprinkling of costumes of animals and other oddities, including at least half-a-dozen imitations of Sherlock Holmes' deerstalker and cap; and a general prevalence of naturally unnatural hairstyles and colors, despite the surrounding conversations being held in familiar Japanese.

Evidence for a theory of Shadows on a Sliding Scale — the more a world's hairstyles look like they belong in an anime from back home, the more present the Shadows are, and the more 'normal' things are, the harder it is to reach the Shadows.

After a few more moments of searching, Kaito caught sight of Riku in one of the nearby corners. The other boy was looking around, but didn't seem to have noticed Kaito yet, attention caught by the antics of various members of the crowd. Kaito ghosted through the various groups occupying the distance between them and stopped just at the edge of Riku's personal space.

"Having fun?"

Rather than startling, Riku glanced over with a little smile. "Some of the people here are amusing. Quite a lot seem to be obsessed with mysteries, and they're all apparently here for some sort of exam in order to gain entrance to an exclusive training school for detectives."

"The Holmes and Hercule Poirot cosplay outfits gave them away. How'd you know that I was right next to you?" He'd been trying to sneak, after all. If those skills were deteriorating, he was going to be in trouble once they made it back home.

"You weren't trying to hide in the Shadows. If you don't, I can tell when you're far away or close by. Since you'd just gone from the former to the latter, I figured you were about to find me."

"Cheater."

Riku snickered, but before he could reply, the entire room went dark and a voice began to speak over a loudspeaker.

"To those who have gathered to take the exam, the exam will now commence. Please look at the screen in the front."

An image immediately appeared at the front of the hall, a photograph of a room in disarray, only to disappear a minute later. The voice on the loudspeaker spoke again, naming the photograph as one of several clues intended for the examinees to use to determine the identity of a murderer. It then went on to describe the circumstances of the crime in detail, including a photograph of the scene as it was found by the police, and information about the victim.

During a brief lull in the explanations, while the crowd around them was busy discussing possible theories, Riku murmured to Kaito, "If we leave while it's still dark like this, no one will notice us disappear."

"Ehh... Not yet, this is interesting." And, conveniently, good practice.

Riku shrugged in acquiescence, and then the room blacked out again. A moment later spotlights switched on, framing the six costumed school staff who were acting the roles of the case's murder suspects. The room abruptly hushed for a moment in surprise as the crowd took in the appearance of
the sixth suspect.

"...Is that a cactus?" Riku demanded.

Instead of a person on the stage, the sixth position was occupied by a giant, potted cactus. Wearing a sombrero.

Kaito laughed approvingly as the individual suspects were further described over the loudspeaker. "I'm going to have to remember that one. It's perfect."

"Perfect for what? Or do I not want to know?" Riku replied.

"Unpredictability. I like that person's sense of flair, although suspect three is the culprit."

Riku raised an eyebrow at Kaito's abrupt deduction. "Okay, how do you know it's three?"

Around them, the lights came on and the suspects began to walk away from the stage, each heading for a different exit. The voice on the loudspeaker instructed the examinees to follow their chosen suspect, as the murderer was headed for the site of the second half of the exam.

"Observation, deduction, and tailing abilities... this school doesn't mess around." Kaito strolled casually toward the exit on the trajectory of the third suspect, a nondescript man except for the bandaged ankle peeking out from under his left pant leg.

"As for why this guy, the culprit took the victim's shoes when he escaped. The only reason he'd need them is because he didn't have a pair himself, and the only time a person would be out in freezing temperatures without shoes, around lakefront property, would be because he were wearing ice skates." Under his breath, Kaito added, "Winter sport from hell." He still hadn't figured out why, when he had perfect balance for everything else, he could not conquer the slippery nature of ice.

"If he needed to take the victim's shoes," Kaito concluded, "it would be because he couldn't wear the ice skates any more. Three is the only one with a leg injury."

Riku smiled. "You've been around detectives too long."

"It's not my fault I attract them..." He grinned at Riku's look of frank disbelief. "Okay, it is. But I can't out-think a detective unless I can anticipate how he thinks, as a frame of reference for where it'd be most effective to pull a right angle and a few steps down an ascending staircase on him."

Riku just chuckled and shook his head as they reached the exit, where a group of close to thirty people had begun tailing the third suspect. "So, are you hoping to pass the exam yourself and join the school, or do you want to keep practicing?"

"We can head out. They've probably got at least an hour's worth of tailing the guy before they get anywhere," Kaito smiled. "See you in a few minutes."

Riku smirked. "Stay out of trouble."

The people nearby were too focused on following the third suspect to take any notice of them, so a moment later Riku let himself simply vanish into a Darkness corridor. Kaito amused himself for the next few minutes by sticking with the crowd and making private bets about who would pass the test, and who would fail. He wasn't sure about the rest, but one trio of young adults that seemed to be working together had some promise. Seeing the younger of the two boys, the one with a turquoise tint to his hair and innocent enthusiasm to his movements, fall partway into an uncovered manhole was almost enough to make him revise that opinion, but... that naivete wouldn't necessarily prevent
him from being a decent detective.

"Come on, Megu, Kinta!" the boy cheered. "Let's go!"

"Watch where you're going next time, or we'll lose him," the older boy grumbled, but without any real anger.

"Ehehe..." Embarrassed laughter trailing behind him, the first boy hurried onward, once more intent on their quarry.

Kaito almost followed them, but it had already been five minutes. He let himself fade into the background instead, and once sure that no one was paying attention to him, reached again for Riku-out-of-sight and pulled, stepping through into another new world.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's world cameo is the beginning of the Tantei Gakuen Q anime. It's all about the cactus.
In the half-second it took to step through the Shadowrift and allow it to fall closed behind him, Kaito came to the sudden unwelcome realization that he was pushing himself too hard. The energy drain that he had been holding at bay over the course of the morning and afternoon, even as it increased with each use of the Shadows, seemed to have decided to cash in its debts all at once, and he promptly staggered backwards into the nearby wall.

"Oh, this is going to be so much fun..."

:And I thought you were smarter than most,: Méraud murmured unobtrusively into his thoughts.

:Driving yourself into the ground with exhaustion is hardly that. Solomon-kun's tea blocks dreams more thoroughly than mere fatigue.: 

"It wasn't intentional," he muttered under his breath. Except maybe subconsciously.

**Food. I need food.**

He surveyed his new surroundings: a school assembly hall of Western architectural design, packed full of adults and teenagers, with a large banner near the ceiling welcoming all comers to Casper High's Parent Night. Tables and chairs were set up across a significant portion of the room, and—

Kaito's stomach growled audibly. On the far side of the room, a large buffet had been set up.

*I love these people.*

Kaito pushed himself off the wall and made a beeline across the room, counting on his age to simply make him one more face in the crowd. While the signs and conversations being held were in English, and the majority population was Caucasian, there were enough ethnic Asian students milling about that his own appearance wouldn't be cause for comment. It still didn't stop Kaito from formulating a cover story in case someone recognized him as not-a-student, while he snacked and filled a plate nearly to overflowing.

Halfway down the line, Kaito's progress was halted by a mountain of a man planted by the ham-on-croissant sandwiches, blocking his way. The man was at least six feet tall and nearly as wide in the shoulders, with gray-streaked black hair and an affable expression framed by a jaw you could crack nuts with. He didn't seem to notice Kaito, however, attention divided between munching a croissant and listening to a redhead teenage girl whose attitude and facial features unmistakably labeled her as 'daughter'.

Arms akimbo, the girl gave the man an exasperated look. "Leave at least half of the buffet for other people to eat, all right?"

Kaito snickered involuntarily at the man's crestfallen look, which caught the girl's attention. An automatic expression of polite inquiry turned to him, to be quickly replaced by a flicker of surprise and then assessment as she took in his unfamiliar face. Before she could comment or ask a question, Kaito grinned at her with a hint of Kid's charm.

"There's so much food here in the first place," he offered, stepping around the pair. "I think the rest of us can manage so long as there's variety." He snagged a ham sandwich and waggled it for...
emphasis. "Why forbid a man some of the best entertainment here?"

He flashed another grin, then continued down the buffet before either could stop him, humming under his breath.

Primary task accomplished, Kaito went in search of Riku again. With some luck, the early dinner would give him enough energy to make one last rip back to Domino, where he could collapse on the couch for a few hours. He still didn't like the idea of risking a Darkness corridor opening anywhere near Yugi or Solomon, and a long walk from wherever else a corridor might land them was equally unappealing. They could afford to draw out their visit to this world for the time it would take Kaito's metabolism to do its job.

After circling most of the room, Kaito slowed in his easy ramble as his eyes lighted on what could only be described as a 'civilized' battle between two predatory alpha males. At one of the smaller tables a chessboard had been set up, and the two men playing a game were faced off with an almost feral intensity. The one controlling black had his back to the wall and Kaito could only see his profile, but the man's quiet smile and general demeanor as he moved one of his knights left no question that this was a man even Kid would be careful about baiting. Not to mention his black business suit looked more expensive than Kaito's computer had been when it was new, which meant he wasn't one of the teachers... but he hardly looked like parent material either.

*Interesting.*

The second man was unremarkable, both in clothes and appearance, barring the predatory lilt to his lips as he surveyed the chessboard for his next move. From the way he fit into the surroundings, Kaito pegged him as 'teacher' and 'more dangerous than he looks'.

Looking beyond the game, Kaito finally noticed Riku leaning unobtrusively against the wall behind the business shark, somehow less noticeable than he should have been with his height, appearance and outfit. The reason, Kaito decided after a moment's further observation, was because the shadows in Riku's localized area were subtly deeper than should have been possible from the lighting setup in this part of the room. A few feet away from Riku, a dark-haired boy a few years younger than them both also leaned against the wall and seemed to be sharing Riku's inconspicuous status. However, though both Riku and the boy were watching the chess game...

The last time I saw a glare that lethal, Kudou had just found a dead body.

Other than crossed arms the boy's posture was deceptively casual, but if looks could kill the businessman would be so much vapor.

Mindful that they were all three within earshot of the chess game, and the players weren't speaking, Kaito ghosted behind the game to approach the pair by the wall. The dark-haired boy seemed to notice the movement out of the corner of his eye because his gaze flicked over to Kaito for a split second, blue eyes raking over Kaito's frame once before refocusing on the chess players. Kaito almost paused mid-step as what the boy had just done sank in, but continued on towards Riku anyway.

...*That was a threat assessment. What the hell?*

That was *not* normal. This kid was younger than Riku, and even Kaito hadn't made threat assessments a habit until he'd become the Kid. For a barely-teenager to be *that* wary... Kaito could feel his curiosity building like a tide.

:Down, boy,: Méraud murmured, amused.
Yeah, yeah...

Even if he wanted to start poking, he wouldn't be able to try it without questions being thrown back at him that he wouldn't want to answer any more than this kid would.

With an internal sigh, Kaito stomped on his curiosity and joined Riku by the wall, giving the younger boy a smile, nod and slight salute with the now-half-full plate of food. Riku responded by shrugging, plucking a roll off the plate, and nodding in the direction of the game.

Kaito smiled. If the chess game had caught Riku's attention as well, who was he to argue?

He'd just taken a bite of the ham croissant when the teacher spoke, hand gliding over the pieces. "It's hard to be fourteen and not have any clue as to who you can trust. Even harder when somebody takes advantage of that and cuts you off from the people who should listen to you. When everybody believes your enemy over you." Casually, the man slid his queen forward. "Check."

Kaito stared at the man, deliberately refraining from looking over at the boy beside them. There was so much subtext packed in those three lines that you could practically drown in it. Something was going on between the teenager and the gray-haired businessman, with the teacher slipping into the middle with an edge of protectiveness, for a verbal and mental fencing match.

Kaito didn't have any time to follow the train of thought further, because the businessman countered by moving his king. "Enemy?" The cultured innocence in the man's voice set Kaito's teeth on edge. He ignored it by finishing the croissant.

"Sure. Popularity contests in school these days pretty much are a war, you know. Check."

A black bishop glided forward to take the queen. "So they tell me. It's not surprising that Daniel would be... somewhat resentful, is it?"

Daniel. Kaito didn't know how useful having a name to go with the dark-haired boy's face would be, but any information was better than none.

"Nope," the teacher replied, leaning forwards a fraction of an inch. "But lucky for him... Some of us are smart enough to look beyond outward appearances and actually listen."

...If you can play this game this well on all fronts, you're not just a teacher. School psychiatrist is more like it. And wonder of wonders, you actually seem to care about the students as people rather than just one more playing field.

Feral grin in full force, the man moved his rook to capture the black bishop. "And you should really pay less attention to the queen and more to the 'lesser pieces,' Mr. Masters... I believe that's checkmate."

Reaching out, the not-teacher toppled the older man's king, then rose and headed back to the rest of the open house. He glanced briefly at the three teenagers as he went to show that he'd been aware of their presence, but didn't pause, leaving his opponent behind to stare at the board in silence.

You are definitely dangerous, mister... I think I like you.

Now, however, was the time to follow the winner's lead and get out of the vicinity before the other man realized that they'd had an audience.

Kaito caught Riku's attention with a head gesture, and they headed towards a pair of doors in another relatively quiet corner outside of the chess game.
"We can't head back yet," Kaito began once he judged they were out of earshot. "I hit a wall getting here, but the food will hopefully be enough to manage the trip to Domino."

"Wanting to avoid a long walk?" Riku gave Kaito a look of faint concern.

"I'll be fine, I'm just gonna crash for a while after we get back." Again. "Did I miss anything interesting?" he added, eyeing the piece of fried chicken on his plate dubiously. He'd grabbed one of just about everything on the buffet, but he was having second thoughts about some of their food choices here.

Riku shook his head. "Just a lot of silence. I'd been on my way to an exit when I saw them playing... they were out of the way enough I thought I'd be okay waiting for you there." Riku smiled faintly. "I hadn't seen a good game of chess in a long time."

"You play?" Kaito asked, surprised.

"I used to. Kairi's dad taught us to play when we were kids. Sora and Kairi never really had the patience for it, but I was okay."

Kaito smiled. "You should challenge Hakuba-kun to a game after we get back. Even if he cream you, he'll give you advice for how to improve your game."

"You've played him before?"

Kaito's smile sharpened into a dangerous grin. "Not on a game board."

Riku chuckled in understanding. "Playing with the white knight?"

"He asks for it," Kaito countered as he pushed open one of the double doors and slipped through, into... a hallway. Where the school psychologist stood just inside, leaning against the wall, attention snapping in an instant from solitary decompression to focusing on the two of them as they appeared.

Kaito smiled cheerfully, hoping to head the man off. "Hi! We're just visiting, can you give us directions to the closest bathroom?"

The man's gaze slowly moved between them. "Visiting?"

"My mom might be taking a job here, so while we're in town I wanted to see the high school I might be transferring to."

"Pull the other one, it plays Dixie," the man replied with a wry smile.

"What?" Kaito blinked, all innocence.

"The odds of any mother pulling her son out of a Japanese high school with... what, a year or less to go? To put him in the American public school system are slightly less than the odds of lead spontaneously turning into gold."

He really needed to work on his accent. And he should have known better than to feed that story to this guy in particular.

Kaito laughed. "Okay, you got me." He glanced at Riku, buying a few precious seconds to solidify his other cover story. "We're just on a road trip, passing through and short on cash, and I hoped a semi-public event would include free food."

He gave the man a calculated grin of embarrassment. "Don't turn us in, will you?"
"Nah." Their new acquaintance either believed this one, or wasn't going to try pushing for the truth after two spun tales. "I've done similar in my broke youth. What brings you to the states?"

"I graduated last year. Riku and I are apprentices in a magician's troupe, and we bet a friend that we could get from Tokyo to LA to New York and back during our two weeks off."

"And how's that coming?"

"Well, we're about on schedule." Kaito didn't even want to try estimating what day of the week it might be here. "But we're lower on cash reserves that I'd like, hence the visit." He smiled. "It was worth it. You play a mean game of chess."

The man took a step away from the wall, drifting down the corridor at a snail's pace as he answered, Kaito and Riku keeping pace. "Saw that, did you? I like to think I'm decent at strategy."

"Well, I only caught the last few minutes, but your opponent wasn't a pushover and you still won." Kaito paused a moment, debating whether to poke. "Both matches."

"...Magician, huh?" The man responded, eyebrows rising. "Guess that'd make you familiar with mind games."

Kaito grinned. "A little. I have a passing interest in psychology. Must be a hell of a thing going on between those two."

"Those two?"

"The boy... Daniel? Watching the game. If looks could kill, Mr. Masters would be a smear on the wall. And you know there's something going on, or you wouldn't have been throwing around subtext around like a sledgehammer earlier."

He itched to ask about the threat assessment, too, but he didn't want to admit that he'd recognized it as one.

"Danny. Only Masters calls him Daniel, and it's a good way to get your head bitten off," the shrink corrected. "That's complicated. I'm impressed you noticed... You're used to watching your back, aren't you?"

"Ok, Danny," Kaito conceded, then smiled. "It's not so much watching my back as incurably nosy. I watch people." And as much as he might want to ask about his tells, he was hardly going to admit to it by asking why the man thought so.

"Yeah. And you haven't let your back move away from a wall since I first saw you, despite walking several feet down the hall to where you're standing now."

Kaito blinked innocently again, for what little good it might do. "It's a hall. Walls everywhere."

"You rolled your back towards the jamb coming through the doorway. You stand on the balls of your feet only, never flat-footed. Your hands are constantly moving when you walk, but always in a position to balance you... doesn't look like any martial art I know, but it's definitely combat reflexes."

...You're very good. And I still like you.

"Sleight of hand reflexes," Kaito admitted, "combined with gymnastics and a year of tai chi... and the inability to sit still," he added with a little grin. "I've never been in a real fight."
At least, not against *humans*...

The man snorted. "Yeah, right. Which is why you look like you're just waiting for something horrible to happen."

...He really shouldn't have given into the desire to poke rather than leaving, after having already noted how observant this guy was.

Kaito smiled, more wryly than he really intended to, but he wasn't being Kid and he'd never see this man again after they left. "Only in my nightmares."

The man cocked his head slightly, stopping beside a closed door. "Wanna talk about it? Confidential, and I work cheap."

Before Kaito could refuse with an easy laugh, Méraud's voice murmured in the back of his mind. :You should consider it. You seem disinclined to take anyone else into your confidence, and you've had two minor breakdowns already.: 

...*Weaknesses are too easily used against you by others.*

:He's not going to be in a position to try.: 

*Hn.*

"Why offer?" Kaito said aloud, giving Cade a slightly skeptical look. "I can't pay you, and you'll never see us again."

"You're not the only one who's incurably nosy. Besides, something about you says you're probably into what my friends and I call the "Wide World of Weird," and there aren't too many people who'd believe you and not lock you in a nuthouse. Since my specialties are adolescent psych and abnormal or paranormal events, I'm probably your best bet, and I hate walking away from somebody I could help."

"The Wide World of Weird? Catchy title."

Kaito ran a hand through his hair, tiredly. It wasn't pushy, just... an offer. So long as he didn't reveal anything about other worlds, it was a no-risk proposition. And while he hated to admit it, he was still stressed.

"Hell. If you're sure... Okay." He let his posture change subtly, no longer bothering to spend the energy necessary to completely hide just how exhausted he really felt.

