Haunted

by Raven_Ehtar

Summary

Ever since receiving a strange artifact from his father, Ryou Bakura’s life has changed. He gains the friends he’s always wanted, and the bullies are disappearing. At night, though, he dreams of the life of a thief in ancient Egypt. A young boy who was the sole survivor of his village’s slaughter, who must turn to thievery and worse in order to survive on his own.

Ryou knows that something is wrong when his friends begin to fall to the same malady as the bullies, that something is wrong with him. It’s not until he makes some new friends in Domino City, including a boy who has an artifact similar to his own, that he realizes he harbors the soul of that thief within himself – that he’s been possessed for years by the spirit of a killer.

He should rid himself of the evil spirit, save himself and those around him. The only trouble is, now he doesn’t know where one of their souls begins and the other ends. After so long, he’s not even sure he would reject the spirit if he could. After all, no one knows him so well as the spirit that haunts him.

Notes
So this is a fic that was originally posted on FF.net a couple years ago and is still in progress. There's been a long break between chapters, and with the long awaited new chapter going up today, I'm posting all of Haunted to AO3. Not all at once, though. After today we'll be going at a chapter a day to keep from flooding inboxes. :)

This is a backstory fic, beginning about six years before the very first comic and continuing through canon to a few months after the very last. So there will be spoilers, if you haven't seen or read everything of the original Yu-Gi-Oh! and want to avoid those, fair warning. Also, for the most part, I will be using the manga rather than the anime as source material.

If you like music to go along with what you're reading, there's an album for this fic on 8tracks.

As always, notes after each chapter will give a run down on words and things used within. Enjoy! :)
Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Prologue

Haunted:
- To be visited or pursued, most often persistently, by spirits or specters of unknown origin.
- To be preyed upon, as by some lingering emotion, memory or obligation.

In all things, there are rules, basic laws that allow the universe to run smoothly. Gravity, cause and effect, action and reaction, all are principles used to make sense of the world. The discipline of magic is no different. It, too, has its guidelines initiates wishing to learn the art of magic, which is the art of slipping into fine print of those laws, of levering them against one another, must know better than he knows himself. Before the first incantation can be read or the first spell spun the laws must be thoroughly understood, lest the wielder of the spell make some fundamental error and be consumed by the very powers he sought to control.

There is the Law of Conservation, which states that power cannot spring forth without a source, and conversely, no power may simply disappear without affecting change. To perform magic, the user must draw his energy from somewhere, be it from his own body and spirit or from some outside supply. Once drawn, that power must be used up completely, or the residual will spin away without purpose. Loose magic, actuated but without guidance, doesn’t bear contemplating. There’s the Law of Contagion, wherein two objects, once they have come into contact with one another, will forever bear impressions of and be affected by the other. Many is the mage who has forgotten this basic premise, and believed that change he has wrought in the world was change limited to the external. No user of the arts ever walks away unchanged, immune from the powers he has used.

One of the most central laws is the Law of Polarity, of Opposites. It is also known as the Law of Balance. It states that for everything that ever was, is or will be, somewhere there is its opposite, its perfect reflection. For day there is night, for hot there is cold, for male there is female, for good there is evil. One cannot exist without the other, and where there is imbalance in one, it manifests in the other. However, despite how complete a picture this offers, and however irreconcilably distant these things appear to be from each other, they all share one thing in common: they all exist and bear some weight in the fabric of reality. In one form or another, be it in mass, in spirit, or just in consciousness, they all take some sort of shape. In this way, all things known to man can be placed on one side of the cosmic coin, and on its opposite face would be the opposite of all.

Void. The never-was, the never-shall, the spaces between where nothing can exist, nothing is created and all is devoured.

Few civilizations have ever grasped this concept, that what they know to be the great opposing forces can all be considered as one on a grander scale, with Nothingness the opposite of all. Few ever did, but there was one worth noting. The high priests and learned scholars of Ancient Egypt recognized this tenant, and they examined it closely. One faction, that of the Priest-Mages, saw this Void and believed that if they could but bend it to their will, they could draw a new kind of power from it, in quantities never before dreamed of. In attempt to harness this potential source, they gave it a name, even as they had given names to their Gods so they might evoke and call upon them.
Names are powerful things. By naming what was once nameless, they gave something formless a handgrip they could grasp, and in this way they intended to wield their new power.

In their eagerness to possess the potential of the Void, the Priest-Mages forgot all it was that a name could do. In their lust for power, they disregarded the very nature of what they desired to control.

Words are a special kind of magic, for words are the shadows of things. By speaking, one can evoke action, or thought, or will. Names are the most potent words of all, for they not only give shape, they also confer identity. When a name is given to something that before was – literally – nothing, it confers shape, identity and will. Foolishly, the Priest-Mages birthed a new God-thing from the essence of Nothing.

The Void that was the opposite of all existence changed under the influence of its new name. It, in defiance of its very nature, developed a consciousness, self-awareness and intelligence. It was the embodiment of Nothing, and yet by existing it was its own opposite as well as the very epitome of its nature. By being, it was what it was not, what it could not be. By giving Nothingness a form, the Priest-Mages called forth a creature of paradox, a being that was a perversion even unto itself. A God-thing of madness and rage.

In its immeasurable wrath, the God-thing seized upon the Priest-Mages that had named it, and unmade them, as though they had never been. The God-thing knew nothing of mercy or forgiveness, and unmade the men down to their very souls, so they might never know immortality in the afterlife. With their souls snuffed out as candle flames, they would never know anything ever again.

The God-thing might have continued on and on, until there was nothing left at all. With a mind and will, the being also felt desire, desire to unmake all that there was, to consume and eradicate the abomination that was existence. But with a physical shape, the God-thing found itself limited as never before; with a body, it was bound by the same laws that governed all life. It could not stretch out and cover all that there was as it once had, now it must move slowly, its ability to act limited by the immediacy of its own body.

Seeing what it was they had unleashed, those Priest-Mages who escaped the first terrible onslaught of dissolution cried out to their Gods to rescue them, to strike down the result of their folly. The Gods heard Their Priests, and when They turned Their eyes toward them, They were appalled at the atrocity They saw. They knew exactly what it was, and They knew that it would not stop its carnage even when all the Earth was a mere memory. It would eventually turn its gaze to the very Gods and the entire universe beyond.

So the deities of Egypt gathered together, light and dark setting aside Their differences to face against a common threat. They combined Their powers, divine and infernal alike, and bent Their wills against the monster Their Priests had unleashed. With the strength of the pantheon working in concert, the Gods bound the God-thing and sealed it away in darkness. They could not unmake it as it had unmade others, nor could they abolish its shape, for once a thing has been named, it cannot be unnamed. Instead, it was sealed away in a place where neither Gods nor humans may tread and where it could no longer continue its carnage. Had They been able to, They would have sealed it away completely, with no chink or gap in its prison, but there are rules, even for Gods. They could not create a prison without a door, but this door was sealed tightly with blood and dark magic’s. The secrets of the rituals and of the God-thing contained within were written within a single book, and that book was entrusted to a single, aged Priest to guard. He had not a drop of magical blood in his veins, and so it was safe for him to possess the knowledge. It was also his duty to find one trustworthy, an apprentice, to take on his task after his death.
Within its prison, the God-thing tore and raged against the walls of its new world, but could not free itself by force alone. The Gods had been clever in Their construction of the prison. Brute strength could not rend it, nor fury weaken it, either from within or without. The only way to escape was through the door, and the only way to open the door was with the keys described within the tome guarded by the chosen Priest. The God-thing might have been a construct of madness, but it knew well that for any hope of escape it would have to rely upon humans. It would have to learn subtler methods to be free once again.

With nothing but time, it did learn. It learned how to harness its own abilities and to exploit them to best advantage. While it was true that the God-thing the Priest-Mages had called forth was an embodiment of Void, that did not mean that it represented all of Void. There still existed patches of Nothingness, places of Void outside of the God-thing’s body, and therefore beyond the confines of its prison. While it could not use these oases of self to escape, it could reach out and affect them, ever so slightly. Like a child blowing on the calm surface of a lake, there were ripples, but tiny ones.

It was a slow, incredibly slow process, and for many hundreds of years, the secrets of the God-thing and the door to its prison were well protected. Eventually, the world of men simply forgot. But the God-thing, it did not forget, nor forgave men for their selfish gifts of name and shape. It worked, slowly yet tirelessly, learning more of the nature of humans, finding those who were best positioned to use those forbidden magic’s and who were the most easily influenced by gentle nudges and whispers of power. The God-thing stretched itself thin, reaching out, finding those places within human hearts and minds that were touched with darkness, despair or loneliness, anything that might be construed as “emptiness”. There the God-thing waited and planned for the proper time, the time when He would be free, and He would have His revenge upon the ones who had named Him so long ago:

Zorc Necrophades.

On the edge of the desert, a gentle breeze caressed the landscape like a lover, eliciting the soft sighs of sand and brush. Nights were cold in the desert, freezing as the days were boiling. As the sun God Ra descended below the horizon, swallowed up by the sky Goddess Nuit to travel through the underworld and be birthed anew with the golden banners of dawn, He took with Him the life-giving light and warmth. Surrendering the night unto Nuit, the gentle Goddess arched Her body over the land, Her soft skin glistening with stars. Under the Goddess’s protection, the men and women of Egypt could sleep peacefully, resting from their day’s labors and preparing for the next.

But for every innocent soul held in Nuit’s embrace, there were those who skulked within Her shadows, who used Her sinuous darkness to conceal their deeds from virtuous eyes.

A scream, hot with blood and terror, ripped through the silken calm of Nuit’s night.

And this night, the crimes committed under the Goddess’s eye were true atrocities to behold.

The scream was the first and only warning to the rest of the village. The response was lightning quick as slumbering folk were jolted out of their dreams into the pitch black of their huts, tumbling up from sleeping pallets, searching for anything that might serve as weapons. Blindly, hands clutched after stones, beer jars, the rare knife or sickle, anything that was close to hand and better than mere fingernails. The villagers flew from their mud brick huts, expecting a pack of desert jackals or a desperate pride of lions preying on an unguarded neighbor, or at worst, a wandering band of outlaws, come to raid as the tiny village slept.

Imagine, then, the confusion when, as they charged into the roads, sleep logged but ready to
defend all that they owned from the unknown intruders, they came against a completely organized body of men invading their village. They were many, bearing torches, horses and good bronze blades… and they wore the armor of the Great Pharaoh’s own army!

Villagers were seized as they emerged from their doors, without ceremony and without explanation to any, and dragged, one by one to a small temple, set into the side of a hill and dug below the earth, that had lain there before the first villager had ever build a hut. They were brought, cursing and fighting, to the waiting Priest-Mages, so they might begin a forbidden ritual of oldest magic’s. Those villagers who did not emerge from their homes were sought out, dragged from their huts and taken to the hidden temple to join their fellows.

The screams wouldn’t stop, nor the pleading, the threats, the desperate bargaining or the sobs for mercy as the Pharaoh’s own men dragged them away. Men, women, children, even babes not yet out of the cradle, all were gathered to be brought before the Priest-Mages. Those who offered too much resistance were knocked unconscious, bound, or their legs broken. The Priest-Mages stipulated only that the villagers must remain alive and whole, their condition beyond that was of no consequence, and the soldiers used whatever means made their jobs easier. In this way, the entire village was emptied, every villager taken underground to the temple, to the Priests and their magic’s.

All… save one. In the confusion and chaos of the attack, one mother got her child away to hide before she herself was taken. Her son watched as she, too, was taken by the men who wielded their strange, shining blades that flashed red in the light of their torches. Even now he remained, wedged between two huts and in complete darkness. He knows it’s not a good hiding place, that if the village is searched more thoroughly he will be found, found and taken. He knows he should find a better hole to hide in… but he doesn’t. He can’t convince his body to move for terror, as the screams of the villagers, his family and neighbors, slowly turn from pleas to inarticulate shrieks of agony coming from within the temple. Huddled in his hiding place, the last poor protection given by his mother, the boy could only tremble and try to stop his ears from hearing.

The hellish glow of torches spilled down the narrow space as soldiers trooped past, in search of more villagers, joking amongst themselves. The boy felt ill, and suddenly even more afraid than before. They were laughing? They found some kind of joy amid the screams? Were these men human, or were they demons that ravaged his home? The boy pressed himself further back, as far as he could go, away from the revealing light and wished himself away, invisible, gone, anywhere but here.

Perhaps if he had remained still they might not have noticed him.

There was a shout, and the sound of heavy footfalls. The sudden form of a soldier, silhouetted against the glow of fire that glinted off of armor and bare bronze blade, cut a ragged black hole in the narrow passage of light. His grin was terrible as he called to the boy, coaxing him from his corner, but his eyes were more terrible still. The boy only retreated further away, pressing his back to the rough, cold wall behind him and praying to any Gods that might hear to save him.

The soldier only laughed, amused by his prey’s pathetic whimpering and squeezed between the huts to fish the boy out himself. The boy stared, unable to take his eyes away as he came closer, his large, calloused hand reaching for him –

Suddenly darkness, and silence. All was peaceful and still.

For a moment, the boy wondered if he had died, and if he would soon see Anubis, Guardian of the Scales, ready to weigh his heart against Ma’at, Embodiment of Truth. He wondered if his heart would pass the test, or if he would fail and be handed over to Ammit, Eater of Souls.
Then, slowly, the light returned. Only it wasn’t light, it was still as dark as ever in his narrow hiding place. It only seemed light in comparison to… What? To where? Wherever it was that he had been, where the weakest of moons would have been as the sun, and where the screams of his dying village had been silenced. Now they returned, but the boy didn’t hear them, distracted by the disappearance of the soldier that had been reaching for him. All was as it had been, but the soldier was gone, his torch fallen into the dust and guttering. The boy stared, unable to comprehend.

Around the edges of his vision, the struggling fire made the shadows dance. But he thought, maybe, that they were moving on their own, reaching toward him as the soldier had.

*You will not die today, boy.*

He jumped, pressing back against the wall harder than ever, his eyes darting from side to side in search of whoever had spoken so close to him.

*You will not die*, it repeated, and the boy realized that he couldn’t hear the voice, it seemed to be coming from his own mind.

*And if you so wish, you need never fear death again…*

Disembodied souls did not dream. Souls free of the demands of the flesh had no need to sleep. So what this soul experienced could not be called an awakening from a nightmare, so much as shaking free of tangled memories. Even so, those memories were the very stuff of nightmares, and the soul was not slow about brushing them away.

The razing of that tiny town on the west side of the Great Mother Nile, and the slaughter of its people was a memory the soul would never forget, and never wanted to. After the Pharaoh’s army had left, he, the soul now trapped in this limbo, had been the only survivor. He’d heard every one of his fellow villagers be put to the sword, had seen some of what had been done to them, and they were memories burned into his very essence. Later he had learned why his village had been massacred, and exactly what it was that had been done to them in that hidden temple.

The slaughter of nearly one hundred people, and the binding of their very souls, for seven trinkets.

If the Pharaoh had ordered the destruction of his home because he believed it to be a den of thieves, he might have eventually forgiven. Though, possibly not, as well. That night, still as raw and vivid in his mind as when he had laid hidden in the alley, included the details of what had been in that temple. The tables, the long, complicated runnels carved into the floor to form a pattern, the huge vats hung over flames stoked to white hot heat… No, perhaps he would never have been able to excuse the deeds, whatever the motivation, but when it was all for seven golden items…

His quest for revenge had pitted him against the Pharaoh of all the Upper Kingdom of Egypt, man said to be descended of the Gods, and all his legions. To avenge the death of a village would have a single man battling against an entire nation. It was the kind of tale children were told at their parents’ knee, and not one likely to end in the favor of the underdog. Not in the waking world. But then, if Pharaoh were a God on Earth, then he, the underdog, had powerful allies. Powerful enough to face the Gods of Egypt.

Except something had gone wrong, and now he was here. Not defeated, for even after death he would not accept defeat, he clung even to the entrapment of his soul if it meant he would have another chance to destroy his enemies. He waited, a prisoner of one of those golden trinkets that had left an entire village empty, fit only for the jackals and snakes.
But he would have his revenge. He would. It was not only his soul that was held prisoner, but somewhere, in another item, that of the Pharaoh, as well. It was only a matter of time for his second opportunity to arise, and even if it took until the end of eternity, he would be there at the end of all things, still waiting.

Though what he might be at the end of all that time, he didn’t know. At the end of eternity, he wasn’t sure if he would still be a man. He could already feel the boundaries of his identity softening and chipping away, and that of others pressing into him. He was not the only soul trapped within the item; there was also that ally, the one capable of facing the Gods, there with him.

As were the many fractured and still terrified souls of the entire village of Kul Elna.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of these, so I’ll try to be brief.

**Ra:** Also known as the father of the Gods, he is usually depicted as having the head of a hawk, sometimes also with a sun disk.

**Nuit:** Also known as Nut, she is the sister/wife of Geb, God of the earth and mother of Isis, Osiris, Neith, and Seth.

**Anubis:** The jackal-headed God of death and mummification. He watches over the rituals of death and the weighing of hearts on a person’s death.

**Ma’at:** Goddess of truth, justice and harmony, seen as either a woman with a feather in her hair or as… a feather. The feather hearts are weighed against, in fact.

**Ammit:** Not a Goddess and not worshipped, Ammit is a demon living close by the scales of justice, having the head of a crocodile, the upper body of a lion and the lower body of a hippopotamus (the three big ‘man eaters’ of Ancient Egypt). If one hasn’t lived by the principles of Ma’at and their heart is found too heavy, they are devoured by Ammit.

**Ancient Egyptian History:** I’m trying to stay fairly accurate, but the very first part seen here, with the Priest-Mages and their understanding of magic… Yeah, I made that up. This is where the ‘fiction’ in ‘fanfiction’ comes into play. ;D

**Zorc Necrophades:** This is another place where I’m playing with what’s unknown to fit my purposes in the story. So far as I know, we don’t get any backstory for Zorc other than ‘Lord of Darkness’, which leaves some room for interpretation. This is mine.

**Timeline:** Obviously this first section is many, many years before the time seen in Millennium/Memory World. I’m never going to pin down exactly when that is. As for when in real time I’m putting the Millennium World, when Pharaoh Atem and everyone are, we’re going to be somewhere between the late New Kingdom and early Third Intermediate Periods (1150 – 850 BC). This seems like a fairly good time to be set for what we see in canon, with what they have in way of culture while being a time of lots of change. (Again, not too specific for plot convenience.)
Law of Polarity: The laws mentioned were inspired pretty heavily from the seven Hermetic Principles found in the Kybalion, (look ‘em up, way too much to explain in a fanfic notation), but this one was pretty much lifted as it was. I love the Hermetic Principles, and reading this one just got me thinking a lot, so it had to show up somewhere. Those interested but don’t want to look it up, the Principle of Polarity: "Everything is Dual; everything has poles; everything has its pair of opposites; like and unlike are the same; opposites are identical in nature, but different in degree; extremes meet; all truths are but half-truths; all paradoxes may be reconciled."

Kul Elna: The fictional village that was razed to create the seven Millennium Items and where ‘Bakura’ came from. While doing research for this I found it mentioned (I don’t remember where) that it was based on the real village Qurna. Considering where it is in relation to Luxor (Thebes in ancient Egypt and the capital during the New Kingdom), and the eerily familiar pictures of the place, I believe it. Check it out, it’s weird.

Thanks for reading, everyone!
"Nerd!"

A pair of hands, large as plates from the feel of them, shoved Ryō hard from behind. It took him by surprise and he landed badly with a yelp of pain, dropping the figure he’d been holding, cracking one knee into the pavement and scraping the heel of one of his hands. He whimpered at the pain and made a quick grab for the figure he dropped, trying to keep it safe and out of sight, but someone else was quicker. A grubby hand snatched it away and brought it before the sneering face of another boy.

"What’s this, nerd?" Standing over Ryō was a ten-year-old with a fat face named Taro. He peered at the figure he held between two fingers, squinting his already tiny eyes to make out the details.

Ryō flinched. Not from the name calling, he was far too used to that to be much affected by it anymore. But it upset him to see his precious figurine in Taro’s uncaring grip. It was a new one, one of the rarest kinds for his new tabletop game. He knew it would be a bad idea to bring something so valuable to school, but he just couldn’t bear to leave it at home. It had to stay close to him. So he’d slipped it into a pocket, only intending to touch it now and then to assure himself it was there, like a good luck charm. But then… no one had seemed to be near or looking his way… and he’d just wanted to take a quick look…

And now he was on the ground, knee and hand stinging terribly, and Taro holding the figure as though it were something a cat had just finished with, his piggy eyes glinting malevolently.

"It’s just a figurine," he mumbled, not looking Taro in the eye in case he took it as defiance. He held out a hand, the one he scraped on the pavement. "Please give it back."

Taro’s face screwed up even further with the effort of thought. "A figurine? Like an action figure?" Ryō opened his mouth to agree, hoping the term ‘action figure’ might save it from whatever horrid fate was developing Taro’s puny brain. Before he could get a word out, however, another familiar voice interrupted. "No, Taro, not an action figure."

Ryō turned his head to see Suichi, a boy a year older than Taro in body and about five or so in intelligence. He looked down at Ryō and smirked, the expression weirdly incompatible with his innocent baby face. "That would be far too cool for this loser," he said sweetly. He walked past Ryō toward his flunky and pretended to examine the hostage miniature closely. "See, look," he pointed, causing Taro to squint further. "If it were a real action figure, then it would have moving parts. Besides, who ever heard of an action figure in a dress?"
Taro threw his head back and laughed, Suichi’s smirk widened and Ryou dropped his head, his face burning. “It’s not a dress,” he muttered into the ground. “They’re wizard’s robes…”

“A dress!” Taro crowed at the top of his voice, ignoring Ryou’s quiet denial. “Baby Bakura plays with dolls in dresses! Not just a nerd, a prissy-boy nerd!” He continued to laugh, seeming not to notice when Suichi took the toy out of his hand.

“Noo…” He came close to Ryou, so his shoes were right under the younger boy’s nose. “I think it’s a little worse than that.” Suichi crouched down, his face inches away from the top of Ryou’s head, who refused to look up. He couldn’t see the older boy’s face, but he felt as a handful of his white hair was held in a deceptively soft grip and braced himself. “I think maybe the long haired prissy-boy is actually a long haired prissy-girl. What do you think, prissy-girl?”

Ryou didn’t answer, just stared at the gray pavement scattered with sharp gravel between his hands. He was relieved that all of this was happening around the side of the building, out of sight of the rest of the school. It was why he had come this way in the first place, to take that one, furtive look at the miniature in his pocket, was because no one was likely to catch him at it. Taro and Suichi must have seen him sneak away and followed him. Of course, now fewer people meant that the chance of rescue was practically nil.

He concentrated entirely on the tiny world between his hands, on how sharp-edged pebbles pressed into his palms, and how the scrapes to his hand and his knee throbbed in time with his pulse. He did his best to tune out the itchiness of his eyes, the sound of Suichi’s breathing, Taro’s chortles, and the feel of his hair being held.

Pain flared across Ryou’s scalp as Suichi suddenly twisted and pulled his hair. “I asked you a question, Bakura. Do you think you’re a girl or a boy?” The boy’s voice, despite what he was doing, didn’t change from its pleasant tenor.

Ryou grit his teeth to keep from making any noise. He wasn’t sure, but he had the feeling that if he made any sort of protest Suichi would only make it worse for him. When he thought he could speak without his voice betraying just how much it hurt, he said, “Not a girl. I’m a boy.”

“Are you sure?” Suichi tugged sharply at the handful of white strands.

Ryou grunted. He was sure he could feel some of his hair coming loose with all the pulling Suichi was doing. “Yes,” he managed.

The pressure eased off, and the older boy’s voice became even sweeter, as sweet as candy. “Well then, if you’re a boy, then you shouldn’t be playing with toys like this, should you?”

Ryou tilted his head to the side so he could see Suichi’s face without ripping out an entire handful of hair. Suichi’s face was the very picture of childish innocence, with round cheeks and warm brown eyes that crinkled in their corners. Teachers and parents both would coo over him and his charming little smile, but Ryou and a few others knew what a fake it really was. They saw how he used his sweet exterior to hide his sour interior, how he would mask his cruelties with a darling face. Boys like Taro couldn’t get away with nearly as much, just because they such angelic features. Whereas Suichi could do as he liked and walk away unscathed because no one could believe such a charming boy could do anything malicious.

Looking up at him from his place on the hard concrete, Ryou could believe it. And not because a good portion of his hair was still balled up in the boy’s fist. It was Suichi’s eyes. Those warm, deep brown eyes did not smile or lighten. Those eyes were flat and empty, and filled Ryou with more dread than any amount of snarling or threats could ever achieve.
With Ryou’s gaze on him, Suichi dangled the stolen figurine before his eyes. With Tarp still standing close and restricted by the grip in his hair, Ryou dared not make a grab for it. “Dolls aren’t good toys for a big boy like you to play with,” he mocked.

Ryou didn’t respond. There was nothing he could think of to say that wouldn’t just make his situation worse. Suichi gave his hair another twist, earning a flinch from Ryou, and then tossed the toy back to Taro, who caught it with a slight fumble. The larger boy waved the miniature at Ryou, pulling a face at him over Suichi’s shoulder.

“Taro,” Suichi spoke to him, still staring straight at Ryou. “Bakura here doesn’t need that girl’s toy anymore. Break it.”

“No!” Ryou jerked in Suichi’s grip, tearing free even more hair and starting tears in his eyes. He didn’t escape; his hair was only yanked harder to keep him still. “Don’t break it, it’s rare! Just… give it to someone else, or throw it away. But don’t break it!”

“Now, now,” Suichi soothed, his tone all honey to hide the barbs. “If we do that, then who’s to say that you won’t find a way to get it back? We can’t have that, now, can we?”

“Can’t have that,” Taro echoed and chuckled as though it were a great joke. While Ryou watched, Suichi shifting to a side to give him a clear view, Taro dropped the figure to the ground and brought down a heavy foot on top of it. It was a rare figurine, but it was made of PVC, not lead, and it crunched readily beneath the sole of Taro’s shoe. The large boy ground the pieces of Ryou’s broken figure into the gravel with relish.

Suichi, still wearing his gentle, empty-eyed smile, shook his fingers free of Ryou’s hair. With his figure already destroyed, it hardly mattered anymore, and Ryou didn’t move once he was released. “I think that’s enough for now.”

The small sounds of PVC being crunched into ever smaller pieces suddenly ceased. “That’s all?” Taro didn’t even attempt to conceal the disappointment in his voice.

Suichi stood, and brushed off his hands against his slacks, stepping away from the still form of Ryou. “Of course. We are his friends, after all, just looking out for his best interests. It wouldn’t do to have our friend walking around with a girl’s toy. Or bruises,” he added pointedly.

Anyone watching Taro’s face as he worked out the implications of what Suichi said would have seen comprehension lighting up his face like a slow dawn over mountainous countryside. “Uh, right. So…”

“So we will be going back inside to attend our classes,” Suichi supplied. “It’s nearly time and it wouldn’t do to be late.”

Taro hesitated, his brow crinkling with worry as he looked at Ryou, who refused to rise to his feet while the other two remained. Suichi followed his gaze and smirked. “Don’t worry about Bakura, Taro. I’m sure he can find his own way in, and he wouldn’t dream of troubling anyone inside with our little chat.”

Ryou didn’t bother replying aloud, but rather bowed his head further, refusing to look up at his two tormentors staring down at him. Despite the valiant effort he was putting forth to keep from showing any further weakness for them to exploit, tears were on the verge of spilling onto his cheeks. Even digging his teeth into the inside of his cheek wasn’t doing much to stop them. Looking up with a face like that would only give his bullies even more ammunition. Not that they needed more.
The sound of receding footfalls came as a relief to Ryou; the light, almost silent steps of Suichi and the heavier, uncaring set from Taro. Ryou finally allowed himself to relax, and sat back on his heels after sweeping the crushed and shattered model into his hands. Through the blur of unshed tears he stared down at the pieces of what had only a few minutes before been his most prized possession. It wasn’t even the destruction of his rare figure that made his eyes fill with stinging tears and every breath a strain; it was how familiar this kind of scenario was becoming. It seemed that every day had at least one kind of incident, something more than just the taunts or sly kicks at his shins in the hallways, and the bully never seemed to catch any sort of punishment for it. Occasionally one would be caught in the act, but if they ever got more than a harsh word, then it was like as not to go even harder for Ryou the next time. Even without Suichi’s subtle warning not to tattle, Ryou knew better than to try. There had been no witnesses, if any teachers confronted the two with this incident they would know exactly who would have ratted them out, and who to revenge themselves on. Ryou had already learned that lesson long ago.

If he’d had any friends it might have been different, but even those who didn’t think of him as a hopeless introvert were reluctant to make friends with the human equivalent of a punching bag. If they did, who was to say that they wouldn’t become targets by association? Ryou, rather than putting any effort into making friends, went out of his way to make himself as small and unnoticeable as possible. Why would Ryou put himself forward when attention of any kind usually turned out badly?

Ryou sniffled and pocketed the broken figurine; he might be able to salvage it, he told himself. He just didn’t understand why playing certain kinds of games made him such a target for this kind of thing. So he liked to play tabletop role-playing games, was that really so unusual that it called for such ostracism? Or was it just something about him personally that made him such a perfect mark?

He wiped away the one tear that managed to escape, rubbing grit into his cheek and salt into his scraped palm, and felt the all too familiar hot knot of anger writhe in his belly. The tears were useless, as was the fury that caused them, but while he could stem the tears, he couldn’t do the same with the fury. It just wasn’t fair! Why should he be so miserably singled out and picked on? Why couldn’t he be left alone?

When the bell sounded, calling in everyone from recess, Ryou was fairly sure he’d found all of the tiny pieces of his broken figure amongst the gravel. Any hope of repairs had been dashed effectively, but he still gathered them up and stowed them in his pocket, then hurried along inside with the press of other children.

“Ryou!” A small flying tackle aimed at his midsection swiftly followed the excited shout.

The air was knocked out of Ryou in a whoosh as he stumbled back, stopping abruptly when his back met the wall. Still holding onto one of his shoes he had been in the process of removing and clutching his book bag that had slipped from his shoulder, Ryou looked down at the dark head buried into his jacket at about the level of his ribs. “Hello to you, too, Amane,” he said when he could draw breath again.

The head tilted back to reveal a bright, smiling face, remarkably similar to his own. Same snub of a nose, same small mouth, same shape to the deep nut-brown eyes, even the same pointed chin beneath the layer of baby fat that Amane had yet to grow out of. Only her hair was notably different, black as a starless midnight as his was white as fallen snow.

She grinned up at her brother widely, her smile only having recently recovered from a major gap after she lost two of her front teeth. He smiled back down at her warily. “Nii-chan, nii-chan! Mama got us some new paints today, come play!” Amane bounced a little bit as she spoke,
jouncing Ryou.

Normally Ryou would play with his little sister readily. There was a wide gap between their ages, he was nine and she was six, but he didn’t mind playing games with her. So long as he kept his models out of her reach, there was never any conflict. But today he just wanted to be left alone. The run-in he’d had with Taro and Suichi had put a major crimp in his day, and that hadn’t been the last incident before the last bell finally rang. When the time to pack up his books and change his shoes had come he’d counted up three more minor confrontations. Now he just wanted rest, to get his homework done and not think about school again until he had to.

“Not right now, Amane,” he said, setting down his book bag carefully and trying to get her to let go. She clung to him tenaciously, refusing to be pried free.

“But nii-chaaaaaan...!” she pouted, squeezed him tighter when he tried to slip a hand under her arm to lever her away. “They’re so pretty, and I want you to see what I painted already!”

Ryou sighed, shimmied around with Amane still attached to him, and sat on the lip of the genkan to finish taking off his shoes. Amane couldn’t hang on without taking a nose dive into the floor, so she let go and pouted at him. “I’ll come and look later, okay? I’m hungry and have some homework to do first.”

“But dinner won’t be for hours, and your homework takes forever. Come look now and do your homework later.”

He gave his sister a look over his shoulder. “Are we being bratty today, Amane-chan?”

The girl’s expression was somewhere between the pout and being rebellious. Ryou remembered their mother giving that look a name once, what had it been? Ah, yes. ‘Petulant’.

“Nooooo,” Amane said eventually, sounding every bit as though she wished she could say ‘yes’ and get away with it.

“Then let me get some things done first, okay? You know how important it is to get schoolwork done.”

His sister nodded, downcast but no longer arguing. Seeing her crestfallen over something so small, some of Ryou’s resolve melted, and he offered a compromise. “I’ll see if Mama will let me have a snack, then do my math homework first, then come look at your pictures, okay? I’ll finish the rest after.”

Amane immediately brightened, nodded, and ran off to – Ryou assumed – set out the paintings she most wanted him to see.

Ryou smiled after his sister. At least he could depend on a friendly welcome from her after a less than enjoyable day at school. Kicking off the last shoe and setting it in its place, then pulling on his house slippers, the boy scooped up his bag and made his way to the kitchen. His mother, against expectations, wasn’t there yet to start preparing the evening meal. Rather than seek her out to ask, he grabbed a small box of crackers out of the bottom cupboard. His mother usually insisted on their asking for between meal snacks, but he had noticed she didn’t mind so much when it was a snack right after getting home, and as long as Amane didn’t see him and pick up the same habit.

With his small prize, Ryou then made for one of the two little bedrooms at the back of the apartment. He was glad to have his own room, and knew how lucky he was to have one. His parents weren’t rich, but they were comfortable enough. Even so, it was hard to find places with
excess space like this. It was one of those little luxuries that they indulged in.

Walking down the short hallway that connected the living room with the two small bedrooms and the bathroom, he paused at the small hall table to stare at something that hadn’t been there that morning. Beside the sky blue vase of orchids drooping their heavy heads and a wireless phone on its base was a small – tiny, really – yellowish box. Ryou’s eyes narrowed, he bent to look at it more closely. Definitely a box, it looked as though it had been carved from some kind of stone, though the harder he looked, the more it looked like it was bone, or maybe even ivory, yellowed with age. It was carved all the way around with tiny elephants, complete with slender tusks and wrinkles at the knees, walking through grasses and reeds. There were no hinges, the lid was sized just so it fit over the lip of the box and made to be lifted away whole. It was an impressive piece, and very pretty.

It was also new to the apartment, and not the kind of thing his mother would buy on a whim.

Fresh, new anger suddenly rose inside him. Ryou stalked the rest of the way to his room, shutting the door behind him just shy of enough force to be a slam. His book bag was tossed into a chair, the crackers flung onto the desk, both appetite and initiative to begin his homework practically extinguished.

It wasn’t as though the box were a strange item to find in his home. The apartment was scattered with similar, some were more detailed, some plainer, larger, and all of them from Egypt or very near. His and Amane’s father was an Egyptologist, a fairly successful and prominent one who owned a museum somewhere in Japan. But he was also something of an adventurer, a scholar bitten with wanderlust that hadn’t abated even after marrying and having two children. Rather than remaining in the country, overseeing the museum and sifting through the discoveries sent to him, he spent as much time in Egypt himself as he possibly could. It was a good year when he and Amane got to see their father for more than eight weeks out of fifty-two. To make up for it, he would send gifts, unique little finds that could make it through customs, as though baubles were an even trade-off.

Ryou’s cheeks were hot, his hands balled into fists as he glared at nothing, rage running through his veins. The box was new, which meant it had arrived in the post that day. If there had been a delivery, then it meant his father didn’t plan on coming home any time soon. If he did, he would have just brought the box with him rather than send it through the post. He wasn’t coming home…

Ryou’s birthday was in three days. He was turning ten this year, and his father had all but sworn in blood that he would be home for it. A promise that was obviously going to be broken.

It explained the new paints Amane was playing with. She had been looking forward to their father’s visit as well, and while she might not understand the significance of the package from Egypt, their mother would. The paints were a pre-emptive peace offering. A peace offering for Amane, but none for him. Ryou ground his teeth; felt the four sharp semi-circles of his nails dig into each palm as his fists balled up even tighter. Not that he would have accepted any kind of peace offering, but it might have been nice to have at least been offered one.

He took a deep breath, shook out his hands, and forced himself to relax. The anger still lay there, waiting coiled in the pit of his belly like a serpent. He stood and breathed for a minute, trying to calm down, without much success.

This would make the fourth birthday of his that his father had been absent for that he could remember. Every year he sent apologies, increasingly elaborate presents, and increasingly ardent vows to be home in time for the next one. It was becoming as dependable a birthday tradition as cake. Unlike cake, though, his father’s false promises and weak excuses only left a bitter taste in
his mouth. What made it worse was how his mother only ever deemed it necessary to comfort Amane when their father failed to put in an appearance, even though Ryou could only remember one of her birthdays that he’d missed. He could understand that she was younger and needed more attention and explaining, but he was outright ignored. It was like she assumed her son needed no reassurances whatsoever. But then, that was fairly typical of her, to focus solely on her daughter, and leave the son to fend for himself.

When he felt like he could walk without stomping, Ryou went to his desk and began emptying out the book bag, stacking up texts neatly on one corner, using a tight self-control born from years of practice. The books were stacked so precisely he might have been using a straight edge. It was usually a sign of how irritated he was: the more self-control he had to use to keep his hands from shaking, the neater things around him became as a result. His room, he noted wryly, was nearly always immaculate.

It wasn’t a very good beginning of the school term, he reflected. Worse than usual, in fact. Normally he had more time before the bullying began in earnest, at least a week, maybe two, before something like what happened with Taro and Suichi. They were starting early this year right along with the term. He wanted to believe that since they were beginning early they would ease off early, as well, but he seriously doubted it. More likely he had a very, very long year to look forward to.

If he had just one friend, then it might not be so bad. He didn’t expect anyone to leap to his defense, but to have someone on his side at school, someone who he knew wasn’t out to get him. He loved Amane, but she was hardly the source of support he needed. What he needed…

Sitting down at the desk, something stabbed into his hip. He yelped, jumped back up to his feet in surprise. There was nothing to be seen, but there was something in his pocket.

Ryou pulled out the handful of broken shards of plastic that had once been his rare RPG figurine. He’d forgotten he’d saved them. Laying them all out across the top of his desk, it quickly became apparent that it was unsalvageable. There were one or two pieces missing, despite how carefully he’d searched the gravel, but even if he’d gathered every scrap, some of the pieces of PVC were so warped as to be unusable. It would be impossible to try and repair.

For a while Ryou just stared at the pieces, considering sweeping them all into the garbage and forgetting all about it. Suddenly he stood, crossed the room and came back with a small tin box. Inside, when he opened it, were many, many more pieces of other broken figurines that, for one reason or another, he had saved rather than thrown away.

Fired up with a new drive and completely ignoring the tidy stack of textbooks at his elbow, Ryou began picking through his collection of broken figures. One figure by itself may not be salvageable, but surely there would be pieces here somewhere that would fit it…

“Happy birthday, nii-chan!”

“Happy birthday, Ryou.”

Ryou smiled, trying to look as happy as he should for a boy reaching double digits. He felt rather guilty that he couldn’t seem to muster any real enthusiasm. There was a cake, a good sized one for only three people to share, and balloons, an addition made at Amane’s insistence, since a birthday just wasn’t a real birthday without them. On the table he, Amane and their mother sat around were three presents, all wrapped in bright, patterned paper and topped with bows. Amane was barely managing to keep her seat, she was so wound up. A birthday was a birthday as far as she was
concerned, no matter if it was hers or not. Their mother, Noriko, sat and smiled as she looked over her two children. She was still young for a woman with two kids, though there were the beginnings of fine lines at the corners of her mouth and her black eyes. Her hair, though, was still auburn through and through, with no touch of gray. She had done what she could to make this little party as cheerful as possible, it was her touch that made the gifts so perfectly wrapped, the cake so carefully frosted.

Yet all Ryou could see was the fourth side of the table, conspicuously empty of his father, and how echoingly bare the whole apartment felt with only the three of them celebrating. He could remember past birthdays when there had been friends, but that had been some time ago. This just felt forced, even the balloons, like they were all pretending it was a happy occasion, but knew it wasn’t.

Still, he tried to smile.

“Thank you,” he said, and then wondered what else there was to say.

He was saved from having to think about it by Amane, who threatened to bounce right off of her zabuton, squeaking, “Open your presents! Open your presents!” She had been a little upset when their father hadn’t appeared, but the disappointment had melted away quickly enough with the prospect of cake.

Noriko smiled and put a gentle hand over her daughter’s to settle her down. “Hush, Amane, he will. Be patient.” She smiled at Amane, who pouted at her mother but she stopped bouncing. The elder woman turned to Ryou with the same smile, eyes crinkled and warm. “Which one would you like to open first?”

Conscious of Amane watching him, he looked over the three gifts and made a show of thinking, as though it were a difficult decision. He held his chin and squinted at the presents, tilting his head. “I don’t know…” After a minute, he looked at his sister, who was near to bursting a gasket and cracked a tiny smile. “Which do you think, Amane?”

This time the girl did come up from her zabuton, throwing off her mother’s hand and seizing upon the smallest of the gifts, a little bigger than his hand, and wrapped in bright pink paper with a white bow. “This one, this one!”

Ryou took it and raised an eyebrow at the girly wrapping. “Is this one from you?”

Amane nodded proudly, grinning from ear to ear.

Ryou chuckled and carefully unwrapped the gift, pulling up each bit of tape and undoing each fold. Inside was a small mirror, much like the kind women used to apply makeup, but with a handmade frame, decorated with painted flowers and lopsided blobs that might have been butterflies. The face that looked back at him from the confines of that cheerful frame looked happy.

“Do you like it? I made it at school last week!” Instead of bouncing, now Amane was leaning toward her brother in concentration, trying to read his reaction.

He smiled at her. “Of course I do, it’s very pretty. You did a wonderful job.”

“Yay! I thought so!” Amane left her seat to fling her arms around Ryou’s neck and give him a little kiss on the cheek. “Happy birthday, nii-chan!”

Mindful of the mirror in his hand as he did so, Ryou hugged her back.
Once the first gift was unwrapped, and the tension of waiting for her brother to see the fruits of all her labors at the kindergarten dissipated, Amane settled down. The next gift, from his mother, wrapped in blue and just as carefully unwrapped as the first, proved to be a set of modeling paints and small brushes. Perfect for the figures that he liked to paint himself, a very practical gift that he had pointed out to her a couple of weeks before. Much better than the extra school supplies he normally got.

And then there was only one gift to go. Ryou stared at it a moment, wondering if her even wanted to touch it. Just looking at it, a flattish square wrapped in rust colored paper and a gold bow, reminded him of all of his anger. It was hard to see that present as anything other than an apology, a bribe to forgive and forget his father’s continued absence. Opening it would be accepting it, accepting it would be like saying it was alright his father never showed any interest in him. That it didn’t hurt and that he didn’t care.

Noriko, seeing him hesitate, slid the package down to him. “And this one is from your father, Ryou,” she said, a note of hope in her voice.

Ryou didn’t touch it. A flat, rough square, it was about twice the size of Amane’s gift, and two inches high. It was so plain, but Ryou hated it intensely. He looked up from the rust package to the empty side of the table. It was no replacement for who was meant to be here.

Noriko correctly guessed the track of her son’s thoughts and interjected herself into them. “He sent a letter along with the present, Ryou. He’s sorry he couldn’t make it for your birthday; there’s been some important find in the Theban Hills. He hopes to have everything wrapped up to where he can leave in a month or two.”

The boy didn’t respond. It was the same excuse he heard every year, only the details ever changed. Something came up somewhere, something more important than his family waiting at home that kept him in Egypt, digging through the dust of centuries. Rather than taking time to know his son, he sent back curios centering on his own interests. It really was all he knew, Ryou supposed. The people he tried the hardest to know were hundreds of years dead, most of his days spent bent over tiny chisels and brushes, hunting out secrets.

When he finally reached for the last present, Noriko relaxed visibly. Even Amane seemed a little relieved. Ryou was so careful and slow in unwrapping this gift that he doubted the tape he pulled free even left marks on the paper. Inside was a box he recognized as the kind jewelry was normally put in. The corners were rounded and the surface was soft, almost velvety, and the size was right for a necklace. Curiosity peaked in spite of himself; Ryou found the front of the clamshell box and pried it open.

He gasped aloud when he saw what was waiting inside.

A golden, gleaming eye was staring back out at him from the darkness, glinting in a ray of sunlight that sneaked in. Opening the box further, the watching eye became a simple design, set in the center of an upright triangle of metal. Both eye and triangle were caught in the center of a hollow ring of more metal, from which hung five, freely swinging pieces, each tapering to wickedly sharp points. And all of it was wrought from – what looked like – gold.

Ryou didn’t notice that Amane had come beside him close when he hadn’t said anything until she cooed and reached out a hand to touch one of the points. “Pretty… What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Ryou admitted, looking up at his mother. She shrugged.

“All he said about it in his letter was that he had found it in an out-of-the-way stall in the Theban
Hills and that when he saw it, it seemed like it was meant just for you.”

Ryou frowned at the explanation, but didn’t give it too much thought. Instead he found himself staring at his new, golden – was it really gold? – acquisition, trying to puzzle out what it could be. The ring that held all of the various pieces together wasn’t completely smooth, he noticed. There were small, interlocking loops that attached the points to the ring, and on either side of these loops were ridges of metal that wrapped all the way around the ring. At the apex of the triangle there was a sixth loop, slightly larger than the rest, but no point attached to it. All of the points were evenly spaced along the bottom half of the ring so they could hang, why one at the top? A place where the whole piece could be hung from, maybe?