"Tell you what, let's step into my office and you guys can sit while we discuss this. Less chance of being overheard, too." The man pulled out a key and opened the door he'd stopped beside.

Kaito followed behind, glancing around the room at potential exits before sinking into a chair in a position that still left him able to dodge in case something came at him unexpectedly. Cade had been right about combat reflexes.

The room was small, but comfortably decorated, with plenty of bookshelves. Kaito smiled slightly. "At least you're not the principal."

"Don't get me started on the principal." Cade sat in the chair behind his desk and leaned back with casual confidence.
"Hey..." Riku had just closed the door behind them, and was looking at something on the wood panel. "Why do you have an ofuda on your door?"

"This town's Ghost Central. Guessing you haven't watched the news or picked up a paper while you've been here."

"No... Just passing through. Define ghost central?" Though if the man had a talisman designed to keep spirits without an invitation from coming inside the room, Kaito could make a guess.

"There's a... dimensional rift, I guess it the best way to put it. Into an ectoplasmic dimension, populated by ghosts. Some of 'em like to come through and make trouble. Lucky for us, the town's got a ghost who likes things the way they are, and usually takes care of 'em before things get bad. But we've also got a hell of a lot of ghost hunters."

...Here, ghosts are real.

Kaito firmly smothered the faint, inarticulate wish before it could fully form.

"Sounds... interesting. Lots of fights around here, then?"

"Yeah, construction and insurance are both booming businesses."

"Could be worse. I know a guy who could justifiably be called a death magnet."

"Ouch. That'd have to suck. Luckily Phantom only deals with the ones who've been dead a long time. Or were never alive." It took Kaito half a moment to process that 'Phantom' didn't refer to Kid, but to the protective ghost that the man had mentioned earlier. "But we're getting off the subject... What's your story? For that matter, what's your name? He's Riku, but you didn't mention yours."

"I'm Kaito. I didn't catch yours, either..." He trailed off with an inquiring glance.

"Cade Maboroshi. You can call me Cade, or the kids here all call me Dr. M."

Kaito grinned. "Cade, then. I'm hopelessly informal."

Cade grinned back. "Yeah, same here. So... What's your story?"

Kaito took a moment to put his thoughts in order and edit out any problematic details. "When Riku and I travel, we keep... running into creatures on the nasty side of the 'Wide World of Weird.' Normally I can handle that fine, but for the past few days, I've had the same damn nightmare every time I go to sleep, and I can remember everything about it perfectly when I wake up. Once I could chalk up to a particularly bad day, but this... I don't know what to do with it."

And he hated it.

...Hakuba wasn't the only one who put a lot of stock in self-control.

"Tell me about it?"

Kaito sighed, gaze wandering absently over the book titles and various decorations as he pushed the memory to enough of an emotional arm's length to be able to think and talk about it. He'd had a lot of practice with that, over the past year... ever since he'd stumbled into Kid's hidden room and begun working with Jii to put his father's ghost to rest. You couldn't do that without facing the memories of what had been. Or imaginings of what could be, but he'd managed to cope with those alone up until now. Of course, while he hadn't had anyone to tell before, either, at least then he'd been able to let
the details blur a bit over time. And despite the wealth of unpleasant thoughts he'd had to choose from, it'd never been him pulling the trigger.

"I'm over twenty. A thief... kidnapped and raised in a crime syndicate after they killed my dad for getting in their way. Uncatchable. I'm on a heist when it starts, taking a ruby. Guards are dead, but the alarm goes off... I'm almost to the roof when a... friend of mine in reality back home, a detective... tries to stop me." Kaito dropped his lids, half-shuttering his eyes. "He's engaged to a girl I knew before I was kidnapped. Recognizes me. Wants to help me. ... I shoot him. Leave. Wake up."

In his peripheral vision he could see Riku quietly watching him, but he didn't want to turn his head enough to make out the younger boys' exact expression after having heard even the basic details for the first time.

"Same dream every time..." Cade murmured. "And no fuzzing?"

"Three nights, three dreams... and I could recite the dialogue word for word." Not to mention recall his stream of conscious thought with perfect clarity.

"...How much else do you know about the background there?"

"Some major events, conceptually, like really hazy memories. Nothing like this level of detail. ...Still more than I'd ever want to." Like what had happened to Kudou, in this world-that-wasn't.

Cade hmm'd thoughtfully. "Something that strong... Anything at all like it happen recently? Something it could twist?"

...And here's where things got tricky.

"I... My dad used to write stories about a Kaitou, a gentleman thief who was the exact opposite of my dream. When I found them, I picked up where he left off. They just come to me, almost like they're writing themselves more than I am, and I just put the words on paper. The last one... there's two thefts, one with a ruby and a confrontation similar to that one, and one where a bastard of a thief dies after blackmailing the protagonist. I finished it last week."

"Would this blackmailing bastard of a thief who dies in the story have any resemblance to your best friend who dies in this recurring dream? Purely coincidental, of course."

_Nightmare... and Hakuba?_

...Oh.

**Oh.**

Seeing a corpse was a big enough shock for most people that it wasn't impossible for a physical resemblance between the living and the dead to twist the details of identity in their nightmares.

And okay, so this guy didn't believe that Nightmare wasn't a real person... but he wasn't going to push it, either.

"Just a friend." Kaito'd seen best friends, growing up. He and Hakuba weren't it. "He gives me a lot of flack over my thief protagonist. But both he and the dead one are blond and blue."

"Mmm. Had any reason to fear for this friend's safety recently?"

"...He ran into the same kinds of things we are, a few days ago. It nearly killed him."
"Before or after you first had the dream?"

Kaito thought for a moment, timelineing. "After. But before, he'd been investigating some pretty dangerous leads on a case without weirdness involved."

:Because you, of course, don't count,: Méraud commented amusedly.

*Quiet, you.*

Cade drummed his fingers on his desk in contemplation. "There's an underlying cause here, but it'd take more time than either of us have to dig it out..."

Kaito sighed. "And I need to stay functional until I *can* figure out what's going on."

"If you can get out of the mess causing your stress, that'd help. Or if you can talk to a professional at home. But in the meantime, you can minimize the damage by telling someone when you have these nightmares. And I mean everything. Get it *out*, or it festers and the pressure builds up."

"Damn," Kaito smirked, but was only half-joking.

"I'm sure, being an... author who specializes in thief stories..." Cade's expression confirmed Kaito guess about just how little the psychologist believed the lie, "You're used to keeping walls up and cards close to your chest. You can't do that here. It's not safe."

The man sighed, eyes drifting across a particular shelf on the far side of the room, and added, *sotto voce,* "The Weird kills in more ways than one... and the indirect, slow and twisting, usually has collateral damage attached. The breakdown doesn't care where the stress came from, or how much of a mess it makes on the way down."

Kaito tensed slightly in his chair, fighting the sudden urge to edge out of a line of fire. The words weren't a threat, weren't even directed at him, but...

They rang too close to home, in ways that he hadn't even considered putting into words yet, a sentiment he had yet to acknowledge was there.

They echoed too deep.

Too dark.

If he'd been more stable during the heists, he wouldn't have broken down on Hakuba, and the blond wouldn't have follo—

He stopped.

*Not going there any more, or Hakuba will kill me.*

Kaito shoved the entire reaction and thought process away for further consideration *later* as Cade shook himself out of his reverie and gave them both a rueful smile. "Sorry. You need at least one person you trust, and can talk to, especially in the Weird. Or winding up snapping under stress is the BEST ending you get."

...*One person.*

*Dammit.*

Riku was going to leave, eventually. Despite the younger boy's fears, Kaito had no doubts that he'd
be able to return to his islands with Sora and Kairi once this was all over. And Hakuba... they weren't in a state of cold war any longer—or at least for the moment, given the number of tripwires they both had and how good they were at setting each other off—but Kaito was still used to needing to keep his masks up more thoroughly around the blond detective than anyone else.

He settled for replying, "I already know about some of the worse endings."

"One other thing." Cade leaned forward slightly in his chair. "Just because you have the capability to be something doesn't mean you're going to be that. It doesn't even mean you're at risk. It takes a hell of a lot more than stress and strain to make you the worst thing you can be, once you've started out trying to be the best."

"Yeah... I know. It's just too damn real." He sighed again. "Thanks, Cade. I'll talk to... someone."

"I'll make sure of it," Riku interjected, dryly.

Cade smirked. "I'd offer my office, but... somehow I don't think you're coming back this way."

Kaito shook his head. "Better to not. We should get going, anyway... we've kept you long enough."

"Hey, every minute away from that hive of scum and villainy is golden."

Kaito laughed. "You know the classics."

"Of course! I'm a man of education." Cade grinned.

And apparently, some things were truly universal.

Kaito stood and held out a hand. "Thanks again. I'll remember you." He hadn't gotten any real answers, but he did feel slightly better for the conversation. And he still liked the guy's style.

"You watch yourself." Cade stood as well, shaking Kaito's hand.

"Will do. ...Look after Danny," Kaito added as an afterthought. "He needs an adult as sharp as you on his side."

"I intend to."

"Good." Kaito smiled. "So long."

Leaving the office behind, Kaito headed down the corridor until he and Riku turned a corner, safely away from any prying eyes.

Riku glanced sidelong at Kaito. "I meant what I said in the office, you know."

"...I'll keep that in mind." Kaito looked up at the ceiling, thinking about the best destination to aim for. His internal clock wasn't accurate-to-the-second like Hakuba's, but it felt like they'd been gone for quite a few hours, between shopping and traveling, and he could already tell he was going to crash hard as soon as they made it back. But he'd agreed to meet Yugi when school got out to be introduced to Bakura for Deck advice, and he didn't want to miss that...

He reached out and pulled, ignoring the specifics of -where- other than the Moutou home in order to focus on the -when-.

:Kaito-kun!: Méraud's objection came too late. Kaito had already opened the way through.
He swayed, slightly dizzy, and Riku put a hand behind his elbow to steady him.

"Am I going to need to carry you again?" The younger boy kept his voice light, but there was still an undertone of worry.

"I can make it to the couch." Kaito waved vaguely at the Motou's living room on the other side, where the couch stood prominently in view.

"Let's go, then."

Kaito obligingly stepped through, shuffling to the couch and half-sitting, half-falling onto the cushions. He barely remembered to toe off his shoes before swinging his legs up to sprawl along the full length of the makeshift bed.

"...Kaito-kun?" The question had an odd note to it. Kaito glanced over at Riku, who was eyeing the clock warily.

"What?"

"The clock says it's not even twelve-thirty yet. We were still shopping, then."

Kaito yawned. "We looped ourselves. I need to sleep before I meet with Yugi and Bakura-kun," unfortunately, "and school gets out between four and five, depending on whether they're in a club. We didn't go home, so we won't meet ourselves. Don't worry about it."

:Kaito-kun: Méraud blocked out any reply Riku might have made, her voice deadly serious. :You're obviously very tired, or you would have thought of this already, but... you're letting yourself slip through time on purpose. You've already lived through more than half a day that Saguru-kun hasn't. It's not noticeable now, but if you don't watch yourself carefully, and keep yourself anchored... you're going to begin aging out of sync with the people you care about.:

Kaito felt his blood run cold.

Méraud continued, :The difficulty that the old Shadow-walkers faced, if I recall correctly, was not always becoming lost in time, but rather being lost to time. They could find their way back... but could not return to the life they left behind.:

Several of Nakamori's choice phrases for when Kid got away ran through Kaito's mind.

...I can't deal with this right now.

Despite the brief shock of adrenaline, his eyelids were still slamming shut.

I'll remember, next time. Won't... do it again...

Sleep claimed him.

Kaito lounged along a branch in one of Beika park's many trees, waiting patiently in the warmth of the afternoon sun. This path through the park was Kudou Shinichi's favorite shortcut, and with the teenager's latest case as resolved as it was going to get, the 'creepy detective' of Beika should pass by soon on his way home. After having surreptitiously watched Kudou's investigation, Kaito was looking forward to this meeting, particularly after the change in Kudou's posture when the detective had reached his final deduction.
of the case... the one he couldn't share with the police.

A predatory smile crept into Kaito's expression. Speak of the devil...

Kudou had finally appeared on the path, trademark walking stick in hand and darkened sun glasses covering his eyes. He looked tense and tired beneath the cut of his high school uniform, but still alert. Kaito waited until Kudou was almost directly below him, then leaned forward.

"Good afternoon, detective," he purred.

Kudou instantly came to a dead stop, gripping the top of his cane so tightly his knuckles turned white.

Kaito's smile widened at the reaction. "Ah, so you do remember me."

"What do you want?" The detective's voice was low and rough, smothered anger bubbling just under

"Have you ever played chess? The queen is the more effective fighter, but without the king," Kaito gestured slightly with a hand, even knowing Kudou wouldn't see it, "the game ends."

"...I've played on occasion. It's not my favorite game, but I know how."

Kaito chuckled in satisfaction. "Welcome to my chess game, Kudouu-kun. The rules are simple..."

________________________

Chapter End Notes

Yes, that was Danny Phantom, specifically the universe of Ellen Brand's Outside Looking In, because Kaito needs to talk to someone and there aren't many people who could listen and whom Kaito would be willing to talk to. Credit to Ellen Brand for the character and dialogue of Cade Maboroshi.
After re-establishing a sense of equilibrium in the peace of the study, Saguru returned to the game shop. Staying in the isolation of the study was hardly preparation for traveling with Kuroba and Riku, and helping in the shop let him feel slightly less indebted to Solomon for everything the older man had done. Not to mention the fact that Solomon was a knowledgeable and pleasant conversational partner, and time in his company passed quickly.

After a few hours, the bell above the game shop's door jingled as Yugi entered, accompanied by a white-haired boy that Saguru didn't recognize.

"We're home, Grandpa!" Yugi smiled. "Hi, Hakuba-kun. How are you doing?"

"Well enough, thank you." Luckily, Yugi had already left for school by the time Saguru had woken up and had missed the morning's drama entirely. "And yourself?"

"I'm fine. Oh, and this is Bakura-kun." The white-haired boy smiled and inclined his head. Yugi continued, "Kaito-kun didn't show up at the school, so we came to see if he was still here."

"He didn't?" Saguru clamped down on the abrupt clenching in his gut. Kuroba didn't miss appointments. "He said they were going out..."

"Of course, they could have easily returned without us noticing," Solomon added. "Why don't you boys go ahead and check?"

Yugi nodded cheerfully. "Sure. Come on, Bakura-kun. You should come too, Hakuba-kun—it can't hurt to know Kaito-kun's deck, and maybe it'll give you some ideas for your own."

Saguru briefly considered mentioning that Kuroba had said he'd say hello when he and Riku got back from wherever they were going, but decided against it. There was no point. And since Solomon didn't seem opposed to losing his assistance for the time being, Saguru shrugged and followed the pair into the house. It was better than facing a silently eloquent raised eyebrow from the older man, which needed no words to ask if Saguru were trying to avoid Kuroba again.

He shut the door behind him just as Yugi called, "Kaito-kun?" into the living room at large, walking with Bakura towards the middle of the room.

Bakura glanced over the back of the couch facing the TV, and stopped. "...Oh dear."

The back of Saguru's mind took a split-second to register Bakura's oddly British-tinged accent, but he was more intent on moving to see what on the couch had caught the other teen's attention, because he had a sinking suspicion he already knew...

Damn.

Sure enough, Kuroba lay stretched out on his side across the couch's cushions, knees slightly bent and an arm across his chest in a vaguely defensive posture, and his other arm hidden beneath his pillow. Even asleep, the magician's entire demeanor was tense and restless, brow furrowed over closed eyes and jaw clenched together.

Unease prickling, Saguru quickly rounded the couch while Yugi leaned over the back of it and carefully touched a hand to Kaito's arm, ready to duck if the older boy happened to wake up on the defensive.
"Kaito-kun?" Getting no response, Yugi looked up at Saguru and drew his hand back, silently giving Saguru the opportunity to try something similar. The look in Yugi's eyes clearly declared that since Saguru knew Kuroba better than they did, he'd be the best suited to try waking the mercurial teen.

Solomon and Yugi were both far too communicative in their silences. A raised eyebrow could practically fill a book.

Saguru didn't feel like protesting too hard about being the one to wake Kuroba up, though, not when the creeping sense that something was not right seemed less irrational by the second. He reached down and shook Kuroba by the shoulder, calling his name. Then shook him harder, when the dark-haired boy didn't even twitch.

"That's... not good," Yugi declared worriedly.

"Well, don't look at me," Bakura replied. "He... feels weird, but I've never seen him before right now."

Yugi nodded. "And if there is magic involved, it's not something I recognize..."

...Magic.

Saguru's eyes darted to the gloved hand gripping Kuroba's arm, eyes narrowing as he shoved aside the odd and entirely unhelpful sense of surrealism that threatened to overlay the situation. Physical interference didn't seem to be making a difference, but perhaps there were other ways to jar a person awake.

Ignoring the sudden background commotion of Yugi calling over his shoulder for Solomon, and footsteps on the stairs that were likely Riku coming to see what was going on, Saguru took a deep breath and yanked off a glove. He'd only discussed the possibility of his abilities' projective aspect with Solomon earlier this morning in the game shop, but he'd always been good at improvisation—and he'd gotten even better, since coming to Japan after Kid.

Before he could think better of the idea, Saguru focused entirely on his frustrated worry over Kuroba's current state, and touched his bare hand to the magician's face.

The world went strange, and then abruptly hazed out.

...And when Saguru furiously blinked his eyes mostly back into focus, he was in another place entirely.

What the hell?

Seeing Kuroba up a tree was not, in and of itself, unusual; the magician had an extreme affinity for heights. Seeing him in all black, talking with Kudou Shinichi—and ye gods they really did look like twins, not counting the hair and Kudou's glasses and cane—with the expression of a cat playing with a rather interesting mouse, however, sent a chill down Saguru's spine.

"Welcome to my chess game, Kudou-kun." The twisted smirk on Kuroba's face did not belong there.

"Kuroba!" Saguru tried to get closer, but the surrealism was not so easily brushed off this time. It suffused everything, lending a strange, cloying depth that threatened to make him dizzy even as it highlighted every detail with burning clarity. He couldn't seem to push through it, couldn't alter his position, even when he thought he felt himself stagger and fall.

Saguru couldn't bring himself to be entirely surprised when neither teen seemed to hear him, and he
clenched a hand into an unseen fist as the scene before him played on, Kuroba continuing without missing a beat. "The rules are simple. You don't tell anyone about me. If you can catch up to me and catch me, you win. If you don't, I get away to have more fun in the future. In return... as long as you don't break any rules, you get to live, and so do all your little friends."

Kudou growled. "Don't you have better things to do than pick on a blind man?"

Well, that explained the glasses and cane, but... Kudou was all-but-vanished from Tokyo, not walking around it blind. What was this even supposed to be?

"Mmm, my... colleagues... are psychopathic bores," Kuroba purred. "You're amusing. Given that you had the bad manners to survive, the least you could do is provide some challenge in return."

Saguru's stomach clenched again. Even knowing that there was no way this twisted reflection could ever be Kuroba—even in this world of knife-sharp edges and colors like fire through stained glass—every motion and nuance of voice were so familiar that to hear him talk so casually about attempted murder, and of Kudou...

"Oh, yeah, like the fact that I'll never see again wasn't enough of a sacrifice?" Kudou shot back, voice tight.

...this was Kuroba's nightmare. It had to be.

Which meant the most likely place for the magician to be watching this scene was from behind his double's eyes. Saguru felt ill, and he was only watching from the outside. He didn't even want to think about what it must be like to feel that twisted smirk stretch unbidden over one's own face, to be drowned in the foreign sentiments shaping it and forced to watch the drama play out with no control or means of escape.

Kuroba's smirk widened. "Come now, detective... I thought you never ran from a challenge, not to mention that an hour ago, you would have given anything to catch me." Kuroba paused, letting the implications of the statement sink in, then continued, "Excellent deductions, by the way. Especially the last; I was delighted to see your mind is still as sharp as ever."

Kudou growled again, unable to do anything else. "Leave everyone else out of this. I won't tell anyone, but I swear, if you touch them..."

"I did promise immunity so long as they remain blissfully ignorant."

"...Fine. Since I don't have much choice... I'll play your game."

Kuroba's expression reflected a sadistic glee at Kudou's grudging capitulation. "I knew you'd see things my way," he purred, with just enough emphasis on 'see' to be cruel.

Kudou's hand tightened even further on the head of his cane. "If there's nothing else, I'm going home." The teenage detective turned and stalked off, tension evident in his lean frame.

"Give my regards to your girlfriend!" Kuroba called after him with a mocking laugh.

The taunting laughter continued to ring in Saguru's ears as the terrible intensity of the dream dissolved and he jerked awake, eyes he hadn't realized were closed snapping open. Kuroba's eyes opened at the same time, and for a few moments Saguru stared up into an empty, uncomprehending blue gaze.

Then the magician's brain rebooted, and the spark of devastating intelligence returned to Kuroba's
eyes a split-second before a jumbled maelstrom too strong and tangled for Saguru to sort through
threatened to overpower his mind and vision once more. He snatched his hand away from Kuroba's
face, slumping against the base of the couch as he fought down a wave of nausea.

Too much. Too much...

*Bach Violin Sonata No. 1 in G minor, Prelude.*

It took another long moment of fighting to draw himself inward, away from the intangible,
overwhelming morass of sensation-that-wasn't-his pulling at him like quicksand, and shove it all
away as best he could with the summoned memory of music. Even then, trying to drown them out
was only a partial success, with faint, foreign whispers still clinging like London winter fog after
sunrise.

The edge of his awareness not dedicated to tuning out the unwanted input registered through his
refocusing peripheral vision that Kuroba hadn't moved on the couch except to sink further down into
the cushions, shaking.

As his focus returned to the real world, a dull throbbing in his left hand demanded attention, and he
glanced down to see his glove trapped in a fist clenched tight enough to bruise. He opened the fist
and quickly tugged the glove back over his bare hand.

"God..." Saguru rested his hands on top of his thighs, letting his breathing slowly even out. "What
the *hell* was that?"

"You saw it?" Riku sounded... oddly unsurprised, really. Saguru looked up, but his gaze caught on
Kuroba's face as the other teen glanced at him with a half-startled, half-haunted expression and then
quickly looking away again, jaw clenching.

Yugi spoke, reminding Saguru that they had company. "You just froze for a moment, and then fell to
your knees... and wouldn't wake up, either."

"Mmm. Apparently 'empathy' is a horribly inaccurate term." Whatever he'd just done, it
was *not* empathy in any traditional understanding of the term, even from the perspective of a psychic
ability.

"Oh dear," Solomon commented mildly.

There'd be time to think about that later, though. Saguru sighed. "Let me get off the floor... and then I
think we need to talk."

Kuroba did, at the least. And while a part of Saguru wanted nothing more than to shove the
entirety of the past several minutes into a mental oubliette and continue on as normal, they couldn't
afford to ignore this... whatever it was. Keeping the melody of the violin at the forefront of his mind
would do until the conversation was over, and the he could quietly acquire some paracetamol from
Solomon for the inevitable headache. He refused to let Kuroba see how much he wanted to
disappear back into the blessed silence of the study, because Kuroba had enough on his mind
already.

"Good idea," Riku agreed. He reached over the couch's arm to nudge Kuroba's shoulder. "Come on,
Kaito-kun... there's not enough couch for you to take up the whole thing."

Saguru almost expected Kuroba to protest, but the teen silently swung himself into a sitting position,
legs narrowly missing Saguru in the process, and dropped his forehead into his palms, fingers fisting
tightly in his hair.
Riku immediately sat down beside Kuroba, placing a hand on the older teen's shoulder and letting his forearm rest against Kuroba's back as well. Saguru hoisted himself up, still feeling more than a little unsteady, and settled down on Kuroba's other side, close enough to establish his presence without crowding the thief. After a moment's hesitation, he extended his hand to grip Kuroba's other shoulder, mirroring Riku's position, determinedly ignoring the echoes still lurking around the edges of his mind. They only emphasized how much Kuroba obviously needed... needed something right now. And he could handle this much, now, with that extra sense dulled by gloves and layers of cloth and the memory of violin. He could.

From the corner of his eye, Saguru watched Solomon return to oversee the game shop while Yugi and Bakura quietly sat nearby, listening but unobtrusive. Kuroba didn't seem inclined to move except for a few fine tremors, however, so Saguru ventured, "Given that Riku-kun wasn't present for that... perhaps you'd better tell him what you saw. Then I'll give him my experience."

And hopefully talking it out here would keep this nightmare from slipping into his own dreams, in all its too-intense splendor.

Kuroba took a shuddery breath, and exhaled slowly. "I... give me a minute."

Saguru nodded. "Take all the time you need."

Several long, silent minutes passed. Then Kuroba took his head out of his hands and leaned folded arms on top of his knees, keeping his eyes on the carpet as he began to speak.

"I was in a park... waiting for Kudou." His head turned slightly towards Riku. "He's our age. Not a bad guy, for a detective. He runs into murders a lot; solves them."

Riku nodded, squeezing Kuroba's shoulder slightly. Kuroba swallowed and looked back down.

"He'd run into one he couldn't solve, this time, not completely. The murderer... was a yakuza operative. Thief. And occasionally assassin."

"Oh, hell." Riku looked like he'd eaten something sour. Saguru didn't blame him; even with Kuroba taking refuge in third person, it wasn't hard to read between the lines.

"Kudou'd run into them before," Kuroba continued, voice hollow. "The same operative'd knocked his visual cortex offline six months earlier, after Kudou poked his nose somewhere he shouldn't have. Since he'd survived, and had even gone back to being a detective... he had a chance of actually providing a challenge for once."

The dull throbbing in his palm was back. Saguru glanced down and found it clenched into a fist again, and realized his other hand was clamped down on Kuroba's shoulder tight enough to cause pain, even though the magician hadn't said anything. He eased his grip, but deliberately didn't pull away.

Kuroba dropped his head again, this time clasping his hands together against the back of his neck. "The operative confronted Kudou, laid out the rules for the "game" he'd come up with. Kudou'd chase whenever they crossed paths, wouldn't tell anyone anything about it... and his friends would be left alone so long as they didn't know about the game, and he didn't stop playing."

He paused, then added, "It was... high school, this time. Five years earlier than when... than the other dream." Where Kuroba'd supposedly killed Saguru, and which had started this whole mess.

"With the same depth of back-story, I see..." Saguru commented thoughtfully.
"...Same back-story," Kuroba clarified. "This just... filled in a lot of details."

"Bloody hell."

"That about sums it up." Kuroba uncurled enough to look over his shoulder and give Saguru a smile with no humor in it whatsoever. "You wondered why I was so sure you were dead."

"It seemed...very real, yes," Saguru agreed, pulling his thoughts into order. More than real. "I entered... probably half-way through? The..." — he edited out 'assassin' — "operative was just starting to explain the rules of his "game" to Kudou..."

Kuroba shivered briefly. "I don't remember seeing you..."

"I was..." Saguru hesitated, trying to find the right words for it. "I was watching it something more like from the outside, I think. Like the difference between being in a play and being in the audience."

"Mmm."

And if Kuroba had experienced that too-real world from a first-person perspective..."No wonder you were watching over me that first night here." It had seemed odd at the time, but it certainly made sense now.

"I preferred you breathing." Kuroba replied shortly.

Saguru inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment. "I don't blame you."

Kuroba ran a hand through his hair, face regaining its typical composure once more. Saguru didn't believe it for a second, but recognized that challenging it would do more harm than good at this point. Kuroba did not show weaknesses to an audience. Not by choice.

"Dammit. One was bad enough." Kuroba glanced around, gaze settling on Yugi. "I think I'm going to need to borrow more of Solomon-san's tea, Yugi-kun."

With the magician's change in demeanor, signaling the other teen's shift to packing everything away for the time being to hopefully finish processing once alone, Saguru took his hand away and leaned back into the couch. He felt half-tempted to try some of the tea himself, though, at least for this evening.

Yugi smiled slightly. "I'll make sure Grandpa makes some up for you to take with you when you go. ...And some for tonight, too."

"Thanks." Kuroba's gaze slid from Yugi across to Bakura. "...I overslept, didn't I. Sorry."

"Given what I just heard, I think you can be excused," Bakura replied. "Would you like the deck-building lesson now, as distraction?"

Kuroba grinned weakly. "Sounds great. If I can, I'd like to have a playable deck with cards that are useful in case of running into something nasty."

"I think we can deal with that..." Bakura bowed his head for a moment, and when he looked up, his face and body language had all changed subtly.

Kuroba couldn't possibly have missed the change, but he kept smiling. "Right."

Saguru raised an eyebrow. "Mind if I sit in?" The distraction would be welcome, right now. Something much more pleasant to focus on than the lingering echoes still whispering darkly, just
beyond comprehension.

"As long as you can keep your mouth shut," Bakura allowed curtly.

...He'd definitely missed something here.

"I think I can manage that."

"Are you sure?" Kuroba asked with a small grin.

"My track record is remarkably better than yours," Saguru retorted, amused.

"I deny everything. Hang on a second and I'll get my cards," Kuroba added to Bakura, standing.

"I'll get mine, too," Yugi offered. "I have a lot I never use in my decks, and some of them might be useful."

"Thanks."

The pair disappeared up the stairs, then returned and quickly proceeded to turn the living room floor into a study of organized chaos under Bakura's supervision.

"First principle to remember: The Shadows can always go one better than the game; you can modify a card's basic framework to fit a given situation. Pegasus was mad, but he was a genius, and designed every modern Duel Monsters card on the market — and he could see a lot further than most people. The descriptions are useless if you're only playing the game, because everything comes down to lifepoints, but in a real fight, it's about the monster, spell, or trap, and what it can do for you. A monster will follow its card specs, from the picture to the pithy comments, except for game conventions that don't properly exist, like a specific number of lifepoints, defined turns, or trap criteria."

Kuroba nodded thoughtfully. "Right. Dark Sage is a special summon."

"And if you're good, you can broaden some of the definitions to your advantage."

"Like what?"

Bakura reached unerringly across the semi-arranged piles of cards and picked one up, flipping it in his fingers so Kaito could see it. "Man-eater Bug. In a game, it takes two turns to get the Flip-effect on a Monster. In a fight, if you're strong enough you can use it for an instant win against one target."

The white-haired teen grinned, nastily. "And if you broaden your definition of "Monster," it works against humans, too."

Kuroba shivered almost imperceptibly; if Saguru hadn't been expecting it, he wouldn't have noticed. Definitely not a definition Kuroba was going to use anytime soon. The magician quickly nodded, then sorted through his own deck and pulled out a card, which Saguru recognized from the picture as Dian Keto the Cure Master.

"What about this one? It says lifepoints, but... could you use it to heal?"

Bakura snorted. "If you want to knock yourself out, sure. You'd be using Shadows and your own internal energy to speed up the healing process."

"Mmm." Kuroba paused, eyes thoughtful, then turned back to the cards, sorting through the pile vaguely lumped together as Wind Monsters. "Hey, Yugi-kun? Do you have the Sapphire Luster
Yugi shook his head. "I have a lot of cards, but definitely not all of them. Kaiba-kun does, though... I could ask him about selling or trading you one."

"Yeah. Thanks, that's be great."

Bakura gave Kaito a considering look. "Why that card? Both of the Luster Dragons are standard Monsters, no extras."

"Yugi-kun gave me the Emerald one when we first met... It seems fitting to have the matching set."

Bakura shrugged. "Since you're not limited by deck size, it won't hurt. Are you thinking of a Dragon deck?"

"Mmm... let's go with useful, with an emphasis on light and wings."

From there the discussion degraded into highly jargon-laced dialogue as Kaito rebuilt his deck in light of Bakura's suggestions. Saguru was highly amused to watch the magician cringe whenever an ichthyoid monster was presented for his consideration, particularly since by the third such card Saguru was positive that Bakura had caught on to the phobia and was doing it on purpose. The white-haired boy had fairly good suggestions otherwise, naming monsters, spells and traps that not only were useful individually as potential summons, but complemented each other for a gaming deck as well.

After forty-odd cards for a deck and a sidedeck of the fifteen cards Kaito considered best to have quickly accessible, the magician called a halt.

"That's all I need. Thanks for helping me set it up, Bakura-kun."

Bakura smirked. "Have fun with it."

Kuroba nodded, straightening his leftover cards into a pile. "And thanks for the cards, Yugi-kun. You guys can have these; split them however you want." He grinned, a hint of mischief returning. "Now, however, I need to see a man about a soldering iron."

Saguru rolled his eyes. "I really don't want to know."

"You'll find out soon enough," Kaito promised, rising to his feet. He sauntered off to the game shop, humming tunelessly.

Saguru glanced at the door to the study, then at the stacks of cards Yugi was putting away into a box. At this point, he'd still prefer a better distraction than a book, and the game did make a good grounding tool. "Would you be interested in a duel, Yugi-kun?"

Bakura snickered, bowing his head, and when he looked up his body language had subtly altered once more. He gave Saguru a wry smile. "I hope you enjoy losing, Hakuba-kun."

"I managed to only lose by 1000 life points, last time... I'll consider myself improved if I can lose by less." Saguru smiled ruefully.

"Ehehe." Yugi ducked his head.

"Besides, the best way to improve a skill is play opposite someone better than you. If I ever hope to consistently beat Kuroba-kun at this sort of game, I could use the practice."
"Mmm. Better than Joey, he wound up learning the game under serious pressure."

"Pressure is an excellent teacher." He'd certainly proved it in the past few days. Kuroba too.

"Yeah," Yugi agreed. "...Getting your ass kicked by Kaiba's not bad, either." The younger boys blushed. "Oops."

"I've heard worse. Shall we? I'll get my deck."

Yugi smiled. "Sure, I'll put these away."

Bakura stood with them. "I really should head home... See you tomorrow, Yugi."

"Yep! Thanks, Bakura-kun. See you then."

Bakura left while Saguru retrieved his deck from the study, and he and Yugi settled in the living room to play. Riku stayed on the couch and watched. Kuroba returned from the game shop and disappeared into the storage room where Solomon kept his extra stock, but didn't make any comments about the duel.

After a while, when Saguru had several monsters out and had just played Umi, Riku suddenly snickered.

"A water-themed deck?" Riku glanced the way Kuroba had left, then smirked. "Nice gaming strategy."

Saguru smirked back and tilted the Monster cards in his hand slightly so that Riku, though not Yugi, could see them: Seven Colored Fish, Terrorking Salmon, and Piranha Army. "Someone has to keep him on his toes."
By the time Kaito had finished using the soldering iron, dinner was ready. He made it almost all the way through the meal before succumbing to a spectacular yawn, and after the dishes were cleaned Solomon made another batch of tea. He gave a mug of the hot liquid to Kaito and one to a slightly startled Hakuba, pouring the remainder into a thermos.

"You can drink whenever you feel ready to sleep, but you both look like you could use that tonight."

Hakuba smiled wryly. "So noted."

"You can take the thermos with you when you're ready to leave, as well," Solomon added. "Temperature and time should make no difference."

Kaito wrapped his hands around the mug. "We seem to be saying this a lot, but thanks."

Solomon nodded. "Of course."

Riku gestured at Kaito's drink. "You should drink that sooner rather than later, with the insane sleep debt you're still dealing with."

"Mmm." Kaito looked at Solomon. "Do you mind if I take this up to the guest bedroom? I'd rather not deal with stairs on this stuff again."

"That's perfectly all right," Solomon chuckled. "Go ahead."

Kaito nodded, made his round of good nights, and headed upstairs. Once ready for bed, though, he didn't drink right away. Instead, he slipped beneath the covers, pulled them over his head, and just let go.

He didn't stop shaking for a long time.

Kaito awoke the next day to silence, alone in the guest bedroom for the second time in as many mornings.

Not counting the morning I lived through twice, of course...

This time, however, sun shone through the cracks in the window blinds and the clock read almost 10 AM. With a yawn, he dragged himself out of bed and got ready for the day. He still wasn't happy about essentially drugging himself to sleep, but at least he was rested and functional for the time being, and with any luck he'd keep a low tolerance to the tea.

Once satisfied that he looked presentable, Kaito paused to grab the brick-shaped box he'd put on the bedside table last night and headed downstairs to find out what Hakuba and Riku were up to. To his surprise, he found them in the living room at the game table, mutually absorbed by a game of chess.

Hakuba was facing the stairs, though he didn't look up from his study of the game board. "Good morning, Kuroba-kun."
Riku turned in his seat and smiled. "It's about time. We were wondering if you were ever going to wake up."

"Good morning to you, too. I was making up for lost time." Kaito joined them at the table, standing to the side and studying the game board. "Have I missed anything yet?"

"Not much, if you don't count breakfast," Riku answered as Hakuba moved a bishop. "Yugi-kun called Mokuba-kun last night. He has a spare Sapphire Luster Dragon that he's willing to give you after school today."

Kaito smiled. "Great." He scrutinized the board for another few minutes, then set the box down on Hakuba's side of the table, by the captured pieces. "For the soon-to-be winner. Sorry, Riku-kun, looks like you still need practice."

Riku's smile twisted wryly. "I'm surrounded by chessmasters."

There was an almost edge to the words, not directed at Hakuba or Kaito, but before Kaito could comment on it, Hakuba replied, "You play well for being a year out of practice. You should do better when you can look more moves ahead."

"Mo—I spent the game anticipating by ten!"

Hakuba's lips quirked. "I tend to be able to calculate fifteen to twenty."

Riku stared at Hakuba, then transferred his gaze to Kaito and back again. "...You people are insane."

Kairo grinned. "You noticed."

Riku shook his head. "No wonder you two haven't given up on each other, no matter how many buttons you push. No one else can keep up with you in so many areas."

Kaito exchanged a glance with Hakuba, abruptly in uncomfortable territory. Hakuba shrugged and ignored the comment, picking up Kaito's box with wary suspicion. "What is this?"

"Just open it and see."

Hakuba slowly rotated the box in his hands. "If it turns my hair purple again, my vengeance will be swift."

Riku snickered.

_Huh, no actual death threat. ...I guess calling me a dead man hits a little too close to home, right now._

Hakuba didn't wait for a reply, but carefully removed the box's lid and a layer of tissue wrapping to reveal a pair of sunglasses, the Puma style that he occasionally wore on bright summer days in Japan. The blond detective shot Kaito a perplexed look, picking the glasses up by the nose bridge with a gloved hand. Once in the air, the earpieces flicked down from the weight of a bronze chain connecting them, the metal welded along their length and across the upper inside edge of the frame to form a single, unbroken loop. Two small bars of metal were also welded to the earpieces at the point where they would rest against the bare skin of Hakuba's temples.