Ryou ran a finger over the empty loop.

He blinked.

The metal was cold.

Of course, it made sense for the metal to be cold. Why did it seem strange that it would be? And just a second ago, something had seemed… off. What had it been?

Ryou jumped when his mother put a hand on his shoulder. He looked up into her smiling, yet empty face. “Time for cake?”

He looked down at the golden ring, feeling uneasy for some reason. He put it down to the eye that made it look as though he were being watched as much as doing the watching. He snapped the box closed and nodded. “Yes. Cake sounds good.”

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Ryou shut the door of his bedroom behind him and leaned against it with a sigh. Who knew that pretending to be happy could be so exhausting? The cake had been good, and watching a film with mother and sister had been pleasant enough. Dinner had been delicious and Ryou had stuffed himself freely, and playing with his sister was a welcome alternative to the homework still waiting on his desk. Still, it was tiring to go through it all acting as bright and cheerful as possible. In the end, he felt like he had done more to make sure they had a good day than the other way around.

He went around the room, putting away his gifts. The paints and brushes went into a drawer of his desk, next to the supplies he already had for his model making. The mirror and its bright little frame went on his bedside table. And the box with the golden ring and eye, after a minute of careful consideration, was very deliberately flung against a wall, where it struck with a loud thump and a protesting rattle from the odd object inside.

His father thought he could be mollified with shiny toys? That his affection could be so easily secured with bits of metal? Did he mean so little to the man that this was all he was worth? Not worth time away from his precious sand dunes or bits of broken pottery, or the focus it would require to just sit and talk for a little while, no. But useless curiosities, of the same kind he sent home every month; those were what Ryou amounted to, now. A trinket.

Ryou sat down at his desk, dug out the little figurine that he’d been slowly repairing over the last few days. Having something to do with his hands would help calm him down, and he was nearly finished. He could finish it tonight if he tried. Though, to be fair, ‘repair’ was an optimistic term for what he’d had to do with the model. It was more like complete reconstruction, using not only pieces of the rare figure, but plenty from other figures as well. The result so far was odd, but interesting. He took out his glues, tweezers, a pair of strong scissors for trimming and a small spool of cord to tie the pieces that needed a few minutes before the glue set and dug into the project with
As he worked he let his mind wander, his thoughts eventually streaming easily from one subject to the next without ever stopping to concentrate on any particular one. Putting together models, even ones that didn’t fit together properly, didn’t require a lot of thought, and he’d done so many before his fingers worked at the tiny pieces and tools automatically. He thought about the hobby shop two streets down where he got nearly all of his games, figures and so forth from and thought about their newest sets that had come in earlier that week. That led to thinking about the rumors he’d heard about the newest tabletop RPG set to come out before the end of the year, called Monster World. The few pictures he had seen of the different interlocking board pieces, scenery and building props you could get had nearly set him drooling. He itched to play that game. Though, that would require someone to play with. He doubted his mother would be interested, Amane wouldn’t have the patience, and neither of them would be likely to grasp the mechanics.

To play, he would have to call on someone closer to his own age who might be interested in RPG’s. He tried to think of anyone he knew who would be willing to play if he got a board. It was a short list. So far as he knew, no one at his school liked to play games that didn’t involve a controller or running after balls, even if anyone were on speaking terms with him. There were a few people at the hobby shop that he had spoken to, but none of them were his age, all of them being in middle school or higher, and unlikely to want to play with someone as young and poorly skilled as he was. He could assemble and paint the accessories reasonably well because he’d had plenty of practice at that, but almost none at actual gameplay. It didn’t stop him from thinking up scenarios for future games, though. That was almost as much fun as assembling the playing pieces.

Let’s see, he thought, laying a tiny line of glue. Let’s start with a simple warrior who, unknown to him, is under the influence of a curse…

The figure, with much of the tricky parts done in the days before, came together quickly under his hands as Ryō thought out the main plot points for a protagonist who’s main enemy was the product of some evil sorcerer’s experiment. It was quite involved, and even some of the protagonist’s friends would end up fighting against him, believing they were doing the right thing. Ryō almost wished he’d written it all down, but then, the opportunity to use it would probably never come, so it hardly mattered.

The last piece fitted into place with a little click. The glue still wet, Ryō carefully set it on one of the shelves above his desk to let it dry and give it a good, critical look.

It was very, very obvious that what he was looking at was the product of more than one model glued together, but not because it was haphazard or broken looking. He had been careful to use pieces from figures about the same overall size, but the styles and colors were different so there was no mistaking it for anything other than a mixture. In one or two places he’d had to trim and shape pieces until they fit their neighbors, but he noticed that those joins were where it was hardest to tell where one ended and the next began. Ryō was proudest of the face, though. That in itself was a combination of three separate models. It now looked back at him using the eyes of two different miniatures and smiled at him with the mouth of a third, and the overall shape of the head was perfect.

It was a strange composite figure, made up of bits he never would have thought would go together, but it all worked out to an interesting piece. One of a kind, that was certain. He would have to think of an intriguing RPG scenario to go along with it.

With that done, there was only homework left to do before bed. Just a page of math… but he really didn’t want to try crunching numbers. It was getting late and he objected to math on birthdays.
While deciding whether to sit and work on his paper or to get up early and do it in the morning, an itch started to develop between his shoulder blades. The ticklish feeling of being watched crept over him and made him turn, expecting to find... something.

The velvet box he had thrown against the wall, still laying where it had fallen to the floor, was all that met his eyes. He didn’t know why, but even with the lid firmly closed, it still seemed to be watching him, waiting.

Telling himself that it was stupid and untidy to just leave it on the floor, and that that was why he couldn’t stand to leave it there, Ryou walked to it and picked it up. Even knowing what to expect this time, it was still weird to find a metallic eye staring out at him from the gloomy interior of the box. It took him a minute of staring at the thing before he reached in to touch it again.

The metal was still cold to his fingertips, and smooth. There was an odd quality to it, unlike the metal of his mother’s pots and pans, a kind of liquid, buttery feel, like the metal was wet. But it was dry, Ryou rubbed his fingers together to make sure, and they showed no sign of moisture. Maybe it was just a property of the metal.

Could it really be gold? Surely not. His father wouldn’t have spent so much for a present for a ten-year-old boy. Did gold even feel... like this thing felt? He didn’t know, he’d never had a chance to feel it. He assumed gold felt the same as any other metal. No, this wasn’t gold. Probably. Though it was heavy for its size, and he was pretty sure that was one of the properties of gold. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered about the ring. Where had his father found it, what was it supposed to be, did it have some symbolic significance, were there other pieces like this one, what had possessed his father to purchase it in the first place, much less send it to his young son, thousands of miles away?

Ryou picked it up by the empty loop at the top and held it in front of his eyes. The points jangled, cutting the light to ribbons and tossing them to the dark corners of the room. The eye set in the center of the triangle gleamed a flickered, giving the thing an almost sentient appearance.

Ryou blinked, tore his eyes away from the thing. Strange how it almost felt like he was having a staring contest with it.

He put the ring down on the desk and unwound a length of cord from his spool. It wasn’t until he had tied the two ends together, forming a loop, and was threading it through the ring’s empty top loop that he wondered why.

The answer came as soon as he formed the question: So he could wear it like a necklace, of course. It was best suited as a pendant, wasn’t it?

Ryou looked at it, the cut and tied cord already being tugged into place by his hands, which seemed to move with a mind of their own. It must have been a little something left over from working on the figure. A part of him was still functioning on auto. He supposed it did rather look like an ornate pendant. It was better than any other possible purpose he could think of.

There was just enough slack in the cord to slip over his head when he tugged, and the makeshift necklace and its pendant settled into place around his neck.

The ring really was very heavy, and the cord was too thin, it cut into the back of his neck. He looked down, trying to see how it looked on him. It hung right over his sternum, the points descending a little lower, but other than that, it was impossible to tell. Well, Amane’s mirror would solve that. Holding the little hand mirror out to see as much of himself as possible, Ryou studied his reflection.
It looked, if he were to judge, absolutely ridiculous. The pendant itself looked nice enough, it just looked ridiculous on him. The pendant was large as well as gaudy, whereas he was relatively small for his age, and not the kind of person who could carry off ‘gaudy’ very well. Besides, what would a boy be doing wearing something like this? Suichi and Taro rose uncomfortably close in his memory.

He sighed, and moved to put the mirror down. Something in the reflection moved behind him. He whipped around, the ring clattering, his heart suddenly thudding in his ears, eyes darting back and forth, searching.

There was nothing there. But he’d been sure that he’d seen something in Amane’s mirror. He looked back into the glass. It was getting dark outside and he hadn’t switched his light on yet, so maybe it was just a trick of the shadows. It must have been a trick. Because it had looked, just for a moment, like a face.

But there was nothing. Nothing at all. He chuckled at himself, the sound too loud and forced to his own ears. Trying to convince his heart to slow, the ring clinked. Outside the wind whispered at his window.

Someone touched his hair.

Ryou flipped around, clapping his hands to his head. Again, no one was there and he was left feeling childish, jumping at shadows. Except he knew it couldn’t just be his imagination. Someone had brushed their fingers across the back of his hair. Just enough to send a shiver down his spine.

His breath was too fast and harsh. The wind outside gusted, rattling his window in its frame. The ring at his chest jingled. Nothing else made a noise. He strained his ears, trying to catch the smallest of noises, anything to give away the presence of… what? What was he expecting to hear?

He slapped at his own cheek. It had felt like a bug was crawling on him, a spider or an ant. But there was nothing on his hand. The sensation didn’t leave, it only spread, creeping over his face, down to his mouth and lips. It felt as though a nest of ants were trying to crawl into his mouth, his nose and ears and back into his hair.

Wiping frantically at his face, Ryou backpedaled until his back hit a wall, trying to get away from the feeling of invading insects, slapping at his own face, hardly registering when the feeling of his hair being touched returned.

He stumbled forward, intending to run from the room and find his mother, to get some kind of help, when he was punched. With an invisible car.

Ryou’s world suddenly centered on his chest, which felt like it had been crushed. His lungs refused to draw in air, his heart seemed to have stopped completely.

Ryou looked down at his chest, which for some reason was beginning to ache. He didn’t see what the problem was at first. Nothing looked out of place, he couldn’t understand why everything felt so wrong? Then the feeling of ‘wrong’ resolved into sharp, searing pain, and he saw the bright red stains seeping through the fabric of his light blue shirt.

He hadn’t noticed at first because he wasn’t used to the ring, but something was missing.

All five of the hanging points of the ring were missing. And as the stains spread, he realized that they had ripped through the shirt and plunged deep into his chest.
Suichi: I usually pick background character names based on their meanings, and this one is no different. It means ‘one lord’, perfect for a little rabble rouser, don’t you think? I picture Suichi becoming a true terror when he gets older. Like if Seto were outright evil and malicious.

Taro: And this name means ‘plump son; first son’. I’m not sure, but my thought is that in the olden days to be the eldest son meant you were more likely to get the most / best portions of food, so the meanings of plump and first are really interchangeable. How I see it, anyway.

Bakura Noriko: I actually didn’t look this name up before settling on it. It was one of those that just came naturally. For those interested, Noriko apparently means ‘law, order’. …I guess how I could see it fitting anyway. :)

Bakura Amane: Amane, for those who don’t already know, is not an invention of mine. Ryou having a younger sister is completely canon, as is her name. We’re never told how old she is in relation to Ryou, so yes, that’s my own detail. For those who do know about her and know what’s going to happen to her… yeah, we’ll get there. Don’t spoil it for everyone else, just in case. Oh, and Amane means ‘sound of the Heavens’.

Ryou’s Father: So far as I am aware, we never see Ryou’s father in canon (manga, not anime), nor do we know his name. But we do know that he is an Egyptologist and works in Egypt at least some of the time.
- Owns a Museum: I remember finding it mentioned somewhere that the museum where the stone tablet was in the Millennium World arc was actually owed by Ryou’s father. Now that I’m trying to find that particular reference I can’t find it.

Origin of the Ring: This is one instance where I am using a detail from the anime. In the anime (I don’t remember which episode, sorry) we see that Ryou’s father found the ring in Egypt at a random stall. There was something about how the ring was sold to him as being related to Duel Monsters and that Ryou’s father thought it would be perfect for his son… I’m ignoring the Duel Monsters detail (because it’s silly) and keeping the rest of it. It fits in well enough with the rest of the manga canon.

Ryou’s Age: Okay… here’s where my obsessive nature is going to show through a little. Prepare thyself, it’s going to be scary. I wanted Ryou to have the Ring for as long as possible, making him as young as possible and still fit the established canon. In Volume 8, Duel 73 we see that when Pegasus went to Egypt he saw a thief, (in Kul Elna), with the Millennium Ring, who was caught by Shadi and a few other robed people. The thief was taken away to be judged, (and was killed by the Ring), while Pegasus watched. He was of course caught and got the Millennium Eye out of the deal, but he went to Egypt a few months after his wife died, which was seven years before the time in the manga. We’re assuming that most of the young heroes are aged sixteen at the beginning of the series, which if true, would put Ryou at about nine when Pegasus was in Egypt and when – as seen – the Ring was still there as well. Giving it a little time for his father to find it and ship it, having it arrive in time for Ryou’s tenth birthday seems reasonable. That all make sense?

Of course, all that means that Ryou will have had the Ring for six years by the time he meets up with Yugi and the rest… but then, Yugi will have had the Puzzle for eight.
Longer, but then, he won’t have had any contact with his item’s spirit until the very end of that time. Think it’ll make a difference? ;D

**Theban Hills:** The Theban Hills is an area on the west side of the Nile, opposite of Thebes, and is an area near to Qurna, which is, if everyone remembers, is the real-life village I’m using as reference for Kul Elna.

**Zabuton:** A zabuton is the Japanese cushion used for sitting. I was just going to use the term ‘cushion’ for these, but thought that was a little too generic. A zabuton is something very specific, so I’m using the specific term.

**Genkan:** A genkan is the traditional Japanese entryway where shoes are taken off and traded for house slippers. Yes, you could call it a mudroom… but really, a mudroom doesn’t have the same purpose or rules as a genkan. So that term stays as well.

**Nii-chan:** This is an affectionate way of saying ‘older brother’.

*No ‘imouto-chan’?* So if I used the term nii-chan for older brother, why haven’t I used imouto-chan for younger sister? From what I understand, saying imouto-chan is a very silly way of saying ‘little sister’, more to be used if you’re teasing – like saying little-widdle sister, if I understood it right. So for the affectionate term for Amane, we’re just using Amane-chan. :)

**Thanks for reading everyone!**
The world had disappeared, and resolved itself to a few bright pinpoints of sensation. The cold floor pressing into his cheek. The thunder of his heartbeat, fluttery and erratic as a bird’s. The smell, the taste of blood, metallic and cloying. Struggling to swallow, to breathe, to scream, but his throat ignoring every command. His hand, lying limp and inert only inches away, it seemed like a mile. Looming largest of all, reducing all else to a mere inconvenience, the sea of agony at his chest. Sharp, foreign things moved under his skin, scraping and clicking over his ribs. The sound they made he felt all the way down to his toes.

Ryou opened his mouth to call for help, but nothing would come out. He tried to move, to fold his legs under him, get up, rip the ring off and throw it to the farthest corner, but all that resulted were a few scattered muscle twitches. It was like he no longer commanded his own body. Under the agony of the ring’s points burrowing into his flesh was the increasingly desperate need for air.

*I’m going to die,* he realized with terrible clarity. He wondered if it would be from lack of oxygen or if the ring, alive and murderous, would find and crush his heart first.

Distantly, Ryou felt a tear slide down his face.

Suddenly sweet, sweet air filled him. He could draw breath, and did once, twice, but just as he was prepared to cry out his throat closed up again tighter than ever. Ryou would have panicked more, except he was no longer focused on breathing. He was no longer focused on his body at all.

Like a strange kind of film, old memories were rising up before his eyes, taking up all of Ryou’s senses. Sight, smell, feel, sound, even thought, he was abruptly reliving small snippets of his past, all jumbled together in a confused tangle of perception. He would have welcomed it as a change from the nightmare reality he’d just been living, except these recollections were far from painless. Guilt, anger, resentment, betrayal, shame; emotional pain was taking the place of physical. Those little agonies he’d hoped were long dead and buried were all fresh as the day they occurred and tearing into him with its old delight.

Ryou wondered if this is what they meant by ‘your life flashing before your eyes’…

It couldn’t have been so long before he noticed what was different, what was strange in all these memories, though it felt like he’d relived his entire life twice through. There was someone… *something*?… else there with him. Some foreign presence, just as the ring was invading his body, was invading his mind. He didn’t know how he knew, for he certainly couldn’t see it, it was more like feeling the hairs on the back of your neck stand up when someone was watching you. It told him that he was not alone, and after a moment, he could tell where it was and what it was doing.

This strange presence was rooting through his memories, traipsing through as they streamed past, picking them up one by one, prodding at them, picking them apart and dissecting them down to nothing. In doing so, whatever it was forced Ryou to relive it all more intensely than ever before, those past shames and mistakes of his all torn afresh and examined by one who cared for nothing of the pain it inflicted. Whatever it was didn’t even seem to be aware of Ryou.
It was too much to endure. Ryou couldn’t—didn’t know how to fight against a phantom in his brain, so he tried to hide. Gathering up as many of those gauze-like recollections as he could, he tried to curl himself around them, to stay as small, silent and unnoticeable as possible. Even his thoughts he tried to keep from wandering, lest they draw attention.

The invader was not fooled. He found Ryou in less than a heartbeat, now enraged at Ryou’s attempted defiance, and ripped into his mind with more brutality than before. Whatever protection Ryou had thought he could offer was shredded alongside his resolve.

He was exhausted. He didn’t know how long it had been since this nightmare had begun, or if it was truly a nightmare or some horrible new reality. It all seemed too terrible to be real, but too real to be fantasy. Either way, it was what he was living through now, it was his reality, and it had left him hollow as an egg. He wasn’t sure which it was that had exhausted him more, the struggle to keep what made him ‘Ryou’ private from whatever it was that roved his mind, or the pain that resulted from it. And in the end it had all been useless. It felt as though there were nothing that this invading mind did not now know about him, and yet he could still feel it, whatever it was, drifting around the edges, looking for something new to drag out into the open and examine.

And Ryou still fought, clutching at the memory of safety, of privacy in absence of anything else left to protect.

... stop fighting me...

Ryou’s eyes, long forgotten with the rest of his body, flew open, darting wildly around from where he’d fallen to the floor, searching for the voice. He was alone. There was no one else in the room who could have spoken to him. Surprised to find that he could breathe once again, he took a deep breath, preparing to call out for his mother, his sister, anyone who could help...

... Ryou...

... and nearly choked at the sound of his own name.

No one in the room, he realized, but the ‘something’ in his mind. Now it was speaking to him. Ryou didn’t try to answer the voice that whispered in his brain, only tossed his head and curled into a ball. Mentally, he tried to do the same, to become invisible.

... relax... it only hurts because you resist...
Ryou shook his head again, and felt his whole body begin to tremble. He wouldn’t be fooled!

“Ryou.”

The voice was so clear, so real to his ears, Ryou opened his eyes again. It was dark now, the sun had set since he had fallen to the floor and his light hadn’t been turned on, so the whole room was cast in deep gloom. Through the shadows he thought he could see a pale hand very near his own. Like his hand it was slender and the same length. Even the shape of the nails and the way the wrist bent to follow the arm looked like his. Except… Ryou squinted. The edges of the person were fuzzy. Soft. Incomplete. He almost thought he could see through the stranger’s hand to see the pattern of the floorboards beneath it. It hurt his eyes, trying to focus and resolve what he was seeing into something coherent.

Ryou followed the arm up and up with his eyes, past the wrist, forearm, and the hem of a soft cotton tee to the shoulder… The other’s face was cast in deep shadow, obscuring his features so only part of a cheek, chin and the suggestion of a mouth could be seen. A few locks of hair, pale as his own, escaped into the small piece of light coming from his window.

The figure flickered, just for a second, and Ryou blinked, trying to convince himself it was an illusion. For just a second, the other’s skin had transformed from moonlight pale to sun burned brown, his entire frame seemed to grow larger and firm, and then just as abruptly flickered back again.

“Ryou,” the impossible apparition said. Ryou heard him speak, saw the vague suggestion that must be his mouth move, but he also heard the words in his mind, like an echo. “Don’t fight me anymore, and the pain will stop.” The head tilted slightly, and Ryou thought he could make out a soft smile amid the darkness. “And then you can sleep.”

It sounded so good, so deliciously wonderful that Ryou let his defenses halfway down before he thought not to. It was enough. The presence slipped past his shields and even further into Ryou’s mind, to places he hadn’t even known existed, searching, searching, searching.

Ryou almost slammed his shields, puny as they were, back into place at the renewal of that foreign touch. But at the mere thought of that a needle of pain lanced through his skull, making his body twitch. It was just as the other had said: struggle was what brought the pain, if he remained still and open then there was none. Whoever the other mind was, he was still roaming about, but now he seemed a little bit gentler.

Ryou made himself relax, to only be aware of it and not to interfere. Whatever was being done to him, it seemed the lesser of two available evils.

The other presence was definitely searching for something specific among Ryou’s memories. He could sense it from the way they would be turned over and over like they were objects and the methodical way they were rummaged through. Ryou wondered what it was the other was looking for, how someone could possibly find a memory like he was doing, and why, but couldn’t concentrate enough to work it out. He was too tired, his thoughts too sluggish and dream-like to focus properly. It didn’t seem so important now that the pain was gone. He just wanted to rest awhile…

Another question nagged at him, though, kept him from welcome oblivion. More than what he wanted or why, who was this other consciousness, and how did he get into his mind?

Slowly, he drug open eyes that had drifted to slits, but the glimpse he had hoped for of the one sitting next to him in the shadows was thwarted. He was gone. All Ryou could see now was his
own hand, lying limp on the floor.

He let himself sink back down to that dreamlike place in his mind, but not so far as to lose consciousness completely. Much as he wanted to sleep, he wanted to know more about the other mind first, and it seemed the only way he would know that would be to be where he was, sorting through Ryou’s deepest memories. He imagined himself standing at the other’s shoulder, watching as he rifled through Ryou’s past, and just as in a dream, the imagining of it made it so. He didn’t notice Ryou at all, so concentrated was he on his task. He was treating Ryou’s memories more carefully than before, but it was obvious he still wasn’t finding what he wanted, and was becoming frustrated.

It was strange looking at him, because it was like seeing, but there was nothing visual to register at all. Nothing like color or shape to remember later, but he could still ‘see’ movement, emotion and attitude translated to him as expression and posture, when there was no face and no body to express.

“What are you looking for?” he asked, all unmeaning to.

The other froze, and Ryou felt that he turned to look at him as his attention came to include him. For a moment, Ryou thought he might ignore the question, or pull away from him completely, but eventually he answered. A memory, he said, the voice purely within Ryou’s mind. A memory of yours that is like one of mine.

“What?” Ryou asked, and became aware that he was speaking the word as much as thinking it.

Another pause. Then, Convergence.

The single word explanation did nothing to dispel Ryou’s confusion, but he accepted it anyway. In his current state he couldn’t find the energy to ask the other to be plainer or to question who he was. Instead he allowed himself to drift away like a wisp of smoke, coiling between those memories of his that the other personality had already gone through. The way they were arranged, it was familiar and comforting, though he knew he had never been in this place before. He drifted, observing scenes as he passed until he came to a place he didn’t recognize at all.

Touching it with what he imagined to be fingers, it felt solid, a wall of some kind… An edge, he realized a moment later. The edge of his mind and – he squinted through the barrier that really offered no blockage at all and saw the beginning of another mind on the other side. Instantly, he knew it must be that of the other presence. Who else’s could it be? Without stopping to question the wisdom – or even the sanity – of what he was doing, he pushed at the edges of the barrier, searching for a way in.

The other remained unaware of what he was doing until Ryou found a small chink in the wall and began working at it, making it larger, big enough to slip through to the other side. Then suddenly the other was there, somehow gripping Ryou tightly, holding him away from the barrier and its tiny breach. Stay out of there, he said, mental voice harsh.

Ryou twisted a little in that grip. “Let me go, I can help.”

Help? The other seemed surprised, derisive.

“While you look through my memories, I can look through yours.” It was a plan that appeared as of out of nowhere. Ryou had put no thought into it, but what else could he have intended by breaching the barrier? He became dimly aware of his mouth, miles away, shaping the words and forcing them out. But the other paid attention only to his thoughts, listening closely to the shape of
them. “Two can work faster than one.”

Neither the other nor Ryou had a physical presence, so Ryou felt more than saw the head tilt as the other considered. He wished there were faces to see, expressions to read as he waited.

Without warning Ryou was dropped, and fell through a barrier that no longer existed to plunge into a roiling sea of foreign memories. If he’d thought that having someone else rooting around in his mind was disorienting, being the one in someone else’s was a hundred times worse. There was nothing familiar, nothing recognizable around him to hold onto as the life and experiences of another raged all around him, trying to impress an alien personality into him.

Desperately he clutched at the identity that was only ‘Ryou’, holding tightly to his own core as the storm of otherness threatened to whip it all away.

Just as his grip on his identity began to slip, the storm eased, then ceased. A perfect bubble of calm had formed around him, allowing him to breathe. He looked around, but couldn’t find why the pressure had suddenly dropped away from him. He gave a mental shrug, deciding it wasn’t important.

Carefully, Ryou stretched out into the other’s mind, proceeding only as he became sure that the bubble or whatever it was would follow him. He started the slow search through strange memories for anything that felt familiar, that might match one of his own memories. It wasn’t until Ryou began sifting through them that it occurred to him just how foreign the other was. These recollections were all bright, hard-edged things, like diamonds left in the sun. It felt like they could cut and burn at the same time when he held them. Ryou, now that he was offered a contrast, realized that his own memories were much gentler, like paper worn to a feathery softness. Memories with the weight, clarity and harshness of cut gems were strange. Nearly as strange as what the memories consisted of.

Ryou understood now why the other had such trouble finding a memory that would be similar to one of his own. They were from wildly different places. Different landscapes, cultures, circumstances, experiences, even the languages weren’t the same. Ryou knew not a word as they were spoken in those memories, but he could understand the meaning of them, as one can in a dream. If he’d hoped to garner some deeper understanding of the other mind, however, he was disappointed. No matter how many memories he peered into, he never seemed to know any more than before.

He wasn’t as methodical as the other, he knew. There were just so many to go through, their organization so obtuse and complex. How was he supposed to find anything?

Ryou wondered how the other was progressing, unconsciously reaching out to him, and was abruptly aware of him, though they remained separated. He was still searching, his frustration mounting under continued failure. In that frustration, Ryou felt an echo of what it had been before, that attacking thing in his mind.

Watching him, Ryou felt himself come more awake, his body, long forgotten, sending him the twin discomforts of aches and cold. He felt a need rise up urgently, the need to question what was happening to him, to wonder if helping whatever had invaded his mind was the wisest course… when he noticed something.

Both of them, Ryou and the other, were only looking at the events contained within each memory. But they were so far apart in so many basic ways that no matter how similar a pair of events may begin, they would quickly diverge. That was where they were both failing.
But memories were more than bare events. The essence of memory was in the experience: the thoughts, sensations and emotions that went with them.

Ryou dove into the remembrances, now not only seeing them, but listening, tasting, smelling and feeling them as well. Swimming through a sea of crystalline recollection, Ryou lived a life not his own.

A long time passed before he found what he was looking for, and the memory that came under his fingers was an old one. If the other’s most recent memories were like diamonds, all sharp edges and reflections, then this one was a diamond worn to a smooth, dull marble with time. Unlike its fellows, it was easy to hold. Ryou knew it was what he had been searching for as soon as he touched it. It was just a moment contained in that memory, but for that moment, everything aligned perfectly. There was an ache in his chest that went so deep even his shoulders felt it, there was a taste like salt, but bitter as well, and a scent that was vaguely metallic. There was a feeling of weakness in that memory, weakness and then exasperation and frustration brought on by that weakness, and anger against everything that existed, including himself. The tenor of everything was just so that as Ryou held the memory, it might as well have been himself living within it.

He didn’t know the name of the other, somehow that and many details discovered in the gem-recollections slipped through his fingers as soon as he found them, but he still called into the void for him. A moment later and he was no longer alone.

Being apart from the other presence, he had forgotten how daunting he was. How his personality radiated and burned, so when it was focused on you, you felt the heat of it. “Here,” Ryou said, holding out the memory uncertainly.

The other took it, studied it, and seemed to scoff when he recognized what it was. This? This is a dead memory. You have experienced nothing like this in your life. It is worthless.

Ryou shook his head, or tried to. He thought he could feel his body attempt to respond and ignored it. “No,” he replied. “Not what’s going on, the emotion.”

The other remained silent, leaving Ryou to just feel the skepticism.

If Ryou had felt like he was in a dream, he would have known how ridiculous the idea of taking the hand of someone who was bodiless and having them feel something that wasn’t there really was. But it was a dream, as much a dream as he had ever had, which was probably the only reason it worked. He took the hand of the other and guided it to a specific place within the memory.

“Here,” he said. “This is where we are alike.”

It was true that the events of the memory were as far outside young Ryou’s experience as it was possible to be. But what was important were the emotions underlying it.

Isolation. Resentment. Loneliness.

Whatever disparate causes they may have stemmed from, the responses that resulted were the same for both of them.

“This will do,” the other said at last, satisfied.

Ryou smiled, pleased to have done well, and nearly missed when his internal world began reordering itself.

The other took the memory from Ryou, then he pulled a much softer looking memory, one of
Ryou’s, out of the nothingness around them. He knew that it must be the one that matched the other’s precisely. One in each hand, he brought the two together, closer and closer until they began to overlap, one a hard, bright marble, the other a soft, iridescent bubble. They overlapped, merged, and finally fused together to make one.

That one merged memory set off a chain reaction through both minds. Other memories of theirs, memories that had been too different to blend before, came together. The barrier between their minds crumbled and disintegrated, and Ryou found himself in the center of a sudden, silent storm as everything reoriented itself. He watched it all, wondering just how stupid he had been to help this happen.

Most disorientating, though, he could feel his mind rearranging itself, making room for another and stretching to hold more. His perceptions wavered and swam, blurred and doubled, then cleared, and slowly began to settle.

Finally – finally! – Ryou felt himself slipping down into welcome unconsciousness. Far away, he thought he could hear the other speak, but using Ryou’s voice.

“Goodnight, Ryou Bakura.”

The night is a black cloak thrown over the world, muffling it in darkness. The cold wind that blows across the land holds the bitter bite of winter, but the scent it carries with it is not the scent of snow or ice, it is the scent of sand and rock. All around is a great, yawning sensation of complete openness, a landscape unbroken by forest or mountain. It is a vastness matched only by the skies overhead that stretch into infinity, dusted with fiery stars.

In the distance, the perfect blackness of the night is broken by flickering lights moving quickly. Their reflections reveal an unexpected rise in the landscape, cut into with small homes, their empty windows staring sightless eyes into the hills. On approaching closer, the poor conditions of the tiny village are obvious. There are no shutters and no doors to keep out the animals. What pottery that exists is plain, poorly made and in many cases cracked. The little cloth to be seen is threadbare, dull colored, none of it large enough to be used for even simple sunshades during the day, when here, on the very edge of the desert, awnings are a necessity.

A dog barks sharply as men turn a corner of a hut, the light of the torches they carry spills up the walls, transforming the dull adobe to rich pottery, the bronze of their arm bands, at their belts and their naked blades to glittering gold. There are nearly a dozen of them, and as they pass the door of the pottery hut, half stop at the door while the rest continue on. Those who stayed behind slip into the hut one by one.

From inside, there are screams. Moments pass like minutes, then the men in their armor reappear, now burdened with three struggling forms. All are long-haired, dirty, the few scraps of clothing covering their bodies are worn and tattered. Their feet are bare and their hands are empty, and behind the wild locks of hair, all black as the night around them, their eyes are wide and terrified. Two women and one man, all are borne away by the men with weapons, two of them for each of the poorly dressed villagers.

In every corner of the village set in the hills that image repeats itself. Numbers differ, sometimes more resistance is given the invaders, but the result is always the same: the ill-prepared villagers are overpowered and taken away, all in the same direction, leading away from the village and deeper into the hills. In most cases, it’s better when no resistance is offered at all.

At the edge of the village, set further away from the hills and where the huts nearly stand on their
own, the night is deeper. The invaders are not so thick here, their torches do not penetrate as far. Those that do come to this corner seem small, isolated, not so brash as their fellows.

A small group of three passes by an especially tiny hut, laughing amongst themselves. They are at ease, enjoying themselves and unconcerned. One pauses, hangs back as the others continue. He peers into a gap between the huts, and calls out to his comrades, who continue on without him. He’s found someone hiding there, and starts squeezing himself into the narrow passage to get them out.

The shadows… thicken… so all light, even his torch is extinguished. There is silence, all sounds, even the screams in the distance receding to leave unnatural quiet. Then there is the softest of sounds, like a lonely sigh in an empty temple. The shadows pull away, letting flickering light and terrible shrieks seep back into the world.

The light of the torch once again illuminate the hut and the narrow gap, but the man who had held it is gone.

Consumed by the night.

A tiny form appears, coming slowly into the glow of the fallen torch. It is a child, no more than five, possibly younger, clothed in rags and wide eyes darting in fear. He is small, this child, and thin. While not starving, the angles of his bones are easily seen at his elbows, his knees and ankles. The expression of terror he wears is genuine, but while the shadows press close at every side, he steps around the abandoned torch, disdaining its light. He is the child of a poor village that rarely could afford to burn precious oil to chase away the dark; he’s familiar with the night, does not fear Nuit’s embrace. As he steps around the guttering flame, the light touches him, briefly reveals him. His hair is white as bleached bone, his eyes a startling violet in a face tanned by Ra’s touch. Wet tracks sprang from the corners of those oddly colored orbs and etched pathways down his dusty cheeks.

The child has no need to fear the night, but the screams of his neighbors and family that grow steadily fainter, the soldiers with their flashing blades and cruel smiles, those ought to give him pause. And yet, rather than fleeing, he turns his feet toward the receding sounds. Rather than following the irrigation canals that fed the village’s sparse fields of wheat and barley back to the Nile, and thence to some town to seek succor and safety, the child follows the pleas of his fellows, fluttering amongst the deepest shadows.

The way is hard and long, the path taken by the soldiers and their struggling captives a winding one amid the high hills. At times the way narrows to a mere goat track between walls of stone, and this is when the child’s fear soars to its height, for there is nowhere to hide, and the sounds of the struggling villagers – those who are still capable of any struggle – bounce up and down the narrow gorge like the distorted cries of hungry ghosts. Still, the boy continues on, even after the bare soles of his feet, toughened as they were from having never worn sandals to protect them, began to bleed, cut on sharp stones that litter the way.

Finally, as the child’s steps are becoming as much stumble as travel and he believes he will never reach the end, never catch up with his family and friends that are being stolen away from him, the way opens suddenly to a basin in the hills. The child has never seen this place before, but does not stop to wonder at it. Ahead he can see the licking fire of torches and the long, dancing shadows of the soldiers their light casts. They are all approaching a shadow, which the child knows immediately is a structure by it precise lines and symmetrical design, sheltered like a precious egg in its nest of rock. The figures bearing torches, and in most cases complacent forms, entered the structure and quickly disappeared. They turned no corners and were not cut off by doors, it was as
though the very ground rose up and swallowed them whole.

The child, exhausted beyond thought, his throat aching with thirst and his feet cut and bleeding into the gravel, follows those disappearing lights.

He is still careful, keeping to the deepest shadows and shunning any light that could reveal him, but there are no guards left to watch the door. With the entire population of the nearest village in their control, what would they be guarding against?

Nearly the entire population. The child slips in easily, a silver edged shadow himself in the moonlight.

In the dark and with eyes only for where he sets his feet, all the child sees is that the building is old. Very old, for the pillars standing beside the doors are worn smooth, devoid of any designs or writings, and the builders of something this precisely balanced would never leave it so plain. All fine decoration left out to the wind has long since eroded. It doesn’t occur to the child how old it must be, how little wind and abrasive sand it would be exposed to in the basin. Within there are stairs leading down. The child creeps down them stealthily, his ears filling with strange sounds, his nostrils with smells that are both familiar and foreign and make his stomach churn.

Deeper and deeper he goes, never coming within sight of a soldier. An oppressive, humid heat builds as the stairs lead him further below ground. It reminds the child of the times when his mother would make stew to eat, the steam that would wash over his face when he leaned over the pot to inhale the mouthwatering fumes. It’s like that, but holds none of the comfort of his mother’s cooking. It only fills him with vague, growing dread. What could they be doing, what did it all mean?

The child hears them before he reaches the bottom of the stairs. Voices. Not the voices of his fellow villagers, though they are still there to be heard, occasionally rising into sharp, brief shrieks of terror and agony. Nor the gruff, taunting voices of the soldiers, who seem to have lost their tongues between the village and this underground temple. No, these are low, droning voices, shaping words the child does not know, but which rattle and clang along his nerves. They are so quiet, yet he hears them perfectly, as though they were being whispered right by his ear. The boy shivers, and continues on.

At the bottom of the steps, there is a doorway. Light spills through like a great wave, splashing the wall across from it with glowing radiance. From this doorway also come the sounds that drew the child on, that still draw him on. With as much noise as a cat, the child approaches the doorway and peers around the threshold.

Up until now, the night had held a feeling of unreality, a dreamlike quality dipped in a nightmare that made him believe he would soon wake. Looking beyond the threshold of that accursed room, the last child of the lost village was pushed into the cruelest, most brutal of nightmares, while at the same time coming more awake than he remembered being in his brief life before. This was no dream, there would be no waking.

Larger than any chamber he has seen, the underground temple contains his entire village and their captors with room to spare. There are tall men, swathed from head to toe in fine robes and bedecked with gold and electrum at their throats, wrists and ankles that glint whenever they move. These men are the reciters of strange words, they seem to be leading whatever is happening, standing on raised daises and facing the rest. But what the child sees the most are the great gleaming vats, filled and heated to boiling by fires beneath them. It is the piled tangle of limp, dirty, painfully thin limbs that rest beside them. It is the troughs cut into the stone floor, filling with a darkly shining liquid coming from the piles of bodies, directing it… somewhere. The child’s
attention skitters around the great room like a beetle in a jar, registering details that don’t seem to fit together. The rise and fall of something white and round in one of the vats. A pendent, remarkably still whole, hanging from a lifeless hand, deep in a pile of corpses. Blood spattered on the white kilts of the eerily silent soldiers. The faces of the villagers yet living, some frightened, some crying, and some so blank and empty they might already be dead. The face of one of the robed chanters, hooded and with a neat beard, his eyes so wretched even as his lips shaped the words, his buzzing going on and on...

The child stays, completely frozen, much longer than he ever intends. When the spell finally breaks, he runs, as quickly as ever he can, tearing up the stairs and out into the cool, dry night air. He no longer thinks of stealth, only of escape. Though his limbs shake and his body cries out for sleep and for water, the boy still runs, down the narrow goat trail, through his gutted village, the only home he’d ever known, and into the wilderness. He is not called, nor ever missed. His mind a terrified, confused blank, the boy follows directions that seem to spring up from the darkest corners of his mind, the shadows cloaking him.

One shadow, watching the boy and his reckless escape, pulls away. It wavers, uncertain of itself. A moment ago, there had been no ‘self’ to contemplate, and it is confused. Slowly, it begins to remember. It is no shadow, but a boy, a boy not of this place or of this time, but he cannot remember how he had gotten here…

Suddenly, he recalls a name, his name. Ryou Bakura.

As soon as he does, the desert, the empty village, the fleeing boy, all melts away and leaves him to dreams that are blissful in their emptiness.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone make it through the weirdness? Awesome, on to the miscellaneous notes!

**Hidden Temple:** If I recall correctly, the temple in which the slab that holds the Millennium Items and in which the ritual to create them was held was shown to actually be in Kul Elna somewhere. Somewhere in the back, yes, but still in the town. That’s changed a little bit here, and it might be seen later on that I’ll be changing the placements of a few other things in Ancient Egypt / Memory World. The reason for this is just to give everything a grander feel to it, and hopefully make it a little more realistic. I mean, in the anime it seems like you could get anywhere in Egypt in a matter of hours, and that’s just not very accurate. So we’ll just be assuming that the manga and anime were using a little something called ‘plot convenience’ by squishing everything close together. We’re dumping that plot convenience in favor of others, using some poetic license and widening the playing field some in Egypt. Sandbox time!

**Story Structure:** What we see here with flashbacks into Ancient Egypt, those will be happening frequently, if not every chapter, (I haven’t got the outline quite that detailed). So be prepared for plenty of time spent there! I’ll be doing my best to keep everything historically accurate – within reason – but if I flub, please feel free to point it out to me along with some source materials so’s I can educate myself for the future.

And as always, my lovelies, thank you for reading! Until next time. :3
Part III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part III

Ryou woke, and was immediately confused. He could have sworn he had already been awake, how could he have woken up? A faint line appeared between his brows as he frowned, trying to remember the last few minutes. He didn’t think he’d been sleeping… He could remember lying on his back as dawn broke outside his window, and how he watched as the sunlight slowly spilled across his ceiling like warm honey, chasing away the shadows. He could remember how it had made him feel… full. At peace. And he had thought that this was the most beautiful thing he had seen in… in how long?

The line between Ryou’s brows deepened. No matter how hard he tried to remember, the rest of that thought was gone. In a long time, he was sure, just not how long. Which was such an absurd thought. There was nothing so special about light on his ceiling. He must have still been dreaming when that had crept into his mind.

And there had been… other dreams before that. Nightmares, he thought, but they were fuzzy, barely there anymore. Hiding, pain, darkness and fear, someone calling out his name… then the same person calling his name again, but it wasn’t his name. It was all very vague and confused now. As was the nature of dreams, it had all made sense while he was living through it, but now it was disjointed, the few impressions that survived the night not linking together cohesively. He wondered, given the little he could recall now, if he would even want to remember all he had dreamed.

He shifted a little, and realized suddenly that he was lying on the floor. His futon, still neatly made, was a good two feet away to his right. Had he rolled out of bed during the night, trying to escape his nightmares? He also noticed that he was still dressed in the clothes he’d worn the day before. He stared down at himself, still wearing the same button down shirt, the same pants, the same socks, even his slippers. Now he was really confused; when exactly had he gone to sleep? Ryou tried to remember getting ready for bed, but it was all a muddle after his ‘party’. He had put his gifts away, he remembered that. The mirror on his bedside table, the paints and brushes in a drawer and the box with the golden ring – which he had thrown against a wall in a fit of temper. Then he had sat down to work on the figurine Suichi and Taro had crushed, and had actually finished it, if he remembered right. And then… and then…

… he’d picked up the box – and opened it…?

A sharp rap at his door made Ryou jump, his heart leaping to his throat.

“Ryou!” came the familiar voice of his mother. “Are you awake? You had best hurry, or you’ll be late for school! Breakfast is laid, Amane has already eaten and you have fifteen minutes to catch your bus!”

Ryou was on his feet in an instant, tearing about his room in a panicked frenzy. The panic of being late for class brought one memory crashing in bright and clear: He hadn’t finished his homework the night before.
The school day was shaping up to be very strange. Ryou didn’t know if it was just how he had woken up that was making it hard to find a good rhythm to settle into, but it felt as though every step he took, every move he made, was just slightly out of sync. Out of sync with what, he wasn’t sure, but it felt like he had a physical echo to his body, running half a step behind his true self, making him stumble when he wasn’t paying attention. Not having his math homework completed was another issue, but not so heavily punished as he had feared it would be. He hadn’t been made to stand out in the hallway, but that was the promised consequence should he fail to bring it in again tomorrow.

No, he would be glad to get home again, and shake this strange feeling that had settled over his shoulders like a shroud. After his mother had roused him, he’d used every second in getting ready in the most haphazard fashion he could ever remember doing before. Every textbook he could find was snatched up and stuffed into his bag with no consideration as to their order and the bag zipped up and buckled before he realized he’d forgotten his notebooks. After they were added to the bursting satchel and it again all sealed up he remembered his pens, pencils and wallet to buy lunch. By then he was so flustered that he’d thrown the bag over his shoulder without bothering to close it properly. He only changed his pants to the regulation school pair and put on the jacket over his street shirt, judging the risk of anyone looking closely enough to notice was worth the time it saved to not change into a clean one. He’d not washed his face or brushed his teeth, having only enough time to run a comb through his hair a dozen times – and ripping out a few knots in the process – before speeding into the kitchen. His mother had reprimanded him, either for his sleeping in or for his mad dash through the apartment or both; he wasn’t sure, as he ignored her. He’d caught up a glass of orange juice, chugged it down – to further reprimands – and then stuffed two pieces of dry toast between his teeth and sped to the door. The laces of his shoes became sentient, he was positive; deliberately twisting out of his grasp like vipers when he’d most needed them to cooperate. He’d torn out of the apartment, his shoes tied too loose, his shirt un-tucked, toast hanging out of his panting mouth and his heavy book bag hitting him across the legs with every step. Despite his rush, there was still a vague terror that he had still missed the bus. Upon seeing a few fellow students also standing by patiently, however, he sighed with relief. He finished his toast with as much dignity as he could muster, taking deep breaths between bites. His mind was still muddled, but it seemed the day would be a little better after making it to the bus on time.