Hakuba stared, turning the gift over in his hands, a thumb absently running along the metal on the frame.
"You won't always be able to wear gloves, especially after we get back home," Kaito offered to fill the silence. "You can brush off a new habit of wearing sunglasses with a catch chain all the time pretty easily, though. I don't know how much Solomon-san has talked about bronze, but it should mute things."

"...Thank you."

"You're welcome," Kaito replied, watching as Hakuba slipped the chain around his neck. Almost instantly, a startling amount of tension previously hidden in the set of the detective's shoulders melted away, and surprise and profound relief flashed through his expression before it settled on quiet curiosity. He slid the sunglasses over his eyes, letting them rest there for a few moments before pushing them up to perch on the top of his head. The blond then carefully tugged off his gloves, and picked up one of chess pieces Riku had captured.

"Well?" Riku soon prompted, curious.

"Nothing, but I suspect any impressions these pieces may have ever had are faded away. A better test would be to rejoin Solomon-san in the store again for a while. I still wanted to talk with him about a few things, anyway." Hakuba set the piece down. "If you want to keep playing, Riku-kun, I'm sure Kuroba-kun would oblige you a game."

Kaito shoved the memories of yesterday's dream and twisted chess game down and away. This was different, and it wouldn't hurt to play a real game. "Sure, why not?"

With a nod, Hakuba stood and headed to the game shop, allowing Kaito to take the chair while Riku reset the chessboard. Kaito let Riku choose color, and Riku took white. The younger boy had an aggressive, if somewhat linear, playing style; Kaito countered with his typical calculated randomness, though he could tell he was out of practice with applying strategies to a game board. Feints worked marvelously when done right, but they were difficult to pull off.

After a while, Kaito moved a pawn and asked, "So... how are you holding up? With any luck, we can go after Sora-kun by tomorrow."

Riku shrugged, which Kaito took to mean 'Nervous, but I'm trying to not think about it.'

"After you went to bed I found the nearest park in walking distance from here and practiced for a while. Hakuba-kun came too, to test his shields and run through some katas. I told him about Yami-kun and Bakura-kun on the way back, since he asked." Riku smiled slightly. "He thought it was weird, but he didn't refuse to believe it or try to disprove it."

"Progress," Kaito snickered. "He's doing okay, then, after whatever the heck it was that he did yesterday?"

"You could always ask him yourself," Riku pointed out, taking one of Kaito's bishops.

"...I don't want him thinking that I'm looking for a reason to leave him behind again."

Riku rolled his eyes. "It's hard to read him, but he seemed fine. Solomon-san went to bed right after we got back from the park, so I think yesterday is what they're talking about now."

Kaito nodded. "Works." He went back to concentrating on the game.

The rest of the morning and early afternoon passed with lazy ease. Kaito took advantage of the fact that they were waiting for Saguru's staff to arrive to feel justified in simply relaxing as much as possible. The last few days at the Motou's had, on the whole, been more stressful than not, and he
was hoping for at least ONE day where nothing much happened.

After the chess game ended (a hard-fought but decisive victory for Kaito), Kaito and Riku helped Solomon and Hakuba make lunch, then returned to the living room with Hakuba in tow. Riku stretched out on the couch with a book that he'd apparently been reading over the past few days, and Kaito challenged Hakuba to a Duel.

"If you're going to be the only person around to play back home, I want to be sure you have a decently balanced deck before we leave." Kaito smirked. "Easy wins are nowhere near as fun."

Hakuba smiled, eyes glinting. "Then by all means, let's test it."

Kaito should have realized that Hakuba's smile was a few shades too smug when the detective agreed to a game.

He glared at the cards laid out on the table, gaze skittering around the multiple ichthyic monsters face-up on Hakuba's side of the playing field. "I hate you so much."

"Consider it desensitization therapy." Hakuba hadn't stopped smirking for the past hour and a half. Out of four games, Kaito had been able to keep his concentration well enough to win all of one, and that one only by some quick last-minute thinking. The fifth one wasn't shaping up very promisingly, either.

*I feel like my luck took one glance at the fish deck and decided to take a vacation until the cards are put back away.*

In a welcome change of fortune, the flow of the game was interrupted by a now-familiar call of "Hi, Grandpa! We're home!" from the game shop. Yugi, Mokuba and Joey entered a minute later, and after a round of greetings Mokuba pulled the promised card out of his school bag and presented it to Kaito.

In the back of his mind, Kaito would have sworn that he felt the mental equivalent of a sharp intake of breath.

"We can't stay," Mokuba explained as Kaito accepted the card. "I work on Tuesdays, and something went wrong in R&D this morning that I need to try and fix before Nii-sama feels like he has to, but I wanted to make sure you got this sooner rather than later. You can just have it; I have more copies than I could put in a deck."

"Thanks." Kaito smiled, putting the card away in his side-deck. "I'll take good care of it."

*Do you want me to try calling him home?* He silently asked Méraud.

::Perhaps... not quite yet?:: Méraud murmured hesitantly. Kaito sympathized. If he tried the card and it didn't work properly because of where the other dragon was, Méraud would be losing her first and best hope in a long time for seeing her brother again. It was almost easier to keep it in reserve, as a comfort.

*When things have settled down, then.*

Returning his attention back to the others, Kaito bid Mokuba and Joey goodbye as the pair headed back out again, leaving Yugi standing by the game table and studying the Duel-in-progress with interest.

"Who's winning?"
"Odds are on Hakuba-kun," Kaito grumbled with only a hint of bitterness. Looking at the arrangement of cards, he decided now was as good a time as any to ask Yugi a question. "Oh, hey, Yugi-kun, I wanted to ask you something."

Yugi looked over from the game to Kaito. "Okay, what?"

Kaito sifted through his discard pile and pulled out Change of Heart, holding it up between two fingers for Yugi to see. "I get how this works in a duel—" he'd used it last game to force one of Hakuba's monsters to protect his Lifepoints "—and Bakura-kun said it would be useful, but I'm not sure how it would play out in a real fight."

Yugi laughed. "It's more of a specialty card than most. Bakura-kun probably included it because he knows firsthand how effective it is. You'd use it if you were facing a possessing ghost, or multiple personalities, and you wanted to deal with the person who's not currently in control." Yugi smiled, letting his school bag slide off his shoulder onto the ground. "Why don't you try it on me? You'll just see us switch, and it's good to have an idea of what your cards look like when used for real, so that they don't surprise you."

Kaito glanced at Hakuba. "You mind?"

"By all means, feel free to postpone your inevitable defeat."

"Git." Kaito rolled his eyes, then turned to Yugi and concentrated. "... Change of Heart."

A pale light appeared, swiftly expanding into a large sphere that encompassed not only Yugi in its transparent glow, but also Hakuba's chair and the part of the couch just behind Yugi, where Riku had been reading his book. The islander had looked up with interest during Yugi's explanation of the card, giving Kaito a perfect view of his face as the light washed over him. Within the course of a few moments, Riku's facial expression progressed from sudden shock to a picture of sheer, unadulterated terror, then went blank for a split-second before morphing into dark, twisted grin of satisfaction. Oh, cra—

The thought hadn't even finished before Kaito's free hand closed on the top card from Hakuba's discard pile, which had been so annoying not ten minutes ago but was now his best chance of keeping everyone in the room sane, intact, and still here—

"Swords of Revealing Light!"

Three shining swords sprang into existence. Not-Riku froze in the middle of rising from the couch, expression briefly flashing into surprise as he realized that his limbs no longer moved. Kaito sagged back in his chair, exhaling slowly, keeping his gaze locked with Riku's golden eyes.

"...Ansem, I presume?"

In his peripheral vision Kaito saw Yami raise an eyebrow, stepping away and half-turning to have Riku and Kaito both in his view. "Ansem?"

When the man in question seemed disinclined to answer, Kaito replied, "Possessive ghost who tried to use Riku-kun to kill a lot of people last year, before Hakuba-kun and I first met him. I thought the bastard was already permanently dealt with."

Yami glanced at Ansem. "I see. And what is it that you want?"

The arrogant smirk on Ansem's face made Kaito grit his teeth against the urge to punch him.
"Darkness greater than your own... little Heartless."

"Only a fool seeks Darkness that doesn't come to him by right," Yami countered, voice steely. "And only a monster steals a child's body to do it."

Ansem chuckled, the same liquid-dark sound Kaito remembered from his first encounter with Riku on the skyscraper, but with a scornful malevolence underlying the amusement.

"He gave himself to me. And the Darkness is already mine."

Kaito finally remembered why Ansem's dark purr sounded familiar—he'd heard it vaguely yesterday, when he'd torn the Shadows to find Riku in the park. It was even more unpleasant now that he could make out the words, as well.

...The room was darkening, he realized, not just the shadows but the entire room, even though Ansem was physically immobile. And Kaito had a migraine quickly building from trying to enforce even that much.

Yami's eyes narrowed. "If you think you know so much about the Darkness, Ansem... then let's play a game."

The inverted pyramid flashed with light, and the familiar dark-colors presence of the Shadows swirled through the room, dancing around all four occupants, even Hakuba. The blonde had turned in his chair earlier so that now Yami faced him, but he sat silent and still, simply watching from behind a blank expression. Kaito noticed the Shadows skate around the sunglasses perched on top of Hakuba's head without touching them, and he found himself hoping desperately that the bronze was working, and Hakuba couldn't feel anything from Ansem.

The burden of the Swords' summon eased unexpectedly, taking a small fraction of the migraine with it as it bled away, somehow adapted into Yami's magic as it wove together the setup of the game: Ansem abruptly finished rising to his full height, looking around at his surroundings but making no attempt to leave through a corridor. The room was dark now, with the illumination that made it possible to distinguish who was standing where coming from an unknown source.

"Neither Light, nor the Darkness..." Ansem's gaze returned to focus on Yami, lips pulling back in a parody of a smile. "How very interesting."

"If you're so interested... let's play." Face revealing nothing, Yami pulled a candle out of apparent thin air with an ease that would have made a skilled conjurer proud. He placed it on the game table, then carefully lit the wick with a similarly conjured match. "If your Darkness is so strong, then let's see it snuff out this tiny light. Douse the candle without touching it, and no one will stop you. If you cannot... you will be destroyed."

"...A child's game."

The Darkness moved, roiling forward around Yugi and Hakuba—Not touching, thank any luck spirits hanging around—and surging over the game table in order to overwhelm the pale, flickering flame. Fire swayed and quivered, but would not dim even as Ansem's expression contorted in surprise, frustration, fury. The more the Darkness covered the candle and flame in its chokehold, the brighter the light shone through.

I didn't know olive skin could turn that shade of purple.

Finally, Ansem's patience snapped. One hand darted out to snuff the candle between finger and
thumb, only to be frozen just short of the flame as Shadows suddenly swarmed around him, immobilizing him.

"That's against the rules." Yami's cold expression didn't change as Ansem snarled, straining to break the Shadows grip. "The thing you fail to understand, Ansem, is that I... and the boy you fight... are touched by Shadow. And while light may banish darkness, it only makes a shadow stronger." Kaito hadn't thought ice and steel could echo, but there were echoes in Yami's voice as he raised a hand and declared, "Penalty Game."

Everything went black.

For a soundless, timeless moment, there was nothing. Then the Shadows dispersed, leaving the living room filled with nothing but lamplight and afternoon sunshine.

Riku lay collapsed against the front of the couch, head dropped back against the seat cushion as he blankly stared up at the ceiling, chest rising and falling erratically.

"Riku-kun?" Kaito slipped out of his chair, approaching cautiously. Hakuba moved as well, shadowing Kaito, even though he didn't speak.

With some effort, Riku's ragged breathing stabilized, the only movement in his lax frame.

"He... He's gone." The note of sheer, disbelieving wonder in his voice was almost painful to hear. "I can't feel him. I'd forgotten..." He trailed off.

"What it was like to be free?" Yami's quiet baritone asked.

Riku closed his eyes. "Yeah."

Yami nodded. "But he is gone, and he won't be coming back."

"...You're sure?"

"Quite."

Riku sighed. "Thank you."

"How do you feel?" Kaito eyed Riku dubiously.

After a pause, Riku admitted, "Like I threw up everything I've eaten in the past year and a herd of elephants trampled through my skull, but it's starting to fade a little."

Yami shifted, Yugi coming back to the forefront. "I'll go get you some aspirin. It can't hurt." The smaller teen headed for the kitchen.

"You'll want it for later," Kaito added, a frustrated growl rising in his throat, "after I kick your butt for not saying anything."

Riku winced. "You couldn't have done anything. I didn't think there was anything that could help me; I chose binding his remnant rather than losing my memories. I had it under control..."

Before Kaito could reply, Hakuba dryly remarked over Kaito's shoulder, "Oh God, there's three of us."

Riku snorted reflexively, covering his face with a hand, as Yugi returned with a bottle of aspirin and a glass of water.
"...Could I have the bottle when you're finished?" Hakuba inquired with a deceptive blandness as Riku shook three tablets into his palm. Kaito glanced back at him, took in the visible tension around the blond's eyes, and snagged the bottle from Riku to pass it over.

"Give it here when you're done. ...How did the sunglasses work?"

Hakuba dry-swallowed two tablets and handed the aspirin back to Kaito. "They shut out the vast majority. After the initial surprise I was able to deal with the remnants myself. I'd imagine they should be effective against most things we might face." He hesitated. "It's... different, depending on whether or not there's a mind behind it."

...So Ansem was an added level of nasty worse than the Darkness corridor and Heartless. Joy.

"Okay, that makes two decent things to come out of this mess. Not bad, considering." Kaito liberated Riku of his half-full water glass and downed two aspirin, then gave the bottle back to Yugi and set the glass on the game table. "Thanks."

"...Well." At the unexpected voice, the teenagers turned to see Solomon standing in the doorway to the shop with a long, thin package in his arms. "It seems I missed something." Amusement with a hint of inquiry colored his tone.

"Um..." Yugi scratched his temple. "The remnant of a possessive ghost tried to take Riku over. We stopped him. Is that a staff?"

"Yes, for Saguru-kun. It just arrived. I thought he might like to open it himself."

"Your friends work very quickly. Thank you..." Hakuba closed the distance to Solomon and took the packaged staff with an almost reverential care. Not bothering to head back to his chair, the detective knelt on the floor and pulled out a pocketknife, delicately slicing through the packaging tape and peeling back brown paper.

Kaito started to take a step closer to Hakuba, then turned back and extended a hand to help Riku up. The younger boy hesitated, then took it and stood in one slow, deliberate movement, wincing only a little.

"So, what's the verdict, Hakuba-kun?" Kaito moved to see blond and staff more clearly. A dark, lacquered wood peeked through torn paper, with a flat, metal cap on the end already visible.

Hakuba removed the last of the wrapping and balanced the weapon in his hands, weighing it carefully. "It's... in gaming terms, it would be a masterwork weapon. The blond looked faintly embarrassed and quickly looked up at Solomon. "Wood, and... copper, for the endcaps? The conductive element in bronze, I believe you said."

"Very good. There's a copper core beneath the wood, as well. The copper acts as a one-way conduit, but on its own the only choices for carrying energy are 'on' or 'off'. The surrounding wood balances the copper by being able to absorb however much or little energy you wish. It also makes the staff lighter and insulated against temperature extremes." Solomon smiled slightly. "Essentially, it's designed to let an empath project without experiencing feedback, but also to not, if he'd rather simply employ a good old-fashioned smacking to his target."

"...Thank you." Hakuba rose to his feet and dropped into a ready stance, then another, before the lack of unoccupied floor restricted his movements. "It's perfect."

"You still ought to take some time to get used to it," Kaito observed. "I'm ready to be outside for a while. Bring the staff and the three of us can hit the park until dinner."
Solomon nodded. "Yes, that would be good for you."

Yugi smiled. "Have fun."

"...Wait." Hakuba gripped his staff a shade uncertainly, hesitating. "If I'm going to be able to concentrate properly, I need to... ground myself again."

"Sure. Finishing the Duel?"

Hakuba looked almost about to say yes, but then he closed his mouth and shook his head. "My alternative should take less time."

Kaito cocked his head. "How long do you need?"

"A few minutes... ten on the outside."

"Okay. I'll clean up the cards."

Hakuba's lips flickered upwards in a brief smile. "I concede a draw."

With a nod, he headed for the study... but to Kaito's surprise, left the door partway open. As faint sounds of movement drifted out, Solomon gained a thoughtful expression and sat down on the couch, joined by Yugi with a look of eager anticipation. Feeling like he was missing something, Kaito glanced over at Riku, who seemed startled, but not unhappy.

"What...?"

Riku held up a hand and shook his head, eyes on the door. "Wait," he commanded quietly.

Kaito folded his arms and shifted his weight, turning back to watch the study door. He didn't have to wait long—after a few moments of complete silence, his jaw dropped as the living room suddenly filled with the sounds of a rapid, complex violin solo.

…He’s playing it perfectly. Cold.

The hell?

"It's not something he shares with people." Riku's murmur, directly behind and above Kaito's ear, made him twitch. "I found out by accident on Sunday night, after you were asleep. I told him he could tell you, but it didn't seem like he would... he must not have known how to say it, but wanted you to know."

Kaito glanced back at Riku, taking in the younger boy's faint smile.

...And the fact that he listened to you means a lot, doesn't it?

"I really should've guessed," he responded absently, still processing the idea. "Especially after the Inverness and naming a hawk Watson."

"If you expect to be psychic, sure," Riku said with a hint of amusement.

"Hadn't you heard? I have sparkly magic powers."

Riku snorted quietly. They fell silent, just listening; Kaito cleaned up the unfinished Duel and pocketed his cards on automatic pilot. He didn't recognize the piece beyond a generic Western-European label, but it was a superb piece of music.
The melody went on for a few minutes, remaining well shy of the ten-minute mark when it finally drew to a close. Kaito found himself almost hoping that Hakuba would play a second piece—he'd nearly forgotten how much better music was when being performed live—but the ensuing silence remained broken only by the soft sounds of what had to be Hakuba carefully packing the violin back away. Solomon stood with a smile, nodded to them wordlessly, and headed back out to the shop. Yugi pulled his schoolbag up onto the couch beside him and took out some homework, then looked up as Hakuba reappeared in the doorway, staff in hand.

"Thanks for letting us listen, Hakuba-kun. You're really good."

Hakuba smiled, a bit self-consciously. "You're welcome." He glanced at Kaito. "If you're ready..."

"...Is there anything you don't do well?" Kaito asked, only half-joking.

Hakuba's smile gained the faintest of edges. "People." The smile lightened. "And I can't draw worth a damn."

"Oh, well, if that's all..." Kaito smirked. "Come on, let's go. See you later, Yugi-kun."

"Bye," Yugi responded, bending over his homework. "Don't be late for dinner."

"The odds of such an occurrence are slim to none, I'm sure," Hakuba responded dryly as they headed for the door.

Riku led the way to the park near the Motou's house, a fifteen-minute walk.

"I'm not sure which is more disturbing," Hakuba commented as they neared their destination, carrying his staff right-handed so that it lay along the flat of his extended arm, the upper end sticking up several feet above his head to ensure that the bottom endcap never scraped against the sidewalk. "The idea that no one seems to notice that I'm carrying around an obvious weapon, or the idea that they simply don't care."

"I'm pretty sure it's the first one," Kaito responded. "I think this city has a permanently active SEP-Field."

"S-E-P?" Riku repeated, puzzled.

"Somebody-Else's-Problem," Hakuba explained, sounding more than a little disturbed, "so named because people tend to ignore unpleasant things that aren't their responsibility to deal with. Kuroba-kun, how on Earth?"

Kaito grinned. "I tracked down the first book after seeing Terry Pratchett being compared to Douglas Adams."

"...You are far too obsessed with Western culture and cult followings."

"Hey, I haven't gotten hold of Doctor Who yet."

"Thank God. The last thing you need is ideas now that you are your own personal TARDIS."

"Where's the fun in that?" Kaito stretched his arms above his head as the stepped from concrete onto a grassy field edged with trees. "Okay. Riku-kun, find a good sword-stick and we can warm up. You and Hakuba-kun need to know what it's like to fight against each other of you're going to be able to do close-quarters combat against the Heartless together with tripping over one another."
"Tyrant." Riku shoved Kaito lightly in the shoulder from behind, then smiled and headed for the trees.

Hakuba's eyes glinted slightly as he laid his staff in the grass to warm up. "Tyrranus Ridiculus."

Kaito laughed. "Detectus Pratori."

"Never try to learn Latin, Kuroba. You'll mangle the poor, defenseless language system while it's incapable of fighting back."

...Kuroba?

"I make no promises," Kaito answered easily. "It's on my to-do list somewhere if I ever get bored enough."

"Oh. Well. If the other option is your feeling bored, butcher Latin by all means."

"I'll be sure to inflict my verbal slaughter on you when I do."

The banter continued throughout the warm-up, Riku joining in occasionally after he returned with a suitable sparring weapon. It ended by unspoken agreement after Hakuba picked back up his staff. The blond began a set of kata to adjust to the nuances of his weapon; Riku and Kaito paralleled him briefly with a few sword and bare-handed kata, before Riku declared "Think fast!" during a mutual interlude and came after Kaito with a swing only marginally slower than his full speed. Kaito dodged instinctively, and let the move initiate a game of one-sided, not-quite-tag that continued until Hakuba stopped practicing and began to watch.

When Kaito and Riku slowed to a halt, the blond commented blandly, "After watching you evade with intent, I find myself terrified of the prospect of you ever chasing down something or someone with any kind of truly determined resolve."

Kaito grinned as the adrenaline rush began to fade. "I'm too lazy."

Until I find something actually worth catching.

Hakuba's snort conveyed how little the detective believed the flippant answer, but he didn't push. He didn't need to.

Kaito relinquished Riku as a sparring partner, and settled in the grass to watch how Hakuba reacted in a fight. Admittedly, one-on-one wasn't the same as being effectively mobbed, but the principles of movement were still there.

Eventually Riku and Hakuba adjusted to how the other fought, finding a rhythm of attack, parry, and counter. They maintained the pattern for a while, orbiting Kaito's position on the grass like a drunk binary star, before finally breaking apart on some unspoken signal and sinking to the ground beside Kaito to catch their breath.

They sat in silence for a while, enjoying the afternoon sun, faint breeze, and endorphin high of a good workout.

And then, almost predictably, the afternoon went to hell.

A pillar of Darkness rose into thin air, then faded away to reveal a man wearing another twin of Riku's black coat, the lowered hood exposing a spiky mane of flame-red hair and piercing green
eyes. In the moment it took for all three boys to scramble to their feet, the Nobody's focus zeroed in on Riku and he declared, with a look of utter exasperation:

"Do you have any idea how hard you are to track down, kid?"

Chapter End Notes

The violin solo that Saguru plays is Bach's Preludia, Partitia No. 3. The SEP-field is, of course, from Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

Saguru's Latin quotation corresponds to "Tyrant Jester" or "Tyrant of the Ridiculous." Kaito's comeback is essentially a bad approximation of Dog Latin, with the intended meaning of "Detective prat."
As noted previously, this story was written with only the canon from KH1, Chain of Memories, and KH2. All else is speculation and theory.

"Do you have any idea how hard you are to track down, kid?"

Hand already on his cardgun, Kaito took advantage of the fact that the newcomer wasn't actively attacking yet to take a quick threat assessment.

Whipcord thin underneath the coat, not that that means anything—inverted triangle tattoos beneath the eyes, can't tell if they mean anything, but they fit with the gravity-defying hair somehow—no weapon out; wonder if he can materialize one like Riku does—no Heartless or Nobodies; so far, but that's still a good thing—feels like the Shadows, but laced with Darkness, not like Méraud—and that exasperation looks genuine, not faked like Riku said Nobody emotions always are.

Kaito glanced at Riku, who was watching the Nobody warily but without the same concern Xigbar had garnered.

And Riku-kun's neither tried to run nor summoned his sword. Oh~kaaay...

"I've been busy, Axel," Riku replied, matching the redhead's English.

Xigbar, Axel, Xemnas... I'm sensing a theme here.


Riku's hands clenched into loose fists. "What do you want?"

"Hey, I'm here totally out of the goodness of my heart—"

"What heart?" Kaito muttered under his breath.

"—tracking you down through your traces in the pathways and who knows how many dead ends just to tell you—"

Another Darkness portal flared behind Axel as he spoke; suddenly a blonde teenage girl in a white sundress ran out onto the grass, gaze immediately fixing on Riku and blurted at him in a panicked, echoing counterpoint to Axel's drawl,

"Saïx kidnapped Kairi!"

"WHAT?" Riku's sudden roar was almost as good as an explosion, Kaito noted absently. Birds vacated the nearby trees, a dog on the other side of the park started barking furiously, bright flame flared briefly into existence around Axel's hands before snuffing out, and even Hakuba looked somewhat impressed.

The blonde girl attempted to explain, words tumbling over each other in their hurry to be heard. Axel
seemed inclined to unobtrusively sneak through the portal she had left open behind her while Riku's attention was distracted, but the younger boy's head quickly snapped up from focusing on the girl's face.

"Stay put," Riku snarled at Axel. Kaito watched, amused, as the (presumably) Nobody actually obeyed. Of course, it probably helped that Riku could likely track Axel down more easily than Axel had found them, should the redhead try to run.

The girl had to have noticed Axel for the first time at Riku's order because she abruptly stopped talking, giving Axel a look of surprise, though not fear. Riku seemed to take advantage of the pause to try finding Kairi, because his gaze went glassy, attention abruptly turned inward and far distant at the same time.

"Her heart," he whispered, sounding horrified. "She not at the islands, there's too much Darkness around her..." He turned back to the girl, practically vibrating as Kaito surreptitiously grabbed him by the arm in case he felt tempted to do anything stupid. "Start again, slower. What happened, Naminé?"

Wait—Naminé? That was the Nobody who messed with Sora-kun's memories... Hoo boy.

...Huh. Dark-laced-Shadow but with starpoints of Light, hidden away? Riku-kun did say that she was unique...

Kaito curtailed the train of thought as Naminé began to answer.

"I don't know how it started..." Her eyes darted to Axel in a gesture that fairly screamed 'lying by omission' to Kaito, but he decided to wait to say anything. She continued, "I've been watching Sora, as well as I can, in case — in case of anything. He was fighting Heartless at Hollow Bastion—" a name that obviously meant something to Riku, going by the way he twitched in Kaito's grasp, "— when Saïx arrived and started taunting Sora, trying to confuse him. That's when he said he had Kairi, but I don't think he's lying. Sora's still struggling with the idea that when he fights the Heartless, he's doing what they want, and he doesn't know how to get to where Saïx is, and Axel left when Saïx came but I didn't know if he was looking for you so I came looking, too. I don't know how long it's been, you were so hard to find..."

"You got that right," Axel muttered when she trailed off, rolling his eyes.

Riku pinned Axel with a glare. "How much of this is your fault? We were even; you wouldn't have come looking for me unless you were trying to fix something you were involved in."

The redhead shifted his weight uneasily, not meeting Riku's gaze.

Riku's hands clenched into fists again, fingers curled tightly enough to drive the nails into his palms. "Having Kairi in your possession," he ground out, an undertone of Ansem's growl creeping into the words, "would not have enabled you to separate Roxas from Sora again, no matter how much you tried to force things."

Axel didn't respond, beyond looking up at Riku with such an utter absence of expression that Kaito found himself unconsciously taking mental notes.

The two stood unmoving, matching gazes, for a short eternity of silence; then Riku exhaled slowly. "Just... go. You've done enough damage."

A tinge of regret shadowed Axel's face. "I..." He hesitated, then closed his mouth. Shaking his head, he turned and disappeared into the Darkness.
The Nobody's response seemed to have surprised Riku a little, because he stood watching the entrance to the corridor for a few moments until Naminé rounded on him, arms akimbo.

"You don't know what it's like to go from having washed-out memories to having the real thing, especially if you don't understand how." She glanced between Kaito and Hakuba uncertainly for a moment, then refocused on Riku and continued determinedly.

"I was lucky—I reached out to Sora, so I knew it was because I'd touched his memories. Axel felt for only a moment, fighting Sora in the castle, before Sora went to sleep... He didn't realize that taking Roxas under his wing for a year meant that when Sora's memories linked back together properly, Roxas's connection to both of them would affect him, too."

Naminé's eyes softened, harshness draining away into solemn gravity. "I can sense the way Sora affects people, because of what I am and how I was born. He has more heart than anyone... and people he meets can't help but be affected by it. Why else do you think I was able to defy Marluxia for the first time, or to help you fight Zexion back then? Why else do you think that a year later, Roxas finally cared about his lack of memories enough to leave the only life he'd ever known in search of the face behind Sora's name?" Her voice remained quiet, but gained an extra layer of intensity to drive her point home. "Why else does a person who shouldn't possibly have the capacity to feel, seek to reclaim a friend he lost?"

Riku breathed out in a long, slow exhalation. "...So it did happen."

Kaito was so busy trying to translate and process Naminé's little speech and slot the wealth of new information into place that he couldn't be sure what Riku confirmed suspicion was referring to, but the younger girl apparently did. She nodded, a little sadly.

"Axel would have started feeling in shades, just like Roxas, with it slowly getting stronger as Sora's old memories came back together and his sleeping self started to reach for the half that was awake. They wouldn't have known how or why it was happening, only that it was, and that the others in the Organization learning about it would be dangerous. I don't know if they even knew it was happening to each other."

Naminé looked up at Riku, blue eyes regretful. "And then Roxas tried to leave, a gamble that Axel wasn't willing to match. ...But if he had been willing to take that risk with Roxas, then maybe both of them together would have been strong enough to defeat you, when you came to capture Roxas for DiZ in order to wake Sora up. You wouldn't have taken Roxas beyond Axel's reach. You wouldn't have stolen the only person in existence that he could and did—does—care about, now that he can care again to a degree, away from him forever."

"I..." Riku put a hand over his face and swore, though not as foully as Kaito figured he could have after a dressing-down of that caliber. "I can't do anything about that. I can't do anything about either of them, and Kairi needs help. If we run into Axel again later, you can be the one to talk to him."

"...All right."

Riku took a deep breath. "We're going after Kairi."

"Agreed," Kaito replied promptly. "But in about twenty minutes."

As Riku turned on him, golden eyes blazing with an anger he'd never seen in the younger boy before, Kaito continued without flinching, "Your coat and your potions are back at the game shop, and if we go after Kairi, odds are we won't be coming back here anytime soon. We're going to go thank Solomon-san and Yugi-kun, grab our stuff so we aren't doing this half-prepared, and then I'll
get us where we need to go. And after we get Kairi, you're going to tell us the full story behind Axel because this damn well counts as *Need To Know*, Riku!"

Riku deflated, swore again, and nodded, then looked at Naminé. "Go ahead of us. Get Kairi, and as close to the edges of that place as you can. If Saïx figures out what happened, we'll catch up soon and deal with him. All right?"

Naminé swallowed, but nodded. "I'll try. Just... be quick. Even together, like this we don't have the power to hold Saïx off for long, if he finds us."

Riku's expression darkened. "I know. Go."

Without waiting for Naminé to leave, he whirled out of Kaito's grip and strode quickly in the direction of the game shop, long legs eating up the ground. Kaito waited for Naminé to run back into her Darkness Corridor, closing the way behind her, before he turned in perfect tandem with Hakuba to hurry after Riku.

...Heh. So he's not willing to turn his back on an opening into the Dark either.

They followed Riku in silence to the game shop, trailing him as he not-quite-stormed through the door, and Hakuba caught Riku by the shoulder as Solomon looked up at them in surprise.

"Oh, dear. What happened, boys?"

"Go ahead," Hakuba ordered Riku quietly. "We'll explain."

Riku nodded shortly and continued into the house, while Hakuba smiled wanly at Solomon from beside Kaito. "An acquaintance of Riku's made contact with us while we were at the park and brought an emergency to his attention. After everything you've done to help us, an abrupt departure on our part is hardly proper, but we are the only ones available to deal with the problem."

Solomon favored them with an understanding smile. "If there's something we understand around here, it's dealing with emergencies. Go and take care of things, but I hope you'll let us know how everything turned out when it's over."

"Thank you. I'm certain we will... Hopefully sooner rather than later."

Kaito eyed Hakuba's expression. "...I'll go get our stuff. You can probe Solomon-san for any last pieces of wisdom."

He headed inside, leaving Hakuba to say goodbye without an audience.

In the living room, Yugi looked up from where he was still curled up on the couch with his homework. "Are you really leaving, Kaito-kun? Translating 'worried snarl' isn't easy, but I've had practice and that's what it sounded like..."

Kaito's lips quirked. "Yeah. Sorry that it's so sudden. A friend of Riku-kun's is in trouble."

"It's okay. If it's important, you have to go." Yugi smiled, standing and following Kaito's trajectory to the study. "At least you had enough time to adjust before everything went crazy again, right?"

Grabbing Hakuba's side-bag with an eye out for anything the scrupulously neat detective might have somehow left out, Kaito snorted. "It's my brand of luck at work. We shouldn't be completely over our heads, but it's not going to be fun."
"There are worse things."

"Mmm."

Kaito exited the study, Yugi trailing behind, and found himself automatically catching a moving projectile before it could impact against his chest.

"What the —"

His eyes focused to recognize his travel bag, which by any normal measurements would be considered impossibly small given that it held a Kid suit, a change of clothes, various Useful Stuff™, and... Yes, the extra weight came from the thermos of Solomon's tea, with a recipe taped against the outside. Looking up, he saw Riku standing tensely by the game shop door in cloak and gloves, hood lowered. Kaito closed the bag and slung it over his free shoulder, giving Riku a dry look. "Nice throw."

A tight smile. "Nice catch. That's everything. Are you ready?"

"Almost." Kaito turned to Yugi. "Thanks, Yugi-kun. You guys are lifesavers."

Yugi smiled again, and abruptly caught Kaito in a hug. "It was fun to have house-guests, even for just a few days. Be careful, and come back again."

Further evidence that Yugi-kun is a class all of his own and not home-grown Japan, other world or not.

"Sure." Kaito semi-awkwardly returned the hug for a moment, before pulling away and approaching Riku. He held out a hand, fingers prompting. "Bag of Shinies."

Wordlessly, Riku produced the small bag and dropped it into Kaito's waiting palm. Kaito hefted it thoughtfully, mentally reviewing what remained after Riku's potion acquisition and his own shopping trip for Hakuba's sunglasses, deciding whether anything might be more trouble than it was worth if a jeweler saw it. Memory stirred, and Kaito poured the crystals into his free palm. Most had the makeup of cubic zirconium and a few colored semi-precious stones, but one blueish gem that Kaito had picked up amidst the chaos on Himura's world was too large to be anything but suspicious to a jeweler. Kaito snagged and pocketed it before Yugi came around to see what he was doing. As it was, the younger boy's eyes widened at the sight of the small handful of crystals as Kaito returned them to the bag.

Kaito half-smiled. "Sometimes Heartless leave this stuff behind when they dissipate."

"Wow..."

"Come on," Riku interrupted brusquely, herding Kaito through the door. On the other side, Solomon and Hakuba broke off whatever they were quietly discussing and looked over.

"We're ready," Kaito announced. He handed Hakuba the side-bag, and set the bag of crystals on the counter in front of Solomon. "For room, board, Hakuba-kun's staff, the tea, and a wealth of lessons. Thanks."

Solomon smiled. "It's been a pleasure to have your company, Kaito-kun."

Kaito nodded, glancing back at Yugi as Solomon and Hakuba exchanged a last farewell. "Say goodbye to Mokuba-kun and everyone else for us?"
"Yeah." Yugi nodded. "See you again." He grinned. "Hopefully before we have to deal with another crisis of our own."

"We'll do our best," Kaito promised, and then they were out the door, heading for the closest alley.

"Can you find her, or do you need to follow me?" Riku asked as soon as they were nominally out of sight of the game shop.

Kaito hesitated. "...I think I can find her. The Shadows know her."

Riku nodded curtly. "I'll go through first. You two follow, and be careful. There will be Heartless and Nobodies on the other side."

Hakuba's grip on his staff tightened a little, and he smiled thinly. "Trial by fire. Let's get this over with, shall we?"

"Mmm." Riku extended a hand in a gesture Kaito recognized as summoning his sword.

Unexpectedly, however, a flash of light accompanied the weapon's appearance. When it faded, Riku held a new sword, similar in base to his original, but with the circular crossguard looking like it was a smaller dragon's wing bent in a semicircle, opposite a mirroring angel's wing... and a keychain dangled from the hilt, in the shape of the emblem that some of the Heartless bore.

All three boys stared.

"...Riku-kun? You said you didn't have a keyblade," Kaito observed.

"I don't! Didn't." Riku turned the blade over in his hand, as if expecting it to disappear. "I don't understand..."

Hakuba leaned in and caught the keychain with his free hand. "Well, if I might make a guess... You mentioned that keyblades are influenced by the hearts of those capable of wielding them. Given recent events, it might be safe to assume that the permanent exorcism of Ansem a few hours ago had some additional and previously unnoted effects."

Riku's eyes widened, and Kaito hid a smile, adding, "It's pretty obvious that the Darkness has still had an impact on you, but that's not necessarily a bad thing, and it's not all you are, either. You've been the balance for a long time..." Kaito tapped a finger against the angel's wing on the hilt. "Now it looks like you finally believe it."

"...Oh." Riku looked down at the keyblade and opened his hand, letting it vanish, then immediately summoned it back. When the keyblade appeared for a second time rather than his old sword, a fraction of the tension in his frame bled out. "I can feel it," he murmured, running gloved fingers down the flat of the blade. "There's a connection. Not like the imitation that Ansem constructed, or when I stole Sora's keyblade..."

"Heaven help me, I'm surrounded by thieves," Hakuba declared, shaking his head, but he was smirking faintly.

The blond solicited a brief chuckle from Riku before the younger boy pulled himself back to events at hand.

"I'll take this gladly, considering where we're going." Riku pulled the hood of his cloak up with his free hand, to cover his face as it had been when Kaito had first met him. "Do it."