That little illusion was shattered upon stepping onto the bus when it arrived, and his overloaded bag tipped, scattering its contents over the steps and across the sidewalk.

Not a good beginning to the day, overall.

The ride to the school, the daily ritual of swapping out his shoes, finding his place in the classroom and setting out his supplies, all did nothing to settle him back into his groove. The inside of his mouth tasted foul because he hadn’t brushed his teeth, the dry toast and orange juice had done nothing to fix that, and his whole body was incredibly sore. At first he thought it a combination of having apparently spent the night on the hard floor and then spending the first part of his morning at a dead run, except that everything hurt; from his back and his legs to his arms, his face and even his toes. It certainly made trying to function normally difficult, doubly so with the odd echoing sensation of his movements and his stubbornly wandering thoughts.

Whatever was left of his dreams blew away with the trials of the day.

While the troubles of school life that plagued him so long, those did not wait long to impress themselves on Ryou again.

The feeling of palms slamming into his shoulder blades was becoming so familiar that Ryou had to wonder if permanent impressions weren’t being left behind. Years from now, long after he’d
graduated and escaped the reach of all his bullies, there would still be hand prints left in his scapula, mementoes of his schooldays.

Ryou stumbled, but didn’t fall. Instead he staggered into a wall, narrowly avoiding cracking his nose into the bricks. Before he could flip around himself – his reflexes were dull, another result of his ‘body echo’ – one of those hands took him by the shoulder and did it for him. Ryou wasn’t surprised to see it was Taro. The older boy leered into his face, his teeth and eyes looking far too small in the frame they fitted into. Privately Ryou thought he looked more and more like a goblin every day.

“Hello there, birthday boy,” he said through the grin full of too-small teeth. “You have anything special today after your day of gifts? Anything you want to share?”

Ryou stared back up at him, feeling strangely detached even from this, like he was watching a scene unfold on television or in a game. He knew he should be frightened. Taro had caught him inside, it was true, but he was cornered by the bathrooms, down a side hall no one came down unless they needed the facilities, and right now every class was in progress. The chances of rescue were slim at best. Still, all he did was look up at Taro, his heart barely changing its steady rhythm, only the tiniest jolts of adrenaline shooting through his bloodstream. He blinked, and then replied with a calm that would later baffle him. “No.”

Taro scoffed in his face. “Don’t give me that, Miss Priss. Everyone knows your family is one of the richest in the school, and rich kids always get great loot on birthdays. And it would be rude not to share.”

The younger boy struggled a little to control his face. Rich? That was stretching the word a little. And as for expensive gifts, well, one certainly counted, but a paint set and mirror with a kindergartener’s frame didn’t. None of them would be things he would bring to school with him. Did Taro expect him to have just gotten more rare figures to fall prey to the underside of his shoe? Or was he expecting Ryou to have brought in any of his gifts, no matter what they were, for his bully to steal or destroy?

“I don’t have anything to share,” Ryou said, still calm. Though a more accurate description might have been ‘numb’. “I only received a few presents, and I left them all at home.”

Taro’s face, never a lovely sight, darkened in an ugly way. “How very inconsiderate.” His body, already blocking Ryou into the corner – close, but not close enough to the door to escape – leaned a little closer, crowding him uncomfortably. “What am I supposed to do for entertainment, now?”

It all felt like a film playing out, with Ryou’s consciousness safely tucked away someplace far removed, simply observing. But it was a film with a familiar theme, one whose pattern he could trace without having to watch. Here, with the heightened threat of violence was where he was meant to back down, to murmur something indistinguishable but generally placating, and sneak off with nothing but more taunts at his back. It’s how the drama of ‘Ryou, a School Boy’s Life’ was meant to go. There was never a variation of the theme that had him come away with more than a few shreds of dignity.

But if today Ryou was the audience watching the show unfold, then whoever was in charge of his body hadn’t read the script.

Ryou shifted, a small movement meant to press himself further into the corner, his lips forming around words to fashion a meaningless apology, when the flow of the scene abruptly changed. Suddenly Ryou felt too hot, a flush speeding up from his collar and across his face. White noise filled his ears, like TV static, and his vision tunneled, cutting off his periphery. Instead of stepping
back, Ryō was taking one forward, forcing himself into Taro’s personal space until he stepped back, giving the much smaller boy ground! Though the small retreat might also have been from the glare that was leveled at him, a glare given from beneath drawn brows and swaying bangs, from a boy who had no right showing resistance. Before he could gather his wits, Ryō ground out in a voice he barely recognized as his own, “I suggest playing with rocks. Even chances you can outsmart them.”

For a moment time seemed to freeze. Ryō would have laughed at the expression of confusion on Taro’s fat face, except he was almost certain he was wearing the exact same one, overlaid with a shade of horror. What had he just said?

Eventually realization and fury twisted Taro’s face. At that slow dawning, Ryō’s detached consciousness seemed to decide that enough was enough and came back full force, dumping him back in his body just when he could most use being away. Terror and dread promptly washed over him, dampening the heated flush on his skin and leaving behind a sick clamminess.

Taro drew back a fist with one hand while the other came up to shove him in the chest, either to knock him off balance or to hold him down so he couldn’t get away.

As soon as Taro’s meaty palm came into contact with his shirtfront, Ryō let out an involuntary shriek, pain ripping though his chest.

With a look of panic, Taro changed the fist coming at him to a palm, pressing it against his mouth to stifle any more sounds. While that worked to muffle Ryō’s whimpers, it couldn’t call back the scream that had already escaped.

“Is everything alright down here?”

At the call of a teacher’s voice, Taro’s panicked expression became almost comical, though even without Taro’s fingers digging into his cheek Ryō wouldn’t have been able to laugh. He was too distracted, trying to drag air into his lungs without letting his ribcage to move in the process. It felt as though a giant set of claws had taken hold of his ribs and was squeezing with every attempt at breathing he made. Outside his own struggle for oxygen Ryō could just hear the sound of footsteps approaching. Bringing his face closer than Ryō had ever wanted to be to him, Taro hissed, “Keep quiet, Priss,” and stepped back abruptly, pulling his hands back behind himself, a picture of comparative innocence.

As the teacher came round the corner of the alcove harboring the two boys, Ryō was still attempting to catch his breath, one hand over his sternum to keep his heart from bursting out of his chest like some sort of science fiction alien. Beneath his fingers, under his shirt, something hard moved with a muted clink.

The teacher, a woman Ryō didn’t recognize, took in the scene of them standing in the lonely corner, a little frown line appearing between her shaped brows. “What’s going on here, boys?” Her tone suggested she wasn’t expecting to like the answer.

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“Nothing, sensei,” Taro burbled. “Just met in the hall and were saying ‘hi’ before heading back to class.”

Ryō took a slow, deep breath which set off a small coughing fit. The teacher looked at him, her frown deepening with concern. She held out a hand towards him, stepping closer. “Goodness, are you feeling alright? Do you need to see the nurse?”

Ryō shook his head, white strands of hair whipping him in the face with each frantic toss. “No,
thank you, sensei,” he managed through the coughs. He snuck a look up at Taro, who was glowering at him behind the adult’s back. He decided he didn’t want to be sent back to class at the same time as Taro, not when it involved long empty hallways. He flashed what he hoped was a reassuring smile the teacher’s way, mumbled, “Excuse me,” and shouldered his way through the restroom door. As it swung shut relief flooded through him, not the least of reasons being the sensei telling Taro to get back to class. At least he wouldn’t have to worry about being jumped as soon as he walked out the door.

Finally feeling more in his own body than he had all day, the boy walked to the sinks, twisted the taps on and splashed icy water over his face.

What the hell had come over him? He’d stood up to Taro, who had him boxed into a corner, with no real chance of rescue in sight at the time. More than that, he’d not even really felt nervous at the time. Instead he’d felt a rush of anger, close to fury, and a need to punish, to pay back the one who had been the source of suffering. There had been no fear until he’d already stuck his foot in it and it was too late to back out. That was when the much more familiar sensation of dread came sweeping back to fill him up.

What is wrong with me today?

Ryou leaned over the sink, watching the water swirl round and round the drain in a whirlpool before snaking down the pipes. He concentrated on breathing, and over the sound of rushing water he heard the faint clink from beneath his shirt again.

Frowning, Ryou undid the buttons of jacket and rumpled shirt. Beneath his clothes lay the pendant his father had sent to him, its golden, unblinking eye seeming to glare back at Ryou with metallic malevolence. It hung from a cord that looped round his neck, the metal heavy and greasy feeling against his skin.

Ryou stared at it, water dripping from his face and a few small locks of hair. He couldn’t remember putting the cord on the pendant, nor the pendant on himself. It wasn’t just today that was so off; last night had been as well, complete with memory lapses. The boy squinted in the mirror, looked down, then back up to the mirror. Carefully he pushed aside the hanging points of the ring, shuddering involuntarily as the oily feeling metal touched his fingers, and stared at the pale skin just beneath them.

A set of very, very dark bruises stood out against the pale flesh that covered his ribs. They were so dark that for a moment Ryou thought they were open wounds. A careful prod corrected that assumption, and informed him that they were unbelievably tender and painful. These were the reason it suddenly became hard to breathe when Taro had pushed him. He’d slammed the ring right into the bruises, making them flare to life. But how had he gotten them? Slept on his belly at some point during the night, pinning the metal between him and floor? It was the only thing he could think of. But then, he wasn’t exactly at 100%, just now.

Really, when had he put the pointed ring on, and why hadn’t he taken it off before falling asleep? Why had he gone to sleep in his clothes, feet away from his futon? Why did he feel so… so out of step with the world around him, not like himself at all?

The eye of the ring drew his gaze to it, just as the drain water had been drawn irresistibly to the drain. He stared at it until his eyes started to ache. Under the fluorescent lights that drained the life and color out of everything, the eye seemed oddly alive. A bead of water ran from his face, down his chest and to the metal, glinting over the smooth curve. Watching it, Ryou’s mind wandered…

... a darkness that was large only because that was all there was. All encompassing, all
consuming, until the very thought of light becomes something to be treasured. Until sunbeams on a paneled ceiling become something beautiful and precious...

The bell rang, making Ryou jump, abruptly coming back to reality. It was the end of a period, and he had to get back before someone started looking for him. Without even thinking to take the ring off first, he buttoned up his uniform and headed back to his home room.

The rest of the day was an improvement over how it had begun. He still hurt everywhere, most especially over his chest since his attention had been brought to it. Every movement made him ache and the ring under his shirt brush against the bruises, lighting them up with pain. He wondered how he had managed to not notice them before. Still, it was some improvement. He finally felt awake, and in his own body. The strange physical echo that had been clinging to him evaporated and he could function without the danger of running into a wall while trying to avoid stumbling over himself.

Though, that didn’t necessarily mean he was able to focus, either. His mind continually wandered when he should have been paying attention to lessons. He thought about his father, half a world away in the place he considered to be more home to him than with his family. He thought about the last time he had seen him, a brief visit of a month over summer, time he could spare from his work, but no more. He’d been distracted the whole time he had been with them, spending his evenings reading academic papers and all his conversation centered on dusty old tombs. It had felt bizarre, like having a houseguest no one knew exactly how to behave around. Even his mother seemed to feel it, which made every meal tense and awkward.

Ryou wondered, as their homeroom teacher wrote up a simple equation on the board, what exactly had possessed his father to send him such a strange birthday gift? His note had said it had seemed ‘meant for him’, but what did that mean? He’d never shown much interest in Egypt or anything related to it. If anything, he did his best to avoid the subject entirely, as getting bored to death by his father whenever he was around was quite enough. It was probably just a case of his father not knowing at all what to get his son and hoping that what would have interested him as a child held true for his offspring as well. Even so, it didn’t answer all Ryou’s questions. Where had his father found the ring, what was its original purpose, was it even genuine or was it some tourist trinket? It certainly felt like more than a knick-knack when he held it in his hands, but he had trouble imagining a genuine artifact making it through customs. How could a precious Egyptian artifact come to be hanging around the neck of a ten year old Japanese boy?

Which got him to wondering how, exactly, it had wound up around his neck at all? Try as he might, Ryou could not call up any memories beyond the ‘party’ and the opening of his gifts, eating cake, spending the day with his mother and Amane, heading back to his room for the night… putting things away, finishing rebuilding the broken figurine… No, after that memories fled before his searching, refusing to reveal themselves. The image of picking up the box that contained the ring might have been a memory, or it might have just been his imaginings of how he must have handled it. He could have put it down to over tiredness making his recollections so muddled, but that didn’t hold up. He hadn’t been so tired yesterday as to lose chunks of his day, even ones near the end of it.

Then there was the matter of his dreams. He remembered practically nothing at all, yet as the day wore on they weighed on his mind, as though they had something important to convey, some clue to impart that would unravel of the uncertainties of the morning.

He caught himself idly playing with the ring through his shirt. Frustrated, he forced himself to pay attention to the class, which had become history without his noticing.
By the end of the day he had exhausted himself with his brooding. After so many hours he would have thought he would have had enough, but as he gathered his things and went out to meet the bus that would take him home, his sneakers and the pavement between blurred as his eyes unfocused. He was miles away as his body continued to carry out its functions, a mindless automaton. So it came as a jolt when his elbow was caught in a vise-like grip and he was steered off of his course.

Ryou came to his senses just in time to have them nearly knocked out again as he was thrown against the brick wall of the school building. Ryou looked around quickly, noting that while he and his assailant – Taro, of course – were only a stone’s throw away from the throngs of children awaiting buses; they were around a corner, effectively hidden. Help was unlikely unless he screamed for it, then.

And Taro wasn’t interested in any sort of long, drawn out kind of payback for being embarrassed earlier. No sooner had Ryou caught his breath and realized where he was then pain and light bloomed like a sun in his left eye. It wasn’t the first time he’d been punched, but it was a particularly heavy blow. Recoiling, he already knew it was going to leave an impressive black eye.

Then… then came something even less expected than the punch that left one entire side of his face throbbing. It was a repeat of what had happened before when Taro had him cornered: He was suddenly too hot, the sound of TV static filled his ears, his vision narrowed to only hold Taro and every aching muscle in his body tensed. But it was faster this time. Much, much faster, almost instantaneous. One moment he was reeling from the strike, the next he was coming back up, his teeth bared in a snarl, the edges of his vision taking on a reddish hue…

Rage. That’s what twisted and writhed in his guts, what filled his mind with terrible, wordless violence. He had always felt it, especially against his tormentors, but had kept it under tight control, hidden away where no one could see. Now it was loose, and Ryou didn’t even attempt to stop the fist that seemed to move of its own accord, and which landed under Taro’s chin, snapping his head back. He watched, once again a distant observer from his own body, in fascinated horror as he took hold of the larger boy’s shirtfront and shoved him back, away, into the opposite wall of the narrow walkway and held him there. He watched himself as he leaned his face in close to Taro’s, his lips curling back from his teeth in an animalistic sneer, rough sounds that might have been meant to be words but came out as an incoherent snarl. He watched Taro’s eyes widen as he pulled back a balled fist, ready to trade one blow for another…

Ryou blinked. He was back, fully in control of his body, and wondering why it was he thought he could punch his bully in the face and get away with it.

Taro felt the difference immediately, his beady black eyes narrowing. Ryou took the moment of confusion to turn and hightail it to his bus, which was just finishing loading up its students.

Not for the first time, and Ryou suspected it was far from the last, he was grateful of his mother’s apparent indifference to him and his comings and goings. His face was already swelling, and from the furtive glances he’d received on the bus ride home, it was shaping up to be one doozy of a shiner. Even the bus driver, an arthritic old man who wore a baseball cap and never seemed to take much notice of the children he ferried from place to place, had done a double take when he caught sight of Ryou’s face. He’d quickened his pace and gotten off and away before the driver had managed to find his voice, avoiding one confrontation. And he avoided a second by simply calling to his mother that he was home and scurrying into his room before she thought to check on him. He needn’t have worried. From the sound of it, she was fully preoccupied with helping Amane help her make dinner. He made it to the questionable sanctuary of his bedroom without incident, only coming out once for a cold, damp washcloth for his eye.
He was trying very, very hard to not think about what had happened. It was too frightening to think about rationally, which was what he needed to do. He needed to take it all apart, decide what it meant, and then figure out what to do next. Except whenever his thoughts would drift back over the events of the day, they would skitter apart, making it all seem even less real than while he had been living it through. It wasn’t that he had been attacked and was now a hiding in his room, clutching a wet rag to his face that throbbed in time with his heartbeat, a headache forming between his brows. The incident where his figurine had been crushed had been a surprisingly mild case of bullying, and while this incidence was particularly harsh, it was far from Ryou’s first time on the wrong side of someone’s knuckles.

No, what was hard to come to terms with was his own behavior, how his body had seemed to act without any sort of input from his brain. He was a thoughtful person, especially for his age. The idea that without any kind of warning his judgment could be bypassed and he could do things he would never otherwise consider… it was terrifying. What if it happened again? What if, while going through his day, he just lost control? What was he capable of doing, of saying if he lost control again?

Even more unsettling, perhaps, was how it had felt. There had been fear, certainly, with its lesser followers, anxiety and anticipation, and then that terrible, red raw rage that had bubbled up from the pit of his stomach like acid, burning through his whole body until the very tips of his fingers had tingled. Fear and rage, those had been the two overwhelming emotions he’d felt, but as he thought back to it – try as he might not to – there had been more mixed in. Surprise had probably been foremost, closely tied with shock, not only at his own actions, but that he had gotten Taro to react, to back off, even. It was probably only out of his own disbelief that he had backed down, but still, it was there. Then, beneath everything else he had been feeling, there had been this sort of… happiness. Not like his usual sort of happiness, the kind he felt when he beat a videogame or went to his favorite fast food place, but a different sort. A darker sort. Ryou wasn’t even sure he should label it with so bright a word as ‘happy’, which brought to mind smiles and laughter and a sense of comfort. What he had felt… it might be closer to ‘glee’. A dark, half-mad glee to see the fear flash in Taro’s eyes, to have him so easily, if briefly, in his power, at his mercy. It was a wild, fluttering satisfaction in his heart that warmed him in a way the rage had not, and for the barest of instants, he had imagined what it would be like to have Taro even more at his mercy, to have him plead for it, and his heart had swelled to bursting…

Ryou shook his head, pressed the now warm washcloth more firmly against his swelling eye. He didn’t want to think about it, about the sensations that had crept through him, so foreign and yet so familiar at the same time. Finding enjoyment in another’s discomfort, no matter how deserved it might be, was repugnant to him, utterly repugnant. He just had to remember that and forget the forbidden rush of joy.

He worked on his homework for the rest of the evening, focusing first on the math papers he had previously neglected – he had no desire to stand out in the hall! – then moving on to what had been assigned that day. When his mother called him for dinner he made the excuse of having too much work, and promised to come out later for food. It might have been a sign of trust that she didn’t insist he come out, but Ryou chose to see it as further negligence. When Amane knocked on his door, again he said he was too busy, too tired to play, and promised to play tomorrow. She put up a little more of a fight, but she, too, eventually wandered off.

It was barely seven o’clock by the time Ryou had all of his assignments finished. He’d been checking the progress of his eye in Amane’s mirror throughout the evening. It was swelling up, but the skin was still intact and the discoloration was surprisingly mild, not nearly as horrific as he had feared. Still, it was noticeable; even to his mother should she chance to look at him. It was best to stay in his room for the rest of the night to avoid a confrontation. He’d come home from school
with bruises before and knew firsthand what it was like when a parent discovered them. He felt no need to repeat the experience. Still, he thought with a wince as his belly grumbled, he might sneak out for a snack once everyone else had gone to sleep.

In the meantime, he was stuck in his room with no more schoolwork to occupy his mind, to distract him from all the upsetting memories of the day.

With no assigned work to lose himself in, Ryou turned to his RPG’s once again. He had no figures he wanted to work on, but he had been taking notes for a storyline for some future campaign. Settling down at his desk, Ryou pulled out the notebook where he kept all of his gaming notes; his characters, stats, world maps, designer class attributes, monster and treasure distribution charts, dungeon layouts and plot outlines, and a pen. He opened it up to where he had left off, which wasn’t very far in, and stroked his fingers over the paper lovingly. Even if he never got a chance to play with another human being in his entire life, he wouldn’t be able to say it was wasted effort. Ryou loved figuring out all the details that went into a well-designed world, the little touches that made it feel really real. But more than anything, Ryou loved to tell a good story. As a Dungeon Master of RPGs, that was what his real job was: spinning an epic tale for others to enjoy and adventure through.

Ryou picked up his pen, found the balance of it, and continued to outline a pivotal character in his most recent game design.

Our warrior is bereft of friends, expelled from his village and forbidden to return. He wanders the wilderness, aimless, for months before being discovered by a motley band of fortune-seekers. Taking pity on him and advantage of another experienced sword in their group, they allow him to join them. Unfortunately for them, they have heard no rumors of why the man was cast out by his own people, and the nature of his curse prevents him from speaking openly on the subject…

Ryou was effectively lost in a cloud of imagination until his eyelids became too heavy to keep open any longer. Satisfied with the progress he’d made both on his schoolwork and on his hobby, he slipped into his pajamas and then into bed, ready for sleep.

Once safely between the sheets, however, sleep became a teasing specter. With nothing to preoccupy his thoughts, he couldn’t keep from thinking of his day. He wouldn’t be able to keep his black eye a secret for long, he knew. Most likely that would be discovered in the morning over breakfast, or if he somehow avoided that, there would be no way of hiding it at school. And once at school… Ryou groaned and turned towards the wall on his futon. Once he was at school he would have concerned teachers to contend with, the kind who would phone home to ask what was going on and set his mother into the kind of state he could never seem to set her into himself. He’d have fellow students staring, whispering about him behind their hands, asking what had happened just so they could tease him about it later. And their teasing would be nothing compared to what would happen when Taro, Suichi, or any of his other bullies caught him alone. He suffered under no delusion that Taro would tolerate the kind of insubordination he’d seen festering in Ryou’s eyes, the blow he’d been dealt, nor would any of the others, whom Taro would doubtless tell. He could expect some form of retaliation. Though probably not more bruises, if the adults were on higher alert than usual. But then that would just mean subtler torments. Until Ryou was no longer being watched so closely…

And to top it all off, he was only now remembering the promise he’d made to his mother to find some food before going to sleep. The emptiness in his belly was just another thing working to keep him awake, but he didn’t want to risk waking his mother in a food raid on the kitchen. Since obviously she had forgotten his promise as well, he had no intention of reminding her. So he curled into a little ball on his side, doing his best to ignore the throbbing of his face, the ache of his belly,
the dread of the upcoming day and the still lingering fear of whatever it was that had come over him at school.

When an hour passed and still sleep eluded him, Ryou felt about ready to cry. He was so very tired but couldn’t drift away, but more than that, he was bones deep weary of this kind of situation he always seemed to wind up in: backed into a corner, a bad option facing him on every side, and no one he could turn to, none he could rely on.

Why was it he could never seem to hold on to any friends? He wasn’t so bad, just quiet and a little nerdy. That wasn’t a good enough reason for a lifetime of exile, was it? Was it too much to ask that had have just one friend, just one other person he was allowed to feel close to, out of an entire world that, when it wasn’t actively beating him down with cruelty, told him over and over he just wasn’t that important enough to bother with?

Ryou allowed himself to sink into fantasy, imagining what it would be like to have that one friend whom he could always rely on. While in the thick of enemies, one friend counted for a lot.

As his mind finally began to unwind, the dream expanded so his one friend became many, and the bullies that had populated his entire world all disappeared. Ryou smiled sleepily at the impossible dream.

*It would be nice if that could happen*, Ryou thought to himself muzzily, half asleep. *It would be so nice if life were like in an RPG, and the bad guys were all laid low, defeated, and the hero’s companions remained by his side forever…*

As Ryou finally succumbed to exhaustion, that final, impossible wish echoing in his mind, the last thing Ryou remembered was an inexplicable feeling of someone smiling at him – just a tiny smirk – and a voice in his ear that might have said, “As *yadonushi* wishes…”

And then there was darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Fairly quiet chapter, all around… that’ll probably change as we go along. ;3

**Sensei**: Probably everyone knows this one, but just in case, this is the Japanese word for ‘teacher’. Occasionally the term ‘sempai’ is used, but that’s usually reserved for students who happen to teach as well, such as upperclassmen or TA’s. Sometimes teachers will allow students to address them as ‘senpai’, but it’s a very informal term to use on a teacher. (This is all gleaned from internet research. If someone out there with more direct knowledge on this spots something wrong with any of this, feel free to point it out!)

**Yadonushi**: Again, something that just about every Bakura fan probably knows, ‘yadonushi’ can mean two things: Landlord / innkeeper, and host, such as a host for a parasite. Considering the nature of the spirit of the ring, it’s a particularly well fitted term, one that was used in the original manga to my knowledge, and one that’s become pretty common to see in fan works. Like this one.

**RPGs VS JRPGs**: Gaming nerds will know that there are some pretty big differences between a western RPG – Role Playing Game – and a JRPG, a Japanese Role Playing
Game. There are entire videos and such dedicated to breaking down how they’re different, in style, structure, goals and more, so I won’t be getting into that. What’s being shown here, though, is pretty typical of what you would find in old school western RPGs, like Palladium or Dungeons and Dragons. The reason for this… I’m more familiar with the western style, and can do more with them without the danger of totally screwing it up. Author’s convenience, and let’s just say that Ryou is an enthusiast for foreign styles of gameplay. It can happen.

Japanese School Structure: Save for what I can find on Japanese school systems via the internet, I’m not that knowledgeable about how it all works. Rules on restroom breaks, for example, or how the children are supervised during recess breaks, I have no idea beyond what I’ve picked up from media. So again, I’m falling back on what’s fairly typical of what you would find in the US. If any of this is so far off that someone notices, please point it out, send me some sources to educate me! :3

Thank you, everyone, for reading! I appreciate all the time, love and attention! (Ooh, the attention, gimme gimme gimme! ;D)
The moment the child wakes, it’s to a dizzying, painful hunger twisting his insides. He knows before his eyes open that if he does not eat this day, he will not eat any of the days after.

The hunger, ever present and gnawing at his spine, is a good counterpart to the discomfort of heat, and it is very hot already. He has slept too long, and missed the coolest part of the day, when it would have been the best time to hunt along the river for tubers, late season eggs or fish. Lifting the threadbare cloth he uses as a blanket against the nighttime chill, the child peeks out, an undernourished face framing eyes the color of dusk, topped with hair white as bone. Blinking, he checks the sun’s position and frowns. How could he have slept so late? It is already the third hour of morning, soon the heat of Ra will be soaring to its height, testing the endurance of even the healthiest of villagers, much less a starved orphan scavenging for scraps.

The boy rolls out of his hiding hole, a small figure of dirty skin and loose bones, held together with little more than grim determination. It is not much of a home he has made for himself, but better than living out in the desert or on the Nile’s bare banks, where he would be easy prey for animals and elements alike. Possibly half a mile beyond the edge of the nearest town, the boy had chosen to take residence in a tiny abandoned farm house. Possibly its owners had experienced too little gain and too much loss to support themselves and were forced to abandon it, but it hardly mattered ‘why’. It was empty and none of the town seemed inclined to reclaim it. With no one to shoo him away, the boy had taken it as his, chasing out the lizards, birds and insects that had taken up the corners, and set up as good a door as his slight body and small strength would allow. What remained in the empty farmhouse was only what was to be expected; ragged cast off kilts and blankets, broken crockery and a stick or two of furniture. He salvaged what he could and he survives.

The boy moves inside, having spent the night on the roof to enjoy the coolness. It is well into shomu, the harvest season, when the days are at their longest and most punishing. To sleep indoors, even in the comparatively cool night, would be unbearably stuffy. The roof offers reprieve from the heat and protection from all but the most determined of prowling predators.

The boy stumbles, falls to one knee before he can catch himself, scraping it open on the rough floor. He hisses at the pain, but it is only one more ache among many. The true cause of concern is why he stumbled. He is weak, and growing even weaker. He’s unnaturally thin and small for his age, he knows that, but over the last hand of days, it has become increasingly difficult to rise from his mat of gathered reeds. He knows the source, knows it is all to blame on his hunger, a sensation that is as familiar to him now as the sun beating his bare shoulders or the wind pressing his skin.

Familiar, yes, but not comforting. It has been too long since he has had any more to eat than a raw, dug up nut-grass tuber or handful of seeds. His body requires more today, or he may well be too weak to try again on the morrow. His lateness in waking was clear enough sign of that.

It is shomu, but the harvests have been bad this year. Hapi, God of the great river Nile, had been too generous to his people, the flood waters had risen well beyond what had been expected, damaging homes, turning roads to heavy mud. When the waters drew back, they had not drawn back far enough, and crops grew poorly in fields that were too wet as well as too dry. It was not so
bad as drought, there was an abundance of water and those foods to be scavenged from the wild still available, but the harvests of grain, vegetables and fruit all suffered. The season of plenty is not so plentiful as it might be, and as stores begin to dwindle, it is set to only get worse.

It’s not yet so bad that starvation is a real danger to anyone other than such homeless urchins as himself. It may not be so prosperous as most years, but to those with money or land of their own it isn’t even time to start tightening kilts. But the well-off knew as well as the poor that harder times are coming, and food or coin was less likely to fall from careless fingers. Most of what the boy has to eat comes from his own labors or from a few lucky chances at thieving.

His own labors… the boy lifts himself from the ground, limps his way to a shaded corner of the little house, holding the wall with one hand to steady himself. There is an urn there, the largest one he could find intact, covered with a piece of wood which is weighted with a stone to keep the vermin out. Removing the stone and cover, he dips in a cup on a long handle and lifts out a little water. It’s cool, but tastes stale and a bit like mud and fish. He gathers the water himself from the river, bucket by bucket to bring back to his hovel, and has yet to master the technique of lifting out the water and leaving the riverbed behind. He drinks it anyway, grimacing only a little at the taste.

It’s better than nothing, and might fool his clenching stomach into thinking it is full, at least for a little while.

His own labors, where food is concerned, has been haphazard but constant. He has tried, both this year and the one before, to grow some of his own food, but the few seeds he’d been able to gather and not immediately consume did not thrive. The few that sprouted were weedy things, sickly in the poor soil and scant water. The farm was too far away from the river to enjoy the renewal of silt during the inundation even in a heavy year, and there were no irrigation ditches to water his tiny plot. He’d tried bringing water to it just as he did for his urn, but it took too much time, time needed in gathering food he could eat now. The results of his effort was… negligible. He abandoned the garden, leaving what would survive to itself and concentrating on more productive means of gathering food. So far, only onions were growing with any success.

His other efforts varied in success, though all were more successful than his gardening. He’d tried fashioning a sling for bringing down fowl or small animals, remembering a neighbor child of his village having done the same and being occasionally rewarded with fresh meat for his efforts. But there is a knack to it he can’t quite seem to get. He still tries from time to time, but it will be some time before he has a dinner brought in from a launched stone. He’s had more luck in fishing the river for catfish and perch, gathering tender shoots which he could eat as he found them or gathering papyrus and reeds to roast over a fire. Sometimes he got lucky and happened on a nest with eggs or – even better – young fowl too young to fly away. Late in the season he can gather budding seeds, and there is always the option of digging up edible roots. The river provides for those willing to look, to those willing to risk the inherent dangers of hungry crocodile or temperamental water horse.

Today, he feels he has no time to spend in hunting what he could from the river. He’s already picked what is nearby clean, he would have to travel far to find an area he has not already scoured bare, and even then, there’s no guarantee he would find anything once he got there. He is not the only hungry mouth that plies the banks of the Nile.

Today, he is going to try stealing his meal.

The boy dislikes thieving, tries to avoid it whenever he can. Not out of any kind of moral imperative, but because he isn’t very good at it. He’s clumsy, tends to draw attention to himself at inopportune times and is slow on the getaway. It’s only because of his size that he’s managed to
stay free as long as he has, ducking into small places his pursuers can’t follow.

Attempting to steal means going into the village, being caught amongst buildings, surrounded by people he didn’t know on all sides. The boy shudders a little at the thought. He hates the notion of such proximity almost as much as the thought of thieving. Being in a village, walking its roads or alleyways, hearing the voices of people raised in conversation or hawking their wares brought back unpleasant memories. Memories he’d just as soon forget completely.

Yet he can’t. He tries to, desperately thinks of anything else but that night, that last night in Kul Elna, but he can’t. He relives it in dreams, is sometimes reminded of it during the day by the smallest of things – a broken jar, the falling of a particular shadow – and suddenly he’s back there again and –

- there’s blood running across the floor in rivulets and he looks to see from where it comes –

- firelight races along the walls, thumps of sandaled feet coming –

- screams of neighbors, of friends as they fight for their lives –

- the gleam of a smooth, curving blade –

- his mother, pushing him, telling him to hide –

- boiling cauldrons, chanting men –

- running, running, running until his lungs felt ready to burst –

- screams and blood and terror and dark –

The boy gasps, clutching the rim of the water urn, his heart pounding, tears stinging his eyes and a cold sweat breaking out over his skin, leaving him to shiver. This is why he can’t forget. Whenever he tries to distance himself, the memories rush into him, real and vivid in his mind, reopening the wound, leaving him raw and throbbing. He can’t forget, nor does he think he ever will. It’s like his own mind won’t let him, giving him constant reminders and keeping his pain alive.

Pain he can live with. Hunger is a more demanding master. Gathering what reserve of strength he has, the boy dresses in his least threadbare kilt, wraps his head and tucks away as much of his distinctive hair as he can, and begins the long walk to the town.

The boy enters the village hesitantly, and is surprised to find how few people there are to be seen. It is late in the morning, but it is still morning. There should be many, going about their routines, getting as much done as possible before the heat would force them to retire for the mid-afternoon slumber. But no, the roads are curiously empty, save an occasional dog.

The boy is instantly wary, staying close to the sides of buildings, his eyes darting from place to place, his eyes open for the slightest sound. It may be nothing, but the boy has survived too much to just assume so. The empty streets bring certain memories far too close for comfort.

He does not have long to wait before his wonderings are answered, by great ringing bells and a distant cheer. That is when the boy remembers: today is the Festival of the Beautiful Reunion. Today, with much pomp and circumstance and under the watchful eyes of the many priests, Het-Hert would be taken from Her temple and ferried up the Nile in Her barque, surrounded by a flotilla of boats, all filled to the brim with worshippers. She would be taken upriver, making frequent stops along the way at other villages, until she arrived in Behdet. There, there would be
more festivities, ceremonies and feasting, as everyone was allowed to celebrate the marriage twixt Het-Hert and Heru.

It is one of the favorite festivals of the people, as it is one all are welcome to participate in. Even now, the streets and homes are empty because all are gathered at the temples, to witness the Goddess begin her journey.

With a jolt, the boy realizes that if today is the Festival of Beautiful Reunion, then it is also his birthday. With a slightly guilty pang, the boy has to pause to recall and count up the number of years he has lived. Without a true home or family anymore, and every day a continuing struggle to keep enough food in his belly to keep it from pressing against his backbone, there has been little cause to keep track of the passing days, save to know when the next swelling of the river was due, and with it the growing season.

He is eight this day. Little more than three years, three rises and falls of the great river, have passed since his home was destroyed, his people butchered.

In the stillness and the heat, the boy shivers, then tenses, but the memories he half expects to engulf him keep their distance. Now is not a time to ponder the past, but to secure food, and quickly. The memories would keep until he slept, when they would visit him in vivid color. As they always would, as they always did.

He could turn his feet toward the temples. With the moving of Het-Hert, that was where the majority of the town’s populace will be, but while there will be some celebration, there will be no feast. The feasting, should it take place at all in a lean year, won’t be for another two hands of days, when the Goddess would reach Bahdet. Any food to be found at the temples will be sparse, and the people thick, the chances of being caught elevated ridiculously. It would be too easy to be spotted accidentally with so many pairs of eyes around. And with some of those eyes belonging to the priests…

The boy breaks into a slow trot, heading in the direction of the river, at an angle that will deliver him to a place well upstream from the temples and their crowds. In a day of celebration, there would be many taking the opportunity to lounge, and there would be those who would pay their respects to the departing Goddess while avoiding the crowds at the temples. There will be those who choose to be beside the water as Het-Hert’s barque floated by, in comparative privacy and real coolness. The boy finds he agrees with the coolness wholeheartedly. So much walking in the sun and heat has drained him even further, his head is starting to feel strange, heavy and light at the same time and stuffed with wool.

With trembling limbs, he speeds as well he can toward the river, part of a prayer, unfamiliar in its disuse, rising to his lips:

“May I receive the loaves which are before You, 
And the victuals of Your Temple.”

Pray to Gods, he thinks. But carry out deeds with your own hands.

When he arrives by the riverside, there are many clustered along its banks, more than he had thought there would be. Not a solid mass of people, but rather a long line of small groups strung like beads on a string, it is still an impressive number. The boy hesitates a moment, thinking to turn back and try his luck at housebreaking, hoping he would be so lucky as to pick one without even a single resident or slave to catch him. But then he sees that nearly all of those by the water have taken the opportunity to enjoy their position to the fullest and brought picnics. Along the bank of the Nile, there was a feast going on, albeit one from many sources.
The boy cannot turn away from such bounty. Moving stealthily, he moves upstream, his left eye on the picnickers, waiting for a set best suited to his needs.

What he eventually finds is more than he had dared hope for. It’s a pair of figures, waited on by a third whose role is to remain unobtrusively in the background until needed. He ignores the third and focuses his attention on the reclining couple.

They are obviously well off, it shows in the whiter than white kilt of the man, the fine linen sheath of the woman, in the braided wigs and jewelry of both. They converse easily with each other, and since they have set their place father from any others than usual to enjoy more privacy, the boy has more than ample cover amongst the reeds to draw close without drawing attention to himself. Ducking into the thick growth along the bank, he crawls toward them along his belly, pushing stalks out of his way when he must, but avoiding moving anything where he can. Mud and stones slide along his chest, belly and legs as he progresses, staining his kilt even further, but he doesn’t care. His mind is focused entirely on his targeted pair and the basket of food they brought with them.

He gets close, closer than is probably necessary or safe to remain unseen, close enough to make out some of the details of his chosen ‘prey’. They are a couple, not brother and sister, of that he is certain; the age gap between them is too great and certain features speak to different parentages. Whether the relationship after that is one of two lovers, a married pair or a man and his mistress is impossible to tell. Their comparatively secluded position on the river might be suggestive, or might simply be their desire for privacy. The boy cares not in any case, as it does not pertain to nor affect his primary concern of the basket that rests between them.

It’s large-ish, but not too large for a boy of his size to manage, and he attempts to calculate how much it might contain. Against the mouthwatering conclusion he comes to, he takes away how much the pair seems to be eating, how much they might continue to eat, and attempts to guess how long he will have to wait before they decide to take an after-meal stroll along the water.

That will be the time to make his move, when the couple moves along. A moment is all he needs, just a moment and a small head start and he can spring up, snatch up the basket and be off again before anyone knows what happened. His only real concern for such a brilliant strategy lies with the slave, hovering near her masters. There is no way to know if, what they rise for their walk, if she will be commanded by their sides or if she will remain by the food. Reluctantly, the boy must concede that her place will most likely be with the basket, to keep away hungry rats such as himself. If she does stay, then the challenge is how to get at the basket? If her attention wanders, or if she leaves for a moment for whatever reason, then small issue. If she doesn’t…

The boy fingers the long, thin scrap of cloth tucked at the waist of his kilt. He isn’t the best shot with the sling, he can’t bring down enough game to live off of, at best his skill would bring in a rare treat a time or two in several hands of days. But a human figure, even one as slim as the girl slave, so near and unmoving, wouldn’t prove to be a difficult target. He won’t aim for her pretty head – an urchin who is a thief is bad enough, one who is a killer stands no chance of survival – he needs only distract her. A strike to her shoulder or back, enough to stave off any pursuit…

But if he does strike her, she will cry out, alerting not only her masters, but anyone within earshot. And he would have to stand up in order to use the sling, shattering any stealth he had before, alerting his target, ruining the whole plan.

The boy lets out a heavy breath, a silent sigh of frustration, and takes his hand away from the sling.

His thoughts already on her, the boy eyes the slave girl warily. Slaves make him nervous. He knows that, should he ever be caught, either in his few stints at thieving or just as a rootless drifter
squatting in the empty hut, slavery is the likeliest fate that awaits him. Placement in a foster home is an unrealistic hope, and slavery offers his captors more than throwing him in gaol. And if anyone were to discover where it was he came from, the name of the village he had been born in that even now was falling to ruins in the wind, not so far to the north… he could expect even worse than prison or enslavement.

While possibly not the worst of fates, the boy avoids slavery like plague. Slaves have certain rights, he knows, and are entitled to such things as clothing, shelter, reasonable care should they become ill or injured, and food. And if a slave won the favor of his or her owner they might gain privileges, small freedoms, or on rare occasions, freedom itself. But the boy, for all his painful youth, is no fool. There are tales told that even his ears can catch of what sometimes becomes of the youngest slaves, male and female alike. He is self-aware enough to know his coloring, his paler-than-moonlight hair and his purple eyes, make him unique, if not particularly beautiful, and therefore a prize for someone’s private collection. He has no desire to become the body slave of some aging merchant, whatever tempting morsels he might be offered in return.

Besides which, the thought of belonging to another in any capacity, to do their bidding, twists his entrails in a way that has nothing to do with food, or lack thereof.

The wind changes, and suddenly the boy is drooling, his stomach cramping hard enough to bring tears to his eyes. He can smell the food the couple have brought with them. Seeing at a distance wasn’t so much an issue; he could pretend it wasn’t there, that they were handling anything other than food and keep a hold of his focus. But with the scent of roast duck and fresh bread in his nostrils, practically able to taste it on his tongue, he almost groans with sheer want of it. Desperately he tries to find some other thing to distract himself, for if he allows himself to focus overlong on the delicious smells, there will be no chance at a successful filching. He drags his eyes to the couple, his attention to who they might be and what they are saying rather than what they are eating.

The man is obviously a court man, his especially fine horsehair wig of hundreds of braids, each tipped with a tiny red bead, his fresh kilt and many flashing rings all mark him as such. Were there any doubt, the lady at his side soon dispels it.

“How did you find your time at the palace?” she asks in a sweet voice, tossing her head to a rattling of her own beaded wig. Her dark, kohl rimmed eyes sparkle with mirth. There is some meaning to her question that is lost on the eavesdropping thief. “Did you see Pharaoh?”

Her companion laughs, a full, happy laugh that belies his years. He is an old man of more than thirty, but his laugh is young. “No, no. I am far too lowly a functionary, as well you know,” he adds with a shaking finger, to which the girl only grins, “to ever approach the Holy One with aught but the back of my head offered up to the bottom of his sandal.”

The girl pouts and raises a small jar to her lips, wine, beer or possibly plain water. A quick look shows the boy there are several sealed jars beside the basket. “I hoped you had perhaps but glimpsed him, moving from place to place, as you spent time within the palace.”

“Alas, such pleasures were not mine to enjoy, beloved.”

The girl takes this in and appears to grow thoughtful, gazing up the river, perhaps checking if she can spot the barque making its start. The man allows the silence, content to watch his ‘beloved’ and soak in the warmth of the day. The slave girl remains impassive. Hidden in the reeds, a small boy’s stomach protests the wait when sustenance is so obviously near at hand. The mud begins to itch at his sides, a dry strand of grass tickles his face, and an insect begins the long crawl from his
calf up his leg. It takes more of his control than it should just to remain still.

“What of the little Hawk-in-Nest?” the woman asks at last. “The young prince, did you see him?”

The man has his back to the boy and he is facing downriver, towards the temples to watch for the barque, and the boy has positioned himself upriver – for an easier escape path when it’s needed – so there’s no way to see his expression, but there is a fond smile in his voice as he replies. “Ah, yes. The young prince I did see. He’s an energetic one! Ready to fledge any moment, his nurses are kept running just to keep up with him.”

The woman is clearly delighted. “Such good news!” she exclaims, her face lit like the sun. “Such a strong young prince will undoubtedly make a fine Pharaoh of Egypt. The Gods look kindly on us!”

“Well,” the man agrees, still speaking affectionately. “We are blessed to have such as our Pharaoh and his son. What other land in the world can claim so powerful and kindly a ruler as he, who beat back the barbarians three years ago? Truly, the prince’s birth at that time could be nothing but the highest blessing!”

“His or ours’, dear one?” the woman asks teasingly. The man chuckles in response, and even the slave girl allows herself to smile at their conversation, taken in by the charm of the subject.

They continue to talk animatedly back and forth, about the Pharaoh and his son, about the Festival, and about the good fortune of Egypt in general, who still manages to celebrate even in a comparatively poor year. The boy, however, no longer listens. His mind has abruptly turned inward, hate and fury of unexpected intensity gripping him, coiling around his spine and squeezing until it becomes hard to breathe.