"Hang on, then." Kaito -reached-, carefully, for the -feel- that had accompanied Namine's presence.
The Shadowrift opened.
Earth and Sea

Chapter Notes

In my personal fanon, Yuushi is truly Riku's last name. Because I refuse to believe that the people of Destiny Islands only run around with given names.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Once the rift opened, Riku ducked through without hesitation. Ignoring the flood of Darkness that assaulted his awareness and glad that Hakuba seemed able to function as well, Kaito paused to allow Hakuba, as the other melee fighter, to go through next. He quickly followed behind, letting the rift fall closed the moment he reached the other side. The Heartless were not going to find Yugi's world because he had been careless enough to give them an open path there.

The Heartless were not immediately present in the Nobodies' stronghold, a castle's open ramparts hovering in a Dark void, white-grey stone under a black sky that was broken only by a twisted parody of the full moon: an orange-tinted heart shape, the Darkness beyond showing through the ragged hole in the center of one curving half.

The Heartless weren't there, but Nobodies were. Two giant, armored, white creatures wielding bizarrely T-shaped bludgeons stood facing away from them, behind a humanoid with a black cloak and blue hair. The Nobodies seemed to have failed to notice their arrival due to being focused entirely on their quarry: Naminé and a red-haired girl, standing in mirroring defensive stances on a incline not far away.

"If I had a heart, this would be where I die of laughter."

By the time the blue-haired Nobody—presumably Saïx—finished speaking, Riku and Hakuba had already moved in silent, deadly tandem and taken out the other two Nobodies in a few swift movements. Hakuba seemed to have instinctively found their weak spots, Kaito noted absently as the hulking monsters collapsed to their knees before dissolving into white smoke. The sound of keyblade and bronze endcaps on armor did not go unnoticed, however, and the remaining three players of the current drama changed focus.

"You..." Saïx growled at Riku as the cloaked boy straightened, winged keyblade prominently in sight. Pale eyes flicked dismissively over Kaito and lingered briefly on Hakuba before resettling on Riku. "Didn't Roxas take care of you?"

Before Riku could respond, Naminé straightened, relieved. "You can take it from here, Riku."

Kaito grinned slightly as the red-haired girl's jaw dropped, head turning from Naminé to Riku and back again. "Riku!"

Her only answer was silence, as Riku drew a hand back and launched a Dark fireball at Saïx's position. The Nobody blocked it and dodged backwards, summoning another handful of the large creatures as Riku ran after him. Hakuba went after the new minions before they could settle on a target, and Kaito joined in, aiming cards with pinpoint accuracy at the areas Hakuba had previously shown to be vulnerable. By the time Riku had slammed Saïx into the wall of the inner ramparts, the lesser Nobodies were gone and Kaito had worked his way to standing beside Kairi and Naminé,
ready to cover them if any more surprises came out of the woodwork.

"Kairi, right?" he asked in English with a friendly smile. "I'm Kaito, and that's—" he hesitated; English was an informal culture and language, even with new acquaintances... "Saguru. We're friends of Riku's."

Out of the corner of his eye, Kaito noted Hakuba pick up a crystal shard from the ground and turn it between gloved fingers.

"Nice to meet you," Kairi returned automatically, still staring at Riku as Saïx pressed his palm against the castle wall to summon a Darkness portal. The Nobody stepped back into it with a little smirk before Riku could attempt to do any permanent damage. Riku hesitated in front of the portal, and Kaito wondered for a moment whether Riku might try following Saïx, but after a moment the younger boy seemed to sag a little, and turned away as the portal vanished.

"Riku!" Kairi raced forward, skidding to halt in front of him with a hand over her heart, looking up and trying to see beneath the hood.

Beside Kaito, Naminé gave him a half-smile and held a finger to her lips, then stepped back into Darkness the way Saïx had. Kaito suspected she was going to find Sora again, so he let her go and headed for Riku, still scanning castle and sky—*No one ever remembers to look up*—for enemies.

"You're really here..." Voice half-questioning, Kairi rose on tiptoe and, ignoring the way Riku visibly tensed, pushed his hood back to reveal Ansem's dark skin and golden eyes, head turned to the side to avoid her gaze. "Oh..."

The recognition as her breath caught made Riku wince. "I..."

He trailed off, but anything he might have wanted to add became moot as Kairi threw her arms around him in a tight hug.

"It is you. I missed you, you and Sora both... It doesn't matter what you look like. Have you been like this since you got your body back? That would explain why Sora hasn't found you with a year to look, though I know something bad must have happened if everyone at home forgot him for so long and then remembered all of a sudden..."

Riku sighed softly, bringing his arms around to hug Kairi back. "Nobodies from the same Organization as Saïx tried to control Sora through his memories last year. He defeated them anyway, with some help from Axel and Naminé, but it took a year for Naminé to fix what she had done. Sora's connection to his friends is so strong that while his own memories were incomplete, no one else remembered him either."

Kairi pulled back a little to give Riku a bewildered look. "Nobodies? Naminé? Axel helped Sora?"

"...Nobodies are born from the body and soul when a person becomes a Heartless; those with strong hearts who embrace the Darkness leave behind Nobodies who keep mind and memory like Ansem's Heartless did. Ansem's Nobody is head of an Organization of Nobodies like Saïx. Naminé is the girl you just met..." Riku hesitated, then plunged on. "She's your Nobody."

"What?" Kairi shook her head. "But I never..."

"Sora did," came the quiet, pained reply. "At Hollow Bastion, to free your heart from where it had hidden beside his when the Heartless originally destroyed the islands. Two Nobodies were born, Naminé and Roxas, and the Organization found them and used them."
"Roxas!" Kairi's eyes went wide again. "Just before I remembered Sora's name—I blacked out and talked to someone who said he was Roxas. He knew me..."

"That would have been after I... caught up with him." Riku looked up to meet Kaito's gaze as he continued. "Naminé and Roxas were used separately. Sora defeated the ones coercing Naminé quickly, not long after he stopped Ansem, but during the year that she then spent piecing Sora's memories back together as he slept, Roxas remained a member of Organization XIII... the partner and mentee of Axel. Sora's heart is so strong that just as he retained emotions and memory as the weakest form of Heartless, Roxas also awoke with a degree of that same heart. It allowed Roxas to wield a Keyblade for the Organization, as they sought to regain the hearts their original selves lost, and the connection between Roxas, Sora and Axel allowed Axel to feel as if he had a heart. I think Roxas is part of why Axel helped Sora defeat his colleagues and free Naminé."

Riku glanced back down. "I took that away from him. I had to. Sora needed Roxas in order to wake up and be whole. Roxas is still there—the other side of Sora's heart, sleeping, but with enough separation between the two of them that Sora and Roxas can wield two Keyblades at once now. If Sora were to become a Heartless again, he and Roxas would separate... and Axel wants Roxas back. It's the only thing he cares about, so he has no reason to try and hurt anyone otherwise." Riku's hold on Kairi tightened, nearly lifting her off the ground. "I didn't think Axel would be foolish enough to think he could use you to get Roxas back. I'm sorry. I wasn't watching out for you closely enough. Axel had to come to tell us before I knew you needed... help."

...And I used to think my life was insane.

Kairi loosened her hug in order to reach up with one hand and cradle Riku's face. "You're forgiven, Riku, for everything. If Sora were here he'd say the same thing. Thank you for coming."

Unable to say anything, Riku's eyes closed and he simply nodded.

A moment later his eyes shot back open and focused with a startled expression on Hakuba, who stood on their left facing Kaito in order to keep all angles of approach covered.

"Riku?" Kairi asked, turning slightly to see Hakuba as the blond raised an inquiring eyebrow. Riku shook his head, but he glanced at Kaito with a brief, wry smile. Kaito grinned back, ignoring the eyebrow as it was turned towards him.

What do you know, heart-sight has been extended to Hakuba. He's just not going to say yet, because he knows Hakuba'd probably be creeped out.

"We shouldn't stay much longer, given where this is," Kaito offered as a distraction, which had the added bonus of being true. "I think with both of you here, I can triangulate to find Sora."

"Really?" Kairi turned towards him, Riku readjusting to keep his hands lightly on her shoulders. From his expression, he wasn't letting her outside of arm's reach for a while. "How?"

"Um... Shadows. It's kind of complicated."

Story of my life.

"Oh. Okay. We can go now?"

Kaito's lips quirked. "Yeah. Just give me a second."

"Given the circumstances," Hakuba murmured, "I believe that it would be advantageous if I preceded Yuushi to our destination this time."
"...Yeah," Riku agreed after a moment's pause, his hands gently tightening on Kairi's shoulders. He shook his head when she looked up at him, expression questioning. "Stay behind me."

Kairi nodded, covering Riku's hands with her own. "All right."

This time, Kaito did close his eyes for the sake of concentration, reaching for Sora-missedfriend-searchingfighting-outofsight-now. A raised hand, a flick of the wrist, and a rift opened even more easily than leaving Domino had been.

...I guess this close to the Darkness, the Shadows are stronger.

Hakuba didn't even pause to study their destination before ducking through, closely trailed by Riku and then Kairi. Kaito followed, cardgun in hand.

As Kaito crossed the threshold of the rift into the area beyond, a brief stab of pain seared through the back of his skull, like an invisible fishhook had caught on his brain stem. Clapping his free hand over the his neck with a faint grunt, he felt his hold on the Shadows pinning the rift open vanish. It closed behind him as he stumbled forward, colliding with Riku and Hakuba where they stood shoulder-to-shoulder not two paces from the portal, warily taking in their surroundings.

"Kuroba-kun?" Hakuba half-turned to see what was wrong, one arm moving to be ready to support him if necessary. "What the hell just happened?"

"I..." The pain faded and Kaito straightened, finally processing where they were. "Oh, hell."

"What is this place?" Flanking Riku's other side, Kairi sounded curious, but not afraid. "Sora's not far, but I can't see him..."

"I set the parameters that way," Kaito admitted wryly. "I didn't expect him to be in the Shadows, not when worlds are mostly Light and he travels through the Darkness..."

Riku looked around at the dark, murky ambiance, nothing clearly defined except for themselves. "...There is one place that I can think of, but it looks nothing like this. It's the path from Twilight Town to the Organization's stronghold, because they're both places Between."

"Near or far doesn't mean anything, here. Don't you remember? Dark Magician said the Shadows were anything but consistent, and this is definitely the wild Shadows, not the Realm that Méraud took us through."

There was no telling what was out there, and it set Kaito's instincts on edge.

"Kuroba-kun," Hakuba interjected dryly, "Not everyone has our ability to remember a complicated lecture verbatim after hearing it once."

"Oh. Right. Sorry." Kaito shook his head, trying to clear it. "I might be able to get us the rest of the way to Sora, but I'm not sure. I think—"

He broke off, chill stealing through his awareness. Somewhere, at nearly the threshold of audibility, something was laughing. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Riku straightened, scanning the Shadows in vain. Kaito quickly moved Kairi so that she stood in the middle of a loose triangle formed by the three of them, then turned around to face outwards, eyes narrowing as he searched for the origin of the soft, wispy sound.

Light and fluttering, the laughter wound through the air. Louder. Closer. Free of malice, but also of
humanity. "That."

"Kuroba-kun, I don't..." Hakuba trailed off.

The eerie laughter paused, only to be replaced by an equally disturbing, whispery almost sing-song: "Flicker, flitter, pale little ghost..."

Riku went stiff. "Who... What...?"

A ripple of sound, high for a chuckle but too intimate for a giggle. "Know me not, know me now? The Knower, the Knower in the Deeps."

The hair on the back of Kaito's neck stood on end as something shifted in his peripheral vision, off toward the side where Hakuba flanked him. Shadows flowed as something stretched toward them, pale against the gloom; a great, knobby shape, tapering up to meet the curve of the thick support zigzagging behind it into the murk. Four spindle-pointed ovals sat parallel on its front face, black as holes in existence: two side by side, another above and the last below. More of the dark markings ran end-to-end down the supporting limb as far as could be seen. Almost unconsciously, Kaito took a half-step forward, eyes narrowing as the Shadows shifted before him. Distance and Shadow still veiled details, but a glimpse told enough of countless limbs, all differing in type and shape and size but with the same patterning and a sense of whispering, constant boil of movement—

"Kaito-kun, there's something over on this side, nearest to you," Riku murmured.

Kaito breathed, and stepped back. "Here, too," he muttered as the thing he'd first noticed soundlessly drew closer, giving the definite impression of peering. He inched their formation backwards, pivoting so that he stood facing it head on with the others behind him. "Hard to say, but I think there's just one..."

"Why am I surprised that you two would be able to make out a shape from patches of pale color, here in this place," Hakuba muttered under his breath, faint annoyance covering any worry.

"Is it a Nobody?" Kairi whispered.

Only willpower kept Kaito from jumping as eerie laughter rippled again. "Remnants and empty shells and things that are not gone," came the whispery not-quite sing-song. "Is that which washes up at the edges all that lies within the deeps? Walk among the echoes, but know that not all here is hollow, not all flicker-brief." Another glissando of laughter. "No, no, walked the webs since long, long ago." The thing's voice wasn't localized at the maybe-sort-of head inclined toward them; it could have come from anywhere around.

It loomed closer, suddenly there in a way that seemed unnervingly as though it had not precisely needed to pass through all the intervening space, and Kaito backed them up to maintain at least a little personal space, something the thing seemed to have no concept of even if it didn't seem to be malicious. So far.

Just creepy as hell.

It didn't seem to mind, because the giggling didn't stop as they moved, half circling around one another in a bizarre parody of a dance. The thing seemed to move effortlessly in three dimensions, limb shifting to support it with a fluid grace not normally associated with joints. "Can't they see, can't they see," it trilled, "Oh, but the pattern's so clear... Poor pretty little lostlings, snarled, tangled, turned around. So much you don't know, little puppets." The voice suddenly dropped low at the last, and Kaito did not have to glance at Hakuba or Riku to sense their wariness.
"The things we don't know—are you here to tell us?" Kaito inquired dryly. If it seemed so interested in talking...

Limbs shifted in the kaleidoscope dimness, and the maybe-head loomed above him, tilted in a mannerism that on a human would show curiosity. Given that it was distinctly Not Human, Kaito couldn't be sure if it knew human body language well enough to imitate on purpose.

"Time, still, to change things the same," it crooned. "Loopholes and slipknot, careful careful that you slip through the noose, lest—it—draw—tight..."

The words fell through Kaito's mind like a twelve-ton weight as his brain caught up with his ears.

*I'm being riddled by something that doesn't exist within space-time as we know it. Ohcrap.*

He took a deep breath, face revealing nothing. He hoped. "Where?"

More laughter. Kaito abruptly decided to be a lot nicer to the Task Force on his next heist. Whenever that ended up being.

Almost kindly, the soft not-quite-chant resumed, "Here is here, and everywhere, beginning and end, not so clear... Careful as you go, not to slip through the gaps. It's so very easy, you see, between the lines, when and where the lodestone fails. Spin to ever, spin to naught, it's all the same should you be lost."

"...Thanks?" Kaito took a breath, trying to think of another question to get a clearer picture of what the thing was saying, but all coherent thought temporarily ceased at the sound of a half-familiar voice yelling defiance in the distance, followed by light piercing the Shadows—a monstrous pillar of Dark-laced flame.

"Axel!" The cry came from both Kairi and Riku together, turning towards the blaze and taking a few steps in its direction, away from where the creature still craned to regard them.

Another flutter of phantasmal laughter, and it suddenly began to fade back into the Shadows like an otherworldly Cheshire Cat, the ovals of utter blackness lingering last in place of a grin. "Such a frail little trinket, as wire and shattered glass and feathers from lost wings. Lost pieces and broken wishes, tied with tears and fraying dreams. Moving by the strings, for there is no breath inside, no, none caught at all. Smoke coiling without fire, for there is nothing to burn."

Kaito turned and lunged, grabbing Hakuba with one hand and catching Riku and Kairi with the other arm, eyes closing.

There.

*Axel. NOW.*

Chapter End Notes

The Shadow Seer belongs to Itself, but It first started talking to Snickerer over a year ago now, and has been hanging around in the Shadows ever since. Credit goes to her for recording a fair part of Its dialogue. And an edit-reworking of it, to get it just right.

The Seer doesn't obscure information deliberately, but the nature of Its speech sounds
rather like riddles to us; It has, however, seen and mentioned four story threads that either haven't yet occurred, or that the gang still remains unaware of.
Kaito opened his eyes, taking in the scene in an instant. The Shadows didn’t crowd as close or clinging here, pale and swirling behind invisible bounds that stretched out to a horizonless distance. It could almost have been friendly, if not for the occasional sparkles of Nobody-crystals on the indiscernible ground, scattered about as far as the eye could see. Axel's firestorm had apparently wiped out an innumerable mob.

Contrasting sharply with the pastel, a splash of red and black not far away immediately drew his attention to where the Nobody in question lay supine on the ground, a boy with spiky brown hair who could only be Sora kneeling beside him. A duck and hound anthropomorphic in a way reminiscent of King Mickey flanked Sora, all standing with their backs to Kaito and the others. Donald and Goofy, Kaito recalled, dredging up the memory of when he first met DiZ from what felt like years ago.

All attention was on Axel—and the black wisps that rose from his wiry frame.

Like smoke without fire.

"You're... fading away..." Sora's voice, aged beyond his years with regret.

NO!

Kaito didn't know if he yelled it aloud, couldn't hear anything; couldn't see Sora or the others, was just there, dropping to his knees near Axel's head; couldn't see anything but red and black and pained green, fading into gray...

He didn't know what he was trying to do. There were no cards for this. There probably weren't words for it. There was no time.

There was only the Shadows, and reaching, twilight and moonshadow unfurling between an instant and the next in echo-extension of his will, with and through the heartbeat between possibility to -grasp- and -hold- and -pull—mine!-, a voiceless snarl at the hungry Dark trying to steal the fading smoke in gloved mental fingers as everything in the depths of his soul raged:

Not again; Not another one; Not on my watch; Not letting go when I can catch this one...

The whirlwind surge suddenly dove, vanishing into its own swirling coil, and Kaito found himself toppling forward through ringing, dizzyingly sudden absence into the empty space where Axel had just been. He managed to twist sideways as he fell, but then suede gloves caught him before his shoulder took the brunt of the impact against unseen ground and Hakuba hauled him back upright.

"Kuroba, you idiot..." Again without the honorific, Kaito noted absently as vertigo and the feeling of having just been inside a thunderclap drained away into simple, utter exhaustion, and he listed dangerously against Hakuba's side. The blond had them facing Sora, and gave a more-or-less pleasant smile to their three staring observers before switching to English. "Hello, you must be Sora. I'm Saguru Hakuba, this is Kaito Kuroba, and behind you are Kairi and Yuushi."

Sora recovered from jaw-droppingly stunned with impressive speed, and whirled around to face Riku and Kairi just before the red-haired girl nearly tackled him with a fierce hug.
"Kairi! You're okay!"

"So are you," Kairi replied as he wrapped his arms around her. "This is real... I missed you."

"You too. You look different. A good different!" He added hastily as she pulled back, and was rewarded with a smile. "Does Riku—" He looked beyond her to where Riku still stood a few paces away, and froze. "...Riku?"

"What!" Donald demanded as he and Goofy turned and saw Riku, gripping his staff dangerously. "What is he doing here?"

Kaito squinted in Riku's direction, attempting to bolt upright and make his eyes focus and mostly failing.

"Don't you dare think about running, because I swear I will drag you back," he tried to demand, only for it to emerge as a mostly incoherent mumble. Hakuba snorted very, very softly from his position of keeping Kaito from keeling into a puddle, so the tone must have gotten at least some of the sentiment across.

And hey, Riku's head had turned in his direction! Ridiculously cheered, Kaito decided to count this as a success as Goofy interjected, "Gawrsh, fellas... We saw Riku's heart behind the door, but didn't Ansem change his body somehow?"

Holding one of Sora's hands tightly, Kairi beckoned with her other to Riku, who slowly approached them with not-quite-wariness in his posture. Once he was close enough, Kairi snagged one of his hands and turned to Sora, who still seemed shell-shocked, staring at Riku with wide eyes.

"Can't you see him, Sora? Look with your heart."

"Um..." Unbidden, Sora's eyes closed for a moment, then abruptly they shot back open. "RIKU!"

He grabbed Riku's free hand, making a loose triangle. "I'm so sorry, I didn't know, we thought you were Ansem, and you were fighting, I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was your sword, I should have, I thought you'd get your real body back—"

Finally giving up on trying to answer over Sora's rush of apologies, Riku let go of Kairi's hand and lightly cuffed Sora on the head to make him stop talking. Kaito was pleased to find that his triumphant "Tol'ja" emerged only slightly distorted.

"You didn't know." The sound of Riku's real voice coming from Ansem's body seemed enough to convince Donald and Goofy as well, because they both visibly relaxed. "You thought you were protecting that world. It was an accident, so stop apologizing."

Sora stopped, but only in order to step forward and grab Riku in a tight hug. Kaito snickered quietly at the utter shock on Riku's face. Sora, it looked like, had a lot in common with Yugi.

Kairi giggled as well, and threw her arms around both of her friends.

"I looked for you..." Sora's voice was slightly muffled against Riku's torso, but intelligible. "I looked everywhere for you. The King wouldn't even tell me anything about you, before he went on ahead of us. Why didn't you find me earlier, before... then?"

"...I didn't want you to find me. Not like this, anyway." Riku looked down and away. "I didn't think you'd want to see me like this. Kaito and Saguru... eventually convinced me otherwise—" Riku ignored Kaito's muffled "Hah!" and continued without pause, "but we've been running into
complications ever since then, until now."

The arm keeping Kaito nominally upright tightened, just a little. Kaito glanced over to see Hakuba looking very startled at Riku's use of his first name, even in English... but not unhappy.

Sora pulled back far enough to look up at Riku's face. "Of course I've wanted to see you! I didn't go back home, just to look for you..."

"I know." A wry smile. "I haven't been thinking straight when it comes to you two for a long time." Blithely disregarding the snort from the listing peanut gallery, he continued, "I defeated Ansem—Xehanort's Heartless, but his ghost was still locked away in my heart until..." Riku blinked. "Today. When someone else we met got rid of him completely. You and Goofy were both right. I got my body back at Castle Oblivion... but then I wasn't strong enough to fight without the Darkness, and I had to become him again myself."

Kairi reached up to rest a hand on Riku's face. "But if — um, Xehanort's Heartless? — is gone, and you're still like this, does that mean you can't change back?"

"Until this is over, I still need the Darkness. This is the way I have to access it, now. After..." He trailed off.

Kaito decided that it was worth fully interrupting the reunion to comment now, and he'd finally gotten his speech articulators back in working order. "After, if he's not already back to normal, I'll figure something out." Sora and Kairi both turned to face him as Riku looked up, and Kaito grinned at all three of them, tiredly. "I make a habit of the mostly-impossible, just ask Hakuba-kun and Riku-kun."

...No, wait. Dangit, English. No honorifics. Great. Not only do I feel like I don't want to move for the next year, I'm not thinking clearly, either.

"Oh, is that what you were trying to do earlier?" Sora gave Kaito a curious look. "What exactly did you do?"

"I..." Kaito paused, words failing him, one hand unconsciously reaching out in a little grasping motion.

Riku crouched down between Kairi and Sora in front of Kaito, and frowned a little. "You're nearly gray, Kaito." He reached into a pocket and pulled out one of the vials of green liquid. "Drink this."

"...You sure?" He was just bone-deep exhausted with a lingering tinge of a feeling that something had taken a scouring pad to the inside of his skull, nothing life-threatening.

"I can get more if absolutely necessary," Riku replied, a hint of almost-fond exasperation creeping into the words. "Drink it before I force it down your throat."

Kaito sniffed faintly, half at the words and half at the huge grin that spread across Sora's face when Riku said them. He took the potion and tried to remove the sealing cork, only to find that exhaustion had also wreaked havoc on the strength of his grip. Without a word, Hakuba plucked the vial out of his hands, uncorked it, and handed it back in one smooth motion, arm slipping neatly back around him before he could start falling over again.

"I have a mother," Kaito groused, without ire. "How'd I pick up two more?"

"By one obviously not being enough," Hakuba responded dryly.
"Don't start, Hakuba-kun."

"You asked."

Kaito tossed back the vial in one go, making a face at the bitter aftertaste. "Why can't they make them taste like chocolate, or something?"

"My theory is so that you'll only use them when absolutely necessary," Riku replied. "Feel better?"

Kaito considered this. "...Yeah." He sat up straight, Hakuba letting go as Kaito supported his own weight again. "Cool. Not quite an adrenaline rush, but close."

"Good. You should be fine until the next time you attempt the 'mostly-impossible', and don't even think about trying to use the ones I gave you as a substitute for sleep."

Right, because it's like an energy drink times ten—adrenaline without actual rest. Too bad. ...I wonder if you tried it, back before we met.

Kaito smirked faintly. "Darn. So much for Yamada's pool back home over whether I can beat my old record."

Curiosity proved too much for Sora. "How long is your old record?"

"Thirty-eight hours. It was a bet with Nanasawa-kun in class 2-C, over who could stay awake the longest." Kaito grinned. "I made 15,000 yen from my cut of the school-wide betting pool when it was all over."

Hakuba shook his head. "Only you, Kuroba-kun."

"Wow. But what about Axel?"

Kaito blinked at Sora's half-anxious question, and tried to trace the shape of what had happened to find out. "I... kept him? I think?"

He cocked his head, considering. "I... think I caught him. Mostly. Somewhere? Not sure how to find him, yet, but..." he gestured absently. "He's there. I can feel it, sort of. Not gone, completely. Gimme... a few days, and I'll figure out... how to unburn smoke." Kaito gave Riku a sideways look, sagging in place a little. "Is the energy boost... supposed to fade this fast?"

Riku cursed under his breath. "No. Whatever you did, it must be taking energy to maintain."

Kaito laughed a little weakly. The Shadows here had always blurred and shifted colors like that, right? "I don't think I'm going to be very useful if I'm stuck playing rechargeable battery."

"You may not have to." Naminé's quiet voice off to the side caused everyone to turn, and she returned the sudden attention with a shy smile. "Hello, again. I think I might be able to help..."

Sora fairly lit up. "Great!" He waved her closer, then paused. "Um, who are you?"

Amidst chuckles from the others, Naminé smiled again. "I'm Naminé."

"Naminé!" Kaito had thought he'd already seen just about everything when it came to anthropomorphism, but the hand-sized cricket that jumped onto Sora's shoulder from apparently riding in the other boy's hood took the cake. "My journal says we're supposed to thank you, but we can't remember why."
Naminé shook her head. "It's too long of a story for right now. Later, okay?"

"Okay…" Sora acquiesced. "But, um… thanks. For whatever it was."

"You're welcome." She returned her attention to Kaito. "I can see the patterns, a little… It's like a cord, or a net holding him somewhere, but… it's in flux, not solid. You can't just leave it alone to sit, or it'll fall apart."

Kaito cocked his head thoughtfully. "So, I… set up the connection, and I can't stop pinging it?"

"Hardly surprising," Hakuba commented blandly. "You seem to be utterly incapable of leaving well enough alone."

Kaito looked up at Naminé with a perfectly wounded expression. "It's not fair. I try to help, and this is the thanks I get."

Both girls giggled a little as Riku and Hakuba snorted, and Riku added, "You walk a very fine line between helping, and pushing yourself to the point of collapse."

"Everyone's a critic." Kaito abandoned the hurt look—it wasn't worth keeping when he could feel himself already slipping back into the fringes of gray fatigue. "I don't know if I can anchor it any other way."

"It pulls at you. I don't think you can, either. But…" Namie hesitated, as though having to feel her way through the words. "It's Shadow, and you're holding it through Shadow. But there's someone else with a connection to Axel who *isn't* Shadow, who might be able to hold it safely…"

Her head turned to Sora, followed by the others turning as well. The brunet responded to being the center of attention with a 'Who, me?' expression of surprise, pointing to himself with faint disbelief.

Kaito leaned forward some, narrowing his eyes, and —looked—. "Hn." There... *was* something there. Some sort of connection. And as far as he could tell, it was indeed headed in the right direction. It was... hard to see, in a way, like trying to follow a flashlight beam in a lit room with night-adjusted eyes. But it was *there*, and he couldn't think of any reason why it shouldn't work, and there was no one to tell him he *couldn't*…

:"It seems a sensible course of action," Méraud murmured. :I'm sorry I can't offer any advice, but you're very good at doing things with which I have *no* familiarity.:  

*It's not on purpose, I swear.*

Sora stepped a little closer and held out his hand. "Can we try it? You still don't look so good, and if there's something I can do to help you and Axel both…"

"…Yeah, okay." Better to do it before things get any worse.

Since instinct had been a decent guide so far in this, Kaito staggered to his feet and let his mind go mostly blank. Hands reached slowly, and strands of moonlit midnight curved in manyfold echo, coaxing unseen flux to unwind and then twine delicately about that bright shimmer like young vines following a guidewire. It grew easier as the tendrils of Shadow veiled the brightness, the core lending them strength to braid stronger and surer as they followed it, back, back—

Until they were winding around and doubling back, weaving seamlessly back up the connection after wrapping a turn around what he realized after a belated, surprised blink was Sora, the threads curling around his shoulders and across his back before rebraiding into the cord affixed over his
heart, now solid and steady and secure.

He let his empty hands fall, the feel of energy drain gone, though he still felt only marginally better than when he'd arrived at Casper High. Standing without swaying by dint of sheer stubbornness, Kaito looked down at the wide-eyed Keybearer with a critical eye, checking for any apparent changes. "How do you feel?"

"I can tell he's there, but I think that's all…" Sora smiled, tentatively at first and then stronger, a hand rising to cover his heart. "Thanks."

Kaito nodded, returning the boy's infectious smile. "Once Xemnas and cronies are taken care of, I'll figure out how to bring Axel back." I hope.

"Good," Sora declared. "I wish he hadn't kidnapped Kairi, but I didn't want to lose him… especially not like that, not after he helped us, even if I don't really get the whole thing about Roxas…"

"Roxas is…" Naminé paused, looking at Riku, who nodded before she continued. "He's your Nobody."

"What? But I never—Oh."

"Yes." She smiled at Sora, eyes seeming to look through him. "We meet again, like we promised."

"You said we'd meet again, but when we did, we might not recognize each other." A second boy suddenly faded into sight, image superimposing over Sora before he took a few steps towards her, styled blond hair and white clothes where Sora was messy brown and black-with-gold.

Chapter End Notes

Given what we know about Kaito's character it's not too surprising that he'd do everything he could to save Axel, I hope. The time dilation and adrenaline rush that Kaito experienced in the process meant that he missed Axel and Sora's conversation, but most of it still occurred as Axel continued to fade and Kaito caught him—Kaito was so deep in the Shadows, his presence wasn't noticeable except as an odd rush of wind until he nearly fell over in front of Sora.

Also, Kaito made about $130 by collaborating with Yamada for the school bet. Since he doesn't work, he has to make money somehow.
"You said we'd meet again, but when we did, we might not recognize each other."

Sora, Donald and Goofy all stared at Naminé and Roxas, while Kaito and the others watched with only marginally less surprise.

"I did, didn't I?" Naminé admitted, voice thoughtful.

"But I remember you."

"Mmm... It's strange. I thought we would both fade back into the Darkness, to rejoin our original selves, but we're still here."

Roxas gestured with a hand. "...I think I understand. Until you came just now, I think I was sleeping... But angry, with Sora, with DiZ, with Riku... with myself. I don't feel that way now, though. You don't see me, don't remember me, that way, do you."

Naminé smiled. "I don't. And if I'm the way you remember, too..."

"Then we'll stay that way. If Sora and Kairi stay together, we'll be together, too. We won't fade away."

"We'll be together every day," Kairi chimed in, taking Sora's hand. "Right, Sora?"

Sora gave her a surprised look, soon joined by an almost disbelievingly happy crooked smile. "Uh, yeah!"

Naminé giggled. "Okay."

Kairi stepped closer and held out a hand; Naminé met her halfway and took it, fading in a golden light that briefly haloed Kairi's form, leaving her looking startled but happy. "Oh..."

"Hey, look sharp!" Sora turned to face Roxas just before the other boy closed his eyes and faded away, followed by Sora also glowing for a brief moment.

"Ah!" Sora looked down at himself, hands patting his torso as if to see if anything were missing or different until Riku took hold of his shoulder with a gentle but firm grip.

"The Organization tried to use him, but he's part of you again now. And don't worry, you're all still you," Riku added with a slightly wry smile.

Sora clapped his hands on the top of his head. "So complicated..."

Everyone chuckled briefly until Sora straightened, jaw tightening in determination, and held out a hand to summon his keyblade, which appeared as a mesh of intertwined silver and pale color. "I guess I owe Xemnas for Roxas, too." He looked around at all of them. "Let's finish this together and go home, okay?"

Everyone nodded or spoke in agreement, and as Riku gestured to summon his own keyblade to his hand, Kairi smiled. "This time... I'm fighting, too."
After she said the words, there was yet another flash of light
—*How many do we get before it starts burning out our retinas, anyway?*—and when it faded, a
second sword rested in Riku's off hand. It was another keyblade, Kaito realized after a moment; there
was no mistaking the shape of the golden blade, or the odd composition style that had expressed
itself this time in a floral pattern around the hilt.

The younger boy stared at it for a moment, then looked over at Kairi and held it out to her, blade
tucked against his arm so that it presented hilt-first. "I don't know how, or why, or even how I know,
but… this is yours. Take it."

She did, with a faint air of reverence, and swung it experimentally a few times, getting used to the
heft. "I don't have your experience, but I've been learning, this past year." She smiled, a bit self-
consciously. "I wasn't sure exactly why, when I was doing it, but I didn't want to be left behind
again."

Sora grinned. "With the three of us together again, plus our friends, we'll finish this for sure." He
looked between Saguru and Kaito, and Donald and Goofy. "You guys ready?"

Kaito took a step forward, opening his mouth, only to wobble dangerously before a hand on his back
and one on his arm steadied him. Apparently, somewhere in the midst of all the conversation,
Hakuba had stood and positioned himself behind Kaito.

*Dammit. I hate being anticipatable.*

"While Kuroba-kun appears to be ready in spirit, perhaps you could spare another potion to keep him
from falling on his face for the time being?" the detective inquired.

Riku looked at Sora. "Do you have any full ethers? I gave him the elixir the first time in case he'd
managed to pull off internal injuries in the process of saving Axel, but now it's just energy drain."

As Sora nodded vigorously and began to rummage through the plethora of zippered pockets in his
outfit, Kaito heard a very faint, mirthless chuckle from behind him. "He has you pegged."

"I resent the implication," Kaito grumbled loftily, trying to not lean too heavily against Hakuba's
offered support.

"Resent away. It's still accurate."

"Why do I put up with you again?"

Hakuba's grip on his arm tightened, just a little, and he murmured in Kaito's ear, "Because at the rate
you're going, without someone to keep you in check you're going to reach so far trying to save
someone that you'll kill yourself in the process."

"…Ah." He was really starting to loathe the fatigue. On a normal day, he'd never have let Hakuba get
away with the last word.

Of course, on what used to pass for a normal day, Hakuba might not have been quite so accurate,
either.

Sora triumphantly brandished a small, squat bottle of blue liquid, which Riku took, opened, and held
out to Kaito. "Drink this, but the next time you get exhausted, you really should sleep. It's not a good
idea to use these too much without resting in between, especially since your body isn't used to them."

"What happens if I don't give my system time to adjust?" At Riku's *look* and Hakuba's hand
tightening further, he hastily protested, "I just like knowing why I'm doing things!"

"...A high enough concentration of these properties in your bloodstream leads to migraines and risk of hallucinations. Moogles mention it if you synthesize enough elixirs at once," Riku added quickly, eyes on the bottle in Kaito's hand.

Too tired and not actually helpful to call you on that. Maybe later.

"Okay, then."

As Kaito quickly drank, and then moved to stand on his own again, pulling out his card gun, Sora gave him a curious look. "You don't have potions where you're from?"

"We don't have magic the way that you do, in our world, or moogles. I don't think we have any way to make them."

"Really? What's your world like?"

Kaito smiled. "Tell you what. We'll tell you all about it when this is over and we're at your home, while I work on bringing Axel back."

Sora grinned back. "Great! Let's go." He looked around. "If there's actually a way out of here..."

Riku extended a hand in front of him and a portal opened. "We're so close to their stronghold, it's really a doorway, not a corridor."

Hakuba smirked. "How helpful."

They walked through.

_________________________________________________________________________

The portal didn't drop them in the castle, this time. Instead, they arrived in a kind of façade of a town, black skyscrapers and black ground beneath the same dark sky and heart-shaped moon, the castle's stark whiteness looming in the background. The buildings beyond the small, dim alley in which they stood had lit windows and neon signs, but nothing living moved either within or without the constructs of habitation.

"The doorway opens here," Riku explained. "To get closer takes a corridor, which would need a person to aim with any accuracy."

"Well, the King went ahead," Sora offered, "but I don't know where he is."

"We'll keep following him this way, then."

Kaito noted with interest that Sora simply nodded, more than willing to follow Riku's lead. The taller boy was a natural leader, when he had the confidence to try it.

"This is pleasant," Kaito remarked dryly as they stepped into a plaza lit by windows and neon lights and a large TV screen on the side of the building that dominated the plaza.

Hakuba looked about to reply, but whatever he had to say was lost when the black, gold-eyed forms of Heartless began rising out of the ground.

"This way!" Riku barked, driving through the mob. "They'll never stop coming, so fight them off and keep moving!"
"You've been here before?" Sora called to Riku as they fought and ran, following Riku's lead.

"I fought Roxas here," Riku replied shortly.

*Ah... This is where Ansem's Darkness changed you.*

They didn't spend long in the town-that-wasn't, fighting and running together. Before much time had passed, they reached the edge of the buildings, where the street gave way to the chasm over which the Organization's castle hovered. A white path stretched upwards across the gap, leading to an entrance at the base of the massive disjointed structure.

The Heartless didn't follow them to the border area, giving them a chance to catch their breath, and for Kaito, to reload his cardgun. The Shadows were fairly strong, but he wanted to keep his Deck in reserve for bigger targets.

They made their way up the path that Riku said the King had to have established and left behind, entering without a challenge. The castle was constructed on no architectural principles that Kaito could recognize—physics and conservation of useful space took a backseat to sheer impressive scale of design. The indoor passages and outside paths leading upward swarmed with packs of Nobodies, coming from all directions, but between seven fighters and three keyblades short work was made of the lesser minions.

It wasn't until they reached the first open area—a large open plaza surrounded by familiar white walls and enclosed by a glass dome through which the strange moon shone—that the real trouble started.