These people, who a moment ago he only thought of as unsuspecting providers, he suddenly loathes with every ounce of his body. He hates them for their comfort, their happiness, their sheer stupidity. Speaking of the Pharaoh as a benevolent benefactor when it was he that ordered the murder of his village, his entire people, in the most grotesque of ways. Lounging and congratulating themselves in their contentment while not ten yards away, in the mud, lies a victim of this ‘great Pharaoh’, starved down to the skin and bone, left to fend for himself. How dare they, how dare they be so comfortable, their lives so perfect when he is all alone? He hates them all, Pharaoh, his brat, these people and their slave, the priests at the temples, the cheering crowds, the Gods themselves. He hates them, hates, hates, hates.

HATES.

The boy’s body suddenly seems to seize, his hands gripping into the mud and rock, his spine tries to curl, but cannot go far. His eyes are so wide they are in danger of leaving his head, his throat freezes around what might have become a scream.

He feels strange, something somewhere is twisting and tearing and stretching all at once and he can’t control it. He wants to cry out, he doesn’t care if he’s heard anymore or not, yet he can’t, his voice has been stolen from him. And overlaying it all, still the overwhelming sense of hate, turning his vision red, then white and filling his nostrils with the sharp, heavy scent of blood. Then there was –

- blood and screams and –

- mud and stones being shoved under his ragged nails as he gripped, trying to hold on to a world fleeing from him, and –
- heat unlike anything he’s ever felt before and something pressing the base of his spine and –
- finally he can breathe, he gasps, tastes and smells mud, hears the woman nearby call out a question but –
- there’s a rushing noise in his ears that’s not from the river and he can’t stand up, his legs and arms refuse to respond –
- **terror and darkness** –
- pain is ripping him to shreds, tearing at his flesh from his toes to the roots of his hair, leaving nothing between untouched and he can hear someone coming –
- he’ll be caught, caught and dragged away and made a slave and he needs to get away but he can’t move –
- **why must you run?** –
- everything hurts, what’s going on, need to get away, she’s coming closer! –
- **who’s to blame?** –
- they are, they are, **they are!** –

With a snap, the boy’s head comes up from where it had been lolling. Through a haze of white, he sees a slender brown hand reaching through the reeds, ready to part them, to find him. A voice is calling, concerned but firm. The boy sees only a hand that is ready to grab him and clap him in shackles. His lips already pulled back in unconscious grimace, the boy opens his mouth and lets loose a scream of rage and hate, all for anyone who dare come near him.

- stretching, tearing, **pain** –

White takes all of the boy’s sight for a moment, his vision comes back just in time to see the hand retreat quickly, and something white and shining and large flashing through the stalks in pursuit. There’s a brief scream from the other side, soon followed by more, birthed from other throats. The sound of footfalls, running, and the crashing of brush comes not long after, growing steadily fainter.

The boy lies gasping in the mud for less than half a minute, feeling light, dizzy, and oddly cold. Then he jumps up, adrenaline burning through him. A quick glance tells him all he needs to know: the couple and their slave are gone, leaving their basket alone and unguarded. He doesn’t know what happened to him, nor what made the trio abandon their picnic, but it doesn’t matter. He crashes through the reeds separating him from the precious basket of food and falls on it. He snatches up two of the sealed jars and the small, partially eaten roasted duck, tosses them in, lifts the basket up and then –

He’s away, bolting for his life up the bank of the Nile. He sprints until his breath begins to wheeze, then stops suddenly, crouching low in the tall grasses and listens, his ears straining for any telltale sound of pursuit. When he hears nothing but the wild beating of his own heart he takes three deep breaths, clutches the pilfered basket closer to his body and runs again. It is heavy – wonderfully, gloriously heavy! – but on no terms will he put it down. The basket and its contents have become his life, he will not give them up.

He continues his escape, running in brief bursts of speed and crouching in slightly longer periods of rest, eyes and ears well open. It is the best method of escape he’s yet discovered. It got him away
quickly while forcing him not to run blindly, the pauses giving him enough time to pick and choose a route. Should he need a longer burst of speed from a real chase, his pauses will have saved enough of his wind to manage it. Hopefully.

Finally, when he feels his legs won’t let him rise again, the boy stops. He is far from where he began, far from any of the people situated along the riverbank, the only sounds reaching him being the flow of the river itself, the tiny breeze through the reeds and distant temple bells. He won’t feel completely safe until he reaches his hut, but for now he is safe enough. Until he feels strong enough to continue, he can sort through his bounty.

On top there is, of course, the two sealed jars of most likely beer and the duck, and as he digs down deeper he finds two small loaves of barley bread, glazed with honey and sprinkled with seeds, dates, another two jars, two honey cakes and, glory of glories, half a melon.

The boy openly gapes at this last treasure. A melon! And in a slim year! A low ranking functionary or not, to afford such a luxury was rare, indeed, and now it is his!

At the very bottom of the basket he finds a small metal knife, another prize no less valuable than the edibles, and he uses it to carve away a small sliver of the tender, sweet melon flesh. It hits his tongue and a shiver goes up his spine, his face pinches in a happy smile. So sweet! He thinks his teeth might shatter from it, or he might faint of sheer pleasure. He does not faint, though, and moves from the melon to sample a little of each of his prizes. As much as he wants to simply gorge on everything the basket contains, he knows better than to try. An unfortunate incident about a year previous taught him the lesson of patience well.

He eats half of one date, finds that it is also sweet, and very tart and sticky, it makes his mouth hurt a little. The bread is heaven, crisp and crackling outside, tender inside, the seeds and honey glaze a beautiful addition to the barley and yeast flavor of the bread. The honey cakes are, of course, sweet, but filling, or would be if he ate more than a bite. Then there is the duck. It’s been so long since he has eaten the flesh of anything other than fish improperly cooked over smoky fires that his fingers tremble a little as he carves away a tiny portion with the knife. It practically drips with grease, and melts on his tongue, flavors exploding in his mouth. Tears sting at his eyes briefly. He licks away every trace of the precious fat off his fingers, not wasting a single delicious bit.

There is a rustling amongst the reeds and rushes from downriver and the boy freezes. If it’s one of the townsfolk finally caught up with him, he will have to abandon the food he’s already taken from the basket, but he might make off with the basket itself and the majority of the foodstuffs if he makes a quick escape of it.

He never gets a chance to try, as the rustler of grasses appears before he can get a single foot beneath him.

What pokes from between the slender stalks would have many fleeing, and in fact had, the boy realizes with startling clarity, but he feels no fear at all. He ought to, he knows, but for some reason fear does not come. The head is large, arrow shaped, and white as bone, like the thick, sinuous, limbless body that it’s attached to. The mouth, when the serpent opens it to greet the boy with a soft hiss, is black, blacker than kohl. It looks at the boy with curious intelligence, only a touch of the usual reptilian chill lurking in the corners of its wide eyes.

Feeling himself to be in a dream, the boy beckons the serpent, holding a hand low for it to touch.

Without hesitation, the serpent slithers close, touches the boy’s fingertips with a flicking black tongue. It tickles and the boy chuckles, shocking himself. How long has it been since he last laughed? The serpent regards him, regards his arm, then begins to climb the thin limb. There is a
very brief moment of concern as the weight begins to tug his arm, but it dissipates almost immediately. The heaviness is comforting, a confirmation he’s not alone. He wonders why it is he’s not afraid of this serpent, when it could so easily kill him, but then the reptile’s eyes come even with his, and he doesn’t wonder anymore.

They are not a serpent’s eyes, for no serpent was ever conceived that had such wide, knowing, purple eyes. They are his eyes, violet as the dusk and knowing, outlined by glistening scales. Deep in his being, the boy knows this serpent is his. In a way that he cannot explain, even to himself, this serpent is him.

Licking his lips nervously, the boy whispers, “Little God, what is your name?”

The serpent does not answer, but in that same strange way he knows it will not hurt him, that it is a part of him, he knows that it wants to, that it tries, but can’t manage. It is too weak, he realizes. If it could be made stronger, than it might be able to. With one hand, the boy carves away a small piece of duck and offers it to the serpent, who flicks its tongue at the morsel, then takes it up almost delicately and swallows it whole.

“One day, you’ll be strong enough to tell me,” the boy swears, stoking the smooth head with his free hand. The serpent’s eyes half-close, it leans into his hand, enjoying the caress.

And one day, the boy thinks to himself, you and I might grow strong enough to topple the Pharaoh that slaughtered my village. Then maybe my rage will ease, and the nightmares will cease.

From deep within the boy, so deep and intrinsic now to his being he hardly hears it, another, half remembered voice whispers, “Soon…”

The scene expands, widens, like it is being seen by a bird who is taking flight, until the boy and serpent are lost, two specks on the Nile bank.

Awareness comes sooner this time, and Ryou Bakura knows who he is. He wonders if this is a dream he will remember, or if it, like the one before, will be forgotten…

Chapter End Notes

You know, I’m not sure if I find the Ancient Egypt parts more annoying or enjoyable to write… ah, well. History time!

The Festival of the Beautiful Reunion: Right, for this I’m just going to give everyone an excerpt from the site I did a lot of research on. Anything more you’re going to have to look up yourselves. Sorry, I’m not an encyclopedia. At least not here, I’m not. “The festival was celebrated in the third month of Shomu, which means June-July, when HetHert travelled from her home at Dendera to go 180 km (110 miles) south to Edfu and the temple of Heru. There she would stay for two weeks while the marriage was consecrated inside the temple. She was greeted and celebrated as the ‘Returning Eye of Re’, which promised fertility and renewed life to the earth and to humans. After the fourteen days, HetHert would sail back to Dendera to await the birth of the child conceived at Edfu -Har-mau (Hor-sma tawy) or Greek: Harsomtus: Horus the Uniter.” This was found at the site www.philae.nu/akhet/index.html (Now defunct, sadly.)
Dendera: If you paid attention to the last paragraph, then that should tell you where our little orphan is, now. The town of Dendera, which is, while by no means close to Qurna (my real life model for the village of Kul Elna) it is conceivable that he would be able to make it from there to Dendera over the course of three years. So look at that, I'm being semi-clever! :D

Prayer: The prayer that our kid mutters to himself is part of a hymn to Het-Hert, found in the XIth Dynasty Temple at Deir El-Bahari. I found that passage fitting for him at the time, and it's more than reasonable to suppose he would know some prayers off by heart, even given his circumstances.

Food: Again, trying to remain truthful to history, but if I've made any glaring mistakes, feel free to let me know. This is how I learn, everyone, by researching and being corrected when I stick my foot in my mouth.

Serpent: Yeah, anyone want to take a guess on what/who this is and the significance? It'll all be revealed, if not explained, later on, and no doubt everyone knows perfectly well… but c'mon. Take a guess. ;3

Again, I'm not sure if I'm having a ball or being completely frustrated by the Ancient Egyptian memories… probably both. Thank you for reading and putting up with my horrible grasp of history and geography, everyone! Love!
Ryou woke slowly from heavy dreams. He was starving.

The boy lay on his futon, silently staring up at his ceiling for a while as he sorted out his most recent memories. They seemed a little muddled, though thankfully not as muddled as those from the day before last. First was the question of why was he so hungry, which was easy enough to remember – he hadn’t eaten any dinner last night. And he had skipped his dinner because he hadn’t wanted to face his mother and sister because…

Ryou scrunched up his face experimentally, then winced at the pain that shot through his cheek and eye. Yes, he remembered that right enough. He had avoided everyone the night before because he’d received a good knock from Taro before coming home. That knock, if it hadn’t become a winning shiner while he slept, was certainly giving a good impression of it by the feel. Gingerly, he felt the flesh around his eye with his fingers. It was warm, warmer than the rest of his face, and still a little puffy, but at least his eye hadn’t swollen shut. It wasn’t even enough to make opening his eye a struggle, and that was lucky. He’d had bad shiners before, and they were a pain to deal with.

But of course, remembering the events of the previous day brought back to mind all of the worries he’d had as well, paramount among them how he was going to get through today both at home and at school without having to explain his injuries or earn any more before he made it home again. He would have to get by his mother first, and then all of his teachers without their noticing his swollen face. His mother he might manage, but not his teachers, so he would need some very plausible excuse why he had a black eye without getting anyone who would retaliate into trouble, and then he would either have to kowtow to any and all bullies that crossed him today or somehow avoid them entirely.

He didn’t think he would be able to avoid the bullies. Not today. He remembered all too well the reason Taro had made him a punching bag. He remembered the way he had gone slightly mad and fought back against his most ardent bully two days before, and had challenged him so that the fat boy felt the need to smack him back down to his low rung in the ladder. The lesson came, as lessons from Taro so often did, at the end of his fist. And somehow, for some reason, Ryou had fought back again. He’d returned one blow for another and had been prepared to deal out more before snapping back to his senses. He could remember how his world had narrowed until it seemed to contain nothing but himself and Taro, how the rage had twisted his insides into knots and left a hot, sick trembling in his limbs. He had been more than willing to beat Taro’s gloating face to a miserable pulp, until his piggy eyes wouldn’t be able to see out from the swelling and his words would be slurred through fattened lips. He had been willing, eager even, to do all of that and more, when the rage that had filled him like a consuming fire went out all at once. He was left with nothing but his own weak, trembling self, facing an incensed boy much bigger than himself.

And he still had no idea where it had gone.

Perhaps more to the point, he didn’t know where it had come from. Ryou often felt anger for those that made his life a small, living hell, but he never seriously thought about fighting back as he had. His usual method was to attempt invisibility, to become so small and unnoticeable that everyone
would just leave him alone. It didn’t really work as well as he would have liked, but it was better than picking fights. At least, he tried to convince himself of that. But then this rage had taken hold of him and had him acting out, fighting back before he could think and stop himself. Was it just repressed fantasies finally breaking free, or was he going insane?

Something lurking at the back of his mind, some blurred memory he couldn’t quite bring into focus made him want to say that he really was going mad.

Ryou’s alarm went off, the volume twice as loud as he remembered setting it, and he nearly put out his own eye with the fingers gingerly feeling his bruise when he jumped. It was an auspicious start to the day.

Compared to the morning he’d had on the previous day, this one was a vast improvement, save one or two details. He woke this time with plenty of time to get ready for school and without his mother breathing down his neck, so he was able to wash in the bathroom relatively leisurely before breakfast. In addition to just feeling better for washing his face and brushing his hair and teeth properly, it gave him time to catalogue the previous day in more detail. He wondered if not having this time yesterday could have been part of the reason for his disorientation, where not having the time to look over all the memories had made them less material. Among other things he remembered that he actually had finished his homework, which was more of a relief than it should have been. With everything else he could expect today, he did not want getting into trouble for unfinished assignments to be one of them.

While washing his face he inspected his eye and found that it didn’t look as swollen as it felt to his fingers. But it had colored during the night, the flesh about an inch away from his eye and a little right on the lids turning a deep bluish purple, with the promise of more coloring to come. There would be no hiding it from his mother as he had hoped, but it still felt a lot worse than it looked.

He also found, in the process of getting dressed, that the golden ring was around his neck, tucked under the collar of his pajama top. That made Ryou stop a moment and scour his memories, which he had thought were without any gaps. He knew that he’d taken off the ring before he’d gone to sleep. He could remember slipping it over his head and putting it on his bedside table. But then… when had he taken it off? Was it before he’d started his homework, or when he’d sat down to write some more of his RPG plotline, or was it just before he’d put his head down on his pillows to sleep? And now that he thought about it… was he so sure he couldn’t remember feeling the cold metal against his skin while he’d lain in bed vainly waiting for sleep to claim him? He wasn’t so sure now, although he was sure he had taken it off, which made no sense at all. The more he thought about it, the more muddled he became.

He could recall wishing for a friend whom he could rely on, and for all of his enemies to evaporate. He remembered the familiar sense of despair that had welled up inside him at the hopelessness of such a wish, the hot feel of tears trying to come up and choke him. Then, what must have been the beginning of a dream before he had even properly fallen asleep, he was sure there’d been someone in his room. Someone who had stood beside his bed, and smiled, and said something; something that had been comforting as he slipped down in to sleep, but which he couldn’t recall now.

And if that had been the beginnings of his dreams, then what had the rest of them been like? He couldn’t remember much, except maybe… a river? A big, wide river and… his school. His school wasn’t anywhere near a river, nor any other body of water, but it had been a dream, and dreams almost never followed rules. And that was all he could remember of his dreams, though he felt sure that there had been much more to them and that he had wanted to remember, even as he’d been in the middle of them.
After getting dressed in a clean set of school clothes, Ryou gave up remembering as a lost cause. It’s not as though they were important, and there were some things today that did require his attention.

He didn’t notice until much later that after dressing he had automatically put the ring back on and tucked it under his shirt, so distracted was he.

At breakfast, which he had enough time to sit down to this time, he was able to eat for about three minutes before his mother, who had been in the kitchen, came out and noticed the bruise over his eye. Ryou was impressed, through the dread of finally being discovered.

“Ryou, what happened to your eye?” she asked, her voice going high as she put down her plate and leaning across to look closely at his face. She caught his chin in her fingers and tilted his head to the light so she could see. “Did you get into another fight at school?”

Ryou jerked his head out of his mother’s grip and looked away, his hair falling over and hiding the left side of his face from sight. “No, mother, I didn’t get into a fight.” It was interesting to Ryou how his mother always assumed that when he came home with injuries that he ‘got into a fight’ rather than having had the stuffing knocked out of him. She thought it more likely that her small, thin boy was dishing out as much as he was getting rather than getting ganged up on. He just considered it another sign that she knew very little about her son. …Of course this time she was right, but that was a major deviation from the norm that even he didn’t understand.

Amane, nearly finished with her own breakfast, looked up from her bowl. “You got into a fight?”

“No,” Ryou nearly snapped, irritated and embarrassed. “I just fell down at recess. I hit my face and got a bruise, that’s all.”

His sister pouted at him, her face worried as she tried to get a look at his eye behind the curtain of his hair. But it was his mother that had his attention, her reaction that he was watching the closest. Her lips were pursed together into a thin line, and she raised an eyebrow at him, every inch of her expression registering skepticism. For a minute Ryou began to panic, remembering how she had, on two previous occasions, gone to his school after he’d come home with bruises to chew out everyone she could find, from cafeteria staff to the principle. On both occasions very little had been done, but Ryou had been thoroughly humiliated and an even tastier target for ridicule. He had no desire to repeat the experience, and his mother’s expression was not reassuring on that point.

But in the end he needn’t have worried. Whether she believed his story about falling down or not – and he was fairly certain that she didn’t – she didn’t make an issue of it. Unreasonably, Ryou felt a little disappointed that she had given up that fight so easily, when he should be grateful. Rather than insisting that Ryou tell her the truth, or marching on the school herself in a righteous fury, or even admonishing him to be more careful when playing on school grounds, she drug him to her vanity a few minutes before they had to leave to catch the bus and used her foundation to cover up the worst of the bruise. Ryou quickly weighed the pros and cons of letting his mother put makeup on him before school. On one hand having it be less obvious for everyone to see the injury, but on the other was the risk of someone noticing that he was wearing makeup. Even worse than long hair or bringing figures into school – doing anything girly.

He didn’t have too much choice in the matter, though, as his mother sat him down and went to work immediately. He comforted himself that the idea was to conceal something you didn’t want to see, not bring attention to what you were applying, so nobody might see the foundation at all. He could hope, anyway, and there were always the bathroom sinks if it was too obvious to deal with.

So Ryou went to school much less rushed than the day before, with his mother’s foundation
smeared over his sore eye and growing trepidation of what he would come back to, what sorts of revenge might be dished out for him.

He was vaguely worried what his own reaction to such revenge might be; if his own body would betray him again, and what sort of dark cravings might spring up from his psyche.

Whatever it was that Ryou might have been expecting on returning to school – Taro lying in wait for him around some corner as soon as he stepped off of the bus, threatening looks as he walked down the halls, an entire group of the school jerks ganged together to stomp on this one upstart with Taro and Suichi at the head of it – he got none of it. Instead it was a perfectly normal beginning to the school day, save one little detail. There wasn’t a trace of hostility aimed his way, which was such an unexpected sensation that his stress levels actually spiked until he realized what the strange vibe was: Not being hunted.

He made it all the way to his classroom, to his seat and unpacked all of his books without being molested or taunted, and he began to feel as though he were experiencing the calm before the storm, that he should be more frightened than ever. There must be something worse than he had ever been through before headed his way, but he had no idea what it could be.

It wasn’t until class began that Ryou got his first clue why the general tenor in the building seemed so different. He sat in the row of desks furthest from the front, and knew where everyone sat by heart. It was a hobby of his to play memorization games, to play with the ordering of the seats in his head like it was a game of chess, and to watch the interplay of passed notes, whispered secrets and sneaky harassment that happened while class was in session. So it was that when the bell rang, signaling the beginning of the day and everyone was meant to be firmly planted in their seats, that Ryou saw there was one desk conspicuously vacant: Taro’s.

And if he thought that maybe the larger boy was tardy, that was soon dispelled by the teacher’s first announcement following roll. He was out sick, had been taken to the hospital by his family that morning, in fact. The teacher, obviously struggling with how little information he had or was allowed to pass on to his class, and his desire to reassure them. He compromised by telling them that while they, the school, weren’t exactly sure what was wrong, Taro showed every sign of making a full recovery and being back in class in no time.

One student, a girl by the name of Yukiko who sat in the second row and was the only girl known to have a soft spot for the class jerk, asked that if they didn’t know what was wrong, then why was he in the hospital? What were his symptoms?

After a show of hesitation and a few more prompts from other students – who cared less for Taro’s wellbeing but were interested in learning what was wrong nonetheless – their teacher finally cracked. He told them, with many warnings not to spread the news beyond their class, that Taro was in a coma, and no one knew why.

That caused a stir like nothing seen before in the school, and despite the warning lain on them to keep it to themselves, the news that Taro was in a coma spread almost instantly from one class to the next. Taro was unpopular in school, and while Ryou had been aware of that, he hadn’t known just how universally disliked he was. It seemed that outside Taro’s own little circle of friends, who shared his attitudes and personal hobby of picking on anyone and everyone he thought he could, opinion on him was all sharply against him. With the one inexplicable exception of Yukiko. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been so surprised at the fellow feeling floating around the school. After all, he was far from Taro’s only target for cruelty. There were others who had felt his harsh sense of humor and gone home sporting scrapes and bruises, cursing his name. But he was still surprised to see how far and wide the dislike of Taro went; with how many people Ryou had at least this one
thing in common. It was a small torture they shared, and Ryou felt an unfamiliar camaraderie spring up between them, however faint, at the discovery.

As days passed and there was no sign or word of Taro improving, rumor and speculation began to circulate around the school, as would happen when large groups of children are left only their imaginations to fill in for facts. There were any number of rumors that were going around at any one time, ranging in credulity from the probable to a shonen special. One of the more ridiculous ones that Ryou rather liked was that Taro and his family were actually a small spy cell or vigilante group, and that Taro’s coma was due to injuries received while throwing down with some of their enemies at the school itself. Or that Taro was secretly a member of another school’s Yanki gang, a young member scouting for recruits in the lower grades before they were snatched up by rivals, and he had gotten into a fight – again at the school – and lost.

As absurd as both of those theories were, they and many others shared the detail that Taro had been found unconscious on school property by the earliest arriving faculty, and that it was from there that he was taken to the hospital. So widely spread was that particular detail that it was generally accepted as fact, and some swore they had heard the teachers themselves talking about it, trying to reason out why the young boy would be on school grounds so late and what could have happened to him while he was there.

Ryou doubted it, whatever other students might swear was true. There were some swearing just as fervently by aliens or fox spirits, so he wasn’t convinced. His personal feeling was that it was much more likely that Taro had caught some weird virus and the doctors just hadn’t figured out what it was yet. But since the only news they got about Taro was that he wasn’t getting any worse, and no one else seemed to be getting sick, he didn’t let the idea of a mystery bug worry him.

Far from worried, Ryou was happy, he was ecstatic. He was delighted that his bully was gone, whatever the cause that had struck him down. For the first time in longer than he cared to think about, Ryou was free from the constant threat of Taro. There were other bullies to be sure – Suichi was never far from his awareness – but Taro had been his consistent, nagging concern. Without his offending bulk taking room in the school, it was like a physical weight had been lifted away from him and he could breathe at last. He didn’t know what was wrong with Taro, and in the end he really didn’t care. So long as it kept him far away from school and him, Ryou only hoped that whatever it was continued on indefinitely.

Let Taro stay sick. Ryou was free.

Except that he wasn’t free, of course. Not completely. There were other jerks at the school, and it was only a matter of time before the balance was readjusted among them to cover up any gaps left by their fallen comrade. It took nearly a week before it happened, nearly a week of peace to actually concentrate on nothing but schoolwork when he was at school before that balance was restored and Ryou was back on the bullying Rota.

It was Suichi, the evil brat of the school who finally caught up with him, remembering that he existed and hadn’t had his self-esteem stomped on for too long. In Taro’s continued absence he had found another cohort willing to pal around with him and act as his fists. It was his style, after all, to never be the one who did any of the damage he ordered, and there were plenty of boys who enjoyed feeling like they were in charge without actually doing any of the thinking. Ryou didn’t know who he was, but recognized him as one of the troublemakers from Suichi’s year that everyone did their best to steer clear of.

It wasn’t as bad as it could have been, not by far. It was more of a reminder that whether Taro was around or on the other side of the planet, Ryou was still on the bottom rung of the school hierarchy.
He came away from the encounter with little more than a jogged elbow from being pushed into a wall. As well as a reminder for Ryou, he got the impression Suichi was breaking in his new crony, making sure he was trained properly.

And wasn’t that a comforting thought?

The next day was worse, more on a par with how things had been before Taro was sent to the hospital. A little rougher, a little bit of jeering of anything that presented itself – and on Ryou there was plenty to choose from – and a parting threat that the next day there would be more of the same. It was almost like Taro had never left, and life began to take on its familiar, exhausting shape again. Ryou prepared himself for a return to that routine and tried not to think too much about what it would have been like if the bully-free life could have continued.

So it was with blank, uncomprehending amazement that he greeted the next morning’s post-roll announcement. Both Suichi and a classmate of his, Ryuji, had been taken to the hospital with what appeared to be the same malady as Taro. Taro himself, they were told, hadn’t made any progress, but neither had he worsened. There was no need to worry, the teacher hastened to add to his room full of nervously shifting students, but it would be best if everyone practiced especially good hygiene – lots of hand washing – and if anyone felt the least bit ill, to report it right away.

Ryou, sitting at his desk, his expectations for a day of torments jerked out from underneath him, felt a little off balance and bewildered. There was the mild concern that there was some kind of disease running through that no one knew what it was or how to combat it, but that was overwhelmed by a sense of disbelief. He couldn’t believe his luck. That this mysterious illness had so far struck down those that had done or meant to do him harm seemed too good to be true. He wondered if he were dreaming, if he would wake and find himself back in his bed, a whole day of school ahead of him, complete with bullies. He prayed not, or that if it were that he would never wake up.

It didn’t occur to him to feel pity for the boys who had fallen ill. They had never shown him any, so the sentiment wasn’t returned. Nor did it register as particularly odd that not only was it his bullies that were falling ill, but only his bullies. No one else appeared to be even brushed by whatever was going around.

Though, for that last observational failure Ryou could be forgiven, as his bullies did take up a lot of his personal horizon, it was difficult to see beyond them. As the weeks rolled by, though, still with no positive word on Taro, Suichi or Ryuji, more students began to join them in the hospital. All had fallen into comas, all of them were in one way or another considered to be bullies, and the majority of them had little or nothing to do with Ryou directly.

The highly selective epidemic ran through the school with no sign of stopping, and families began to worry about their children. Students themselves were nervous as well, wondering if the virus would have them next. But Ryou’s spirits lifted every day. It was like his wishes had been granted, or one of them at least; to be able to walk down the halls without fear! It was something he had long craved, and now that it was his, he was determined to relish it.

Only his dreams troubled him, and their shadow flitted away with the rising sun.

Nights were perfectly dark, now. Dark and cold with the sharp bite that promised heavy winter frost. The first snows of the season had yet to blanket the world in its heavy mantle, but it wasn’t far away. Each morning found every surface caked in thick frost, the sun reluctant to climb into the cold sky and all too eager to retreat to warmer lands in the evening. At night one was very glad of whatever shelters they had, whatever kept the breathtaking snap away from their flesh, and
burrowed into their blankets and futons. A cold wasteland was coming, blowing down the abandoned streets and setting the lamps to crazy dances. Warm homes in which to retreat was something that was greatly appreciated.

In one home, as in many, not a sign of life was to be seen or heard. The hour was late, and all were abed. Each light had been switched off, the TV silenced, all of the kitchen utilities checked, the curtains closed and the locks on the front door all drawn to. If one were to walk from one bedroom to the next, checking to make sure everyone was where they were meant to be, they would find all as it should be. In the largest room was the mother, deeply asleep but still carefully keeping to her own side of the bed. Her husband was often absent, but she kept up the habit, behaving as though he were beside her. It was a source of comfort, a reminder that he whom she loved would not be gone forever, and the cold patch at her side would one day be warm again. In the next bedroom closest to the mother’s and absent father’s was the little girl’s room, arranged and bedecked as suited a young girl who loved all that was pretty or cute, with the girl herself nestled deeply in her blankets, hiding from stray breezes that might catch her.

In the final bedroom of the apartment the shadows were just as deep as everywhere else, but one might, with great effort, just make out the shelves lined with books, the figures and models left out on display and the very neatly arranged texts on the desk. If one listened, one could hear the sound of muffled breathing coming from the futon. Muffled, because the boy sleeping there was buried in his blankets. Though, as the hypothetical listener paused beside him, they would notice it was not peaceful breathing. The breaths of the hidden boy were those of a troubled sleep, uneven and hitching often.

And the boy was not alone. In the deepest corners of his room, the shadows *writhed.*

As the boy tossed in his bed sheets, fighting the nightmares that had become a regular, nightly visitor, the darkness, as innocent as shadows had ever been, churned around the room. Out of natural darkness came something darker, something blacker than shadow and more menacing than nightmare. Night bore no man ill will, but this had an awareness that reached out, that observed, that judged. And it flowed, gathered together, like droplets of spilled ink, beside the boy’s futon.

For a time the pool of darkness did nothing, merely lay beside the boy and seemed to observe his quiet struggles. If darkness could be said to watch when it possessed no physical eyes to do so, then this darkness watched the boy as he slept.

After a time the shadows began to move again, to stretch themselves upward and outward, fountaining and twisting itself in different directions so one moment it was tall, the next wide, and the next both but very thin. It was trying to form a shape, but appeared to be struggling. The shadows hesitated after a moment of this, and flickered uncertainly.

They were trying to recall, in whatever it was that passed for memory in a patch of shadow, a form from times long past. It had once been a shape the shadows knew well, but now the memory was blurred and uncertain. The details couldn’t be held for long before the memory collapsed in on itself, with the attempt to replicate it soon following. Much easier, the consciousness within the shadows discovered, was to recall the shape it had most recently resided in, even if it had been very brief.

Beside the sleeping boy, the shadows twisted in on themselves, reforming and molding themselves until they became something that looked almost solid, a single entity that sat beside the futon and looked down on the boy with a considering look on its newly formed features.

The shadows had metamorphosed to become a boy. The same boy, in fact, as the one it looked down on.
The doppelganger was a perfect copy of the child that slept so uneasily beside him. From the softness of his skin and the shoulder length, silvery hair to the warm, nut brown eyes and the deep blue school uniform he wore nearly every day. In appearance the two boys, even when right beside each other, were one and the same. But there was something about the shadow-boy, a presence that hung around him like a miasma, clinging to his skin. One would have seen, if they happened to look beyond the first impression of his appearance, that the shadow-spun imposter was very different from the sleeping boy.

Were there any doubt, his eyes would have given him away. They were the proper shape, and the shade of deep brown was flawless, but they were filled with so much anger and hate that anyone caught in their gaze would almost feel it brushing their skin with virulent heat. Right now they were aimed downward, watching his twin as he struggled quietly with his dreams. His breathing was ragged, his limbs shifted in his sleep, seeking escape or respite, and the occasional soft, pathetic mewling sound escaped his lips.

The shadow figure sneered in undisguised contempt.

It was only an expression, a small shift of the features, but it was enough to transform the doppelganger into an entirely different person, as unlike the sleeping boy as it was possible to be while still wearing his face. It turned him into something twisted, evil.

“You are living one of those memories,” the shadows said to the boy. His voice, without a throat or tongue to shape the words, might have been the boy’s voice, if it were possible to construct a voice out of a whispering wind and the whine of shifting sand.

The boy twisted, possibly at the sound of the strange voice, but did not wake. He wouldn’t wake, couldn’t, until the memory he was within had played itself out to the end. He was effectively trapped within his own mind and another’s life until dawn came.

The figure snorted, a sound so soft none would have heard it even had they listened for it, and leaned back on his elbows, narrowed nut brown eyes on his host. There was nothing to be done this night, and the streets were freezing, dangerous. It was best to remain indoors for now, and in doing that, there was only his host to watch over until he woke. His host, who was still going through the ancient memories each night as dreams. It wasn’t a pleasant process. There were so few in the shadow-boy’s memories that were not horrible, for this boy to experience them was a muddled nightmare. Nor was it entirely without its share of discomfort for the shadows. Without a reason to use his host’s body and distract himself for the night it would be a long vigil.

It was irritating, this dependence on his host, the holder of the millennium ring. But there had to be an equal exchange between them, give and take for the bond to be complete. If it was all one sided, then it would all fall to pieces. He needed the boy’s body to live in this time period, but he also needed access to those memories that allowed him to speak the strange language that surrounded him, that gave him vital knowledge of this world so far removed from his own, that told him who ‘his’ family was and how to interact with them without raising their suspicions. To have all of those memories, then some of his life in Egypt had to be given to his host.

More than that, though, the bond itself required the exchange, the sharing of memory and identity. Those threads that bound their souls together, begun by the convergence of memory and experience and a sympathetic resonance, were multiplied and strengthened by the exchanges. The link would be strengthened beyond the point of casual severance.

Such a bond could not exist and only one of them be aware of it.

But then, it didn’t follow his plans that his host become aware of what was happening. Not yet, at
least. The bond was still developing, it could be broken; his host could escape him if he knew. So he hid the memories from his host. The boy relived pieces of his life as he slept, and while he was dreaming he could remember every other dream-memory he’d had, but on waking they would be covered over in a mantle of forgetfulness. All the boy could recall when he was awake was perhaps an impression or two and that the night had been full of dreams.

Slowly the boy quieted and grew still in his bed, and the shadow boy seemed to relax. Then he leaned forward, staring intently at his host’s face. For a minute he stared, silent, his head cocked to one side. Finally he asked aloud, in a tone that was confused even in its unearthliness. “Why does he weep?”

Difficult as it was to see anything in the deep darkness of the room, it was just possible to make out the boy’s face, more serene now than it had been when plagued by nightmarish memory. It was also just possible to make out twin tracks of tears streaming down his cheeks, sneaking out from beneath pale lashes.

Immediately after asking the question the apparition snorted again and answered himself, his voice suddenly rough, what had once been wind and sand becoming gales and grinding stone. “Terror. He is weak, would never have survived these trials had it been he who truly lived them.” He paused, considering the boy with a cold eye.

He really was just a child, chosen by the millennium ring. He was even more a child, the figure knew, when considered by the standards of this ‘modern’ culture. In his, this boy would have been a young man, taking on the responsibilities of adulthood and forging his own way into the world. But there was a line of distinction between boy and man, and this one was still far from crossing it.

And this was his host. A child so weak in himself that he was intimidated by essentially everyone else in his school. He knew enough of the boy’s life to know that even other children who were picked on considered his host as a weakling, laughed at him when they thought no one could overhear. But his host could hear them.

He heard them and their taunts and he did nothing. He felt the anger rise in his breast and did not act on it. He shoved it aside and let it fester. Because the fear was always greater than the anger.

“Perhaps,” he whispered, the sound of stone rolling against stone in the depths of caves, “I should find a more suitable host…”

But that was easier said than done. It was the millennium ring that chose the host, not him. There was a magic involved in the choice, in the binding of their souls. Even so new as it was, one couldn’t simply pull away and find another. So long as this boy lived there would be no way to bond with a new host.

Of course, that could be arranged without too much trouble.

The shadows changed, slowly altering themselves to a new shape. The shadow boy reached out a hand, and slowly the fingers lengthened, thinned and sharpened to wicked points, until the hand was a claw, the fingers a set of grasping talons. They moved to the insensible boy, and then halted just shy of grazing one of the pale cheeks, still damp with tears.

“He is weak,” the stone and gravel voice said, the talons still spread and ready, but frozen in place. “And he weeps at mere memories of another’s life.”

The reasoning was sound, the opportunity as choice as one could hope for… yet the hand did not move the final distance. The talons twitched, as though they desired nothing more than to plunge
into the flesh lying so defenselessly before them, but they did not act on that desire. Something held them back.

“A weak host can be more easily controlled,” the stooping shadow reasoned, the grinding stone tones replaced with shifting sands. And the strength that mattered wouldn’t come from the host in any case, the shadows knew, but from him. A weak host provided more positive characteristics than negative. Easier to control, easier to deceive and manipulate, easier to appease with gifts, and a weak host who was known to be weak by everyone around him would arouse less suspicion. The only thing he would need a strong host for would be an inner strength, one that could weather the strain of the bond and not burn out or break. And so far his current host was doing exactly that.

Besides which, the millennium ring had chosen this boy…

A talon flicked, diving toward the boy’s exposed throat- and came up again with the cord that held the golden ring hooked over a joint.

The shadow boy stared at it, a mixture of reverence and loathing in his eyes as he examined his centuries long prison. In many, many ways, the ring was the start of all the troubles that extended across time and continents, and still it was here, gracing the neck of a boy on an island country.

If only he knew what it was that hung under his shirt, laying against his skin every day.

The ring had chosen this boy, this clueless weakling child. The ring possessed a kind of consciousness of its own, the shadows knew, and was more than capable of judging those who came into contact with it, of choosing who was worthy. It could sense the threads of fate, and choose its wearer accordingly. And it had picked this out of all the possibilities of all the countries of all the generations. This was the boy that it considered worthy.

The shadows glared accusingly at the ring, which only stared back enigmatically with its single golden pupil, the dangling points swaying through the air innocently.

Heavy gold held aloft by shadow, the figure slowly lowered it back down to his host without disturbing his slumber. His face still told of an internal struggle, one on which his life hung precariously.

Abruptly the figure leaned forward and down, bringing his face close to that of his host. Thrusting his face to the crook of the boy’s neck, he inhaled deeply.

To the boy it would have felt no more than the passing from light to shade, when shadows fall over one’s skin. To the shadows, though, it was much more profound. A shudder passed through him, and he inhaled again. He could smell him: sweat and soap, sun and fear, pulse and breath. He was alive. A part of the shadows could remember what it was to be alive – truly alive and not co-opting life from another, and that part of the shadows ached.

Alive… he yearned for that simple, greedy, vibrant spark. He wanted what it was that made this boy smell so good.

The shadows pulled away from his host, reluctantly, the long talons melting away and the rest of his body slowly fading to become one with the darkness. He would trust to the ring that it knew what it was doing, and he would gather his strength, guard his host diligently until the time came when he could act as more than a shadow. With fate and patience he could accomplish anything, and he knew he had patience.

A final whisper insinuated itself into the room, all snaking sand carried on a breeze that did not
exist, defensive and hopeful.

“Perhaps he is stronger than he looks…”

Chapter End Notes

**Shonen**: ‘Shonen’ is a word that basically means ‘young boy,’ and is best known to the fans of manga and anime (at least in the US) as part of the title to manga zine, ‘Shonen Jump.’ In this context I’m using the word to refer to those comics/manga that appeal to young boys.

**Yanki**: This one is a little harder to explain. For those who don’t know and come from a more Western background, think of it as the Yakuza for high school or really hardcore punk rock. It’s a style, lifestyle and a way of lashing out at society. The general frame of mind in pop culture seems to be that if you begin as a Yanki, you’ll graduate up to Yakuza, but that’s not always true.
Was it possible for dreams to come true?

It was something that Ryou had found himself wondering for some time now, and the best part was that he wasn’t immediately tossing the notion out as ridiculous. It really did seem like it could be possible, that his heart’s desires could be fulfilled, made a reality through some nameless force. And in this case, it came twofold.

The first had been the strange malady that had struck his school - and only his school - which had incapacitated so many fellow students, all of them bullies. The adults were calling it the Higashi-ku Strain, since it was a sickness that was limited to their area - in fact a single building. The students, on the other hand, had dubbed it the Kagome virus, after the little kids’ rhyming game. It fit well enough, only targeting kids, and only kids who liked to play the ogre.

Ryou would never admit it to anyone, but this was as perfect a solution to his problems at school as he could have asked for. His bullies were gone, perhaps forever, and he didn’t even have to change schools in order to escape them. He could stay where he had started to become comfortable and perhaps make some friends at last.

From this came the second half of his wish fulfillment. Since nothing the doctors did seemed to help those who had already fallen to the Kagome virus, nor could they say what it was, how it was spread or how anyone was to protect themselves from it, the school had decided to enact drastic measures. Only two months into the semester, and their doors had closed again to thoroughly sanitize the whole building, in attempt to scrub out whatever contagion was harming their students.

While normally a school-wide interruption like this would lead to students being shuffled to other schools temporarily to keep them from falling behind in their studies, Ryou’s school was recommending their students take the time as an unplanned vacation. While some parents vehemently protested this kind of academic disruption, the school board was firm, explaining that while they still didn’t understand how the disease was spread they couldn’t risk sending possibly contaminated children to infect completely new schools. The practical upshot was that they got to have a nearly homework-free vacation before they were tired of the curriculum.

Normally whenever Ryou had time off he spent it on his own. He finished his homework early, and then distracted himself with games, puzzles and projects. Occasionally his mother allowed him to attend local game tournaments as a spectator - he would need much more practice against an opponent other than himself if he wanted to participate. When his father happened to be in the country he would take his son to his museum to see the exhibits, and not just those that the public saw. Ryou got to see the behind-the-scenes stuff, where the actual work of the exhibits went on, and got to see things that would never make it to a display case, but which were still fascinating.

Or so his father always insisted. Ryou had once thought so as well. Now he was more inclined to think that his father brought him to the museum as an excuse to keep working while spending the day with his son.
This time found Ryou in a completely new kind of situation. He had people - friends - who would come to his apartment and play games with him.

It was strange. A few weeks before the school closed its doors to undertake its sanitation regimen, one of Ryou’s classmates had approached him, friendly and a little shy, looking for someone to play with. Ryou was so used to being a target, and to being shunned by others as a result of it - who in their right mind would hang out with the kid who was pummeled on a regular basis? - that at first he hadn’t understood. He had wondered if it was some kind of prank, then when he had realized that she was being completely sincere he had worried and looked around to see if anyone had seen the girl speak to him. A girl daring to talk to him would only bring trouble down on them both. He’d forgotten for an instant that the bullies were all gone, all lain out in the hospital and far from being a danger.

He could make friends.

Ryou had gained a few friends, actually. Four in all, all of whom shared his interests and passions to varying degrees, and with whom he could more or less be himself.

It was wonderful. No bullies, friends at last, and now a vacation to spend whole days with them, playing the games he had played alone for so long.

His friends were over now, and they were all playing a tabletop RPG. It was one designed to have a particular board, but Ryou didn’t have that part. He’d never needed it before and his mother wouldn’t buy it for him if he would never have occasion to use it. It was fine, though. They were making do without the board by using things found in Ryou’s room as stand-ins for terrain and obstacles. They had the rule book, which had maps and layouts of what the miniature world was meant to look like, so it worked out quite well.

“My mom says they still don’t know what it is,” said one of the girls. Her name was Natsuko and she was a year older than the rest of them, but was still new to these kinds of games. She got interested because she liked to watch a lot of fantasy anime. “She thinks that it isn’t a virus at all, and that’s why they can’t figure it out.”

One of the boys, Manabu, picked up the dice and rolled for his turn. “What does your mom think it is, then?” He moved his figure around the makeshift board, mounting a set of stair-stepped textbooks.

Natsuko shrugged, showing that she didn’t think it was important what her mother thought. “That it’s a punishment for being bad.”

Ryou looked up from his notes, frowning. “What, like God did it?”

She shrugged again, looking uncomfortable. “Yeah, I guess.”

Manabu shook his head. “Yeah, but your mom thinks everything is because God did it. Everyone else says the devil did it, or the devil made them do it, your mom says it was God, every time.” He grinned at Natsuko, teasing. He knew that she was sensitive about what people thought of her mother and was deliberately pushing her buttons. Ryou had learned those buttons quickly by observation and was careful not to push them himself.

It never stopped Manabu, though. Natsuko flared up right away, cheeks flushing bright red. “Shut up, she does not!”

“Wait,” Rie, the second girl of the group said. She was a girl with freckles and glasses who was
experienced with games, but only video games. Natsuko stopped, looked at her. “Your mom thinks the Kagome virus is a punishment? Does that mean she knows all the kids who got it were bullies?”

Hitoshi perked up in his corner. “Ooh, that’s true,” he said, waving his figurine around in the air. Ryou winced at the sight of a figure being handled so carelessly, but it wasn’t his, so he couldn’t really make him stop… “No one else knows that, no grownups, anyway,” he went on, figure outlining patterns in the air with every move of his hands. “So how does Natsuko’s mom know that?”