"Well, well..." Saïx stood in an aperture high up the far wall, gazing down at them. "Decided to embrace the Darkness, Keybearer?"

"What?" Sora looked confused until Riku growled from beside him, and then he joined his two friends in glaring at the blue-haired Nobody. "Riku's my friend, Darkness or no Darkness, and we're going to stop all of you!"

A chuckle, smooth as snake oil. "How quaint. You're too late... Just look there." He gestured grandly toward the moon, which now appeared to be whole. "Our Kingdom Hearts... Thanks to you, we've collected countless hearts. Can you hear their euphoria? Now, all they need is one more helping from the Keyblade bearer!"

He snapped his fingers, and abruptly Heartless began to emerge from the floors and all the nearby walls, with a band of Nobodies joining the closest approaching Heartless to surround them in a loose ring.

"We've gotta fight!" Donald cried, as Saïx vanished into a Darkness corridor.

"But—Kingdom Hearts!" Sora protested, and Kaito realized that while Sora had fought in perfect unity with Donald and Goofy to destroy the Nobodies within the castle, the younger boy had gone through the streets of the town below entirely on the defensive, knocking Heartless out of the way without destroying them.

… The Nobodies had been using Sora, somehow collecting the hearts released by the Keyblade's destruction of Heartless to create their heart-moon, however they thought they could regain some semblance of their own hearts, using it…

Kaito growled softly, in the back of his throat, as the Heartless scuttled into mêlée range.
Riku displayed none of Sora's conflicted hesitation, and plowed into the creatures before they could get close enough to overwhelm the brunet, followed by Kairi.

"Fight to stay alive," Riku ordered sharply, turning to deal with the next wave, "and we'll stop Xemnas and the others before they can use these."

Sora hesitated only a moment longer, then nodded determinedly. "Okay." He turned and joined Donald and Goofy in a joint attack that cleared a fair amount of ground in the direction of the exit.

Kaito stuck close to Hakuba, watching the blond's back and not liking the sudden stiffness in the other teen's movements as they fought. "You okay?"

Hakuba grunted, knocking several Heartless through the air with a sweep of his staff, one into an advancing Nobody. "Too much pressure against a barrier can create cracks."

Which translates from Hakuba-speak into: If too many Heartless or Nobodies show up, they're probably going to breach your shields from the sheer weight of numbers boosting the effect they have on you.

Kaito took a page from Inspector Nakamori's book and swore creatively about Xemnas, the Organization, and the Heartless in general under his breath as he half-herded Hakuba along the edges of the empty space the keyblades where creating. He didn't stop the muttered tirade until after they'd passed through an oversized doorway, shoved the large and ornate white doors closed behind them to impede the Heartless's advance, since no mind remained to direct the irrational creatures beyond the obstacle, and Hakuba's movements had become less labored as they ran on. One look at Hakuba's face, however, eloquently informed Kaito that suggesting anything other than continuing on would be disregarded with extreme prejudice.

Stubborn idiot. If this happens again, I'm using Exile of the Wicked even if it makes me pass out.

The detective saved his breath for running and fighting rather than commenting, and Kaito did as well for the rest of their ascent. The paths seemed to follow a linear progression of stairs and inclines interspersed with larger halls. In the next hall that they reached, they found that their presence had been expected.

"Down!" Kaito shouted, grabbing Hakuba by the coat and ducking as an energy-laced projectile flew down from another raised ledge on the far wall. It sliced through the air where Riku had been standing before Kaito's warning and thudded into the ground.

"Nice reflexes." Kaito recognized Xigbar's voice before the Nobody moved into view, aiming an arm-mounted, miniature energy cannon at their group. "Hey… I remember you." The arm adjusted to put Kaito squarely in its crosshairs as they all straightened to face Xigbar. "Did you decide to be the Keybearer's lackey instead? You really made a bad choice there, going with this dud—he's caused plenty of trouble, but he's not half as impressive as the as the other ones were."

…Others, past tense? That… does not sound good. Potentially fascinating in the corollaries, but not good.

To Kaito's chagrin, before he could frame an inquiry that had hope of getting an answer from their opponent, Sora called angrily, "Are you done rambling?"

A lanky shrug. "Rambling? As if! All you need to know, traitor, is that your time is up!" He threw his arms out to the sides, a second energy cannon materializing around his free arm, and jumped down from the ledge, golden eye glaring at Sora. "You really shouldn't have betrayed us, Roxas."
"I didn't!"

Sora's declaration of innocence apparently didn't merit a response; Xigbar teleported back up to his original ledge and began firing, raining down a shower of projectiles at the entire group. "Gotcha now!"

_Friggin' teleporters. Hell, where's a sword when you need one?_

There was no cover to hide behind. Sora, Riku and Goofy were able to knock the energy darts away or even some back up at Xigbar, forcing the Nobody to dodge. Kaito moved behind Hakuba, shooting over the blond's head as quickly as he could to knock as many of the projectiles as possible away before they hit anything, hoping that Hakuba would be able to take care of the rest. Donald hid behind Goofy's defense and summoned a wave of lightning to hit Xigbar's position, while Kairi stayed where Riku had shoved her behind his larger frame, smart enough to not try sword-work out of her league.

A few impacts from his own weapons brought Xigbar back down to their floor, still teleporting around so that only a stray hit or two even grazed him. After Sora and Goofy collided from trying to attack him simultaneously, Kaito finally managed to finish sorting through his Deck for the right card.

"Swords of Revealing Light!"

*I love this card. Stay put, you bastard.*

Despite the quickly developing headache, Kaito's silent comment was obeyed and Xigbar froze in place.

"Now!" Hakuba called, standing aside to give the others, particularly Sora and Riku, free access to the Nobody. Kaito realized a second later that 'standing aside' placed the detective directly next to him.

"You're not going to hit him for me?" he asked lightly.

"No. Five against one seems sufficiently overkill at the moment, and you apparently require a keeper."

Kaito tried to keep his eyes from squinting against the headache and gritted out, "I do not collapse at the drop of a hat."

"Then why do you look three seconds from starting to sway?"

The sound of Xigbar's weapons clattering to the ground precluded Kaito's response, and he gratefully released the Shadows' hold with a small sigh.

*I have no idea how this card works. I'm just happy that it does.*

"Got any aspirin on you?" he inquired, more to have something to say than anything.

"Yes, as a matter of fact." As Xigbar collapsed to the ground, Hakuba reached into his bag and came up with a small bottle, pulling out a white tablet.

"Thanks." Kaito took it, dry swallowing again. To his surprise, he didn't even have to give Hakuba an inquiring look before the blond quietly volunteered,
"Large crowds have always given me headaches." He smiled wryly. "I suppose now I know why."

"...Yeah. With any luck, though, maybe now they won't." Let something good have come of the whole mess.

"There is that hope."

"Hey, Kaito! Saguru!" Kaito looked up to see Sora waving at them from where Xigbar had finally evaporated into thin air. "Come on!"

...No honorifics is easier to get used to that I expected. Or maybe it's just that telling Sora-kun to be less familiar feels like it would be like kicking a puppy for being friendly.

"Shall we?" Hakuba commented, but didn't move to walk ahead of Kaito.

"I do not need a babysitter, Hakuba-kun."

"Of course you don't."

"Gah!" It wasn't worth continuing the argument while Sora and the rest were waiting for them. Kaito moved to catch up, acutely aware of Saguru's presence just behind him. Even traveling with Riku, as the long-range fighter he'd been watching the younger boy's back, not the other way around.

...It made the back of his neck itch.

Hakuba seemed content to stay silent as the group fought upward, since he'd—Argh—gotten the last word again. Kaito realized vaguely, through the chaos of running, firing, dodging, and firing again, that for all that Riku and Hakuba had practiced fighting together, he and Hakuba had gravitated to each other automatically, while Riku fought alongside Kairi.

The most disconcerting moment came when he discovered that he and Hakuba were circling each other as they all moved forwards, anticipating where the other was going to be without thinking.

...We spent too long trying to get into each other's heads.

During a brief reprieve from the bands of Nobodies, a bright beam of light cut through the sky above them, touching the heart-shaped moon from a place higher up in the castle's ramparts.

"What's that?" Sora asked Riku, shielding his eyes.

"It's the king and DiZ—I mean, Ansem the Wise," Riku responded, faint worry in his tone. "We'd better hurry."

"Hold it," Kaito broke in. "DiZ is one of the Ansems?"

Riku beckoned for them to keep going, and answered, "The original Ansem. The others are all fragments of his foremost apprentice, Xehanort, who stole his name and perverted his work of trying to understand the human heart."

"Why do I not like the sound of that?"

"...Because Xehanort and DiZ's other apprentices gave rise to the Heartless, and became Heartless themselves. Their Nobodies created Organization XIII."

"Wow. Hey, Riku..." Sora laced his fingers behind his head as he walked. "How do you know all of that?"
"That's right!" Jiminy spoke up from Sora's hood. "I've catalogued some of that from bits of a journal we've found that seems to have belonged to Ansem the Wise, but where did you hear it?"

Riku gave Sora a wan smile. "DiZ, Naminé, and I worked together to keep you safe while you were asleep, and then to wake you back up."

"Oh." Sora smiled. "I guess I should thank him, too!"

"…If you want. He wanted you awake to be able to stop Organization XIII because he couldn't."

Sora nodded decisively. "I will. They have to be stopped anyway, and he helped us."

"How… touching." Darkness blossomed in front of them, and a bearded blond appeared in its wake. Before anyone in the group could react, he snapped his fingers and a wall of enormous playing cards cut across the path, isolating Sora and leaving the rest of them in a circle of spinning cards.

Before Kaito could even think of trying to examine the cards, the circle split apart and vanished, revealing Sora standing by himself.

He blinked.

…*Time dilation?*

"Are you okay, Sora?" Kairi asked.

"Yep! No worries. Let's keep moving."

"Why do I feel like we should all be more creeped out by what just happened than they are?" Kaito muttered quietly to Hakuba as they fell once more into acting as the group rearguard.

"Because that Nobody's power was enough that we had no awareness of time passing, while Sora-kun fought him alone." Hakuba gave Sora a thoughtful look. "Whatever being a keyblade bearer means, he is far more powerful than he appears."

They entered a room that held what could have been gravestones, with two intact and glowing while the rest were cracked and dimmed. As they paused in front of the only open door, Kaito's eyes glanced across the closest stone, which glowed half-dim, unlike any of the others: an engraving of the chakrams that Axel wielded, beneath the words, "Flurry of Dancing Flames."

Axel…

…*He's not gone, not completely.*

The thought wasn't as reassuring as he'd hoped it would be.

*When I figure out how to bring him back, I'm damn well bringing him back as a whole person, not a fragment. No matter what it takes.*

…I promise, Axel-kun. For Sora and Roxas.

He was still staring at the 'gravestone' and another darkened one beside it, which displayed the words "Key of Destiny" over an engraved keyblade, when the closed door in the middle of the room suddenly opened on its own. He quickly turned, realizing belatedly that he'd been assuming the sense of Hakuba's presence at his back meant that the others were still in the room, while they'd in fact been standing alone.
Another of the gravestones had gone out, leaving only one intact, next to the door.

_I'm zoning way too easily these days._

He hadn't realized he's muttered aloud until Hakuba spoke, while the others returned. "You're running on adrenaline, which is likely interfering with your usual ability to multitask."

_Among other things._

Riku declared, "All that's left is Xemnas. The King and DiZ should be close, so let's hurry."

Outside the room, the path returned to following the outside edge of the castle. Heading for the source of the beam of light, they found Mickey and DiZ at the top of a long incline, near the edge of an open landing of white stone. DiZ held a machine that vibrated under his hands, while Mickey stood slightly to the side, watching.

"Your Majesty!" Sora called, causing the two to both look over at the Keybearer's approaching company.

DiZ stood no longer hidden beneath in red bandages, but a short blond goatee and beard framed an almost regal looking Caucasian face. Kaito matched gazes briefly with piercing golden eyes, which darted to Hakuba and back before the man seemed to smile, ever so faintly.

As they got close, the machine began to spark and short.

"Sora," DiZ declared gravely, gaze resting on the younger boy, "the rest is up to you."

_I don't like the sound of—_

:Kaito!: Méraud's voice cut in, drowning out DiZ's words as the world grayed.

_Wait what? Can this wait?_ Kaito strained to hear DiZ's voice, and caught the words "Hear me... ...Sorry."

:No?: Méraud's presence overwhelmed the surrounding conversation again. _I'm sorry, I've been distracted by a conversation with Dark Sage and some of the other Monsters, but I just noticed something that worries me. There's something... It's like a thread or a wire, connected to you, in the Shadows that I don't think you can see, and it's—:

A new voice caught Kaito's attention, the smooth baritone interrupting Méraud's explanation. _I was wondering who would dare interfere with my Kingdom Hearts._

:Kaito! Are you listening?:

_Ack! Thread-wire thing in the Shadows! Do you know what it is_? If she wasn't going to go away, he wanted this conversation done with as soon as possible.

:Not exactly... It's stretching out into the wild Shadows, where I can't see it either, so I don't know where it ends, I can't seem to touch it... and it's not just Shadow, Dark Sage and I both agree that there's traces of Darkness in it._

Kaito's blood ran cold.

_Can you do anything about it? Can I?_

:I don't know.: Méraud replied, sounding frustrated. _We've never seen anything like it before. It doesn't seem to be doing anything, not even trying to drain your energy, which is part of why I didn't_
Then keep trying to figure it out and get back to me, there's important stuff going on here, too. ...Please, he added, just soon enough to not be offensively demanding, he hoped.

All right. Be careful. Her presence faded.

As Kaito blinked, trying to refocus on the real world, he saw DiZ hunched over his machine, which rattled and sparked ominously in the man's grip, a hairsbreadth from overloading. He had a resigned, almost peaceful expression as he turned away from Riku and Mickey, who stood closest, to look up at the degenerating moon.

"Farewell!" he declared.

Wait, what? No!

Kaito lunged forward as electricity surged along the outside of the machine, trying to reach the man before the inevitable explosion, trying to do something...

A bearhug from behind stopped him in his tracks, and Hakuba's voice roared in his ear, "No, you bloody idiot!"

He struggled against the iron grip as time seemed to dilate for a second time, etching the silent, supernova-bright explosion into Kaito's memory. "No..."

If I'd been paying attention...

The arms around him tightened, just a little, and Hakuba spoke again in a quiet, tired voice. "You can't save the ones who don't want to be saved, Kuroba. He made his choices, as Connery-san did."

Kaito closed his eyes, fists clenching around his card gun and Duel deck, and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

It doesn't make it hurt any less.

"Kudou-kun and Edogawa-kun would both disagree with you," he murmured.

"Not when attempting to save someone is guaranteed to kill you both," Hakuba countered immediately, loosening his grip and stepping back just a little as the white light began to fade.

An even larger hole now marred the moon's surface, and beneath it countless thousands of hearts were falling towards the ground over both castle and the city below. Of DiZ and the machine, no trace remained.

Kaito shoved any reaction away and looked over the others picking themselves up off the ground.

"Riku?" Sora's voice drew Kaito's gaze to him, and the stark contrast of Riku's black cloak against white stone.

Wait a minute...

The figure slowly getting to his feet was too small. His hair was still silvery, but it had a feathery, layered look to it, and as Riku turned to face at them, Kaito found himself staring at a fellow teenager's face: soft where the lines of Ansem's face had been sharp and harsh, lightly tanned instead of dark brown, and broken by a black cloth covering his eyes in a blindfold.
"Riku!" Sora and Kairi chorused, echoed by a "Wow…" from Donald and Goofy.

"Ansem did say that anything could happen," Mickey mused, smiling as he came up to Riku. Riku looked down at him with an almost disbelieving little smile, pinpointing the King's location with perfect accuracy even through the blindfold.

…Heart sense. I guess Mickey has been to Riku what Donald and Goofy are to Sora.

"Riku, are you gonna take that off?" Sora asked from Riku's other side, standing beside Kairi.

"Oh…” Riku sounded like the thought hadn't even occurred to him, but he reached up and pulled the blindfold free, blinking several times against the long silver bangs that threatened to fall into his eyes.

Kaito and Hakuba walked closer, the movement catching Riku's attention, and his eyes focused to look at them as they came to stand behind Sora, next to the low stone railing that edged the path.

Kaito gave the younger teen a grin. "Unless you didn't always have silver hair, you look back to normal to me."

"No, I did—do. …What color are my eyes?"

"Somewhere along the lines of teal-aquamarine," Hakuba replied, with a hint of almost-amusement in his voice, then took a step to the side, looking over the edge of the railing. Kaito kept his eyes on the newly-restored Riku, still grinning.

"Why do you ask?" Sora gestured at the black cloth in Riku's hand. "And what was the blindfold for, anyway?"

"His eyes couldn't lie," Mickey spoke up, white-gloved hand pointing at Riku.

"Lie?" Kairi tilted her head.

"And just who were you trying to fool, huh?" Sora leaned over, looking up to be able catch Riku's gaze as the other teen looked down with a bittersweet smile.

"Myself. The more I used the Darkness while you were sleeping, but before I reawakened it completely to fight Roxas, I could feel Xehanort's Heartless stirring… I put this on after I left King Mickey's company, when gold started appearing around my pupils. If I didn't have to see it in my reflection, I could pretend it wasn't happening, just for a little while longer."

Kaito smiled. "But now you don't have to pretend any more. All that's left is you."

Riku looked up, a full, genuine grin slowly spreading across his face. "…You're right."

In a move that reminded Kaito somewhat of the way he switched from a civilian disguise to his Kid suit, Riku took hold of his cloak and flung it away, revealing jeans and a two-layered vest.

Riku continued, "We have to defeat Xemnas. He's the Organization's last real survivor."

Since Axel and Roxas don't count for this.

"Then let's go!" Sora cheered.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Hakuba suddenly interrupted, voice strained as he looked over the path's edge to the rain of hearts and what lay beyond the drop-off, "I believe you need to see—Nng…"
As Kaito turned, the detective crumpled sideways, legs colliding with the shin-high stone railing…

…and the physics of torque sent his unbalanced frame toppling over the edge just ahead of Kaito's outstretched hand.

"HAKUBA!"

Kaito didn't think. Acting on pure instinct, he dove after the blond, -pulling- and -reaching- and -grasping- with everything he had to catch hold of Hakuba's coat. They fell together in a sickening spiral towards the luminescent white ground far beneath the castle, where a swarm of thousands of Heartless grew thicker with every raining heart.

"Why didn't you say anything earlier, you idiot?" Kaito shouted over the rush of wind.

Hakuba didn't respond beyond a low stream of foul invectives that he didn't seem to be entirely conscious of muttering, doubled over within Kaito's grip with his eyes closed and hands over his ears. Kaito added a few curses of his own. The Heartless swarm was growing exponentially as he watched—the time it had taken to evolve from a noticeable presence to overwhelming pressure could easily have been no longer than the time it had taken Hakuba to interrupt.

This isn't the Shadows, there's so much Darkness, and I can't bend the Dark…

He reached out anyway, and –pulled- again for nothere-somewherereal-safelanding-HOME!

The rip opened beneath them.

They fell through.

Chapter End Notes

Potion lore is fanon, not canon, but depending too much on the magical equivalent of healing drugs and energy drinks cannot possibly be healthy.

Exile of the Wicked destroys all face-up Fiend-Type monsters on the field.

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