“Yeah, adults are usually dumb about that kind of thing,” Rie said matter-of-factly. “They think their kids are little angels no matter what. It’s not until it’s one of their kids is picked on that they think someone else… oh.”

The bespectacled girl trailed off, noticing Natsuko’s expression. She had gone very quiet and was studying the playing board very carefully.

An awkward silence fell over them all, effectively halting the game as everyone tried to think of some way to smooth over the blunder Rie had stumbled straight into. Finally, shifting like she had sat on something uncomfortable, Rie said softly, “Sorry.”

Natsuko shrugged like it didn’t matter, but Ryou could see her face, could tell that it really did matter. He knew how she felt. Hitoshi, if he saw, either wasn’t very good at reading expressions or just didn’t care.

“It’s no big deal,” he said breezily. “I think everyone was bullied by those jerks. That’s why you don’t see anyone at school getting all sad that they’re gone.”

Natsuko didn’t respond, but the rest of them nodded. The bullies, their experiences with them, and the mysterious virus were never very far from their minds. Even more than shared passions and hobbies, the surest way to camaraderie was in the sharing and comparing of battle scars. Figuratively speaking.

“It is really strange, though, isn’t it?” Manabu asked after a minute, sounding hesitant. “I mean, it was only the bullies who got sick, and it was all of the bullies. Isn’t that weird?”

Hitoshi rolled his eyes, snatching the dice out of Manabu’s hand. “Duh, that’s why everyone is so freaked out, genius. No one can figure it out. I hope when they do figure it out they spread it to every school in Japan, no, the world, and then there will be no more bullies at all.”

Natsuko smiled. “That would be cool.”

Rie looked a little scandalized, but Manabu interrupted her before she could say anything. “No, I mean it’s really weird. Viruses don’t pick people because they’re mean. Viruses don’t care what kind of person you are.”

“So what?” Rie asked.

“I don’t think it’s really a virus.”

This announcement was met with a thoughtful pause as four heads tried to wrap around it.

“What else would it be, then?” Hitoshi asked, confused.

Manabu shrugged. “I don’t know. But I don’t think it’s a virus, it makes no sense.” He paused,
biting his lip. “Maybe Natsuko’s mom is right and it’s a punishment?”

“Like God or something?” Hitoshi was laughing again. “Like how Natsuko’s mom says? That’s so dumb!”

Natsuko scowled at him and kicked him in the foot, nearly taking out the mountain made out of textbooks in the process. Hitoshi squeaked and stopped laughing quite so hard.

“Noooo…” Manabu said, glaring at Hitoshi, “I mean what if it’s a person doing all of this? That would make a little more sense, right? That someone was going around who didn’t like mean kids and doing something to them?”

Rie shivered. “Makes sense, but that’s scary, someone going around and hurting kids he doesn’t like. Not even going around, but hanging around our school.”

They all thought about that, Ryō included. He had contributed very little to the conversation thus far - he rarely did. He liked to listen and observe, a habit learned over years of having no alternative. He considered the idea of there being someone at their school, some teacher or janitor or cook, some adult who decided they just didn’t like mean kids. It made him shudder as well, that there could be someone at his school, someone he had probably seen who would put a bunch of kids into comas. It was scary…

He wanted to personally thank whoever had done it.

He put down his book, a sign that he was joining the conversation. “If it’s a person instead of a virus, then it’s probably someone we know, who works there. And if it is someone, then we have to figure out how they’re doing it.”

Rie’s face lit up. “Like a mystery simulator!” she said. “Or a detective show!”

The others brightened up as well, the somber mood of a few moments ago lifting at the suggestion of playing at detective in their very own mystery. “Wouldn’t it be cool if we solved it when all of the grownups and all of the doctors couldn’t do it?” Hitoshi said, though they were all certainly thinking the same thing.

It would be cool. To show up the all-powerful adults on something so important would probably be one of the coolest things any of them could imagine, a bit like being the superhero who saves the day. A hero in real life, that would be even more of a wish come true than Ryō would have dared imagine.

With daydreams of cheers and praise raining down on them, the five kids set aside their tabletop RPG to bend their minds around this new possibility in the riddle of the Kagome virus. Ryō didn’t mind abandoning the game in the middle. So long as his friends were there, so long as he had friends, then he was content whatever they were doing.

Still marveling a little at how his fortunes had changed, at how much brighter every day was with friends to share them with, Ryō allowed himself another daring, selfish wish. He wished to himself that days like this would never end, so he might always enjoy them. He wished that these friends wouldn’t leave him as he feared they eventually would. He wished that they would stay forever.

Beneath the cotton of his shirt, the golden ring clinked.
taken out of the picture was like having all of his wishes fulfilled, then *this* was a nightmare.

School was back in session, all of the classes resumed, and herds of students were trooping though halls that reeked of antiseptic and floor wax. Alcohol-based hand sanitizer dispensers had been mounted to walls inside and outside every door. Face masks, which many had already been wearing before the school had closed, were available at the front door and mandatory. Every teacher, every student, the janitors, the nurses, the people who worked in the offices, everyone sported a white mask across nose and mouth. Some had drawn silly faces on the outside of them and walked around with permanent grins, snarls or kissy faces. It was hard to understand what the teachers were saying, and the whole thing made it seem like they were in a giant Yanki gang. Or a hospital. Neither was a particularly comfortable thought.

"Ryou, wake up! Wake up, **please**, you have to wake up!"

It would have been indescribably ridiculous to try and go on as normal, one class after another, to pretend that there was nothing at all wrong when quite obviously there *was*. All he had to do was look at his neighbor, or down the hall, or across the room. The sea of surgical masks would be enough to convince anyone.

But even without the masks, Ryou doubted that anyone would have been able to keep up the charade. Even with the school closed and having every wall and desk scrubbed to within an inch of its life, more kids had fallen into comas. While away from the halls and in their homes, with no bullies left, there were more students filling beds at the hospital. Four more, in fact - two boys and two girls. And it had nearly been five.

"**Ryou**!"

Ryou walked into his homeroom and was faced a wall of eyes and surgical masks all turning towards him. With half of everyone’s faces obscured it was difficult to read expressions, but none of them seemed overly friendly. They seemed frightened, mistrustful… angry.

As he walked to his desk his classmates parted around him like the Red Sea. No one spoke to him, nor would anyone look directly at him. It was all sidelong and furtive glances, eyes sliding away from him as soon as he would return a look. Of this kind, Ryou was the recipient of many, many stares. He sat down at his desk, and when class began and everyone was meant to be at their seats, his neighbors were sitting as far from him as possible without physically moving their desks.

It was then that Ryou understood, or thought he understood, why coming back to school was a very bad idea for him.

They had never really gotten anywhere in their deductions, he, Manabu, Natsuko, Hitoshi and Rie. They had written down a list of ‘suspects’ and done their best to determine who would be the most likely to do this to the students based on motive, opportunity and their incomplete ideas of their personalities. How much did they know about the janitors anyway, or the lunch ladies, or even the principle? Who was to say that *any* of them couldn’t go insane and start attacking the students, taking out bullies one after another? As for how kids were being put into comas so that even doctors couldn’t figure out how it was done, that left all five of them stumped. In the end, though they all still dreamed of being heralded as deductive geniuses, they had set it aside, though Hitoshi would sometimes voice a new theory.

Instead of solving real life mysteries, which were much harder than the detective shows made it look, they had turned back to their tabletop adventures. Tabletop RPGs never frustrated them with dead ends, while still giving their imaginations room to stretch.
Ryou discovered that after all the solitary practice he had gotten in designing campaigns without ever actually playing through them, he enjoyed taking on the role of Game Master. The title was cool and he got to be both friend and antagonist to every player. It was better than he had ever imagined, having people to play his games with. The banter, the laughter, the way Natsuko and Hitoshi would tease each other. It was the best time Ryou had ever had.

“Ryou, wake up, wake up, please!”

His mother was shaking him by the shoulders, screaming at him to wake up over and over again. Ryou scrunched up his face and shook his head, seeking his pillows. He didn’t want to wake up yet. There was no school today, so there was no need, and he was so tired...

“Ryou!” Another hard shake that rattled his teeth.

Ryou groaned, rolling his head around until he thought he was facing his mother. He hadn’t realized at the time that she was holding him up in a sitting position. “Mmmph… mother, I--“

The rest of what he had been about to say was cut off as his mother enveloped him in a crushing hug, nearly smoothing him. He tried pushing her away, but his arms were like noodles. When Noriko finally loosened her embrace, he noticed that he wasn’t in bed like he had thought. He was on the floor of his room, sitting at the little table he brought in whenever his friends came over to play games. He looked around, confused, and it dawned on him just how drained and weak he felt. Even the alarm rising in him wasn’t enough to snap him out of it, he just had no energy.

“Ryou, Ryou, I was so scared you wouldn’t wake up, none of the others have, I don’t know what I would do, what I would tell your father…”

Ryou shook his head, trying to clear it. It felt like a heavy helium balloon, if such things could exist. His mother continued to babble, making no sense in her ramblings, though he still tried to keep up with her, a lost swimmer in a tossing ocean.

Eventually his heavy eyes fell on the first of the bodies. Something - a scrap of dream - flashed in his mind and was gone. In his leaden tiredness, Ryou still went terribly cold at the sight.

“Mother, what happened? What’s happened to them?”

It took several repetitions to get Noriko to actually hear him, and then still some more time to understand the reply she gave. After Ryou’s friends had come over and sequestered themselves in Ryou’s room as per usual, Noriko had let them be for several hours. It had taken that long for her to realize that no one had come out for snacks or to use the restroom, or that there was any sound coming from the room. When she walked in, all five children were passed out on the floor, still around their game table, the game in mid-progress.

Ryou’s friends had fallen to the same virus that before had taken only bullies, and it had nearly taken Ryou as well.

All five of them were rushed to the hospital. The parents of the other four children were called in. The four were tested, and it was found that they were the same as all the other students they had gotten so far: physically fine, no wounds or visible trauma, no sign of infections or disorders, they looked as though they could open their eyes at any time. Despite appearances, nothing woke them up. They were unresponsive to any and all stimuli, and remained in their comatose states without so much as twitching.
As for Ryou, the doctors took an especial interest in him. Of all the cases they had gotten, he was the only one who had fought off whatever this disease was. They put him through a barrage of tests, drew phial after phial of blood, and asked him questions ranging from what he’d had for dinner the night before to what he remembered of the last hour before falling unconscious.

He couldn’t remember anything important. He could remember his friends arriving and setting out the board they needed for their game, but after that… nothing. Which didn’t seem right. The five of them had been in the middle of a game when they had all collapsed; he should remember the beginning of the game, his friends chatting… but no. There was nothing. The very last thing he remembered before his mother shaking him back into the world of the living was handing out the little figures that each of them had chosen as their favorites.

The doctors ran their tests on him, hoping that as the single known case of someone who had contracted and somehow trumped the virus, he might provide invaluable information. Ryou held still for them all and tried to remember what had happened in those few hours that were all blank to him. He tried to understand, to come to grips with the idea of his friends suddenly all being gone. Just like that, after years of yearning for them, to having them for a few bare weeks before they were taken away again.

It wasn’t fair.

Three days after the hospital admitted him, they released him again. They could find nothing wrong save the few things he had complained of himself; extreme exhaustion, weakness and short term amnesia. They found one or two things in his blood work to explain the first two symptoms - he was low on some chemicals with long names that he couldn’t remember. The knowledge failed to lead to any better understanding of what was going on or give them any clue on how to help those who hadn’t fought off unconsciousness. They couldn’t explain why Ryou felt the way he did or why he had been able to wake up. What they were able to say was that Ryou had no sign of infection of any kind, and that once he felt better and the school reopened, he could start attending as normal.

And so here he was, mask over his face and as normal as everyone else.

He hadn’t been sure that coming back to school would be a good idea. He didn’t want to come back, to be surrounded by classmates, all chattering together between classes and passing notes during. It would be a constant reminder of friendships that he was not a part of. Even more of a reminder, though, were the two empty seats in his classroom, Natsuko and Hitoshi’s desks. Manabu was in a different homeroom and Rie was one grade ahead of the rest of them, but their desks would also be empty - scrubbed clean of any contagion and of the students that had once sat at them.

None of them had been safe from whatever was sweeping through the school.

But if he hadn’t seen why going back to school could be a good thing - his mother insisted that it would be good for him, that he couldn’t hide from what frightened him - neither had he seen all of the reasons of why it was a bad thing. In all his imaginings of this day he hadn’t seen all of the hostile looks being sent over the ubiquitous surgical masks.

Rumors had already spread about how the latest four had gone into comas. Ryou wasn’t surprised. Anything at all to do with the Kagome virus would spread like wildfire among those who attended his school. But the dark glances he was getting and the unspoken but apparently unanimous agreement to avoid him as much as possible told him that they all knew that those four classmates had been at his apartment when they collapsed. They knew that he had somehow escaped the same fate that was leaving no one else standing, and they were angry.
It wasn’t fair.

The day went on uncomfortably, the teachers doing their level best to behave as though nothing was wrong and that their lessons were all that was on everyone’s mind. The students were also pretending - pretending to pay attention, to care, to be learning anything at all beside how to put on a false face while their minds were miles away. Ryou was doubly uncomfortable, trying to do as everyone else was while being keenly aware that no one was glad to have him there. Even the teachers seemed less than pleased to have him in his seat today.

He didn’t think it could get much worse, and was looking forward to the closing bell, when during art period their teacher required them to break up into three-person teams.

It was then that Ryou realized why it really was that everyone was looking at him with such hostility.

“No way, not here!” Toshi, a dark complexioned boy said when Ryou tried to join him and one other to make three. Groups had formed quickly, and after wandering the entire perimeter of the room, Ryou had found only one group still in need of a person. There was nowhere else for him to go, and now…

“Go find somewhere else!”

Ryou looked between Toshi and another boy, a child whose name he didn’t remember and who was watching his partner worriedly. Ryou looked behind him, wondering if he had missed some other group with only two he could fit into. Determining that no, there was not, he turned back and made himself sound as apologetic as possible. “I’m sorry, but everyone else already has three. This is the only--”

“Well too bad,” Toshi snapped, pushing his chin forward, trying to look down his nose at Ryou. He had drawn a kitty mouth and whiskers on his mask; it didn’t suit the rest of his face. “We don’t want you, so you’ll have to find somewhere else.”

“But there is nowhere else,” Ryou protested.

“Then make a group by yourself!”

The dispute had already caught the attention of those who were close by, but Toshi’s belligerent shout had made everyone in the room aware of their argument, including the teacher. He strode over to them, wading through the intervening sea of children, brows drawn low over his eyes and nose. Toshi refused to look away from Ryou to watch him approach, he was too focused on his glaring.

“Boys,” he said, his words muffled by the mask. “What’s the problem here?”

Ryou was at a bit of a loss to explain what was happening, why Toshi was being so unreasonable, or why the other boy was standing so silent behind him. Toshi, however, had no such trouble with working his tongue.

“He wants to be a part of our group!” He pointed at Ryou, who flinched away from it. When Toshi said ‘he,’ it was said with such venom that it really did feel like an attack.

The teacher’s brows drew even lower. He looked from Toshi to Ryou and back again. “Yes?” His tone was just as confused as his partially visible expression suggested. “And why is that a problem? There are only two of you so far, Ryou can be your third.”
Now Toshi did look up at the teacher, with such a scowl on his half face that was rare to see a student level on a teacher. “He can’t be a part of our group, sensei,” he said, as though stating the blindingly obvious.

The teacher was becoming impatient, and almost snapped, “Why not?”

The scowl was transferred to Ryou, its intensity clashing with the cuteness of the drawn mask. “He’s infected.”

The words weren’t shouted, but they could not have had a greater impact on the room if they had been. Everyone froze, the few whispered conversations around the edges of the classroom cut off abruptly. It seemed as though every pair of eyes were fixed on the little drama unfolding in their corner, and more specifically on Ryou. All fixed on him, all echoing the look on Toshi’s face: angry, distrustful, hostile.

Surrounded on all sides by such open aggression, all directed at him, Ryou felt a stab of fear.

“Infected?” The teacher repeated the word, as though he were unfamiliar with it. “What do you mean he’s infected? You aren’t sick, are you, Ryou?”

Ryou shook his head quickly, not trusting himself to speak and sure that nothing he could say would clear the rising tension. He had a pretty good idea what Toshi meant when he said ‘infected’ and it had nothing to do with catching a cold.

His suspicion was confirmed when Toshi practically shrieked, “He has the Kagome virus!”

The teacher went even blanker than before. He blinked. “Kagome virus?”

Toshi nodded emphatically, a motion that was mirrored all around as students came closer to see what was going on. The fear rose in Ryou a little higher. School had never been the safe haven it was meant to be for him, what with the number of ‘fights’ he got into and the innumerable petty intimidations, but the classroom itself had always been a safe place. Under the watchful eye of an adult and surrounded by witnesses, it was impossible for anyone to really mess with him and not get themselves into trouble as well.

Now even the classroom was filling with this sense of danger, of impending disaster. Looking around now, Ryou no longer felt protected by his fellows, but threatened by them. He was surrounded, boxed in, with nowhere to get away to.

Anger began to rise along with the fear, swelling up around his heart. How could they keep him out of things, just because he might have the virus or whatever it was? He was awake, walking around, that should be proof enough that he was fine. How dare they exclude him.

Ryou’s face and the back of his neck felt too hot.

“Everyone knows that Rie, Hitoshi, Manabu and Natsuko were all at his house when they fell asleep. Bakura fell asleep too, but woke up again. That proves he’s got it!”

More nods of agreement around the room. Ryou felt a little dizzy with the motion in his periphery. He shook his head again and, on finding his voice, pushed down the fear and anger to reply. “No, I don’t. The doctors tested me, they said I didn’t have it at all and I should be fine. No one will catch it from me. I don’t have the virus!”

Toshi’s brow furrowed, but it was someone else who spoke now, a lilting voice from a small girl standing behind Ryou. “But the doctors can’t find the virus in anyone, even the kids who are
“Asleep, so…”

“So how do we know for sure that you don’t have it?” Another girl picked up when the first trailed away. “Maybe you have it, just like them and they can’t find it in you, just like them.”

“But I’m awake!”

“So?” Toshi picked up again. “Maybe you got lucky, doesn’t mean the virus is gone. People who get sick can make other people sick even when they look fine.” He glanced back at his partner, seeking even more support than the room was providing him with. “We don’t want to catch the Kagome virus!”

“But--“

“Alright,” the teacher cut in sharply. Several students jumped, forgetting that there was a teacher in the room with them. “That is quite enough of that. Everyone, I can assure you that Bakura is not infected. He will not give anyone the ‘Kagome virus’ or whatever it is that has been causing so many of our friends to fall ill. His doctors called the school before we reopened to assure us that he poses no danger to anyone. Ryou Bakura will not make anyone sick.” He looked around the classroom, making eye contact and driving the point home to each of them.

When he was sure that everyone had heard him and understood, he nodded sharply. “Good,” he said. “Bakura, you team up with Toshi and Nao. We’ll begin our project in five minutes, so I want everyone,” he looked around the room, “to be at their stations and ready by then.”

The teacher went to stand at the front of the class again, watching all and ensuring that his instructions were followed. After a few moments hesitation his students went to work gathering what they would need from cabinets, cupboards and sinks. The classroom quickly became busy, though still a little too quiet for a class of twenty-odd children.

The only ones who were not so quick to jump were Ryou’s group. They stood frozen for considerably longer, locked into a standoff, Toshi and Ryou being the main perpetrators, with Nao looking nervously back and forth between the two. Finally Toshi turned away to a cupboard to find the paper mache for their project station. An instant later and Nao followed suit, unwilling to stay so near Ryou without his friend.

Ryou turned away as well, relieved, and forced himself to take a long breath. He tried, without much success, to clear his mind of what had just happened and the emotions that it had brought to the surface. The fear he couldn’t completely dispel, instead it settled into anxiety that gnawed quietly at the back of his mind. That was fine. Until very recently, that was how every day had been at school, and it was remarkably easy to slip back into it again.

Less easily gotten rid of was the anger. That still coiled around inside of him, unspent and sullen, looking for some escape, some sort of expression. It was like the day when he had lashed out at Taro, only instead of coming upon him suddenly and blindsiding him, he was aware of this anger and difficult as it was, he could rein it back. He was still in control of himself. It was more difficult than before the day with Taro, when controlling his anger was a matter of repression and extending his tightly held control out to whatever he could touch, but he could do it. The urge to lash out at Toshi and all of the others who stared at him was contained, and all would be well.

He went to the sink to pick up and fill one of many small buckets with water, being careful not to splash himself, and making a small game of not allowing any of the water touch the outside of the bucket. He didn’t hear Toshi come up behind him over the sound of the faucet running, nor did he sense anyone behind him in time to do more than glance over his shoulder as a bag of dry paper
mache mix was thrown in his face.

The parent-teacher conference that was called after the incident at school was long and exhausting for everyone involved.

No one could say that Ryō had started the fight, but his case was not helped at all by how willingly he had joined in after the first attack. To onlookers it seemed as though Ryō, shy and unassuming in every teacher's estimation, had become something of a demon after Toshi threw the paper mache. After that first blow, Ryō had taken the bucket of water he had been filling in the sink and tossed it at Toshi, container and all. That alone would have been enough to warrant disciplinary action for both boys, but from there it had only escalated.

Ryō had followed the thrown bucket of water with his body, intending to either strike or kick the retreating Toshi, and tripped over a chair. He got back up again quickly, but the extra few seconds had given the class enough time to process what had happened, and given Toshi time to regain his feet. When both boys were upright, they had gone at each other, one soaked to the skin, the other whitened with dust and clumps of paper stuck in his hair. They only traded a couple of blows before the most eager of their classmates joined the fray, throwing juvenile sized punches, pulling hair, some even taking the measure of tossing their water into the free-for-all.

Their teacher had been hopelessly outnumbered and completely unable to calm the pandemonium that had become of his normally well-behaved class. It had taken a shout into the hall to bring more adults to act as referees and pull everyone apart, keep them apart and in some cases sequester students away from the others to keep the fighting from starting up again.

Ryō had been one of those. Out of everyone in his class, Ryō had come away with the most injuries, including a bruised and swollen cheek, a split lip, and a twisted ankle. He was also given the most credit for inflicting damage on his fellows. If the rest of the class were to be believed, then every bruise on every other child had come from him, though the adults were more inclined to believe that at least half of it came from clumsiness or 'friendly fire.' Since Ryō had been everyone's primary target, it wasn't surprising that they would attribute their injuries to the common enemy among them. And as for Ryō himself, even with the addition of four more teachers to break apart the fighting, he had been unwilling to stop. Even with his homeroom teacher physically holding him back he had still been straining towards the classmate that had most recently attacked him by twisting at a handful of his hair.

Upon hearing of what had become of their children during their first day back, and what they in turn had been responsible for, most parents were outraged, some had been incredulous, and all had been surprised, perhaps none more than Noriko Bakura.

Of those gathered, she was the only one with sympathy for Ryō, let alone taking any sort of stand in his defense. It seemed impossible that her son would be capable of so much violence, even if he were provoked. He got into fights, she avowed, but they were rare, the kind of thing any school age boy might get into, not full scale brawls against his entire class. It was unthinkable, impossible.

Those of the school faculty who knew Ryō Bakura as anything more than a name on the class roster and a shock of white hair were inclined to agree with her. Ryō was not one to start fights, and this level of antagonism was as unprecedented as it was impossible to predict. It was generally agreed that while it was no excuse, the boy certainly never would have behaved as he did, had not Toshi provoked him.

Other parents were less inclined to be so understanding. They heard that Ryō had not acted first, had reacted to violence towards himself, but the boy had done so with unwarranted vehemence,
causing injuries to their own children. They felt that if Ryou were not so naturally violent, if his parents had done a better job with him, or if the teachers had been more firm in controlling his class and those within it, then none of this would have happened. Their own children were not to blame, obviously, they had been victims all.

The school was ready to dole out minor disciplinary action for all the students, including heavier homework assignments and eliminating recesses for a time, save for the two who had started the brawl. For Ryou and Toshi, the school was disposed to be more stringent, beginning with detention over the weekend for several weeks and including more schoolwork and completely truncating rest periods. Most of the parents, while protesting a little the punishments of their own children, were in agreement with those of the two catalytic troublemakers. Not all was fair, but at least those most responsible who could be punished would be.

All save one pair of parents agreed. Toshi’s mother and father, as well as protesting the punishment of their son, howled at what they perceived as light handling of the boy Ryou. In his fury Ryou had managed to break their son’s nose, strained a muscle in his shoulder when he attempted to bear him to the ground, and one other semi-major injury that made it painful for the boy to walk properly. Toshi’s parents were righteously angry, threatening to sue Noriko and her husband, sue the school, and to take the whole story to the media if that was what it took to receive some sort of restitution.

Once all of the parents save those of Toshi and Ryou were excused, the faculty did their best to placate the irate mother and father. They would not be soothed, however, and the best that could be negotiated was that they would pursue no legal action if Ryou Bakura were immediately expelled from the school to keep him away from their son and any other child that he had hurt.

Noriko protested on behalf of her son, whom she felt was being unfairly prosecuted, attacked again for the very act of defending himself. She argued and pleaded with Toshi’s parents, fighting for Ryou’s right to stay where he had finally grown comfortable and when he had not been completely to blame for what had taken place. Toshi’s parents were unmoved, and would not compromise more than they had already done.

The school, while agreeing with Noriko’s points, was not insensible to their own position in the matter. In the public eye they were already under scrutiny with the unexplained epidemic that had run rampant through their halls. Public funding was on a decline in an economy that was already proving difficult to weather. To have a large lawsuit to battle on top of all that, the publicity that would result from it, or just the publicity that the parents threatened to level themselves would be enough to cripple the school if not sink it entirely, taking a few careers with it. With these things weighing heavily in their consideration, they were not so motivated to side with Noriko, but instead advised her to consider the option.

When she turned on them and their attempt at mollifying her in betrayed disgust, they made an offer, as close to a compromise as they were able to give. Rather than expulsion, they would transfer Ryou Bakura to another school. This incident would still be on his record, they assured Toshi’s parents, but an expulsion would not be, and it would save the Bakura family a great deal of time and effort in finding and re-enrolling Ryou in the middle of the year.

Toshi’s parents were displeased, but more inclined to agree when reminded of their own son’s unprovoked attack on a classmate and what kind of mark that could leave on his record, what it might mean for his future prospects for colleges and universities. Noriko considered the situation, the sets of angry eyes glaring at her from across the table, the seated men and women of the school board who were all so hopeful for a peaceful resolution that wouldn’t cost them everything and so uselessly apologetic for what it would cost her family. She considered all of these things and wished her husband were home to help her make this decision. She had phoned him as soon as the
school had called her and appraised him of the situation, but all she had received in return for her half-panicked international call was vague reassurance that she would be fine, that everything would be fine, and whatever came out of the meeting they could work through. He would support her in whatever she decided, and they would handle whatever came together. Later. When he had more time.

Noriko considered all of this, considered her reclusive, troubled son and how another transfer would affect him. She also considered what remaining in this school, and having to see these same children day after day might do. All of which might be moot if Toshi’s parents made good on their threat and sued the school into oblivion. She considered the coma sickness that was still spreading through the school, that it had already touched Ryou once and how close to death he looked, and how very much like being dead those children who had been asleep for weeks already were.

She considered it all, and under the pressures coming at her from all sides, Noriko bowed her head.

Snow covered the ground in a thick, white blanket that muffled all sound and turned the world pure and sparkling in the afternoon light. It was very fresh snow, which was the only reason why it was still so perfectly white along a street. Even now it showed the first signs of contamination - a set of footprints, a winding, serpentine track left by an intrepid bicyclist. This was city snow, its beauty made all the more precious in its brevity.

Ryou looked at it all and could feel nothing but resentment. Resentment for the cold, for being made to stand out in said cold with nothing to do but be blinded by the whiteness, resentment for the set of circumstances that made him available to stand out in the snow.

It had been about two weeks since he had been ‘transferred’ to his new school, and he had yet to set foot in the place. A combination of paperwork and the nearness of Christmas break made it so that Ryou wouldn’t be seeing his new school until a few days after Christmas. Until then he was at a loose end, his brain atrophying while his bruises healed. His lack of occupation - or any friends to otherwise fill up a portion of his days - was more of an irritation than he would have thought. There was nothing to do but watch TV and attempt to distract himself with his games. Television became dull and repetitive quickly. His own projects, once he had the experience of sharing them with others, felt empty now he was left alone to them again. He had almost thrown away the game board, books and pieces that he and his few friends had been using on the day they had fallen ill, but he just couldn’t quite bring himself to. Instead he had packed it all away neatly in a box, then tucked the box into a far corner of his closet. He even included the four little figurines that his friends had been using as their avatars. They didn’t belong to him, but staring down at them as they lay cradled in his hand, he couldn’t part with them. He doubted that their parents would appreciate seeing him if he went around to return them, so he tucked the figures into the box along with everything else and did his best to forget all about all of it.

Remembering them now, and why he had been so unwilling to return them to the families of those they belonged to, made the resentment seethe in him even more.

He had been doing so well in keeping control of his anger, in making sure that the unexpected, frightening part of himself that had taken him over when Taro had pushed him too far wouldn’t do so again. And then stupid Toshi had to ruin it all by tossing a bag of paper mache in his face. The surprise made his control slip, and the bucket was leaving his hands before he could even fully take stock of what had happened or why.

He had wanted to hurt Toshi and every other kid who came at him. The first few blows signaled to all that there was a free-for-all to be had, and anyone had carte blanche to take a swing. He had wanted it, had joined in more than willingly. A small portion of his mind watched in horror as he
landed punches and kicks with far too much precision, and then as he had struggled against the adults, trying to inflict more pain before he was dragged away.

Ryou had been trying to reign himself in as well, with much less success.

His punishment for fighting was not to stand in the hall, not detention, but expulsion. Except that they weren’t calling it an expulsion. It was a transfer, ‘to find an academic setting more suitable to your personality.’

*Which one?* was Ryou’s cynical thought.

His mother had explained that this was the most amicable, the most rational option available to them, and they ought to be glad that they could walk away from it all with so very little fuss. Ryou had only looked at her smiling, worried face without saying a word, and wondered how hard she had tried to keep him from being expelled before giving in.

So now, since he was at such loose ends, he had been delegated as Amane’s chaperone on her walk back from school. She could just as easily take the bus home as she did going to school, but Noriko had decided that Ryou needed more fresh air while he was out of school, and that Amane would like to have her big brother walk her home like a gentleman. The fact that the two of them had to walk the distance through several inches of snow didn’t seem to register with their mother, nor did the fact that Ryou was left standing in the cold, sneakers buried in miniature drifts until Amane was let out.

He could have gone inside to wait. He doubted anyone would mind a boy who was waiting for his sister choosing to do so where it was warm, but he suspected they would have an issue with Ryou coming into their halls. He knew that he would rather not go inside if it could be avoided.

Amane attended the same school Ryou had been so recently expelled from, and he doubted that anyone other than his sister would be happy to see him. And he didn’t want to risk being seen by a classmate, or what sort of scene might develop after that.

Ryou sighed, a stream of white breath rising up to the sky and lost. Rather than retreat to where it was warm, he stayed outside, out of sight from anyone within. He wouldn’t have to worry about any ex-classmates seeing him on leaving, at least. Amane’s class let out an hour earlier than any he had once attended. He would be safe from that, but he was still nervous that someone would see him from the windows.

By the time Amane’s class was over and the tide of younger children was let loose on the world, Ryou’s toes were numb, along with his nose and cheeks, and he was sure that he could feel his old class somehow managing to stare at his back. Amane took a little more time than the first rush, making his wait even longer. When she finally did come out and spot him, she grabbed him around the waist in her usual greeting, the hug coming a little more heavily than normal with the addition of the pink and yellow backpack she wore.

“Nii-chan!” she squeaked, squeezing him tight. Even through his thick coat, it took Ryou’s breath away a little. She was so strong, it was no wonder she was already showing an interest in sports.

“Hello, Amane,” he said, much more dully than was his norm. He was cold, and he was tired in ways that had nothing at all to do with sleep. He just wanted to go home, get warm and escape into something, be it a book or an RPG design. “Have you got all of your things?”

Amane nodded, disengaging herself from him. She wiggled her backpack a little by way of demonstration. “Uh-huh, all in here, safe and sound. Can we stop by the candy store on the way
home?”

The candy store was a block out of their way. The trip from school to home wasn’t long, but it was made much longer than it seemed when slogging through snow. Adding an extra block for candy, and then the same block again in recovering their steps to return to their original route... “No, Amane. Not today.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s too cold, it’s too far, mom probably doesn’t want you to have candy right before dinner, and I don’t have any money.”

“I have money,” Amane said, seizing on the one objection that was any real obstruction between her and the sweet of her choice. “I have ¥500 pocket money that mom said I could spend on anything I want.” She smiled up at him. “And I want candy.”

Ryou frowned. He should just give in, go the extra figurative mile and let her get her sweets. He wanted to, he wanted her to be happy and keep smiling. But that want was weighed against his more selfish wants of warmth and rest and solitude, his own disinclination towards more exercise, especially on someone else’s behalf, and it was swiftly losing that battle. “I said no and I meant it. It’s too cold and I’ve already been waiting fifteen minutes for you. I’ll get frostbite and you’ll catch a cold if we stay out here too long, so we’re going straight home.” He felt guilty even as he said it, and even more put out and resentful at that stab of guilt. He grabbed her hand in its mitten and tugged her along after him. She whined but didn’t try to pull her hand free, and though she pouted she didn’t ask anymore about the candy store.

They made their way down the sidewalks covered in snow, what had so recently been pristine already churned to a mess from the stampede of children that preceded them. Ryou and Amane walked in pouting silence, hand in hand through the wreckage of those before them, no longer able to see the beauty of winter through the muddy prints of sneakers.

“What took you so long coming out?” Ryou asked at last, when his sister failed to begin jabbering at him. “Everyone else is long gone already and you’re usually one of the first ones out the door.”

For a minute she didn’t reply, and he thought she was sulking too deeply to answer him, but eventually she lifted her head a little and answered, “I had to stay behind to talk to the teacher.”

Ryou’s gut did an unpleasant flip. Amane was never in trouble, her being asked to stay behind was unheard of. “What happened?”

“She talked to me.”

“What about?”

“About getting into fights at school.”

The flip in Ryou’s stomach twisted itself into a knot. Amane was getting into fights now, too? Or was somebody picking on her like they had him? It would hardly matter either way in the minds of the teachers, who all knew Ryou’s new record, and knew that they were brother and sister. They would see that and draw their own conclusions about Amane’s potential as a troublemaker. Unless, of course, they had actual evidence that Amane had started a fight…

“Did you get in a fight?”

The girl shook her head so that the fringes of her hair peeking out from her knit cap flew out to the
sides. “No-o! I didn’t get into a fight. There was just this one boy, he said a mean thing, so I…” She trailed off.

Ryou looked at his sister. Her head was bowed and she watched as her patterned winter boots made their way through the churned slush, not looking up at him. “What did you do, Amane?”

She shrugged, making the backpack bob up and down. She still refused to look up at him. “I yelled at him, and I pushed him. But it was only a little push,” she added quickly, looking up at him with big eyes. “He didn’t get hurt, so it wasn’t a fight, right?”

He shook his head. “No, but it could have turned into one.” He remembered all too clearly how quickly, how unexpectedly a fight had broken out in his own classroom. A fight that everyone seemed to think he had started and blamed him for. How had it even started, and how had it escalated so much? No fight should have gotten so bad, especially not one started during class. It should have broken apart as soon as it had started, with no more than Toshi and Ryou involved in it.

Actually, it shouldn’t have broken out at all. If Ryou had been more himself, all that should have come out of that would have been himself covered in paper mache. Instead, he had fought back, the strange, temporary insanity that had taken over with Taro taking hold again, and then seeming to possess everyone in the room so they joined in the fray. It still baffled him, he knew it must baffle all of the teachers and faculty, and they loaded the blame on he who was found in the center of it all: Ryou. If they found Amane in the center of a similar situation, they might decide to take proactive measures to make sure that nothing like the incident in Ryou’s class happened again.

So in addition to the fight in his own class, Ryou could be held responsible for anything that went wrong for Amane as well. He was the elder sibling, and obviously a bad role model. Ryou did his best to not grind his teeth.

“If that ever happens again,” he said tightly, “then just walk away, all right? If someone says something bad, you ignore them or tell a teacher about it.”

Amane pouted up at him. “That’s what Ms. Shiraishi said. But the boy was saying bad stuff about you, nii-chan.”

Ryou twitched a little in surprise. What would a class full of six year olds have to say about him? “It doesn’t matter what they say, Amane. Just ignore them.”

“Yes it does!” Amane’s voice rose, she looked on the verge of angry tears. “He was talking about you, said that you had hurt his older brother in a fight, that you had tried to kill him and you should be in jail and I yelled at him, told him he was dumb and didn’t know my brother at all, that you would never try to hurt anyone like that, and he said I was dumb and that you were a murderer and I just got so angry I pushed him over--!”

“It doesn’t matter!” Amane’s face was red as a beet, which couldn’t be healthy. “Whatever anyone says about me, it doesn’t matter because it’s not true, right? So they can say whatever they want, it doesn’t hurt anything and you can just ignore them. They’ll stop eventually.”

Amane shook her head, not at all pacified. “No, it does matter, Ryou, because you’re nice and that boy was a liar! If he says those things then people will believe that you’re bad. You’re not bad!”

The girl had stopped on the sidewalk, forcing Ryou to stop as well. Her face was flushed and her dark eyes overly bright, shining with frustrated tears. Her whole little body shook, and Ryou didn’t think it was from the cold. She stared up at him, one hand balled into a fist, the other squeezing his
hand until it hurt. “You’re not bad,” she said, a smidgeon more quietly but not any less intensely. “They say you are, but you’re not, and I won’t let them say so!”

Ryou stared, surprised. Amane was so young that it was easy to forget she could hear what was going on around her as well as anyone else could. And even a child could draw conclusions from what she heard. He hadn’t thought of her being more than nominally aware of what was taking place in Ryou’s school life or what the common opinion of him might be. He certainly hadn’t thought of what her feelings on the situation might be. He was seeing it now, and was taken aback to realize that he had someone in his life who was on his side.

But she was still a child, and could get into trouble if she wasn’t careful, all because of him. He sighed. “What they’re saying might be truer than you think, Amane. It’s not worth it to pick fights at school over this. Don’t bother. Let them say what they want. I don’t care.”

The look she gave him was as betrayed an expression as he had ever seen on her face, and he felt a little sick to realize that he had hurt his sister.

Amane threw Ryou’s hand away and stormed off towards home without him, stomping muffled, angry stumps through the dirty snow. Ryou watched her for a minute, wondering what he should do before trailing after her, deciding the best thing for now would be to give her space. He would make it up to her later, after she had some time to cool down and he had some time to think of something really good. Maybe a trip to that candy shop with his allowance added to hers as a present. Their mother would hate it, but Ryou was more concerned about his sister than his mother.

Ryou followed after Amane, feeling like a heel, resentment and frustration still bubbling quietly beneath everything else, while Amane continued her angry progress along the sidewalk, arms scything through the air with each step. She would either still be mad when they got home, or too tired to be anything, she was expending so much energy.

Amane came to the final crosswalk before their block well before Ryou did. She was so far ahead that she was able to look both ways before crossing and step out into the road before Ryou could catch up. The red ‘Don’t Walk’ symbol was still glowing.

Ryou started to run. “Amane, stop! The light’s still red!”

Amane looked back over her shoulder, still scowling at him, still angry--

--loud, ear splitting sound--

--flash blur blue and black truck flash in the light--

--shriek, was it brakes, was it-?--

--thud, so small and soft but Ryou could still hear it, hear it, hear it--

... Ryou stood, as immobile as though his feet were frozen to the pavement. His feet really were very cold. And his nose. They might be frozen. Rock hard. He might never be able to move his toes again, or wriggle his nose. That would be sad.

Amane was gone.

Where had she gone? She was right there, looking at him, then...
He didn’t want to look, but his head moved of its own volition. Maybe he really was possessed; his body kept acting on its own, with no input from him whatsoever.

He turned his head and noticed that in the snow on the street, as well as the regular sets of tire tracks left by the flow of traffic, there was a set that swept through them all at an odd angle, obliterating the neat lines of organized traffic. A black swath of chaos through the white order. His eyes followed the wild tracks until he came to the tires that had left them. Ten tires, two and two sets of four, they belonged to a cross-country truck. The truck was blue, white logo on the side, and knifed across both sides of traffic, an effective blockade. Ryou stared at it.

Ryou stared at the truck, his chest hurting. He stared at it, and stared as the driver threw open his door and staggered out, almost falling headfirst into the snow. He was yelling something, his mouth stretched wide, but Ryou couldn’t tell what it was.

Why did his chest hurt?

The driver stumbled in the road and Ryou watched him, fascinated. What had the driver stumbled on? Snow? Ryou looked. It wasn’t snow, it was too colorful. Pink and yellow.

A backpack.

Amane’s backpack.

Where was Amane?

His legs worked. He didn’t tell them to go, but they went. He ran on frozen feet, following the truck driver because there was no one else and he didn’t know where he should be running to. He followed him around the front of his blue truck, and noticed another color in the white and gray of street snow.

Red.

He stopped. He looked down.

There was Amane.

He started to grin, and didn’t know why. He shouldn’t grin, but he couldn’t stop.

There was Amane.

His chest hurt.

For the first time since he yelled for Amane to stop, Ryou took a breath.

And began to scream.

Chapter End Notes

**Higashi-ku:** This is a specific section of a city in Japan I picked as where the Bakura family currently resides. It’s not really important where it is, since it’s a placeholder and nothing of the city in question shows up in the fic, but for anyone who’s curious, it’s Sapporo in Hokkaido. (Which would make the school Naebo Elementary… but
don’t expect this to be a perfect match. I don’t even know if this school was around in
1990.)

**Kagome Kagome:** The name used for the ‘virus’ sweeping through comes from a
children’s game and song. In the game, one child is chosen as the oni (ogre) and sits
with eyes closed while the rest of the children circle around them singing the song.
When the song stops, the oni tries to guess who it is that stands behind them. It’s an
interesting game and (creepy) song, and the various interpretations of the lyrics makes
interesting reading. I find some of them particularly fitting for the relationship between
Ryou and Bakura.

**Pocket money:** ¥500 in 1990 would come out to just under $4.

**Amane’s Death:** This is, actually, canonically correct. In Duel 50 (of volume 6 of the
original run) Ryou is shown to be writing a letter to his sister, Amane. In another
Bakura died in a traffic accident and that Ryou continues to write to her in heaven.
Unfortunately this book has only ever been released in Japanese and French, so the rest
of us have to search out this info. As for the exact specifics of Amane’s death (hit by a
truck while crossing a street) I will admit to being heavily inspired by Goendama’s
dojinshi *Boku to Maou*. I recommend it to anyone who can find it. Ryou’s letter to
Amane, for anyone who is curious, runs like this:

> “Dear Amane,
How is school? How are you and mother? Your brother started his new school today.
I’ve only been there a little while and on the very first day I made a lot of new friends.
They asked if they could come over to my apartment to play some games. I’m really
looking forward”

At which point Ryou was interrupted in his writing by the voice of Bakura.

**Yu-Gi-Oh! Character Guidebook: The Gospel of Truth:** This doesn’t have anything to
do with the fic directly, but for anyone who is intrigued by this book and would like to
read it - but is hampered by being a strictly English speaker - there is hope. Two fans
are working on scanning, translating and posting the entirety of the book online for
others to read. They can be found on tumblr at yugiohbibleproject.tumblr.com. They
are accepting donations and general encouragement to fuel the project. :)

Thanks for reading, everyone. Until next time!
Part VII

Chapter Notes

Once again, this has gone far too long without an update. Blame my continually busy and flipping upside down life for that. Moves, being kicked out of new homes, relationship dramas, broken cars, job shenanigans… the same old stuff, but boy does it eat up time and motivation. Anyway, sorry for the long wait. I’m not giving up on this fic, man. Not ever.

**Historian’s Note:** This story takes place before, during and (eventually) after the original story through Millennium World, following the canon established in the manga. There will be spoilers, so proceed with caution.

**Soundtrack:** ‘Haunted’ on 8tracks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part VII

**Dear Amane,**

It’s been a little time since I last wrote to you, and I apologize. I know it is no good excuse, but your big brother has been getting ready for some big changes. Can you guess what they might be, Amane? I’ll give you a little time to think about it and tell you about mother and father.

Father is away in Egypt, at another one of his digs, but he will be coming home next month, and it’s possible he will be staying much longer than he ever has before. You remember that father was great friends with the owner of the museum where he worked? He was a very short man with a mustache and eyebrows like a family of caterpillars living on his face, and mother was upset that he smoked those nasty cigarettes in the apartment. He called us ‘Yin and Yang’ because of our hair. Though to really be yin and yang you would have to have lighter eyes. Anyway, it seems that Mr. Caterpillar Face has made father his partner at the museum, which will make him a co-owner!

Just think, Amane, our father a co-owner to a whole museum! He’s very honored, of course, and keeps saying how he can’t believe Mr. Caterpillar Face would do something like this. Mother says it’s only what he deserves and is long overdue in any case.

But being an owner of a museum, even if he shares that with another, is going to mean some pretty significant changes for him, and not all of them he will like. For a start, he will not be able to spend nearly the amount of time he has been used to in the field, participating in the digs. As an owner, father will have to spend much more time close to home, in the museum itself to oversee all that goes on and restoration of artifacts. I think that he will eventually come to prefer this, because being in the field… much of the time it must be very boring. In the museum he will get to work with artifact after artifact with no long dry patches between.

So he will be spending most of his days at the Domino City Museum - which is a name I bring your attention to, little sister, to remember, for it has to do with my own news. Have you any guesses yet?
Mother, as well as being very proud of father and his accomplishments - though I am unsure precisely what it is he has accomplished in this case - is also very pleased at father’s enforced localization. She says that father is getting no younger, and it will be much better for him to continue his work in a much milder climate, not breaking his back moving stone, climbing in and out of holes, breathing nothing but dust and sand and taking who knew how long between baths. Much better for him to be holed up in an air conditioned room and plying out secrets of the ancient world there.

Really, it is good to see mother so animated, Amane. I don’t think I have seen her so lively in, well, in the last six years or so. I think that our mother has missed father, who has only become even more absent and dedicated to his work since the last time you saw him. It has been very difficult for them, and it is good to see that the promise of having father near again had so improved her mood.

And it’s not just been the long stretches between father’s visits that has been so difficult for her. You may recall the many times over the last six years when I have had to transfer schools, sometimes to districts outside our own, for various reasons. Such changes in routine have always been hard on me, it’s true, but they have also been hard on mother. It’s not easy to transfer a son so many times, or to find schools willing to overlook the string of previous schools and any poor patches in grades due to the frequent changes. I’ve been a burden to her, I’m afraid, though not for much longer.

Have you made any guesses to my big news yet, Amane? I have given you some clues, and now I will tell you.

Since father now has close responsibilities at the Domino City Museum, we will all be moving to Domino City. It’s a very modern city on the coast with some interesting communities. But this is not my big news, merely a part of it.

If you look at the date of this letter, baby sister, you will see that I have recently had a birthday - my sixteenth. It will be some years still before I can celebrate my Seijin no Hi, but mother and father have both deemed me old enough to live on my own. We are all moving to Domino City, but I will be living in my own small apartment on the other side of town. With father’s new position, he will be able to support me until I graduate and can support myself. I think it will make things easier for mother to not have me underfoot, and with father back in the country the majority of the time, and actually spending time with her, we don’t have to worry about her being all alone.

And having my own apartment will be good for me, as well. I will have privacy, much more space than I have even been used to before, and I will be closer to my new school than if I were to stay with mother and father.

Ah, yes, my new school. Because of the timing of this move, I will be transferring after the school year has already started. This is unfortunate, but I will be starting my first year of high school, and in an area where no one knows me at all, where no one will ever recognize me.

It is a very liberating feeling, Amane, to think that I may start completely fresh, with none of my past casting a shadow over my future. All I must do is be careful not to make any of the same mistakes as I have before.

Are you surprised, Amane? Your big brother is growing up and getting ready to live on his own, in a brand new city! I’m excited to get started on this next chapter of my life, and only wish you were here to see it begin with me.

I miss you, little sister, and really do wish you were here with us still to brighten our days with your
smiles.

I will write to you again once I am settled in my apartment. Until then I beg your patience and wish you all the best.

Your Loving Brother,
Ryou

The boy runs through the streets of the village, the pounding of his sandals offering a counterpoint to his delighted laughter.

It is not an uncommon sight, especially in the season of akhet, when farmers and their sons are left with little to do than pray that the gods would be generous, but not unreasonably so with the inundation. It is the beginning of a new year, the great river’s banks are spread wide and continue to rise even now. All a farmer may do is sit and watch, and wait for the river to pull back her skirts once again so they may sow the fields in the rich black silt it will leave behind. For work there is the repairing of tools and of home, the endless task of every family, or one may go to the temples and building sites, offering labor in exchange for taxes. In the first case, the skills required might be too much for a child, and in the second the labor too arduous.

So children were allowed to run, more free now for these four months then they will be for the rest of the year to come. With no work, the youngest are allowed this freedom, as the majority of families cannot afford tutors. They run, they play at games of strength, of skill, of speed, they swim in the river’s more languid eddies, hunt up small treats of lotus roots and duck eggs, and play at flirting. None may know the joys of life as children unbound, as the majority of families cannot afford tutors. They run, they play at games of strength, of skill, of speed, they swim in the river’s more languid eddies, hunt up small treats of lotus roots and duck eggs, and play at flirting. None may know the joys of life as children unbound, and in a month of one festival after another, the village of Dendera had come to know the sound of laughter, of shrieking voices raised in untamed joy.

But this child is not running for the sheer joy of the exercise, is not sharing his laughter with peers who run with him. He runs, darting down side streets and alleys, dodging stalls and people who share the streets with him, all to avoid the adults that are pursuing him. Three men, all in clean kilts, all carrying short staves at their hips and one with a flail of braided leather in his hand fought to keep up with the small boy darting from street to street. These are not playmates at some game, but guards that pursue the boy with anger and purpose.

In two years, the boy has come to be known in Dendera. The skinny boy with a shock of white hair, he is known by sight to many of the villagers, and certainly known to the guards. He is known as a petty thief and vagrant, who takes a delight not only in the act of theft itself, but in escaping with his prize even with pursuit snapping at his heels. In fact, the guards have come to suspect that the boy gains more in enjoyment by his thefts if he knows that the watchmen chasing him will fail than he gains in terms of food or wealth. This time the boy has snatched a wig right off the head of some noble’s daughter. It is a very pretty wig, made of human rather than horse hair, set into hundreds of delicate, perfect braids, each tipped with four beads: red, black, white and gold. It is a thing of skill and beauty, every little head motion of the girl who wore it a musical rattling of tiny beads. To a street urchin, though, the wig is worse than useless, as anyone would recognize it for what it is and report him to the town magistrate.

Last year had been a fat one. The gods looked kindly on Their land, blessing it with a full flood, rich silt and kind temperatures. There had been plenty of food - so much so that stall owners had been less prone to noticing when something went missing. And this year looks to be much the same. There is no need to steal something like a wig, where at best one might trade it for food.

To steal a wig in the way the boy has done only calls attention to his crime. If he is hungry, there is
plenty of food in much easier places to get away with theft.

It is obvious to all that the pride of making off with his prize like a jackal into the desert is the true prize the boy seeks. This is his game, and there is no greater joy than being the best at it. Though it is far from a safe amusement, as the serious men with serious clubs are there to prove, and none of them is more eager to catch the boy than the watchman with the leather flail.

This watchman is the highest ranking of any of his comrades, a Captain, and eager to be noticed, recognized and perhaps even promoted beyond the office of a village watchman. He has dreams and ambitions that would make his peers gap if they knew the extent of them, but to which he holds himself rigorously. This one boy, who somehow slips even the tightest nets left by his men, who consistently gets away with his every theft and takes a positive delight in mocking the watchmen for their inability to catch him, had been a thorn caught in his flesh for some months. It makes him seem incompetent, it interferes in his ambitions, and the jackal-boy’s cheeky smiles and mocking laughter only serve to enrage him further. None are more determined than he to catch the little thief and put an end to his games forever.

The boy does not care. Much has changed for him in the last couple of years, and he is no longer the frightened, trembling creature he had once been. There is new confidence in him, new vitality that animates him, and he revels in it freely. It had brought him food to strengthen his body, clothes to protect him, and a sense of power, of indestructibility that a past self would never believe.

He laughs again, looking backward over his shoulder to watch the stupid, heavy police try to catch him. They are so clumsy, they trip over pots as they run! Pots that had always been there! How stupid can they be?

“Come now, iwiv, why so slow? Your heads still stupid from so much wine?”

“Itja!” The boy’s insults only enrage the watchmen more, especially the Captain bearing the short whip. The big man is a vision of rage, flushed with exertion and yes, wine from the night before, but the truth of the boy’s jab only makes him feel his perceived incompetence all the more. “Itja!” He screams again when he takes a corner too tightly and smashes his shoulder into the unyielding mud brick of a home. “Your blood will feed the crocodiles!”

The boy laughs again, and turns down a very narrow alley. It has been fun to lead a fruitless hunt, but the time approaches to put an end to his games. He is beginning to grow tired as well, and if he allows the watchmen to chase for too long, they may finally think of something clever to catch him. And the boy did not doubt that the Captain would make good on his threat and feed him to the river. Best to make a quick and clean getaway.

Maybe tonight he will sneak into the Captain’s rooms and leave the wig with him, since he wants it so badly. He is getting quite good at his sneaking, and he is sure the watchman will appreciate such skill and professional consideration.

The alley is narrow, and the boy can barely run down it. The three guards, who are all full adults, can fit, but must slow down and go single file. This is one of several such alleys and other inconveniences the boy has memorized, all leading away from his abandoned ramshackle of a home outside of town. None have discovered his hiding place in the years he has lived there, and he will not lead anyone there.

He reaches the other end of the alley, and the watchmen have fallen off his tail even further. The wine of the Tekh festivals truly has slowed them, and the boy may make good on his threat almost as soon as he decides to really try. Sunlight and open air claim him, blind him as he comes sprinting from the alley, stolen wig clutched in one hand, stolen sandals slapping the earth--
The wind is knocked out of him as he collides with what feels like the wall of a hut, and he bounces off, falling to the ground, dropping the fine wig into the dust.

For a moment the boy is stunned, hands and feet seeking purchase as his eyes adjust to the sudden light.

*What did I run into?* he thinks to himself. *There is no wall there, so what...?*

His eyes seem to take forever to clear. When they do he sees a man standing over him, thick and heavy as a water horse, staring down at him with the same slow comprehension as the great wading beasts.

The boy’s heart fills with hate for this man who has slowed his escape, but he has no time - no time! - to stop and punish him. The watchmen are too close, now, and he must flee in earnest. No time even to catch up the stolen wig, he must leave it behind, and after so much trouble to get it!

He gets to his feet, stumbles, is ready to run to the next trick of alleys and lose the watchmen - perhaps they will not chase so closely now they have the wig? - and takes a running step in the same moment a hand, rough with calluses and hot against his skin, grabs his arm and halts his flight.

The boy only has enough time, a split second, to know it is the Captain that has a hold of his arm before the limb is yanked almost out of socket and he is slammed against a hot mud brick wall. A strangled noise escapes his lips, part yelp and part gasp from the pain and impact. Bright constellations bloom before his eyes as his senses are knocked loose and he loses focus once again on the world around him. The slow, stupid watchman is saying something, but the boy concentrates on getting air inside him first.

“Caught you at last, little *itja,*” the Captain crows. Though the boy is stunned, and much smaller than he, he keeps a firm grip on the boy’s arm, as though afraid the boy will slip away like water if he loosens his grip for an instant. “What good is a fine wig to a useless bug? Idiot! If you are to steal, steal what you may use! Not just a useless *itja,* but a useless and *stupid itja!*”

The daytime stars that swim before his eyes finally begin to fade, leaving the boy with nothing but the pain throbbing through his small body. It’s a sharp reminder, it brings the boy back to reality, to the truth of *now* – that he is caught.

Caught! *Him!* He has never been caught before. Always he has managed to slip away, quite often undetected. He is very good at coming and going unseen, so none know their possessions have gone, or were even in danger until they find it is no longer where it ought to be.

In an instant the old terror washes over the boy like the river’s current; the constant, nagging dread that this exact situation would come to pass. Caught by the law jackals, to be dragged to gaol and sold when it was discovered he had no family and no owners. To become a slave, to lose his freedom, the one thing he had left… He might prefer the crocodiles, after all.

The boy forces his fear aside, and although it still coils in the pit of his stomach, it does not show on his face. He sneers at the stupid slow watchman, in defiance of his helplessness. “Stupid thief? Stupid thief you could not catch, *iwiw,* so your brains must be made of shit. *Tcha!*”

Rage ignites in the Captain’s eyes. It’s almost enough to make the boy regret his words, but he will not take them back, not even as the man lifts him from the wall only to slam him against it again. His skull bounces against the mud brick, spine and ribs lighting up with pain. It fills him with joy, this power he has over the Captain. His pain is proof of his power.
“HadbaHak!”

The two other watchmen, even slower than the first and puffing like overworked cattle, finally catch up with their leader. They stumble out of the alleyway and into the light, blinking stupidly before they spot their Captain, holding their prey at last, but with an expression that promised death as assuredly as his words. If they see danger to the boy, though, they do not care much. They have not their superior’s ambitions, but they have been humiliated and frustrated by the little white-haired thief as well, and are only surprised and pleased that the chase is finally over.

One stops immediately he understands the situation and folds over, hands on his knees to catch his breath. He drank heavily at the Festival of Wag and Thoth, and the chase under a hot sun has driven home his foolishness. The other, panting and holding a stitch in his side, ventures a smile at his Captain, nodding to the boy.

“Caught him at last, Captain! It was only a…”

He trails off, the words of congratulation dying in his throat as his Captain looks at him. He sees the fury, the half-mad rage on his superior’s face and recognizes it for what it is. He knows better than to risk turning it towards himself by a careless word.

Swallowing what had been on his tongue to say, the watchman halts and holds himself as much to attention as his body will allow, awaiting his orders. The other watchman, still doubled over and puffing, notices nothing.

The Captain all but snarls at his underlings. The boy watches as the muscles along his sweaty jaw jump and tense, the painful grip the man has on his arm tightens even more, until it feels as though the bone may snap like a bird’s. He does not cry out, but turns his wince into a grin, his grunt of pain into a taunt. “Pack of dogs, running down hares. So proud of so little.”

The Captain’s arm moves so fast that the boy doesn’t even see it, knows nothing of what is happening until his vision is washed over with bright darkness, the side of his face blooming with agony.

“Quiet, itja! You are no hare, you are a jackal, and you will be put down like one!”

His vision and thoughts still a blur from the strike, the boy is tossed to the side, to be caught by one of the watchmen. He tells himself to run, to get away from these fools who have taken their hands off of him, but he is confused. There’s no knowing which way leads to freedom, which to more captivity, and he stumbles over his stolen, too-large sandals. Before he can even sort out his own limbs he is held again by another set of hands - gentler, but no more likely to let him slip free.

Shouts of the Captain sting at his ears. He is calling to his two subordinates. “Get up! Get up and hold this little itja shit. He is going to learn right here and now what awaits useless thieves in the afterlife!”

Two hands are on one of his arms, and then another two come and take hold of the other. He is being moved, forced to walk somewhere, his stupid heavy legs tangling and making the two watchmen carry him. But where are they going? Why won’t the world clear so he can see, can slip away again to safety? Why won’t his body respond?

They stop moving, and the boy feels hot brick against his bare back again. His arms are still being held firmly, held out to the sides, leaving his center exposed. It is not a good position in the presence of enemies, and another small wash of fear laps over him. He shakes his too-heavy head, his cheek and eye throbbing, and tries to understand the danger he knows is there.
A voice beside him, the puffing watchman, speaks up. “Captain… oughtn’t we to take him to be judged?”

“Quiet, or you will be next! This little shit is beyond judgment, beyond any mercy some fool judge may be tempted to give! He will be punished and by my hand! Understood?”

There is no reply. There does not need to be. The boy recognizes the madness in the Captain’s voice, making it crackle and strain. It is blind rage, hatred gone so far that even if the Captain were to recognize what it is for what it is, he wouldn’t care. Too far gone, too much hate, all that can appease it is retribution. All that can slake it is blood.

The boy knows, for he feels it as well.

His surroundings begin to come into focus as his vision clears. This is not a busy street, but a small crowd has gathered around the drama developing, drawn by the shouts and the sight of watchmen with staves at the ready. Tradesmen, women, farmers, even children his own age and younger watch with curiosity as he is held by two men more than twice his size against a wall, forced to face a third full grown man standing before him.

As his vision clears further and he is able to make out the Captain, his intestines turn to water. Fear of a kind he has not felt in years clamps around his ears as he realizes what is happening. He is held, spread and defenseless, and the Captain is drawing back his flail. He is about to be whipped, not even across his shoulders as even the lowliest slave might expect, and it is to be by a man with the twinkle of insanity in his eye.

Arms held, terror squeezing his heart, there is nothing he can do. The Captain’s arm comes down, forward, white teeth bared in a frenzied grin--

--the lash bites with teeth of fire--

--a high, keening scream fills the air--

--smells of terror and blood--

--copper--

--flashes in the darkness, the screams of villagers as they try to run--

--helplessness, terror, rage, hate--

--twisting at his guts, pressure at his spine, pain--

The screams become louder, piercing shrieks that attack his ears. Distantly he feels the twin grips at his arms disappear. He is falling, but he does not try to catch himself, his hands instead going to his right eye, where the lash bit him, catching blood--

All around him are sounds that have filled his nightmares for years. Screams of terror and of pain, the voices of men and women raised in confusion, the pounding of feet against the earth, the crack of shattering pottery…

The boy pays no heed to the cacophony all around him. He gives thought only to his face.

He has never been whipped before, although he has seen it done to others more than once. He has seen the long, gaping wounds they can leave when in the hands of a cruel man. With his small, dusty hands filling with blood, he knows that he has received just such a wound, even if he could
have doubted the possibility with who had dealt the blow.

The pain is more than the boy has ever known. Even starving, even travelling alone along the river for days he has never encountered such biting agony. From the center of the gash the white hot pain reaches out to all of his face, a throbbing sting that strikes him with every beat of his pulse. Soon his whole body is trembling in sympathy, and his stomach clenches, nausea rising.

The boy clenches his teeth, holding down his morning meal as best he can. He dares not touch his face. If he does, then his entire skull may break apart from sheer pain. But he must know what the watchman has done to him, how bad it is. He cannot see out of his right eye, and he must know…

Slowly, with fingers muddied with blood and dust, the boy probes his face, assessing the damage. What his fingers tell him make him lose the battle to keep his stomach still.

The flesh of his face has parted in a long line. From his hair line, across his eye, and down his cheek, past his lips, almost to his jaw. Blood is pouring from his face, a small river of gore cascading down and dripping into the dirt with soft patters. The entire right side of his face is burning hot and slick with blood, but his eye…

Even more gingerly than before, he searches with blood soaked fingers around his eye socket. The gash is deep along his brow, along the ridge above his eye - he is sure he feels bone - and even deeper below his eye, digging into the flesh of his cheek. His eyelids - the boy feels dizzy with the new wash of pain - they are scored by the passing of the lash as well, but not nearly so deep as on either side of them. It is more like scratches and not, as he feared, a complete split of the lids, leaving him with four instead of two. As for the eye itself…

It is where it is meant to be. The lash had not plucked out his eyeball as he had feared, and in that alone he knows the Gods have smiled on him. Whether or not the lash had cut his eye or if he were simply blinded by his own blood was less certain. He would not know until he has more time to examine his injury. Now…

Now he needs to escape. Shock is wearing away, allowing the normal instincts of flight and survival to assert themselves. He is no longer held, and must run for safety.

The silence strikes him first. What had been only a moment ago a storm of screams and feet - what had been the cause of that? - now there is only his own breathing, and the soft sound of some chicken clucking not far off.

Hand cupping his injured eye, the boy raises his head and looks around.

There is no one. In the dust there is a pair of staves and a flail, dropped by the watchmen without a doubt, along with the shards of a large jar, a half-eaten piece of bread, and the churned footprints of a fleeing crowd.

The boy frowns, and then cries out at the pain such a simple act causes to lance through his face. What has everyone gone?

He looks around, and cries out again when he sees the crumpled body of a watchman right beside him. It is the less winded watchman, the one that had dared to question his Captain’s rash handling of their prisoner. He is, without a shadow of doubt, very dead. His eyes and mouth are open, wide in an almost comical depiction of terror, screaming even in death with his gaze towards the Gods. Shrieking at Heaven. His body is already twisted, his fingers curled into claws, as though to attack or snatch at whatever it was he saw in the afterlife.
The boy scrambles back, away from this mad specter of death, and looks around, suspicious of other such gruesome discoveries.

There are none the boy can see. Beside the body of the watchman and the tracks of a panicked group of people, he is alone. What was it that killed one of his captors, and chased away all the others so effectively?

He does not have long to wait for answers to both riddles. As he looks about himself, a moving shadow draws his attention. It is a small shadow, low to the ground where no shadow had any right to be, and moving swiftly toward him. For an instant the boy is frightened and draws away from the oncoming shadow. But as it draws near he recognizes it for what it truly is, and all mysteries are solved.

“Little God!”

The white serpent, larger since the last time he has seen it, and much larger since the very first time beside the river, pauses in its progress long enough to rear up and give a hiss of greeting, black maw ringed with white fangs, violet eyes sparkling in the sun.

His face still hurts beyond words, but the boy cannot help but smile. He has only ever seen the Little God a handful of times since the very first, and every time it has been to save him from some predicament. He knows not why he has gained such a valuable ally, but he is grateful. Even more than the assistance the Little God is so good as to provide, the boy no longer feels so completely alone.

It is good to not be alone.

He holds out a hand to the serpent, who pauses to flick a tongue out at the blood pooling in the boy’s palm. The triangular head tilts to allow the serpent to look at the boy, one violet eye to another.

There is communication in that look, one which the boy, without knowing how, understands.

He swallows hard, his legs shaking. It’s a warning of what’s to come, he knows. Soon his strength will leave him, and he must be safe before that happens.

Pulling his hand away, the boy breathes, gathering every bit of strength he can to himself.

“Little God, please help me. Take me somewhere safe, somewhere hidden, where I may rest and heal without being discovered by these dogs.”

The Little God tilts its head again, its eye that was also the boy’s eye examining him, weighing his ability and strength. Then, abruptly, the Little God drops to its belly, turns on itself, and slithers quickly away.

Trembling as he does so, the boy stumbles to his feet and trots after the rapidly receding tail. He pauses only twice, once to stoop for the dropped flail, and again for the dusty bread. He knows not where the Little God is leading him, but he will need protection and food in any case.

Today is not the day to die, and neither will the morrow.
Seijin no Hi: This is the Coming of Age Day, making when a child crosses over into adulthood at the age of majority (20). At the time the fic is taking place it would be taking place on January 15, but after 2000 it was changed to the second Monday of January.

Iwiw: The ancient Egyptian word for dog, referring to their bark. (My sources for ancient Egyptian language are a little sketchy and hodge-podge, so don’t take them as 100% accurate, as I can’t be sure.)

Itia: The ancient Egyptian word for thief.

Gaol: Ye olde word for jail. (Not Egyptian.)

Tcha: Not an actual word, this is just a derisive noise, like ‘tsk’ but more violent.

HadbaHak: This is Arabian Egyptian (close enough?) for ‘I’ll kill you.’

Akhet / Tekh: Akhet is the season of flooding (mid-July to mid-November) and Tekh is the first month of the season. This is also the first month of the year, so lots of festivals.

Water horse: A hippo.

Ryou’s Letter: One mistake I noticed in my editing but which I’m not fixing is that I have (accidentally) made it so that Ryou’s mother is still alive. If we go back to the in-canon letter he wrote to her (see A/N2 of previous chapter) he’s asking how Amane AND their mother are doing, suggesting that they are together, i.e., in Heaven. In theory this could be fixed later on, since this letter is taking place before the in-canon one and she could die sometime between. While true, this doesn’t allow for much time, and if she died so soon before meeting the rest of the crew at Domino High, I would feel the need to show it… and I don’t wanna. Why not fix it, then? Again, I don’t wanna. It’s a small enough continuity error, and Ryou’s mother will be dying off screen at some point later on anyway, and I like how the letter in this chapter flows without having to cut all the parts she’s mentioned in and try to lever in a not-quite-explanation of how she died since the last chapter. I made a boo-boo, but it’s a little one and won’t be causing any bigger boo-boos later.

Thank you for reading, everyone!
Part VIII

The first days of the new year are passed, the month of Tekh and its festivals and rituals to the Gods all properly observed and celebrated. Now is the second month of the year, Menhet, when the festivals are less thickly spread, though no less fervently observed. The farmers’ fields are truly submerged beneath the rising waters of the river, bringing the blessings of Hapi in the forms of mud, flies and a riotous odor. There are none who doubt that this is a year that will be blessed by the Gods. The people are happy and content that theirs will be a relatively easy lot for the year.

Had he the energy to spare for the effort, the boy would have despised them all.

Death is never a far off companion to a child living on the streets with no family to shield them. The specter lurks near at hand, always ready to lead one into the afterlife and stand in judgment before Anubis. Anything could prove to be the outstretched hand of Death were one not always careful and vigilant. Starvation, illness, drowning, accident, a beast whose hunger proved greater than your own; any of these could snatch one away to the afterlife. All of them, to greater or lesser degree, the boy has faced and come away still in possession of his soul.

The boy has faced worse than hunger and jackals in his short life, and yet to succumb.

Injury and infection are new enemies, ones that are difficult to battle.

Carefully, the boy touches the skin around his right eye, and bites back a yelp as fresh pain lances through his body.

In the many days since the whip opened his face, the wound has still not healed as it should. At first the flesh had begun to mend itself, coming back together and scabbing closed, but within two days, it showed the first signs of infection. The wound had swelled, and heat radiating out against his hand when he touched his face. In another two days his eyes was forced shut from the swelling, and pus oozed down his face whenever the gash reopened.

Fear had taken hold of him, then. After taking his injury, the boy had successfully retreated to his abandoned farm house with the help of the Little God. Since then, the boy had not ventured out, choosing to wait until he was healed before risking it. His stolen home had some food, and there was certain to be some coming retribution for what happened in town. The fallen guard would surely call for some kind of revenge.

But he was not healing. He was getting worse as the days spun by. There was a creeping weakness stealing over his limbs that had nothing to do with hunger, and with one eye sealed shut, how was
he to see enemies approaching? Fear crept in with the weakness.

What if he loses his eye?

Vague memories of his youngest days, before the night of screams, pushed their way to the surface of his mind. Memories of someone, a boy who was not him, screaming in pain, his arm clothed in red. He had been climbing the rocks… and fallen…? He had been bound and cleaned, but his arm healed slowly. It had become infected, growing hot and swollen, dribbling horrid, stinking fluids. More than anything, the boy remembered that smell.

Did his wound smell the same way that other’s had smelled?

Through the haze, he remembered that long ago boy growing sick, feverish, tossing in his pallet, his eyes too bright and seeing nothing.

He remembered a voice saying the poison must be let out of him. He remembered a sharp knife, and fresh screams.

The boy, terror filling him for what might happen, for an eye he might lose, had found his own knife. If it was the poison that made his face swell and his limbs weak, then he would dig it all out.

That had been several days ago. The boy remembers the pain of the blade sinking into his cheek, somehow worse since it was done by his own hand. Blood and poison had run together down his chin, plopping into the dust, leaving craters. Two cuts running across the whip gasp, and it felt as though all of the poison had left him.

It had seemed at first to have done the trick. The next morning he had been able to open his eye again, and while he still felt weakened, his face was not so heated as it had been. In another couple of days, he had thought, he would be able to go out and replenish his dwindling food. Very carefully, of course, no brash wig snatches like last time, but something more than simply sitting around.

It is now a few days later, and the boy cannot summon the strength for even the most careful of thieving opportunities. Even stealing eggs from a negligent river duck seems beyond him, now. His face has worsened more than ever, sealing shut his eye, the skin hot as a furnace and tender to even a gentle breeze. Worse, the poison in his face has sunk into his body, sickening him, the heat spreading until he feels like a well cooked hare. Whatever strength he’d held on to is now leaving him, so to even stand and drink from the water jug is too great a feat.

Not that it matters if he could. The jug is dry. There is no water to drink.

Lying on the floor of his stolen home, his bones aching from the fires lit inside him, the boy stares at the ceiling and wonders if this is how he will be lured to the afterlife. Choking of thirst as poison riddles his body from the inside out. It is not how he thought he would die, of the many ways he might have over the years, and somehow it almost seems like a cheap way to be taken. He has food, shelter, a small measure of protection by his own hand, and he would die now?

It doesn’t seem fair. To survive so long, to have it taken away now, before he is done…

Day passes, as does the night. The boy wakes sluggishly from dreams he does not remember, but which leave him certain he is not where he is meant to be.

He’s thirsty. As once he had ached of hunger, now he craves water. His tongue, too thick to fit in his mouth properly, cleaves to the roof of his mouth, his throat aching. He begins to roll his body
to the water jug, every muscle protesting, before he remembers: the water is gone. Defeated, the boy falls back.

Were he well he would laugh at so small an obstacle. Water gathering was one of the simplest of tasks, and while not perfectly safe, it would give him no trouble. Were he well.

Too hot to be comfortable, but too weak to do much to help himself, the boy drifts back to sleep, the right side of his face aflame.

Whimpers wake the boy. Confused, he struggles to consciousness, looking about him with one bleary eye.

The shadows have changed, lengthened across the floor, the remaining light the gold and scarlet glow of a dying day. The boy has slept the entire day without intending to. Why then should he still feel so tired?

Whose quiet weeping had woken him from his dreams?

There, in the near corner is another sleeping pallet, and in the pallet the shape of another human body, sharing his space.

Perhaps feeling the attention on him, the figure shifts, letting out another high, weak moan of distress. A thin blanket falls away, and the boy finds himself staring into an unfamiliar face, shining with sweat and twisted in pain.

It seems to take the other boy a moment to realize he is not alone and to gather his thoughts. After a moment he smiles. It looks only slightly less pain-filled as the expression that came before.

“You’re the last one.”

The boy frowns, and the right side of his face burns. He tries to focus. “What…?”

“They called us thieves. Lies. But now you are a thief, and you are all that’s left. So, truth.”

Nothing the other boy says makes any sort of sense. He tries twisting his brain around the words, to understand what he is being told, but understanding refuses to come. As he stares at the boy speaking nonsense, he feels he recognizes him…

“Killed us all. Except for you. And me.” The boy smiles and it is horribly like looking into a skull. “Didn’t get us, did they?”

He needs water, his tongue and throat demand it before he can speak, but still he tries. “Who… are… you?”

“You’re with me…” The other boy’s gaze goes far away, his smile collapsing into a grimace. He writhes on his pallet, curling on himself, turning away, apparently no longer interested in conversation. In a voice strangled with pain, he murmurs, “Soon… we’ll all be dead.”

The boy tries to understand, to call out to the other boy, but his voice will not work. A wave of drowsiness overtakes him, and he’s swept into sleep like a careless swimmer in the river.

When he next opens his eye, the second pallet is gone. It and its occupant had never been there.
The poison coursing through his veins is turning him into a piece of the desert. It is the only explanation for how during the day he would burn with the heat of the deepest sands, while as soon as the sun set he would be so cold.

The thirst has grown too much, and the boy now walks, stumbling, by the light of the moon, towards the river.

He does not feel much stronger, but with the loss of the beating heat a walk outside does not seem so completely impossible. It is still not easy, though. His limbs are weak, and even with the blanket of his pallet draped over his shoulders, the night cuts into him. Like the heat from before, it feels as though it radiates from inside him. He can barely keep hold of the dipper he’s brought with for the water. No jug, there is no way he could manage its weight empty, let alone full of river.

Weeds and stones catch and his rip his sandals free. He does not stop for them. His feet are so calloused it makes no difference, and he does not know how long he will be able to keep moving. Best not to waste any time.

The boy does not try touching his face anymore. The pain is too intense, but more than that, the picture his fingers describe to him is too horrible. It is hardly a face anymore, but a raw and weeping mass of flesh. Would he ever be whole again?

He pushes such thoughts out of his mind well as he can. There is no point when simply setting one foot before the other takes so much effort.

The water is beautiful in the moonlight. The river itself would sparkle, land bound stars flowing along on earth, but this is only a piece of the river. A small wanderer whose sense of urgency was all left behind. Its surface is calm, an almost perfectly flat sheet of silver.

Even as he is, the boy does not rush forward to plunge in his head and drink. Beautiful as it is, the river and its children hold dangers, and only prey would choose to disregard them.

Ears pricked and eyes scanning carefully, the boy approaches the water. No dangers reveal themselves, and the boy’s shivers become more violent as the water he needs comes closer and closer.

The temptation to rush forward worsens with every step. So close, but having to remain so cautious…

No threats appear, no scale revealed, no stealthy footfall save his own sounds through the darkness. Finally, the boy’s thirst is slaked.

The water is so cold the boy’s insides practically freeze. He means to sip, to look around, and sip again, to stay safe in his drinking… but the water is so good. It’s been too long since he’s drunk anything, and he drinks deeply, gulping down the river as fast as he can to scoop it up. He drinks so much, so fast, he begins to feel sick, but still he does not stop.

He was made into the desert, and this is his Inundation, inexorable in its onslaught.

A twig snaps in the darkness.

The boy spins, heart in his mouth, one heel slipping in the silt rich mud. The boy’s balance, already precarious, is completely lost, and he tumbles backward. In the moonlight he can make out the shape of a man, large and imposing, coming toward him. Before he tumbles completely, the boy gathers every scrap of strength he still has and pushes.
There is a flash of white, a familiar wrenching in his gut, and then a hard slap against his back as he finally lands, tumbling into the river.

Water, cold and heavy, closes over him. He has a brief understanding of what the river feels like in his lungs, every muscle locking in the cold, before darkness overtakes him.

Confused and confusing flashes of consciousness, bits of light and sound snatched from the murky depths of oblivion assail him. No logic connects them, nor do they seem to have any connection to him. He is merely an observer, a drifter on the current, catching glimpses of the distant shores. A water jug that is not his own, an incessant scratching, like birds’ claws on stone, coolness that does not freeze, and warmth that does not burn; an aged face half hidden in shadow, staring at him.

None of it makes sense to the boy, but none of it matters, either. He drifts along, carried by on the river’s placid current, neither touched or touching what is happening around him. It’s a pleasant feeling, this unmooring from reality. He wonders, with thoughts that are also prone to drifting away from him, if he had died, and now travels the river of the Underworld. It is not so bad if it is, he decides. Certainly it is calmer than any time he had enjoyed when he lived. If all of the afterlife is such as this, then death is far from the worst that could happen to someone.

As unmoored from the concept of time as he is from reality, the boy drifts, enjoying the view.

Reality comes back to him slowly, like the light of Ra along the eastern horizon.

The first thing he can process is simply that he is no longer floating along the river of the dead. He is still, lying on his back and all too aware and attached to the sensation of hardness pressing into his spine, hips and the backs of his legs.

He opens his eye, and though there is very little light, the boy squints. It feels as though his eyeballs were plucked out and then returned with the desert coating them. A moment of blinking does nothing to wash his eye of sand, and only makes him aware that the desert has crept in and filled him completely. His throat is dry, his tongue a dry slab of stone in his mouth. Even attempting to move a single arm tells him the same tale: he is a hollow shell, filled with the heavy sands of the desert.

Slowly, the boy’s vision clears enough to look about him. The first thing his eye falls upon is a water jug - strangely familiar? - with a dipping ladle resting beside it.

Nothing else does the boy need to see. Fighting the heaviness of his limbs, which seem to be becoming a very part of the land with how little they wish to move, the boy lurches toward the promise of water.

The heaviness extends to his very fingertips, making them as clay as he fumbles for the ladle. To reach the handle, let alone to get the ladle over the rim of the jug, the boy must twist his body and come up into a half seated position. The effort is almost too much for him, and by the time the bowl of the dipper has splashed into the jug, he is gasping for breath. It doesn’t matter, nor do the questions that hover around the edges of his awareness about where he is or what has happened. Nothing matters save the need for water, sweet water to wash away the desert that weighs him down.

The angle and length of the dipper makes things awkward, and most of the water in the bowl spills out back into the jug or outside it to the table on which it sits before the boy can bring it to his lips. Enough remains, though, a mouthful of the precious stuff which he gulps down so hard it hurts.
The boy repeats the process once, and twice, and a vague memory begins to nag at him. This is familiar, this desperate drinking. Familiar and somehow important. Something to do with the river…

He slows in his ladling. The effort grows no easier, but more difficult with repetitions, and the unclear memories distract him. He had been drinking at the river, hadn’t he? So thirsty, he had felt he could drink the river dry, leaving only reeds, crocodiles and the great water horses wading in mud. Then, something had happened…

Another sensation makes itself known to the boy. One he had been aware of but had ignored with many other sensations, but which now demands his attention. His face feels strange. At least, the right side of it does. A sort of stiffness makes it difficult to move, and though the boy is aware of some scratchiness, that is overshadowed by numbness.

Setting down the dipper, more memories trying to make themselves known, the boy tentatively explores his face with his fingers.

The left side feels normal, the flesh is soft, warm under his touch, and his left cheek can feel his hand in turn. The right side, however, makes his stomach turn. It is still and rough to the touch, and registers no sensation at all to being touched. The hovering memories rush at him out of the dark and all at once. Memories of a whip, the gash, the infection, the knife… The boy’s heart hammers in his chest. His left eye is fine, but what has happened to his flesh?

When his fingers find an edge to the rough and the numbness, he almost cries out in relief. Not his own flesh, he realizes, he had been feeling a covering. Something had been put over his face, and that is what he felt, not his own dried and dead face.

An edge found, the boy begins to pull at it. Now he knows it is not his flesh he feels, he must feel his own face. He has to know what the wound has done, how much worse it has grown.

“Leave that, boy, unless you enjoyed having fever.”

He freezes. He wants to leap to his feet, to crouch defensively, ready to run or at a desperate extreme, to fight. But the water has done little to wash away the sand and silt in his body. There would be no chance of getting away even if he could convince his body to obey him. Only his eye is capable of quick movement, and it darts about the darkened room until it falls upon a doorway, barely distinguishable from the wall, where stands a human shape.

He doesn’t look like a guard, soldier or slave trader, and with those possibilities made more remote the boy’s heart begins to calm even as his confusion and suspicion grow. Who is it that has caught him?

Apparently deciding that the boy has had long enough to examine him, the figure moves out of the doorway. He approaches slowly, as one would with a snake or jackal, cautious and watchful for any sign of a flashing fang. The boy feels a momentary stab of pride that even so weakened as he is, he can still inspire some fear.

As the man comes close, the boy can see how old he is. Wrinkles like cracks in a fired pot splay
out from the corners of his eyes and mouth, and he doesn’t stand quite straight. His shoulders hunch forward and his back is slightly bent, as though he were carrying a weight. He is carrying something in his hands, the boy sees, but it is only a bowl and a heel of bread - not enough to leave a man bent in strain, not even an old one.

The aged one comes near enough to set down his burden on the table, and looks at the boy with sharp eyes. After a moment he grunts and nods his head once. “It is good you wake, boy. I feared your soul too far gone to make the journey back to the land of the living. Some time yet before you sit in judgment before Anubis.”

The boy scowls as best he can through the coverings on his face. What the old man says makes him uncomfortable, stirs memories of dreams already fading into nothing.

“Now, let us see…” and the man reaches for him, for his face with broad and grasping hands. The boy jerks back, nearly falling all the way back to the pallet, a growl rising from his throat. Whatever help the old man might seem to have done while the boy was unaware, he doesn’t trust the why of it all. Nothing is done for nothing, everything is done for something. Whatever it is this old man wants, the boy intends to give him none of it.

Rather than pull away, the old man actually smiles at the snarl thrown at him. He drops his hand, a twinkle in his ancient eye. “Ah, there. That is good! Fire and spirit, fight and defiance, the best medicines never invented by doctors. Hold those, boy, and you do more for yourself than any others will ever do for you, oh yes.”

Nothing new in that, the thought scuttles across the boy’s brain.

“Very well, then,” the old man says, and takes a stool out from beneath the table. He sits down, closer to the boy than he would like, and takes up again the bowl he had set down. As he brings it around, the boy can smell an aroma coming from it that makes his stomach clench. “If you are so thirsty, might I also assume you hungry?”

The boy’s eyes - and nose - lock onto the bowl. It is half full of some kind of thick gruel that smells heavily of onion and garlic. His mouth floods with saliva, and as he watches he sees steam rise up. It’s hot, cooked, and not cold as so many of his own meals.

The old man lifts up a spoon full of gruel and holds it out to him, as though he intends to feed him like an infant. When the boy tears his eyes away from the hovering food to look at the old man, a faint smile is playing his mouth.

That the food might be poisoned is a brief thought, easily ignored. Looming much larger in the boy’s mind is the indignity of being seen so weak as to need to be fed. Lying in a bed or not, he is not so helpless as that!

Lip curling, the boy lunges forward and snatches the bowl out of the old man’s hand, ignoring the spoon entirely.

Gruel slops out of the bowl a little, but the boy holds onto what is left, challenging his captor to try and take it back with his stare. The old man only chuckles at him, showing no inclination to take it back.

Still wary, the boy looks down at his prize. It is warm; he can feel the heat through the clay in his hands, as it rises from the bowl to his face, bringing delicious smells along with it. His stomach cramps and his jaw tightens in anticipation, but he hesitates. A lifetime of mistrust is not so easily
swept aside, and he glances back up at the old man.

Without words, the aged one seems to understand. Quirking an eyebrow at the boy, he lifts the spoon, still full of gruel, and very deliberately eats it.

Satisfied, the boy hesitates no longer, and tips the bowl like a mug to eat with no spoon. The old man chuckles again, then, “Go slowly, boy. You’ll choke if you breathe it, and vomit if you swallow too quickly, oh yes.”

He wants to consume the food even faster just to defy the voice telling him what to do, but the advice is sound, and he has no desire to choke or vomit. He slows, enjoying the flavors and the sensation of food weighing his stomach.

As he eats, the old man speaks. The boy does his best to ignore him, but his cracking, wizened voice chews at his ear.

“I suppose you must wonder where you are and who it is that had captured you, eh, little thief? You needn’t be so suspicious; I am no guardsman or dog of Pharaoh, nor some poor fool you have robbed in the past. Though I have heard of you. Oh yes, and know you by sight with that mane of yours. Oh, yes. My name is Iumeri, and once I was a great and respected scribe for the Pharaoh Himself. Those days have long passed, I’m afraid, and now I am here. I scribble the nonsense of peasants for pennies and doggerel of merchants for my meals, when once I wrote the histories of our great land, the declarations of our Pharaoh!” The old man sighs, the sound of wind down a forgotten tomb.

“Long past those days, oh yes. But not forgotten, no. Never forgotten. And so long as a thing is not forgotten, it cannot be said to be truly gone. Remember that, little thief, if you remember nothing else.”

The old man pauses, staring off to a darkened corner. The boy watches him carefully, this rambling, dusty codger. This is perhaps the longest anyone has ever spoken to him without the inclusion of threats to his life or limbs, and he is not sure he likes it any more than previous treatment. The gruel is good, though, and he knows any attempt to escape would be thwarted by his own weakness. So he sits and listens, ears open for clues as to what the ancient one wants.

“I had not expected to find you so easily as I did, khered,” he goes on, and the boy does his best not to growl at the use of the world ‘child.’ “Truth be, I doubted I would find you at all. After all, if the dogs had not found you and fed your bones to the river in so many years, than what chance of a creaking scribe? Mmm. And then I heard of the guardsman, the ‘tragedy’ that befell him at the hands of the little thief with the white mane. I heard that tale and I despaired. Not for the fallen dog, may his bones nourish the desert cats. No, for the thief he had tried to take. Oh, yes, he. For surely such a boy, who had survived so long, would not be so foolish as to remain in Dendera after killing a guardsman and so wounding another. Surely he would be incense on the wind, lost to me forever, or at least until another rumor reached my ear.”

The old man taps the organ in question with a finger, his expression taking on a sly kind of moue. The boy slows his eating, watching him through narrowed eyes. It sounds as though the old man has been looking for him, and that cannot bode well. He said he was once a scribe to Pharaoh, does he hope to regain favor by capturing a thief? Small prize, but perhaps it is all the old man can hope to manage.

“Oh, yes. Imagine my surprise when I found the boy, the very boy, at the river’s edge. Imagine my delight, my joy to have discovered him at last. Imagine my despair when I realized his condition, my panic as he tumbled into the river and apparently right into the afterlife.”
He leans forward in his stool, the bright intensity of his eyes making the boy lean away.

“I gathered you up, stole you from the river’s greedy grasp, oh yes, and brought you back here. For near a week you have laid here, senseless, speaking nonsense to the shadows as I pulled you back, inch by inch from Anubis’ halls. I have hidden you, kept you safe and alive as you jabbered.” The old face stretches into a grin that almost makes it look like a skull in the flickering lamp light.

“You even tried to attack me in your fever. Oh, yes. Though those attempts were even less successful than the one beside the river.”

The boy’s heart thumps hard in his chest. Memory is beginning to trickle in as the old man speaks. He remembers the long days of pain and weakness as the whip gash across his eye began to fester, how he had struggled to keep it clean and to drain it, and how he had finally found the strength to pick himself up and carry his body to the river for a drink.

The old man. He was the one who had startled him at the water’s edge, the one who had made him tumble back… Which meant it was he who the boy had attacked, yes. In terror and confusion, he had reached for that place inside where the Little God resided and pushed. Obviously he’d survived the encounter, hadn’t even been frightened enough to flee. And now…

Now he is at the mercy of an old man who wants him for some unknown reason, and who knows too much of him already. He knows of the Little God.

Experimentally, the boy reaches inside himself, prodding carefully as he would a sore tooth, searching for any sign the Little God is still there, has not left him.

The Little God is there, but the feeling is faint. The Little God is weak, just as he is. Any hope that he could be saved by the pale serpent bearing his eyes withers away.

The old man has leaned back again in his stool, still with the over-bright eyes fixed upon him, gaze keen as a hunting bird awaiting its unsuspecting prey. After so long and rambling a speech, he seems just as willing to remain silent and to stare, waiting for the boy to do something. Keeping one eye upon him, the boy tips back the last of the gruel in the bowl. He chews it slowly, refusing to look away, putting as much defiance into every silent moment as he can. He is weak, nearly helpless, even his Little God too feeble to help him, but there is no reason to act as though that were all the case.

When his mouth is clear he stares a moment longer, then sneers. “What do you want, iawi rehew?”

The old man’s lip quirks, he’s almost certain he’s going to laugh that tomb-breeze laugh again, but he does not. “May the Gods be merciful, he speaks! Though I suppose it was too much to hope that he would also be polite?” He raises a brow.

In response, the boy spits the worst insult he knows, picked up from overhearing angry, drunken soldiers. It’s enough to make a second brow join the first.

“Well. Too much, indeed. What do I want from you, khered?” He stretches back, and it is unknown if it is the stool or his bones which creak more. “That will largely depend upon whether or not you are who I suspect you are. But let me first tell you, boy, that the only thing holding you here is your own infirmity. Once you are well enough to rise neither lock or bar stands between you and freedom.”

The boy can’t help the quick glance to the door the old man came through. He’s smiling when the boy looks back at him.
“Oh, yes. Whenever you have the strength to rise and to walk, you may do so. I will not stand in your way. Though you will find, is you choose to stay, that I can be as much service to you as you to me. Don’t scoff or spurn that which may have value, boy,” he admonishes lightly. “You are far from a position to do so. For what I wish of you, well… In payment for what I have done already, I think a name would make an excellent start.”

The old man stares. The boy blinks. A name? The old fool wants his name? The boy almost laughs. After all the possibilities and their varying degrees of awfulness, a name seems almost a joke. A realization makes the laugh die in his throat, though.

He can’t remember his name.

He’s had no need of a name in years, no one to trade words with beyond shouted insults and threats. What need of a name for a homeless, friendless thief such as himself? None. The closest to a name he has had in years is itja, and that is not who he is but what he is.

Once he’d had a name. He is sure he did, once. But that was back in the time before, before the night of screams. It was before he had been made to be homeless, friendless; before his family had been stolen, turning him into a thief.

The boy automatically shies from the distant memories. They are hazy, hard to hold on to, and cause an aching pain if held too closely. He has avoided them for so long, it is best to leave them be…

But a name. A name that is his. How long had it been forgotten, and he never noticed?

Acting against his instincts, the boy concentrates on the past, beyond the night of flickering lights and cold shadows, to when…

Just a boy. So young, and content to play with simple toys in the dust. A woman’s face, and a man’s, both thin, dry, but smiling. At him, at each other. They say soft words he cannot make out, do familiar things he cannot remember. Sometimes they look at him and say a word, a word that is special, means only him. He strains, trying to hear it across the years, bring it back through the bad night…

“… Bakhura.”

The old man smiles, pleased. “Bakhura. I will remember it. Mine is Iumeri. Please remember it, even if you never use it.”

The boy nods, still a little giddy from the rediscovery of his name after so many years. “Iumeri. The scribe.”

“Disgraced scribe,” Iumeri corrects, raising a finger. “Once I was a part, a small part, of Pharaoh’s household. Oh, yes. I have since been ejected from that coveted seat.”

Bakhura raises his brows at the old man. “Disgraced, eh? Whose wife did you diddle?”

Iumeri snorts, casting a glare the boy’s way. “Once I was a part, a small part, of Pharaoh’s household. Oh, yes. I have since been ejected from that coveted seat.”

Bakhura raises his brows at the old man. “Disgraced, eh? Whose wife did you diddle?”

Iumeri snorts, casting a glare the boy’s way. “Do I look as though I am given much to that kind of sporting, khered? No,” he holds up a hand, stemming any reply. “Do not answer that, it would doubtless only be a crude remark. The reason for my disgrace, well. You may well find some points of interest, there.”

He shifts in his stool, adjusting the lay of the wrap around his shoulders. He really is old, Bakhura realizes. His large frame, even wizened as it is, gives an impression of strength, of vitality. But as
he moves, Bakhura can see that any strength of his youth has long passed, and he is as any reed- slender old man seen on the streets in Dendera. His hands tremble a little as they grab at the edges of his wrap, his fingers thick and clumsy. He moves slowly, with the caution of the elderly lest he damage himself with his movements. And the wrap itself... it is not so warm in the shadowy room that Bakhura feels any need to kick away the blanket at his feet, but neither is it so cold that he wishes to wrap himself in it. Iumeri does wrap himself, as though warding off a midnight chill.

Even without his promise to allow him to walk out unhindered, Bakhura is certain with his strength returned that he would have no trouble at all leaving whenever he wanted.

“I was a scribe of Pharaoh,” Iumeri begins. “And I was dedicated and loyal to his service, as was only correct. As was also only correct, however, my first loyalties lay with Thoth, my true patron, and in whose service I am set the task of recording all that is true, lest it be forgotten and lost. For many years, there had been no contest between these two loyalties, no friction between my duties to Thoth or to Aknamkanon. None, until five years ago.”

“You would be too young to remember, khered, but not long ago our great country was at war. We fought a crude, brutish people, but they were strong and possessed of Sutekh’s own cleverness. Perhaps foolishly, Aknamkanon sought peace with them, but in their brutish minds there was no room for peace or negotiation, only slaughter and conquest. Five years ago the war had come to a critical point, where we must turn back the invaders or find ourselves their newest victory.

“Pharaoh’s brother Aknadin was his advisor, and so he advised, as he always did, that strength was needed to ward off catastrophe. Throughout the war the brothers had argued and bickered over the best course of action, but with doom looming so near, Pharaoh at last listened to what Aknadin had to say.

“Aknadin had translated an ancient text full of powerful and terrible magic. One such magic, he said, would have the power to repel our enemies and save our land and people. Pharaoh knew not the exact form the magic his brother proposed, but he knew the nature of the translated tome. My Pharaoh Aknamkanon with his gentle heart, he knew the kind of price that would have to be paid, but with the jackals at our door, he agreed, and charged Aknadin with the execution of his plan.

“The magic Aknadin intended was one which would create seven mystical items, imbued with power and magic strong enough to turn back the advancing hoard. To create these items, however, would require a sacrifice, and the greater the sacrifice, the greater the power. To create these items, Aknadin would have to sacrifice human lives and human souls and bind them to the items themselves. And so he did so. Under Nut’s cloak, he took a band of his brother’s soldiers to a tiny village and killed every human there.

“The items were created, and our enemies driven back once and for all.”

Iumeri sighs, staring off in the distance. “Oh, yes. We won the war, but at a great price. I learned these events, the details of them some time later. It was not easy, though, no. There were few around who were able or willing to speak of it at all. The soldiers who had gone with Aknadin, those who still lived, were all vague on that night, as though they were remembering a dream. It was only through persistence that I was able to piece together any sort of picture. Once I had, I was horrified. I wished to unlearn what I had taken such pains to know, but such is not the way of man.”

“I intended, therefore, to record the history of our victory in all of its entirety. It was a terrible one, but if it were forgotten, so too would the sacrifice of those souls. Such was not an option to one dedicated to Thoth.
“Somehow, Aknadin learned of what I knew, of what I intended. He found me, and commanded I still my pen on the history or write a version of his own design. I knew from what I had learned which village it was that had given up their lives for the creation of the Millennium Items which even now rest in the hands of those Pharaoh trusts the most. I know, too, that this village was a poor one, struggling as best it could in the hills. It was a village of innocents - for innocents make for a greater sacrifice and stronger magic.

“But my Lord Aknadin, in his version, would have it be so there would be no mention of how the village contributed to the salvation of our land. He would have it said only that the village had done its part, which was more than could be expected from a village of thieves. Thieves! An entire village sacrificed, without whom all our land would be lost, and how would my Lord Aknadin have them forever remembered? As thieves.

“My loyalty to Thoth would not allow it, let alone my own sense of what was right. I refused, and I was cast out by Aknadin, disgraced so none but the most menial of tasks would ever be entrusted to me again. He said it was to protect his brother’s gentle heart, but I know it was to protect his own skin. Oh, yes, that it was.”

Iumeri tilts his head, eyes fixing on Bakhura with that same hunting bird intensity. “Can you guess which village it was as was struck? I did not tell Aknadin all. I did not tell him of the one soldier who remembered a certain fragment of that night. Who saw, perhaps, one lone figure, nothing more than a child, escape into the dark. He did not pursue, because his sickened heart could take no more. He remembered this because the child’s hair shone white in the moonlight. White hair. A strange feature shared by many in that doomed village. In Kul Elna.”

Memories swirl in Bakhura’s mind, set in motion by Iumeri’s words. He knows he ought to feel something; anger perhaps, or grief, but there is nothing. He is numb to all feeling, and he can only stare at Iumeri, as blank of face as he is of emotion.

“When I heard rumors of a young thief with white hair, I followed them,” Iumeri goes on quietly. “The possibility that this child would be the same one that soldier had let escape years ago was remote, the chance that he had survived on his own for so long too much to even hope for, but it was a possibility. And the Gods, if your face tells truth of your thoughts, have granted me that remote possibility.”

Bakhura’s throat feels dry again, and he wishes he could reach for the water, but he feels frozen in place as Iumeri’s words slowly begin to take hold.

That night, those men, they had been Pharaoh’s men, he had known that. He hadn’t known it was the Pharaoh’s brother who had led them, and that hardly mattered. Whether the ‘gentle hearted’ Pharaoh knew or not didn’t matter when it was by his word that his village died. What he hadn’t known was why his village had been killed. All for some items, the… Millennium Items. Items of magic which still held the souls of those who had been killed.

Bakhura wonders where those items are now.

“So you found me,” Bakhura says, his tongue cleaving the roof of his mouth again. “What do you want, iawi rehew?”

Rather than answer, the old man throws back his head and laughs a wild, uncontrollable laugh. “Ah, Thoth! He shouts to the air. “You have not abandoned your faithful! You lead my steps, oh yes, and reward my quest for truth with the very one who can give it!”

The laughter and the ranting goes on for some time, long enough that the boy begins to wonder if
he should try to make Iumeri stop before he injures himself. But the old man stops himself, all at once, and now the eyes fixed on him are flashing with victory, not searching intensity.

“What I want, khered, is what I have always wanted, oh yes. Truth. Absolute truth of what passed on that night and of the people of Kul Elna. For this, I am willing to trade something of equal value.”

The offer snaps at Bakhura’s attention, even as the words ‘absolute truth’ clangs warnings in his head. He narrows his eyes. “And what could that be?”

“Knowledge for knowledge. Tell me the truth of these things, and I will teach you the ways of the scribe. I will teach you to read and to write so no writings will be secret to you. I will be your Thoth.”

Bakhura almost laughs in his turn, but tiredness is beginning to make things difficult. “What use of I of a scribbler’s tricks?”

“More than you might know,” the disgraced scribe says. “And beside the exchange of knowledge, we might both keep each other alive better than we would alone. I am an old man,” he says, stating the obvious, “and I cannot always afford what I need to make my living, or to fill my belly. Nor do I have the skill or speed to take what I need unnoticed…”

“You found a thief to thieve for you.”

Iumeri smiles and Bakhura notices just how knowing it is. “Who better? I cannot thieve so well as you, and you… Well. That mane of yours makes you very recognizable, and with the scar you will doubtless have on your face, you will be even easier to spot. With my help, we may disguise you so you are not so easily picked out. Though first we must leave Dendera…”

“Tcha!” Bakhura scoffs. “I can do this without you, iawi rehew. Why do I need you?”

Iumeri’s eyes flash, his smile gets sharper. “You have escaped the fate of your village for five years, Bakhura, survived only because none knew of you. But I have found you, and I am not the only one who knows white hair was common in Kul Elna. Do you think, if your fame grows too much, and whispers of a boy with white hair reaches Aknadin’s ear, your life will be worth any more than lotus petals?”

Bakhura thinks on this. He still thinks he can do fine without the ancient watching over him, but the mention of Aknadin gives him another idea.

“You lived near to Pharaoh and those close to him, yes?”

Iumeri’s face shutters at the abrupt question. “Yes…”

“You know the habits of Pharaoh and his brother, the defenses they have, the structure of their palaces?”

“Not extensively, but yes.”

“That.” Bakhura says, pointing a finger at the aged brow. “That knowledge is what I wish. With that I may avenge the death of Kul Elna and put to rest the hungry ghosts. Tell me these things, iawi rehew, or I will leave you to starve when there are none who wish a scribbling from a disgraced, ancient scribe.”

Iumeri remains silent for some time, his bright, flashing eyes gone hard as pebbles in his seamed
old face. For a time Bakhura thinks he might refuse, and now he has decided on something he wants from the old man, he worries he has gone too far. The knowledge in his shriveled brain would help in the wild, half-formed notion taking shape in Bakhura’s head. He must say yes.

At last Iumeri murmurs, almost to himself, “‘To teach one must first know the nature of whom one is teaching,’ yes. And now I know that nature. Oh, yes.”

The old man rubs a hand over his face, and then nods. “Such knowledge you shall have, boy. But first, sleep. If you die, then it matters not your plans for vengeance, because Kul Elna will truly be dead, and remembered only as thieves.”

A grin stretches across Bakhura’s face, a strange, dizzying elation shooting through his chest.

“I am the last of a dead village, Iumeri. Kul Elna is thieves.”

Chapter End Notes

Menhet: The second month of the season of Inundation (Akhet).

Khered: Meaning 'child.'

Iawi: Meaning 'old.'

Rehew: Meaning 'man.'

(Keep in mind, my cobbling together of the ancient Egyptian phrases is haphazard at best, and probably nowhere near accurate.)

Kul Elna: I have severe doubts that Kul Elna was actually a town of thieves, for several reasons that I won't get into, (rant on the horizon, seriously), but probably the most notable one is that we have an unreliable narrator(s) telling us that Kul Elna was populated with thieves. Aknadin had good reasons to make the people of Kul Elna as unsympathetic as possible, so the soldiers would do what they were told without protesting (and they were still enjoying the mass murder, seriously how does anyone see these people as anything but monsters, argh). Anyway, without going completely off the handle, this is my interpretation, if you want to believe that Kul Elna was actually full of thieves like how our lovely, manipulative, mass murdering Aknadin tells us, that's fine, too. (...I have a lot of feelings on this subject...)

Bakhura: So I'm going with the name 'Bakhura' instead of 'Akefia' or anything else for the Thief King. Why? Well, I was going to go with Akefia, until some beautiful person on deviantART pointed me in the direction of a little meta article a fan put together about TK's name. It's full of good stuff, and I recommend giving it a read.

Bakhura's Age: For those keeping track at home, Bakhura was five at the time of the Kul Elna massacre, it's been another five years, so he's ten as of this chapter.

Scribes: The role of a scribe in ancient Egypt was a highly honored one, as might be expected. To be literate was a huge deal, and not everyone got the opportunity. Normally it was restricted to the sons (and sometimes daughters) of scribes, or to those children whose family could afford to send them to the schools to learn for four or five
years. Scribes held a very high social status on their own, whether or not they were a part of Pharaoh's court, but even they could fall on hard times.

The next chapter officially takes us into the realm of canon continuity. Prepare yourselves; we're going to be meeting the rest of the Yu-Gi-Oh main cast!
Part IX

Chapter Notes

Hey, we’re a day late with the posting of this chapter, but considering the posting history, that’s not too bad. With any luck we’ll be on schedule for the next one. :)

Part IX

Transferring into a new school when the academic year had already begun was generally thought of as something of a hassle for all parties involved. For the school there was the question of being certain the new student was up to date on all of the course work, as well as paperwork to be filed which ought to have been finished at the beginning of the year with everyone else. For the rest of the students there was the disruption of routines, a new distraction to take their attention away from their studies when distractions were already plentiful. Of course, this was also considered something of a positive by the students themselves, as a fresh face added a small piece of excitement to the monotony of school life.

To the student being introduced midyear, there came a whole set of discomforts. Coming into a class were one is unknown and friendships and cliques have already formed was an obvious one, a personal challenge to be faced and overcome in any way the new student could. The regular challenges of becoming acquainted with a new school, with the curriculum, teachers, and particular traditions of that school are thought to be heightened for the transfer student who must do all of this when their peers have already done so.

To some extent Ryou still agreed with this perception that was held about transfer students and the trials they faced. For himself, many of them no longer applied. Over the last six years he had been shuffled so often from one school to another that it now felt normal to begin school partway through a quarter. To him the disruption of routine was routine, and he found that he could stride through it all with aplomb. It was one of the few points on which he felt he was on firmer footing than any of his peers, and while he reaped the benefits of that greater experience gladly, he hated the necessity which had granted it. And while repeated experience of being the new face may have given him a measure of calm and familiarity with the process, it also jaded him as to any hopes of actually staying in his new school.

Still, he had more hope for this school than he’d had for the last dozen. It was a whole new city as well as a new school. No one had ever heard of him or his checkered academic past. There was every reason to hope that this school would be the one where he could stay.

“Attention, everyone. We have someone new joining our class today…”

Ryou looked out over the small sea of faces that made up Class 1-B of Domino High. It was a very mixed lot, which was about what he had expected on enrolling. Domino High was a public school which, while not quite on what would be called the rough side of town, was close enough that a good number of students seemed to come from there. There were several students in 1-B who looked as though they came from a rough life - something in the way they sat, the disinterested or
belligerent way they stared back at Ryou standing at the front of the class. Ryou took careful note of each of them, their looks and their placement in the class, should it become necessary to avoid them.

The majority of the class did not fall into this category, Ryou was glad to see. Most of the faces turned up to him seemed friendly and open, curious of their new classmate. Some of the girls, Ryou noted, seemed especially interested.

Ryou maintained the gentle smile he’d put on before entering the room. First impressions were important, and he wanted to get this right. He wanted to be seen as friendly and good natured, even if he couldn’t manage outgoing. This was his fresh start, and he wasn’t about to mar it so early by giving himself a reputation as being antisocial.

When the teacher finished his introduction, Ryou gave a formal bow to the class, carefully keeping his smile in place. “My name is Ryou Bakura. Pleased to meet you all.”

There. A friendly greeting, neither too formal nor too slack. Surely that was alright?

The teacher nodded his approval, and then cast his eye around the classroom. “Now, where should we have you sit…? Ah,” his face lit as he found a spot. “The seat next to Jonouchi is open, you can sit there.”

Ryou looked over the desks, searching for an empty seat rather than anyone who looked like they matched the name ‘Jonouchi.’ He didn’t look long. Before he found the one empty desk in the room a boy directly in front of him in the second row sat up out of a slouch and waved energetically. “That’s me! You can sit over here!”

Ryou’s smile stiffened slightly. He covered the expression by adjusting his grip on his bag. The boy gesticulating so wildly at him was one of those he had marked down as a person to watch and behave very carefully around. And Ryou was meant to sit right next to him. He could only hope that his energy was as positive as it appeared to be, and that their nearness to the front of the class - and the teacher - would keep the boy on his best behavior.

Any worries Ryou had of anyone noticing his expression slip were soothed as he sat down. Everyone’s attention had been diverted by a small argument that had sprung up between Jonouchi and the girl seated on his right. A quick glance at the teacher told him that the bickering was an annoyance, but not one likely to be clamped down on unless it escalated. Ryou decided to intervene before that happened.

“Hello, it’s nice to meet you, Jonouchi!”

The boy turned around, blond hair flipping across his eyes as his expression went from a scowl to a friendly grin in an instant. “Yo, same here! Let’s be friends, eh?”

Ryou was startled into a wider, more genuine smile. He hadn’t been expecting so warm a reception from anyone, and from one who looked like Jonouchi even less. His shaggy, bleached hair, wrinkled uniform left unbuttoned, and his general slovenly air had all marked him down as one of a type Ryou had become very familiar with on his tour through various schools. It wasn’t a type which lent itself to affability, let alone open petitions to become friends.

It gave him hope, and at the same time raised red flags in his mind. Instead of answering directly, he kept to his smile and turned his attention to the first lessons of the day.

The class went by quietly, with nothing to take Ryou’s attention besides what the teacher was
presenting. Despite the mixed impression he’d been given on the student body itself, the hours slipped by in a peaceful and orderly manner until the lunch hour.

Ryou sat back in his seat, pleased. It was always a question whether what he knew on a given subject would match well with that a new school was teaching or if he would have to spend a lot of time catching up. It seemed this time he had no cause to worry; he was actually a little ahead of the rest of the class. It was one less thing to distract him.

His new fellow students were still something which required his attention.

At the lunch bell most of the class left the room, supposedly all headed to the cafeteria or some other suitable place to have their meal. There were many who opted to stay, however, or were simply lingering. Ryou had brought his own meal and planned to eat at his desk, but decided to wait and see if any more would leave before digging in.

Jonouchi was still sitting at his desk, and rather than making any move to get up, several other students had clustered around his desk. Without turning his head, Ryou listened in to the conversation they were holding just beside him.

“Hey, Yugi! I meant to ask ya this morning: have any good monsters for Monster Fighter come into the shop?”

“Mm, a few. But none that you would like, I think. Most of them are designed after bugs.”

“Ick. What is it with the bug obsession everyone has lately?”

“I agree. But I thought you were practicing your yo-yo tricks, Jonouchi. Isn’t Monster Fighter a little old to still have your attention?”

“That’s rich coming from someone who’s still feeding their Digital Pet.”

“She just means it’s weird for you to still be focused on something more than a week old, Jonouchi. You do tend to rip through the trends pretty quickly.”

“Right. Besides, I’m not the only one who still has a Digital Pet. Right, Yugi?”

“Uh. R-right.”

There was a slight pause in the conversation going on beside him. Ryou tensed slightly, suddenly certain he was being scrutinized. Had his eavesdropping been noticed? Embarrassed, he began stooping for his bag, to dig out his lunch and give himself a visible reason to be lingering, rather than just sitting and staring off into space.

“Ah, hey, Bakura,” Jonouchi called his attention. Ryou winced, then quickly put his smile back in place and looked over.

Three other students had gathered around Jonouchi, two boys and one girl, and all four of them were looking at him. The consolation was that they were all smiling, and didn’t look as though they were about to scold him for listening in.

Jonouchi grinned as he motioned to the three with a proud sweep of his arm. “These are my buds!”

Ryou blinked, and then his smile spread as he took in the new comers, looking them over more carefully than before.
It was almost as though the mixed impression Ryou had gotten on looking at the class as a whole had been boiled down to the four in front of him. Jonouchi he had already decided was a street tough of some kind, or had been one. From the way he acted now it looked as though that had changed or was only a look he had adapted without actually being a thug.

The girl was by far the most respectable looking. She was pretty, with medium length chestnut hair, and her uniform was clean and the blazer fully buttoned. She watched Ryou with interest, but he was happy to see none of the over-eagerness which was becoming more and more the norm from girls.

The taller of the two boys looked a little more respectable than the average of 1-B. His uniform looked as though it had been pressed, and his hair was clipped neat and close to his head. However, his jacket was open all down the front, and the way he slouched in place made him resemble Jonouchi more than his clothes did.

The last boy was short, even shorter than Ryou, who was far from tall, and he wasn’t at all sure what to think of him at first. The gentle look on his face and the set of his shoulders suggested timidity, but the way he was dressed… Judging only by his clothes and hair, Ryou would have said that the small boy was even wilder than Jonouchi. His hair was dyed in streaks and styled into spikes like an 80’s punk, and a wide, buckled choker at his throat furthered the impression. The school must have been very lax in its dress code, Ryou reflected, if they allowed their students to go about as these three were.

The small boy raised one hand, smiling wide. “Hi, I’m Yugi.”

Ryou raised his hand, mouth open to return the greeting, when a golden flash at Yugi’s chest caught his eye and arrested his words.

It was a little like taking a step and the ground you expected to meet your foot suddenly being jerked away. Resting against the black of Yugi’s shirt, a familiar golden eye stared at him coldly.

Ryou felt his heart trip over itself, shuddering in his chest. The hand he’d raised in greeting almost snapped to his own shirt front, to be certain that the pendant was still there, tucked beneath shirt and blazer. Before the hand made it, though, he comprehended the rest of what his eyes were telling him.

The golden eye was similar to the one set into his pendant, but the one hanging about Yugi’s neck was set on an inverted pyramid, a heavy chunk of a pendulum.

Realization brought back Ryou’s sense of balance, and he dropped his hand back to the desk, forgetting to say anything.

There was a slightly awkward pause, a glance or two shared between the friends before Jonouchi motioned to the other two. “And this is Hiroto Honda and Anzu Mazaki.”

The boy - Honda - nodded, and Anzu waved. “Nice to meet you!”

Ryou nodded back, doing his best to shake off the last of the odd unbalanced feeling. “It’s nice to meet all of you.” He tried to think of something to say, something which would present him as normal, friendly, and not as socially inept as he felt. He could only think of one thing, and it was a subject he had been hoping to avoid. But it was better than nothing. “I couldn’t help overhearing you before, but you all seem to enjoy games?”

Yugi’s face lit up, and Jonouchi grinned, leaning forward. “Aw, yeah, we love ’em! If it can be
played, we’ve played it - and mastered it!”

“Wow, really?”

“Heck, yeah!” If Jonouchi grinned any wider, Ryou thought the top of his head might come off.

Honda gave the blond a sideways look, lips quirked in a half smirk. “Well, sort of. We enjoy games and have our favorites, but it’s these two who are the hardcore game buffs.” He nodded at Yugi and Jonouchi.

Anzu nodded her agreement, and added, “We really all started to get into games more after we became friends. Yugi’s grandfather runs a game shop, so we get to see all the newest things as soon as they come out. And really, Yugi’s the real master when it comes to games.”

“Hey-!”

Both Jonouchi and Yugi blushed, though for different reasons.

Ryou looked at Yugi again, and couldn’t help the old thrill that went through him on finding someone who shared his interest. Games, and someone to play with… Games had caused him nothing but trouble over the last few years, but he couldn’t help but still love them. He still had all his old boards, figures, dice, rule books… he’d even kept the old broken figures. If Yugi and Jonouchi and the others were really so enthusiastic about games, then surely at least two of them would be familiar with tabletops games…?

“Your family runs a game shop, Yugi?”

The boy’s smile widened a little. “You like games, Bakura?”

“Yes, very much.” The thrill wouldn’t be quashed. But surely there was no harm in just talking about games… “I especially like board games and tabletop games. My favorite is a game called Monster World. Have you heard of it?”

His face lit up again, if possible even more than before. “Oh, wow, Monster World!”

Jonouchi tapped Yugi on the arm, getting his attention. “What sort of game is Monster World?”

Ryou listened as Yugi explained, with no small amount of enthusiasm, the basics of how Monster World worked to the others. More than knowing his grandfather owned a game store, hearing how well and with what familiarity Yugi laid out how Ryou’s favorite RPG worked convinced him that the boy was very well versed. He spoke as one who often explained how a game worked, and his excitement, the particular note in his voice and the light in his eye bespoke the real passion he had for what he was talking about. The others listened, their own expressions brightening the more they heard of the game.

The grin came to Ryou’s face without any sort of effort, now. He’d given up on ever finding someone, let alone a group of people who shared his enthusiasm for games. It seemed like the older he got, the less those around him had time for things generally considered childish. He was only sixteen, but more and more often he found any friends he made were more focused on their schoolwork or more serious hobbies.

Finding a group of gamers on the very first day at his new school seemed almost too good to be true.

“I’m impressed, Yugi,” he said through his grin. “You know a lot about games!”
Yugi flushed slightly, scratching the back of his spiked head. “Nah, not really…”

Ryou felt an odd kinship, a sort of connection with the short gamer. He had met others before who liked games, of course, they weren’t that rare, but normally it was a pastime that was buried rather than shared openly. Yugi was completely open about his interest, proud of it and yet bashful of his own expertise. Had there been a time when he had been less open about his interest, a time when he’d felt as apart from his peers as Ryou had, simply because of his hobby? Ryou’s eyes drifted down.

And that was all without taking into account the strange coincidence of his pendant…

“That sounds like fun!” Jonouchi’s exclamation shook Ryou out of his thoughts. “How about we all play Monster World tomorrow! Huh, Bakura?”

Ryou’s heart about stopped. “Uh…” Not already. He seemed to have met at least potential friends on his very first day, a personal best and more than he had ever expected would happen. But to actually play those games… he couldn’t risk that. Couldn’t risk them. They’d understand if he refused, wouldn’t they?

He looked at the faces arranged around him. They were all bright, eager, looking to him to accept or reject the idea. Yugi looked especially eager at the prospect of a tabletop game, his oddly colored eyes shining.

Ryou felt his resolve dissolve a little under the pressure of those looks. “O-okay…”

The pause which followed his lackluster answer felt awkward and loaded. His scalp prickled a little under the stares he imagined leveled on him. He dared not look up for fear of confirming that was exactly what was happening. He didn’t want to look up and see the look in their eyes, to see the openness he had just seen turning to concern, to suspicion.

In a desperate bid for anything which might distract them from his own awkwardness, Ryou seized on the one other thought that presented itself. “By the way, there’s something I’ve been wondering about. Where did you get that pendant, Yugi?”

The concern on Yugi’s face melted into another smile. One hand came up to touch the pendant. “Oh, this? It’s called the Millennium Puzzle.” The boy’s eyes were warm as he looked at the pendant, full of fondness. “It came from the tomb of an ancient Egyptian Pharaoh!”

With everyone’s attention drawn to the pendant, Ryou felt free to stare at it himself. The design of his ring was ingrained in his memory so well he could have drawn every detail blindfolded. Looking at Yugi’s Puzzle, Ryou felt as though someone had sketched some of those details on another object. The shape of the central eye of the Puzzle was very similar to the one on his pendant. In fact, the longer he looked at the Puzzle the more convinced Ryou became that the two were companion pieces, forged by the same hands in the same place. That they would each end up, by separate ways, in the same place thousands of miles from where they had come from, and that their bearers would meet was all almost too much to a coincidence to believe. And yet.

“Wow,” he breathed, then stopped short when he realized that he’d begun to reach out towards the Puzzle. He snatched back his hand. “Ah… would it be alright if I…?”

If Yugi was insulted by how his Puzzle had almost been handled without permission he didn’t show it at all. His smile was still in place as he nodded. “Sure!”

Ryou returned the smile and reached out again. “It’s actually a little strange,” he said. “Because I
His fingertips touched the cold surface of Yugi’s pendant, and two separate but equally intense sensations choked his voice. The first was a familiar, almost overwhelming sense of the metal feeling cold, even lying against Yugi’s body; cold and slick, like the metal was damp with oil, and that the unblinking eye was suddenly watching him. The familiarity of it all washed over him and almost drowned out the sharp, tugging pain at his chest, as though a set of claws had dug in around his sternum.

He gasped a little, grabbed at his chest. Beneath his clothes he felt the cord of his pendant and the top arch of the ring. It was still in place.

Had he thought it was gone?

“Bakura? Bakura! Are you okay?”

He took a deep breath as the pain in his chest would allow and tried to give a reassuring smile. “Yes… it’s nothing, I’m fine. Thank you for, ah…”

Before Ryou could think of what exactly he was thanking Yugi for, he was interrupted by a shrill voice. Looking up and seeing exactly who it was that saved him, he wasn’t certain just how grateful he should be for the rescue.

A group of four girls, who had been clustered in an opposite corner of the classroom, were gathered round Jonouchi’s desk and, for some reason, glaring at the blond. “Jonouchi! Quit hogging Bakura all to yourself, would ya?”

Jonouchi looked about as startled and puzzled as Ryou felt. He pulled a face at the girl that had spoken to him, reminding Ryou of the first impression he’d had of the boy. “Wha-at? Whaddaya talkin’ about, now, bossy?”

All of the girls drew up at Jonouchi’s words, his natural drawl worsening in his annoyance, but none so much as the girl who had spoken to him, her cheeks coloring. “It’s bad enough you get to sit next to him all during class, but now you’re keeping him to yourself during breaks! Let someone else have their turn.”

“You little brat!” Jonouchi sneered at them. “What are you meant to be, the Domino Welcoming Committee?”

“Someone like you four?” Jonouchi sneered at them. “What are you meant to be, the Domino Welcoming Committee?”

“And why not?” One of the other girls demanded, blushing furiously. “Bakura is new, he’ll need to know where everything is, and staying here with you isn’t going to teach him anything,”

“C’mon, cutie,” the first girl said with a smile, grabbing his hand and pulling him to his feet. He was still off balance, the pain in his chest too distracting to offer any real resistance. “We’ll give you a complete tour of the school!”

“Uh--“

There was no stopping himself from being swept along by the impromptu committee. He didn’t feel up to a tour, or to having to figure out how to behave around a bunch of girls who were obviously more interested in spending time with the new boy than in actually being helpful, but what was there he could politely do to prevent it?

“We’ve already started a fan club for you,” the shortest of the girls said shyly. Ryou held back a wince.
It was a slight relief to be taken away from Jonouchi, Yugi, Anzu and Honda, though, if only because things with them were quickly turning awkward. Bad enough he’d agreed to a game with them, something he had wished to avoid at his new school, and within the first fifteen minutes of talking with any of his new classmates, as well. So much for restraint. He would have to find some way out of it, make some sort of excuse to keep them away. Ryou still wasn’t certain why it happened, but whenever he sat down with friends to play games, they fell victim to that strange illness. The ‘Kagome Virus.’ All he could think was that if he kept from playing games then everyone might be safe. Safe from him.

“Down that way is the Nurse’s office…”

“Out there you can see the old building where a lot of our clubs have rooms. Do you think you’ll join a club, Bakura?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it much…”

“Oh, you should! We have a lot to pick from: Kendo, archery, flower arranging, cooking…”

Ryou nodded as he listened without actually processing anything that was being told to him. He was certain he would be just as lost after the tour as before, he was taking in so little. He was too distracted, trying to puzzle out the sharp pain in his chest. It was a new sensation, and it wasn’t going away. Every dozen steps or so it would flare back to life, radiating outward so every nerve in his body throbbed. He was too young for either a heart attack or a stroke, wasn’t he?

Maybe once the girls had finally released him he would try to find the Nurse’s office that had just been pointed out…

“Hey, you!”

The group came to an abrupt halt in the hall. Ryou looked back and saw a teacher with a severe haircut and wearing a tracksuit. He was large, well muscled, and glaring at all five of them with startling ferocity. Had they missed the bell calling everyone back to class?

The teacher focused on them, dark eyes narrowed and heavy brows drawn low. “You! You think you can just walk around the halls with a flock of girls all day?” The man’s lip curled like a dog’s into a snarl. “Whose class are you supposed to be in? Where do you belong?”

One of the girls, the one who’d mentioned the fan club from before, murmured just loud enough for him to hear. “Oh, no… That’s Mr. Karita, the PE teacher. He’s such a tyrant…!”

Ryou didn’t reply, either to the girl or to the question Mr. Karita had thrown at him. There was no use in being deliberately antagonistic, but he wasn’t certain how to reply to questions practically screamed at him by a teacher. It brought back unpleasant memories of grade school, when he’d been targeted by any boy larger or older than him as easy prey. He did his best not to remember those times, the apprehension and the anger that had been his constant companion…

On receiving no answer, Mr. Karita’s face grew darker. He strode forward, the better to tower over them.

“Hmph… You’re the new kid who just transferred in, aren’t you? I hear you had some problems in your last school.”

Ryou started, shock rocking through him. The pain in his chest flared again, and he had to fight not to clutch at it. How would a PE teacher have heard anything of his past school? Ryou had been told his history was on a need to know basis and his privacy would be closely guarded. What reason
would a PE teacher have to know any of it?

He didn’t need everyone in the school knowing all that had happened, to be watching him from the corners of their eyes. This was meant to be his fresh start…!

“However, there are rules in this school, mister. Like this hair!” Mr. Karita’s hand shot out and caught a handful of Ryou’s hair. Instinct had him try and jerk away, but the man was too fast. He got a good grip of the white locks and twisted ever so slightly.

Ryou gasped at the pain. His first instinct had been to flee. His second, once caught, was to freeze and hope whatever came next wouldn’t be too bad.

His chest throbbed.

“Long hair for boys in against the rules.” The girls were all speaking at once, pleading with the PE teacher to not hurt him, to let him go. Karita ignored them to lean in close to Ryou’s face. The boy kept as still as possible, old experiences replaying in the back of his mind.

“Listen, Mister Fashionable,” he growled in Ryou’s face. His breath stank. “I want you to have a crew cut by tomorrow, understand? Then maybe I’ll treat you like a student of this school! Show you’re willing to leave your past behind you and we’ll see about your future!”

Karita gave one final stinging twist of his hair and then released him suddenly, making Ryou stumble as the teacher walked away, laughing to himself.

The girls clustered around him, worry writ on every face. Kind hands were on him, kind voices asking if he was alright, but Ryou felt as though he were being smothered.

“I’m fine, thank you. I’m sorry, but I’d like to be alone for a minute. Is there a restroom nearby?”

The restroom was mercifully empty when Ryou walked in. Rather than have the committee waiting for him, he told them he could find his way back fine and to go on without him. With many a concerned glance, they had done as he’d asked.

Now he stood in the relative cool and peace of the tiled room, staring at his own reflection. He looked worse than he would have liked, even after splashing himself with water. Too pale, the skin around his eyes and mouth tight, his eyes holding a familiar, wary look.

It was a much rougher start to his new life than he would have liked. It had seemed to be going well enough before today. He had an apartment all to himself, small though it was. He was developing a routine that served him well, made him feel independent, in control. He’d gotten himself enrolled into Domino High with very little help or involvement of his parents - a circumstance he was sure they appreciated as much as he did. He was functioning well, with no hint of the problems which had led him here.

And now his first day was shaping up like this.

He’d agreed to play a game with the first people he’d spoken more than a dozen words with, which was something he’d made a resolution not to do at all, however strong the temptation was. He’d been herded around a good portion of the school by a gaggle of girls, none of whose names he could remember but who he was certain would make themselves felt over the future weeks and months. He’d met a man who seemed, within two minutes, to embody every bully he had known over the years.
Ryou wondered about that encounter. Karita had cited a school rule as the reason for needing to cut his hair, but there were inconsistencies with that. The most obvious one could be seen in his own class. If Domino High really cared about how its students wore their hair, then Jonouchi wouldn’t have the hairstyle he did, let alone Yugi. And when Ryou had met with the Principle during his intake and enrollment, she had said nothing about having to cut his hair. Neither had his homeroom teacher, and either one of them would have more right to tell him to alter his appearance. Karita, as a PE instructor, had no direct sway over him.

The man was just an overgrown playground bully, Ryou decided. Bullies followed no real logic in how they tormented their victims, and wouldn’t bother with something as trivial as consistency. In Ryou Karita had seen an easy target and seized on him, that was all. What Ryou had to decide was how to deal with him. Would the Principle listen if he went to her with a complaint? If the assessment of his Welcoming Committee was generally believed - that Karita was a tyrant - then she might.

Ryou sighed, gripping the edges of the sink until his knuckles went as white as the porcelain.

To top it all off, his chest wouldn’t stop hurting! It continued to throb and sting, so even his outside worries of heart attack or stroke were thrown out. Heart attack and stroke didn’t feel like this, he was certain of that. In fact, he was beginning to think that the pain was familiar. He’d felt this pain before… but for the life of him he couldn’t remember from where or when. With pain this severe, he should remember what had been happening at the time.

He was tired, though. The stress of the first day combined with the pain was exhausting him. It was getting hard to concentrate, or to even think clearly.

Ryou unbuttoned his jacket, revealing the golden ring he wore beneath it. He always wore it these days, ever since Amane had… It just felt strange not to have the ring with him. He’d grown used to the weight of its cord around his neck, the feel of it tapping against his chest with every step. If he tried going out without it on it felt as though he were unbalanced, like trying to walk with one leg abruptly shorter than the other.

He pushed it out of the way and unbuttoned his shirt as well to examine himself.

There was nothing to be seen. No scratching, no bruising, no marks at all on the pale skin of his chest. He wasn’t certain what he’d expected to find, but it seemed like this much pain ought to leave some sort of visible mark. Even the barely there suggestion of memory said there ought to be something. But no.

Ryou touched the pendant, as he often did when he felt the need to ground himself. He traced the outline of the eye, his thoughts going soft as tiredness seeped deeper into his bones.

The pain had first hit the moment he’d touched Yugi’s Millennium Puzzle… Maybe that had something to do with it? Maybe it had something to do with why they looked so alike. Or maybe Yugi’s Puzzle just didn’t like him…

A deep, throaty chuckle made Ryou jump, interrupting his thoughts. He drew his shirts together self-consciously and looked round the bathroom. He was certain he was the only one…

“Hello? I’m sorry, is anyone else in here?”

There was no answer, and the absolute silence worked to convince him that he was alone. He was also just as certain he had heard someone close by, with him, laughing.
Ryou shivered, buttoning his jacket and hiding the pendant from sight once again.

Perhaps he was just going insane.

“Hey, Bakura!”

Ryou stopped, cursing under his breath.

The rest of the school day had managed to go by without further incident. Even the pain in his chest had subsided to a dull kind of ache. He’d sat quietly through every period, doing his best to avoid eye contact with anyone but the teachers, drawing as little attention to himself as was possible. It had seemed to work, as well. The final bell had rung and he’d gathered his books, changed his shoes in the entrance hall and left the building all without having to speak or interact with anyone.

It was only on the literal threshold of the gates where he was stopped.

So close.

He turned, not quite managing a smile, but keeping any negative expression at bay. As he’d dreaded, it was the same four who had been talking with him at lunch. The same ones he’d promised to play a game with. “Hi, you guys.”

Yugi came up close to him. With both of them standing Ryou realized just how short Yugi was. It wouldn’t be surprising if he were often mistaken for a junior high student rather than high school - or even younger.

“Hey, Bakura,” he said, a shy smile on his face, his eyes bright. “I was talking with everyone, and we’d all love to play Monster World with you tomorrow! What do you think? Could we come to your place? If that doesn’t work we can play at my house. I know my grandpa’s got enough parts of the game for at least a short play through.” He nodded behind him to the other three. “We’re all good with whatever works best for you.”

Warring impulses jostled inside of Ryou. The first and overwhelming one was to joyfully accept Yugi and the others coming to his apartment to play his favorite game. It was such a rare opportunity to have so many other people to play Monster World with at once, and they all seemed so genuinely interested in playing. Ryou wanted nothing more than to tell them yes, to come straight after school. Then he would spend the rest of this evening preparing an interesting campaign for them all to play, making certain there were plenty of snacks and comforts for his new friends to enjoy their time with him.

Yet he couldn’t. He knew he couldn’t. More than just his resolution to not play games with any new friends at this school, was a strange kind of bone deep knowing that if he did, bad things would happen. It was more than just past experiences. Ryou knew, as certainly as he knew himself, that if he played then he would lose these new friends as well.

But the look on Yugi’s face stopped him from just saying no, from telling them all that he’d changed his mind. He looked so happy, so eager to play. How hurt would he be if Ryou suddenly changed his mind?

How hurt would they all be if they did play?

Ryou stayed silent too long. Yugi’s face clouded slightly, his head tilting. “You don’t want to…?”
“No, that’s not it,” he said quickly. “I want to play with all of you, it’s just that…” He stopped, uncertain.

After a moment, he sighed. He’d hoped that Domino City would be a completely fresh start for him, untainted by the last six years or so of his life, but it didn’t seem as though it would be that simple. Karita was proof enough of that. His past life would continue to pursue him, but it would be up to him to make sure his past didn’t go on to be a part of his future. He wouldn’t let it all repeat, but he didn’t want to ruin the new friendship that had only just begun.

The only way he could see, the only hope to achieve both of those needs, was to be honest about why he couldn’t play with them. To escape his past he would have to acknowledge it.

“The thing is…”

He explained it as well as he could, this bizarre situation even he didn’t really understand. As much as he wanted to look away, he watched their faces as he spoke, seeing what their reactions were. It was hard to tell how much they believed him. They all looked a little surprised by what he was saying, Jonouchi wore a small frown, and Yugi looked more worried than incredulous.

“I made a decision,” he said, finishing up his explanation and turning away. “I don’t want to lose any more friends. So you shouldn’t get too close to me.”

He left before anyone could reply, walking out the gate and towards his apartment. The others called out to him, but he ignored it. He couldn’t stand the thought of the questions they must have, the reassurances that whatever happened wasn’t his fault - which his gut would tell him was false. He didn’t want to see just how much they believed his story, how little they might think of him already.

Ryou walked home to his empty apartment, his plans for the evening considerably different from what they could have been.

There wasn’t very much homework to do after only one day. There would have been a set of assessments to complete to be certain he fully understood all the previous material everyone else had already covered, but he’d long since filled all of that out. The homework only took about an hour to finish, and then he was on his own for what to do.

After several minutes of running through his limited options, Ryou decided to write a letter to Amane. Writing to her was normally a good way to settle his nerves and put his thoughts in order. Besides, he had been rather lax in writing to her of late, and she deserved to know what all was happening.

He gathered up paper and pen and sat down to write. He began with the basics, wording it just as he would any letter addressed to a friend or family member, while his mind raced ahead to how he would word some of the more serious sections of the letter. He had told her his original intentions on coming to a new city, his hopes for a fresh start unhampered by everyone around him associating him with people falling into comas. How would he tell her how he had already ruined that dream by telling his story to his classmates? For that matter, how would he tell her about Karita, and how he seemed to know more than he ought to about the past Ryou tried so hard to abandon?

He paused in his letter, sidetracked in his thinking. He still had to decide what he was going to do about that situation. Should he take the incident to another teacher, or to the Principle? If he did then he ran the risk of one of them backing Karita, and of being forced to cut his hair anyway. He
doubted that would happen, though. He doubted anyone else would be quite so willing to be blind
to all the other dress code violations blatantly walking up and down their halls. But then if he were
supported and allowed to keep his hair, he then ran the risk of retaliation from Karita, probably
something worse than a crew cut. In Ryou’s experience, bullies did not take well to being
chastised, and would take out their humiliation on the one who dared tattle on them.

It wasn’t as though he had much choice at this point, of course. It was late and there wasn’t like to
be any salons or barbers open. What would he even look like in a crew cut? Would he be able to
give one to himself if he tried…?

Ryou jumped at the sudden sound of a chuckle. It was the same as what he had heard in the school
restroom, and it sounded as though it were directly beside his shoulder!

When he looked round, though, there was nothing. There was no one in his apartment besides
himself.

_Hah. So, you can hear my voice, can you? Interesting. That’s been some time…_

Ryou’s heart froze over, he leapt to his feet. There was no mistaking _that_ for his ears playing tricks
on him. That was a clear, distinct voice speaking to him, and it was terribly close. It was also…
familiar?

“What is that? Who’s there?!”

The voice, whatever it was, ignored the question.

_I guess from now on, I’ll be able to speak with my host. Truly this is a day to remember_. The voice
laughed again, apparently enjoying a private joke of its own. Ryou was beginning to feel dizzy,
held the edge of his desk to steady himself as panic built in his chest, filled his limbs until they
trembled.

_Ah, yes, the voice went on, lest we forget, there is something else worth remembering. We’ve
finally found him. That one, and the one who holds his Millennium item. At last, after 3,000 years
of waiting. The items must be resonating with each other after being apart for so long, increasing
their power. That’s why you can hear me so easily now…_

Ryou’s head throbbed, almost like a vise had clamped round it and he could feel every beat of his
pulse throughout his skull. It was as though the pressure of another person’s thoughts in his head
was straining on his skull. Or, as he was truly beginning to suspect, the break into insanity was just
as painful physically as it was psychologically.

He dug his fingers deep into his hair, into his scalp, as though trying to dig the voice out with his
hands. “Who are you?! What is this voice in my head?!”

_Don’t worry, Ryou. You’ve not gone mad yet. I am very real, and I have been with you for a long
time, just out of sight. I am a part of you, and the Millennium Ring you wear._

Ryou blinked. The words felt strange in his head, just how a foreign voice butting against his own
thoughts ought to feel, and yet he could feel the sense of them, the wordless meaning that lay
beneath all thoughts just as he could his own. The voice said ‘Millennium Ring,’ and while the
words themselves meant nothing, his fingers were already reaching for his shirt front.

“Ring…? You mean my pendant?” He tore open his shirt, looking down to the golden eye…and
his stomach lurched sickeningly at what awaited him.
The pendant, his pendant lay against his chest just as it always did, its golden eye flashing up at him like a live, blinking thing. And all five of its wickedly sharp points were buried beneath his flesh, the skin raised so sharply he could still see the shape of them. Blood trickled down his chest and on to his belly. The voice laughed again.

Now, now, Ryō. No taking me off. Thanks to you, we’ve finally found the Millennium Puzzle and the one who possesses it. It is good I decided those years ago to keep you as my host.

Ryō’s heart felt as though it were about to explode. It was beating too hard, too fast, surely it would give out any moment now. “Get out,” he screamed out loud. “Get out, get out, get out of my body!”

Don’t be so cold, Ryō Bakura. You can believe me when I say it is comfortable in here. In you. And besides, I am a most thoughtful tenant. I don’t pay rent, but I grant your wishes! I’ve been granting them practically every day for the last six years…

Ryō’s breath came out in a rush. His mind was working fast, almost too fast for him to keep up, but he had a suspicion, a terrible premonition of what the voice in his head meant by that.

What was it you always thought to yourself whenever you were playing one of those games with your friends…? ‘How fun this is!’ ‘I wish I could play games with my friends forever!’ I granted that wish for you.

All at once Ryō was glad he’d not had dinner yet and that he’d been too distracted to have lunch at school. “…What are you talking about…? You can’t mean all of those…”

Well, you’ll realize soon enough just what I mean. For now, let’s focus on something a little more important, and why we can speak to each other at last! The Millennium Puzzle is within our reach! If we let this opportunity go by, who knows how long we’d have to wait for another one.

Something shifted inside of Ryō, like the voice was moving from one place to another in his brain.

But we must wait a little on that, I think. In the meantime, since I’m in such a good mood tonight, allow me to pay my rent…

The presence shifted again. It might have only been Ryō’s perception, but it felt threatening. He threw out a hand, useless against something inside his own head. “What are you up to?”

That chuckle again, with a knowing tenor. So you want a crew cut, Yadonushi? You may not believe it just now, but I care for my gracious host. That gym teacher, he was very rude, wasn’t he? And you know even if you report him, it’s not safe to leave him free. Who knows what he really knows, what he could do with that information…

Once again, Ryō felt the meaning behind those words, saw what the voice intended much more clearly than if he’d only heard the words spoken. A wave of numbness washed over him.

“No, don’t-!”

Sleep, Ryō Bakura. Sleep…

Heaviness washed over him, slowing his thoughts, turning his limbs to lead. He remained aware just long enough to feel as the voice, that other mind took control of his body. He felt that moment, the wave of foreign exhilaration, of dark joy as it took hold of his body.
Then the heaviness became too much, and he knew nothing for some time.

Chapter End Notes

So, we’re finally into the actual canon timeline of the manga, and finally get to meet the rest of the main cast. Huzzah!

**Yadonushi:** For those not in the know, ‘Yadonushi’ means ‘host’ and is how Yami Bakura refers to Ryou in the manga - or at least in the original Japanese. The interesting thing is that Yadonushi could mean host as in ‘landlord’ or host as in ‘host for a parasite’ with equal ease.

A lot of the dialogue (most, actually) for this chapter was pulled straight out of the English translation of the manga, with a few alterations to make it flow better in a non-visual medium. Yes, the classroom these kids are almost never in is actually 1-B, and no, I’m not sure if the Principle is female or male, I’m winging that.

Next chapter should be up on the 19th, see everyone then! Thanks for reading!
Part X

Chapter Notes

I'll be scrapping the posting schedule, since I'm obviously too inept to stick to it properly. Rest assured that chapters up to 16 (out of 22) are written and just waiting for edits and formatting to go up. I'll be beating myself over the head to sit and focus on it, but yeah, taking away the schedule, as in that direction only lays disappointment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part X

Within the metallic confines of the Millennium Ring, the spirit raged.

So close! He had been so close! The Millennium Puzzle had been right there, against all the odds of probability. Despite centuries, miles and the interference of many generations of fools, two Millennium items had come together in such a way that he’d been given the perfect opportunity to take it for himself. And he’d failed!

The spirit’s memory was hazy in places when it came to the events of 3,000 years ago. Having one’s soul locked in a prison for so long was bound to have negative effects; some memory loss was to be expected. The problem was only exacerbated by the fact that he was not alone in his prison. Other souls shared the Ring with him - the very souls that had gone into the making of this and every other Millennium item. With them pressing close in on him for millennia, confused, in pain, terrified, they had had their effect on him as well. With no bodies to keep their thoughts separate, he and they had eventually fused together into a sort of gestalt soul: one which was made from the parts of many. And he, the soul of the Ring, who knew why they were all there and was awaiting the time when he could at last act on the world, was one of them.

In such circumstances it was understandable, possibly even forgivable that some memories were harder to recall than others. Yet despite that, he was certain - certain - that the spirit of the Millennium Puzzle was the soul he most wished to find. The Pharaoh.

He had been so close! In a single confrontation he could have imprisoned the soul of the Pharaoh into an object no more magical than a stone, and then there would have been none who could stop him. As a bonus he would have had several other prisoners in his collection, including his own host, Ryou Bakura.

With the powers of the Ring and the Puzzle, he would have no need for the soul of Ryō Bakura. Such power would grant him the ability to take the boy’s body completely, with no need to give it up to its original owner to rest. With that limitation removed, he would have been free to seek out the remaining Millennium items. No longer would he have to wait and depend upon luck. He could use Ryō Bakura’s body and hunt them all down, wherever they might be hidden.

So close to winning it all, and instead he’d lost all everything! The spirit of the Ring shrieked his frustration and impotent fury against the walls of his centuries’ long prison. He raked against the boundaries with talons that had no more effect than a breeze and swore his vengeance on all those who had denied him his victory. He cursed the Pharaoh and his vessel, Yugi Mutō, and all of his
friends - Honda, Jonouchi and Anzu.

The one receiving the most venomous of his curses was not the man responsible for his imprisonment of millennia, however. No, those were reserved for the architect of his most recent failure and to whom his vengeance would be denied even more assuredly than any of the others.

Ryou Bakura.

His gracious host, in whom he had found a mind and body he could inhabit. The one whose body he had occasionally been able to borrow, to live and breathe again. Through his host he had been able to feel the simple physical pleasure of having flesh, at being able to see with eyes, to smell scents carried on the wind, to feel with fingers all those textures the living took for granted. In Ryou Bakura’s body, he had discovered a world so changed after three thousand years as to be completely unrecognizable, amid a people so different from his own they may as well have come from another world entirely. It was through the mind of Ryou Bakura that he was able to comprehend any of it at all. It was his memories that opened this new world to him, that made it possible for him to function, to stretch out and seek what he had waited for for so long.

It was also Ryou Bakura who had snatched his victory from him.

The spirit snarled, talons bared against those remnants of other souls that drifted too close. They parted, weeping pathetically as they fell away from the heat of his ire.

Weak boy! Had the spirit not, years ago, wished to kill him so the Millennium Ring might free to seek out some other, more suitable host? He had, he remembered that moment of six years ago very well. He had reasoned that a weak host, while initially undesirable, had distinct advantages over one that was strong. A weak host would be easier to control, to deceive, to overpower once he had regained a little of his own strength. It was Ryou Bakura’s weakness which had saved him all those years ago.

Where had all of that weakness gone, then?!

Somehow the boy had found the strength not only to resist him, but to actually fight against him. Bit by bit during the game of Monster World he had regained control of his body, sabotaging the game and stealing the spirit’s victory.

Had he misjudged Ryou Bakura all those years ago? Had the boy some hidden reserve, a secret strength that had gone unnoticed all this time? Or had he grown stronger in the time between then and now? If he had grown in strength, then where had that come from? There had been nothing, no battles that Ryou Bakura had been forced to fight which would have toughened him, given him the power he needed in order to resist the spirit’s hold.

It must have been an effect of his own presence, the spirit decided. Just as he had gained the knowledge of this new time and country, Ryou Bakura must have gained something as well. It would explain how he had managed to do what he had during the game, how the boy had the fortitude to dig he way back to the surface from the deep place the spirit had stuck him, and how he knew how to defy him.

It made sense. That must have been what had happened. Ryou Bakura had used the strength of the Ring against him and freed himself and his new friends.

The knowledge that it was his own strength turned against him by his host did nothing to calm the spirit. In fact, it angered him even more. It would have been bad enough had Ryou only used the stolen strength to thwart him in his plan to take the Millennium Puzzle and imprison those souls
brought to him. But Ryou Bakura could not be satisfied with just that, no. The boy, in his efforts to save his friends, had sacrificed his own soul. He had cast himself into nothingness in order to protect some people he barely knew.

Ryou Bakura was dead. The spirit had watched as his host sacrificed himself, unable to stop him or save the soul he was throwing away. And now, with no host, he was once again trapped in the Millennium Ring until another host was found. All while another Millennium item lay tantalizingly within reach, he was stuck in a ring of metal.

Ryou Bakura was dead.

Some of the rage churning inside the spirit drained out of him as that realization settled into place. His host of six years, the only suitable host the Ring had found in three thousand years, was dead, killed himself rather than see his friends hurt.

The spirit had witnessed so much death when he had been alive, and had been the cause of so much death himself that he was desensitized to the general horror of its realities. He had died himself long ago and made a prisoner of the Ring. The concept of death was no more disturbing to him than eating or sleeping. It was simply a thing that happened.

The implications of Ryou Bakura’s death, however, did disturb him. Without his host, the spirit was once again trapped, nearly powerless without his means of reaching out into the world. The sort of semi-freedom he had enjoyed over the last few, brief years was once again gone, and all he could do was wait.

And all because Ryou Bakura was dead. Was there some way, something that he could have done that would have saved the boy? Had it been a failure on his own part which resulted in Ryou Bakura’s death, and if he had done anything different would he even now still be alive? The spirit thought carefully about his host, about the limited interactions they’d had over the years, searching for any fault, any clue that might point to how he’d been allowed to die.

For the most part, any ‘interaction’ between them had been very limited and indirect. The exchange of memories was necessary to strengthen the link between them, and for the boy that meant vivid dreams of the spirit’s past. On occasion when the bond and the spirit were both strong enough for the experience, he had taken Ryou Bakura’s body for himself and gone out to experience the new world first hand. And, of course, those times when he had reached out through his host to capture the souls of those he played his games with, though those incidents were never anything so energetic as what he had done when going up against Yugi Mutou and the others.

In all of these things, Ryou Bakura had remained ignorant. The spirit had made especially certain of that. All of the dreams, no matter how vivid, were forgotten within minutes of waking. The times the spirit went out with the boy’s body, his consciousness had been deeply buried. And all of those friends snatched during games… well, the boy had been awake and aware at those times, but completely unaware that the reason his friends were falling unconscious around him was coming from him.

That had been the spirit’s way of protecting his host. He might have argued that it was to protect himself, that if his host were aware of the presence of another soul he might find a way to reject him, but it was just as much for the boy’s protection, if not more so. He had done his best to protect Ryou Bakura from the madness within the Ring. By holding him apart from the many spirits within, he had spared Ryou Bakura. He had preserved the boy’s sanity.

Had that been a mistake, he wondered?
In sparing the boy madness, had he left him too much independence, too much autonomy? By leaving his will more or less his own, it was possible that the spirit had set in place all the pieces needed which had led to the awful conclusion seen not long ago.

He ought to have exerted more effort, more control over his host, he saw that now. It would have been a more difficult path than the one he had chosen, but not impossible. To allow Ryou to be aware of a second soul sharing his body, to retain the memories he relived at night, and to keep control over his body even with that knowledge would have offered up more of the challenge, there was no doubt. Like taming a horse to rein and saddle, it would have been dangerous, but in the end the rewards he would have reaped would have made it all worthwhile.

Instead, when the moment had come and the spirit could have used that control over his host, he had been left fumbling. And as a result, Ryou…

It was his fault. It was his fault that Ryou was dead now. If he had only tried harder, had gone to just a little more effort, then the boy would still be alive. It was all due to his negligence that his host had perished. If only he had done more to protect him--

The spirit stopped. He raised his head, looking about the nonphysical boundaries of the Ring.

Those were not his thoughts. Those were not his emotions. They were only barely his own memories. If they weren’t his own, then they must come from some outside source, and he could rule out any of the other spirits of the Millennium Ring. None of them were capable of anything so coherent, so continuous.

Tentatively, the spirit prodded about his own mind, his own soul. He knew what he was searching for, but couldn’t quite dare to believe he would actually find it.

There was one small thing he had done in order to exert some of his will over his host, a small toehold when it came to control. Years ago the spirit had performed his ‘parasite mind’ on his own host’s soul. It was a way of making the bond between them stronger, as well as making it easier when the spirit did decide he wanted to take over his body, or to reach through him to the outside. Unlike inanimate objects, though, the parasite mind required an exchange of soul when performed on a living being. To implant his own soul into Ryou Bakura, he had to keep a piece of Ryou Bakura with him.

Ryou was still a part of him.

If that small piece of Ryou Bakura were still able to think, to have memory and feeling, then it meant that the one to whom it once belonged was still in existence.

Ryou Bakura was alive?

When Ryou finally came home, he felt much more apprehensive than he thought he would have.

He had spent so much time at the hospital, prodded about, questioned, scanned, sewn back together and everything else that he had wanted nothing more than to get away, to come home and have some peace. Now he was here, he wondered just how much it would ever seem like a home to him.

It seemed strange that less than twenty-four hours had passed since everything had happened. His new friends had come to see him, worried he hadn’t come in to school on his second day, and offered to play Monster World with him. It was a sweet gesture, which Ryou, even at the best of times, wouldn’t have dared to expect. That they cared enough after knowing him less than a day to go so out of their way was simultaneously touching and extremely odd to him.
What the little group didn’t know was that it had taken nearly all of his will not to go into school that day, to just stay at home, away from anyone that might be hurt. The voice he heard inside his head, the voice that apparently came from the golden pendant his father had given him years ago, was a powerful one capable of possessing his body to go out and do terrible things. Ryou had dared not to go anywhere near the school, knowing that voice was lurking in the back of his mind, waiting for an opportunity.

He could remember what it had felt like, that voice in his brain pushing at his consciousness, pushing him towards blackness so it could take over. But Ryou had finally been aware and understood what was happening and pushed back. He’d resisted a second possession and remained in his apartment. It had felt like such a great victory, just keeping his mind his own.

And then Yugi and the others had come. Ryou’s gratitude and his terror had nearly overwhelmed him when he saw them. It was enough of a distraction that the voice had rushed in under Ryou’s defenses and taken over. In a moment, all his struggle had been rendered useless.

Back once again on the threshold of his front door, Ryou squeezed his eyes shut and did his best to not remember what it felt like to be invaded.

He took a shaky breath and looked around his apartment. It was empty, of course, but it showed all the signs of having hosted guests. After the game, and once it was certain that the voice was gone an ambulance had been called for Ryou. He had been rushed away to the hospital with Yugi and Anzū riding along with him, with Jonouchi and Honda returning to their own homes once they were out of sight. There had been no clean up of the Monster World board, all of the chairs were still out, still pushed to where they had been when everyone had stood up.

It was his apartment, as empty as it ever was, but it still looked as though there could be others there, just out of sight. Right now that was not the most comforting of thoughts.

Taking one more minute to prepare himself, Ryou stepped into his apartment.

Even in house slippers his footsteps echoed slightly. He walked from room to room, uncertain exactly what he was looking for, but unable to stop himself. He knew - was certain that besides the living room where the game had been that everything would be just the same as it had been two days ago. Nothing would be out of place, nothing would be changed… but he still had to check. Possibly he was just avoiding the scene awaiting him in the living room.

When he had no more rooms to delay him, he went in. It was like walking onto the scene of a crime long after all of those involved had left. In a way it was, but the victims had all escaped and the villain was far out of reach of any punishment.

Ryou stood and stared at it all a while before going near. All of the player character figurines were still clustered together on the board, the NPCs still tucked away in the village. Zorc’s figure was in pieces, scattered over the table, and Ryou’s box of figures lay open to one side.

There was more blood than Ryou remembered. He rubbed absentmindedly at the bandages around his left hand, looking at it all. Not just on the resin turret where the voice had slammed his left hand, spearing it completely through. His hand had bled freely and heavily, and it had spread everywhere. Looking at the mess, he doubted there would be much of this particular board he would be able to salvage.

All things considered, he didn’t think he would mind so much.

Sighing, Ryou went to gather some cleaning supplies.
Ryou had been to doctors and even hospitals before, but this was his first major injury. Considering how little time and effort had gone to creating it, it had taken a very long time to repair the damage.

The doctors had been very careful in making certain the wound was clean and nothing foreign had been left inside - apparently not believing his word that the spire that caused the puncture was unbroken. Then, once a temporary bandage had been put in place to stop the bleeding, x-rays had been taken to be sure none of the long bones in his hand had been broken. It was something that hadn’t even occurred to him until it had been brought up, but thankfully his bones were all whole. That done, the wound had been cleaned again and rewrapped properly, which included a brace to prevent him moving too much while he was healing. He may not have broken any bones, but they worried that he’d caused muscle damage. Limited mobility was meant to prevent any further strain or tearing. Then he’d been given a tetanus shot, a prescription for antibiotics and instructions to schedule a follow up with his regular doctor very soon. There had even been talk of physical therapy, but that would be up to his doctor to decide if he needed it.

And throughout all of this they kept asking him how he had been injured. At first Ryou had thought that the hospital staff just wasn’t communicating well with each other - not a comforting idea in itself - but when he noticed that the same nurse had asked him three different times he realized that they didn’t believe his story. It was false, but still as true as he could keep it while leaving out anything to do with evil spirits and possession.

He supposed he couldn’t blame them for being a bit suspicious. He was underage, his parents were nowhere to be seen, and he’d come in with two other underage kids. And quite frankly, Yugi’s personal style choices probably only made the situation look even more questionable. When Ryou had revealed five more punctures across his chest, the questioning only increased.

He’d been so glad to get away from the hospital, away from the people and the third degree questioning that he’d forgotten what would be waiting for him when he got home.

Emptiness. Silence. Blood. He almost wished he’d asked Yugi or Anzu to come back with him. He wasn’t sure he would be able to handle the silence so well as he had before. Not when he might hear voices that weren’t meant to be there.

Ryou cleaned as much of the blood as he could, carefully stored the figures, swept away the pieces of Zorc and the broken dice, then began pulling apart the board and deciding which parts were salvageable and which were not. Once the game was cleared away, he wiped down the table and put the chairs away.

It wasn’t until he was getting ready to fold up the table that his foot tapped against something hidden underneath. Something which gave a metallic *clink*.

He froze. How had he forgotten *that* would still be here? In the rush to get medical attention he hadn’t seen where the Ring had ended up, but it had to have stayed in the apartment. No one had left with it in their hands, and it was far too much to hope that it had been destroyed when the voice had been defeated.

Slowly, as though he were facing off against a viper instead of a lump of metal, Ryou took a step back and squatted down so he could see the thing that had taken over his mind.

The ring - the Millennium Ring - lay there, completely inert. Just as though it were completely harmless. The strap Ryou had used to hang it round his neck was snapped, the ends frayed. The Ring lay on the floor as though it had been tossed, with its five points splayed in every direction like broken limbs. Its eye stared up blindly at the underside of the gaming table.
The bandaged punctures in Ryou’s chest ached with renewed vigor. A trembling began to steal over his limbs, his breathing coming a little too harshly. The emptiness of the apartment abruptly felt too close, smothering him.

He should have asked one of the others to come back with him, help him get rid of the Ring. Even if all they could provide was company, a supportive presence, he would have gladly taken it.

Before they had parted at the hospital, Yugi had given him his phone number, told Ryou to call him if he ever needed anything, even if it was just to talk. Should he call Yugi now? He would have just gotten back home himself, and it was so late that soon it would be early… Was it fair to call Yugi back to his apartment so soon? It was something of an emergency, but…

But was it really an emergency? Ryou had owned the Ring a little over six years now, and knew what it was supposed to look like. He was familiar enough with the Ring to know when something about it was off. Something was off now. Even under the table, light was shining on it, but the Ring itself wasn’t shining. The Ring always seemed to shine before, even when it was in shadow, but now it only gave a very dull gleam, as though it were covered in a layer of dirt.

It was almost as though it were absorbing the light that fell across it, drinking it greedily rather than reflecting anything back.

Ryou watched it a while longer without moving, but nothing changed. He took a pen out of his pocket and carefully prodded the Ring, like he expected it to leap up at him.

Nothing happened, save it gave a sad clink. To Ryou’s ear even that sounded dull, not as musical as it had once been. The Ring gave no sign of life.

Ryou took a deep breath. It shook slightly, in time with the trembling stealing over his whole body.

He couldn’t remember what had happened after he had… died. But the others had filled in those few missing minutes, the key time when the spirit possessing his body had been defeated and expelled. They hadn’t said as much, but it sounded as though that other spirit had been destroyed. Was that the case, and now the Ring was an empty pendant, just as he had always thought it was? It had certainly lost something; a sort of otherworldliness he had taken for granted until it was no longer present.

Very slowly, Ryou reached out and touched the broken strap with his fingers.

Nothing happened.

Ryou exhaled. He felt lightheaded, dizzy, but he was fine. There was no one in his head but himself.

Winding the broken strap carefully around his fingers so as to avoid touching any of the actual metal, he lifted the Ring off the floor. It felt heavier than it ever had before, and even as the light slid across its surface, the metal seemed dull and lifeless. The five wicked points swung erratically as Ryou lifted it up, clattering together noisily.

It seemed so… ordinary now. It was a strange thought. Even if it hadn’t been harboring an evil ancient spirit, the Millennium Ring never would have been ‘ordinary.’ It had always been at the least a curiosity, this strange piece of jewelry from Egypt. It wasn’t like anything else he had ever seen, either ancient or modern, and given his father’s profession and habit of sending gifts home, Ryou had seen more than a few examples of what was the norm. Beyond the design was the fact that it seemed to be made completely of gold. That might not be so strange, save for its size and
how cheaply it had been sold to his father.

His Ring had always been strange, but he had grown used to it. To him the Ring had felt ordinary, normal. Now it felt as though some special strangeness had been sucked out of it.

In all of six years, had the Ring ever… ‘communicated’ with him? The spirit within, he had no doubt, was the one who had really been responsible for the comas all those years ago, the true source of the ‘Kagome Epidemic.’ But had it ever reached out to him, to make contact or possess him before a few days ago? It seemed impossible that it hadn’t at least tried.

His hand strayed to the front of his shirt, the tips of his fingers seeking out those places where he had been pierced. It was difficult, thinking back so far, seeking out memories of things which he hadn’t even been aware of happening, but…

The pain at his chest, it was familiar. The voice, when it had spoken to him, had sounded familiar to him as well. In fact it seemed like the longer he stared at the Ring, making his thoughts stay with it - in the past - the more familiar everything felt. He even thought he could feel other memories, much older than any of his own could be rising to the surface. They tiny impression he got for them were tangled and confusing, the snippets fitting in nowhere in his life.


Ryou shuddered. Just how much had he been affected by the Ring and the spirit over the years without ever knowing it? How much of his life had the spirit known about?

A sick feeling settled in Ryou’s stomach and he pushed those considerations away. The spirit was gone now, and all that was left was to figure out what he should do with the Ring. He wasn’t sure he could keep it close to him anymore, but he was having trouble imagining doing anything else with it. He could sell it, he supposed, but if he was uncertain of how safe it was to keep, then how could he give it to someone, anyone, who would be completely unaware of the danger? The same problem presented with the option of sending it to his father at the Domino Museum, with the added issue of having to find some way of explaining why he wanted to get rid of it to his father.

He lowered the Ring, still thinking, but unable to come up with anything viable. There was the option of just getting rid of it somehow - in the garbage, thrown into the sea or suchlike - but his mind rebelled at the idea for some reason. For it to be completely lost and forgotten, the idea of that made him feel sick all over again.

Once again he wondered if he ought to call Yugi. He had a Millennium item as well, perhaps he would have some insight on what could be done with the Ring? And if Yugi didn’t have any ideas, then maybe the spirit in his Puzzle would. It seemed reasonable to assume that a spirit that resided in a Millennium item would have some idea of what to do with another one, of how to keep the spirit inside under control. One of them would surely have some idea of what he should do.

For that matter, Yugi’s experience of owning a Millennium item which housed a spirit was exactly the same as Ryou’s, save that his spirit seemed considerably nicer. The urge to go to the phone and call him came back stronger than ever. Of all the people in the entire world, Yugi was probably the only one who had any real idea of his experience, of what it had felt like, of the fears and anxieties which were even still just beginning to tighten their grip on him. If he ever wanted to talk about what he had been through, then Yugi was the one to turn to.

On the other hand, his spirit seemed so much nobler. Yugi knew of the other residing inside his Puzzle, had made friends with him. They had worked together in order to defeat the spirit of the
Ring. Yugi might know what it was like to harbor a second spirit, but would he be able to really relate to Ryou’s experience?

He’d had a whole other person inside his head and now had four friends who had seen him at his worst and not run. Was he still alone even after all that?

The eye of the Ring stared up at him, waiting to see what he would do. The eye so much like the one on Yugi’s Puzzle.

Where had the Millennium items come from, anyway, and how old were they? Ryou had been left with a vague sort of impression that they were very, very old indeed. Why had they been made, how had spirits gotten trapped inside them, and who were they?

For a brief moment his father returned to his thoughts, but only briefly. It had been his father who found the Ring and sent it to him, but beyond which stall he had found and purchased it from, he wasn’t likely to know anything more. If he had thought it at all important, having any sort of historical significance, then he wouldn’t have sent it to his son as a birthday present. His father would be no help here. In fact, Ryou intended to never tell him about any of what had occurred with the Ring. Even if he believed Ryou were serious and that he hadn’t gone insane, what was there he could possibly do? In fact rather than showing any sort of caution, he would want to study the Ring to learn its secrets.

If anyone were in any sort of position to learn about the Ring, then it would be Ryou. He probably already knew the most out of anyone what there was to know about the Ring, plus he knew the risks of interacting with it too closely. He knew them firsthand, and wasn’t likely to forget any time soon.

He would keep the Ring, he decided. It was the only thing which made sense. He wanted - he needed to know more about the item which had nearly taken him over completely, the spirit which had been a part of his life, subtly affecting it for so long. As tempting as the thought was, even if he got rid of the Ring he wouldn’t be able to forget about it, would forever be trying to puzzle out its mysteries, and the only clues he had were the Ring itself and Yugi’s Puzzle. He had to keep the Ring and see if Yugi would let him study the Puzzle on occasion. He was understandably attached to it and the spirit within, but surely he would allow it? Surely Yugi was just as curious about his Millennium item as Ryou was.

He would keep the Ring, he would find more clues to what these items were, who the spirits within were, and how all of this had happened. The need to know ate away at him, overpowering even the fear and foreboding he held for the Ring. Who knew what they could learn from the Millennium items, what secrets they might hold, how the whole world might change in wake of that learning?

What if there were more items?

Ryou’s heart froze at the possibility even while his skin tingled all over with excitement. What if there were more items, more spirits? What would that mean?

He shook off the thought. He needed rest, sleep. It had been a long couple of days, and unpossessed or not, he wasn’t thinking very clearly anymore. Ryou rose to his feet and turned to his bedroom. The rest of the mess, everything in fact, could wait until morning. He was too tired to care anymore.

He was too tired even to notice he still held the broken strap wound in his fingers, the Ring accompanying him to sleep and dreams.
Ryou Bakura was alive.

Relief infused the spirit’s being, his anger melting in the wake of the realization. He had very carefully felt along the bond, searching for the shapes of his host’s thoughts, his emotions, those clues he had become so very familiar with over the years. The spirit turned his own thoughts around, molding them as closely as he was able to match those of his host, knowing that the closer they were in that way, the easier it would be to find those which were purely Ryou Bakura.

Wary hope and pessimistic expectations become disbelieving shock when he found, on the other end of that bond, something which flickered and moved. Signs of life, not just an afterimage, an echo of what had been there before. No, Ryou Bakura was still there, still alive, though distant. He wasn’t wearing the Ring, or even in contact with it, but he was there.

Ryou Bakura was still alive.

For a moment, relief overwhelmed the spirit. The dim future which had become all he could see with no host to call his own lightened once again. Not all was lost. There was still a chance.

His relief did not stop him wondering, however, how it was his host had survived. He had watched and felt as Ryou’s soul, possessing his doppelganger dice, had willingly destroyed himself along with the dice. Ryou’s soul had been shattered. Once the spirit had been expelled from his host’s body, it would be nothing more than an empty shell. Ryou Bakura had been dead, he knew he had. How had he defied death?

There had to have been some sort of interference from his gaggle of new friends, the one with the Millennium Puzzle in particular. The power of his item seemed enough to rival his own, it was perhaps enough to pull the shards of Ryou's soul back together and give him life again. But even with that kind of help, it was only help.

If Ryou was alive again, it would be most due to the strength of his host. Defying death was a thing which came down to the strength of the one who battled it.

The spirit had much to think on about his host - and of how he was meant to utilize him to his own ends, now. He had been taken by surprise by the defiance his host had shown during the game of Monster World, just how much control the boy had been able to wrest from him. It had been enough first to inconvenience him and then to completely derail his plans. Ryou Bakura was unexpectedly strong and clever, tenacious even. And then, somehow, he had even defied death.

The spirit smiled. The boy was more like him then he had previously thought.

Which presented a problem. Several, in fact.

In the past he had been able to affect change through his host, to occasionally possess him as he slept, and to even subtly affect his thoughts. With the added power that contact with the Puzzle had brought, he had been able to directly communicate with his host, to force sleep and possession, to bury the consciousness of his host deep down, cutting him off from his own body, and to utilize more of the magic inherent in the Ring than ever before. And yet despite all of that, Ryou had still found the strength of will to defy it all. He’d wriggled free, putting cracks in the spirit’s plans until it had all come apart. He was much stronger than the spirit had ever suspected, and that was a problem.

He was also now aware that his Millennium Ring housed an ancient spirit that desired little more than destruction. Ryou was a boy who harbored more anger and resentment in his heart than he ever allowed to show, but he was not naturally destructive or malicious. Even if that were the case,
the spirit had attempted to harm his friends, and that would make it so Ryou would be on guard against him. It would be significantly more difficult now to take control of his host, if he even allowed the Millennium Ring near him again.

The spirit considered his options - how he had handled his host in the past and how that would have to change in the future if he wanted to maintain any control at all.

In the past he had maintained as little direct contact with his host as possible, deliberately hiding his presence from the boy, suppressing memories of the dreams he had on a nightly basis which relived a life in Egypt. Doing so had somewhat weakened the bond, but kept his host ignorant and unwitting. With the advantage of ignorance lost, then there was no point in maintaining such a blind.

He would allow the dreams to be remembered, for everything to be remembered, from the very first day he had put on the Ring. Those memories were still there, merely repressed by the spirit’s influence. He would allow them to flow back where they belonged. A stronger bond was what was needed now. He would not attempt another direct attack on the boy’s consciousness, at least not yet. No, he would have to be subtler than that, slowly undermine the boy’s senses until he was no longer so resistant to him.

Yes, he would use the bond between himself and his host to his advantage. If he pulled Ryou Bakura closer to himself, poured more and more of himself into the boy and blurred the lines… there might lie his solution. Ryou would be bound closer and closer to him, and his very perceptions would become a mirror of his own. As time passed there would be less need for manipulation, for direct conflict with his host, as his way of seeing and interpreting would become like that of the spirit’s.

It would never be complete. Even at the closest the link of the Millennium Ring could bring them, Ryou would still be his own person, have his own core identity. But it would make things easier. It was a chance to continue on with his plans. He would take it.

The spirit waited, paying close attention to the link. He knew when his host approached, came close, but did not touch the Ring.

Slowly and gently, the spirit removed some of the barriers he had maintained between them for so long. He dared not release them all at once, or his host would be overwhelmed. Ryou was aware he existed, but the last thing he wanted now was for him to be aware of any influence, or even of any presence in the Ring.

When Ryou found the Ring, the spirit felt it. He drew himself, his presence in as far as he possibly could, making the Ring appear as ordinary and inert as possible. At the same time he continued the slow dribble of influence over the link - the memories, the self of the spirit to go into Ryou Bakura.

It was a nerve wracking time as he sensed the boy making a decision, contemplating the Ring and what he would do with it. The spirit did risk something a little more, then, something so small the boy wouldn’t suspect any sort of outside source. Without direct contact between him and the Ring and the link as shaky as it was now it had to be a small thing, but with luck it would be enough. He just had to encourage the idea that to keep the Ring was better than not.

Curiosity.

It was a simple drive, but one he knew his host already had an abundance of, and which would influence a decision rather than commanding one.
He waited as his fate was decided, literally held in the hands of a child. When he felt the decision be made over the link, the spirit weakened for the second time from pure relief. Ryou Bakura would keep the Ring, and spirit’s plans weren’t all in ruins.

As Ryou turned himself to bed, keeping the Ring close to him even now, the spirit exalted.

The influence seemed to be working already. Ryou Bakura was still his, and he was far from defeated.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve often wondered what the thought process was behind Ryou actually keeping the Ring after what happened with the tabletop game. It was fun to theorize about that here.

For those especially fond of the scenes set in the past with Bakhura, the next chapter is nothing but that. For those who liked seeing Ryou and Bakura finally interact, the chapter after that will have plenty of it, including dialogue that doesn’t come straight from the manga. ;)

Thanks for sticking with me, everyone!
This chapter is over 13K, all set in ancient Egypt and with multiple time jumps. It shouldn’t be too hard to follow, as the exact years between each jump isn’t really important.

As always, translations are at the end.

Many are the pleasures and securities that life has denied me, thinks the boy as he proceeds at a leisurely trot down the path that curved round the temple. But there are none, I think, who could have such fun as I on an errand.

The boy steps aside as a small procession of younger children led by a man with a sagging mouth troops past him. The boy waits until they are all out of sight, only the sounds of sandals on the earth reaching back to him, before he continues on his way.

Certainly more fun than that poor gaggle, he thinks with a smile.

Bakhura is pleased, and pleased with himself. He is an infiltrator in a world far removed from his own, the nearest he ever ought to have gotten was not even within a stone’s throw. And yet here he is, walking amongst strangers as though he belongs, weaving in and out of the buildings and people as though he were not a thief come to pillage.

Bakhura stalks through a cluster of three buildings, a temple to Amun, a workshop and a school, surrounded by small, outlying structures that. Of the three the temple dominates, of course. It’s only correct that the house of the gods, and particularly of Amun, should be impressive. The workshop and the school are relatively the same size to each other, though on opposite sides of the temple. Bakhura has disguised himself as a student of the school so he might walk about with virtual freedom. He has washed his body, scrubbing it free of any stain of dirt, cut his nails to smoothness, torn the tangles from his hair and bound it back so he might wear a simple head cover to hide its color. He’s donned a clean kilt and new sandals, and decorated his wrists and throat with beaten silver. To anyone observing him, he should appear as nothing more than one of the older students of the school, perhaps a low to middle ranked official’s son come to learn the fundamentals of his education before returning to apprentice under his father. The only part of his appearance which disturbs the illusion is vivid, unmistakable scar running over his right eye and down his cheek.

Two years have passed since that time, when it seemed the dead were rising all about him to claim him as one of their own and drag him down to the underworld. Two years since his face had been opened by the iwiw’s whip, and since he had then cut open the wound himself to drain the festering poison within. Two years, and still the scar was with him, distinctive and unshakable as his hair, and much harder to hide.
Though others might disagree, Bakhura is grateful the river is so full of dangers, as are the villages and cities that dot its length. It is easy to think of reasons why he should bear such a mark, plausible even for the son of an official. It is easy to conceal who and what he is, even when surrounded by enemies.

It is the best, most thrilling game he has yet played.

The boy rounds the side of the temple and is forced to squint as he faces into the sun. Ra is fierce this day, and he is glad not to be one of the many students who must sit in suffocating rooms, listening to old men lecture characters and mathematics. Not that path for him, whatever he may look like at the moment.

He continues in the direct path of Ra, away from the pillared building of the school, every outside surface covered with the hieroglyphic teachings of the priests, scholars and scribes of the past, and towards the plain, squat structure of the workshop. It is there, inside, where lies his prize.

Bakhura dares not perform this trick very often, but this is not his first time coming to this workshop. He knows which way to turn his sandals to get where he wants, knows what it is he will find within.

Like the school, the workshop is meant to service the temple. Within are dozens of laborers and craftsmen all working to create those things which allow temples, schools, and many other such places to function. Pottery, furniture, clothing… and papyrus.

It is the papyrus which draws Bakhura. There are many surfaces suitable for writing, the most common being stone or shards of broken pottery, which have the added advantage of being very easy to obtain. Hardly anyone cared should a damaged pot or plate go missing, and not even the gods tracked the movements of common stones. But these are low quality mediums for writing. Papyrus, made from reeds and rolled into tight scrolls, are much to be preferred, especially for important writings. It is the only thing upon which Iumeri trusts his words of history to be kept, the only thing to which he will put a brush to for his own words.

Unfortunately, even with the combined income of Iumeri’s commissioned writings and Bakhura’s more… eclectic skills, they cannot afford the precious scrolls.

Which is why Bakhura has come himself to where the papyri are made. Disguised as a student, none will question his presence so near a school and the little clay tablet he wears round his neck shows him to be a student of Thoth. A future scribe, far enough into his years to no longer wear the childish lock of hair beside his right ear, it would raise no suspicions that he would be trusted with various errands about the complex in addition to his regular duties.

Errands such as fetching rolls of papyri for his teacher or his class.

The boy continues on his way, his steps confident. The temple and school are sizable enough and the number of people going about their business great enough that one stray face is easy enough to lose. No single teacher or priest can know every child and adolescent around them, and so it causes no alarm to find one which is not so well remembered. As he has grown in age and somewhat in wisdom, Bakhura has learned that at times the best way to hide is to be seen. Just so long as one is seen as belonging, it’s as good as not being seen at all.

Deception is as good or even better than invisibility.

The inside of the workshop is cool after walking beneath Ra’s glare, but stuffy. The high windows allow for light and breezes, but with so many working bodies confined within, it’s more than can
be compensated for. Bakhura does not hesitate, but makes his way to those chambers where the papyrus reeds are cut, lain, beaten and dried to the sheets scribes so valued. The true key to his disguise, even more than his clothes, hiding his hair, or even the little clay tablet at his throat, is to look and act as though he belongs. A boy who walked with purpose and just the touch of urgency of one on a mission was a boy who was ignored, left to go about his task. A boy whose steps faltered or whose eye wandered too much was clearly one who was some place he did not belong.

Bakhura walks with purpose and direction, his sandals striking the ground with loud reports, his eyes never straying from his path.

He is ignored by every worker and every overseer he passes. Though he’s done this before, his heart still leaps and pounds in his narrow chest at another successful deception. If they but knew who he was, and what he intends. The desire to laugh and to cry it all out, to shout to the ceiling and all who could hear that he has tricked them all courses through his whole body, and he must clamp down hard on the impulse lest he lose control of his tongue.

In the chamber where is made the papyri, he is at last recognized.

Mereruka, the overseer for the making of papyri, spots him as soon as he enters through the door. Bakhura has come to know him through his handful of visits as surprisingly jovial, pleased with his position in the world. He seemed to find the work of making papyrus and of the ordering of such work fulfilling. Bakhura can’t understand the appeal himself, but appreciates the attitude in Mereruka. It makes speaking to him and stealing the fruits of his hard work right out of his hands all the easier.

“Rudjek!” The overseer approaches him, hands spread out in greeting. He is a relatively young man for his position, but already the fewer demands of his job are softening his body. He wears a finely woven belt with his kilt, a more elaborate headdress than those of his workers, and wide bands of worked metal at his wrists. The little tablet he wears about his neck, Bakhura can just make out, proclaims him an honored overseer, ending any doubt one might have on that point upon meeting him.

Bakhura returns the smile given to him. “Good morning, Mereruka. How do the gods find you today?”

“The same as anyone else, young scribe. By shouting.”

The man laughs heartily at his own joke, and Bakhura laughs along with him. He likes the overseer, possibly only because he has seen him so seldom and he always seems more than willing to give him what he asks for. An apparently ignorant or willing victim of theft is always more agreeable than one who struggles.

“So. Has your master sent you to fetch more papyri, or have you decided you would rather pound reeds than paint them?”

“I am a well learned hound, sent to do the bidding of my leash holder,” Bakhura replies, hardly needing to strain to put in an appropriate level of weariness in his tone. “I pray you have baskets, overseer. This time I am sent for two dozen finished papyri.”

The brows of the overseer rise up to meet the band of his headdress in surprise. He whistles lowly, hands coming to rest at his hips. “So many all at once? Does Ibebi intend to copy out every text in the House of Life?”

Bakhura shrugs and does his best to only look put out at the size of his task and disinterested in its
meaning, and not anxious that Mereruka might decide to check with ‘Rudjek’s master Ibebi’ to be sure the order was right.

“It must be a project of some size,” the overseer muses on. “For I recall now that not two days ago another boy came from Ibebi requesting a large order of papyri. Not so large as yours, but it makes one wonder what it is he is writing.”

This time Bakhura must hide a wince. He knew that asking for so many papyri at one time would present a greater risk than before, but it seemed a risk worth taking. He has been to this workshop half a dozen times, they recognize his face and know his (false) name and which of the masters is supposedly his. He has yet to be questioned or even looked at askance, but the boy feels it is only a matter of time and of luck. This is meant to be his last time coming to this workshop, this temple and school. It will mean finding some other source to keep Lumeri happy and writing, but that should not prove too difficult. To tide the old man over until then, he intended to make off with as many papyri as he could carry. Doubtless this amount will cause comment - even now Bakhura can see the overseer planning to go to Ibebi to ask him why he needs so much material. Return will be impossible after today, but Bakhura is accustomed to that idea. He just hopes now his deception lasts long enough for him to leave the complex. He does not wish to fight his way out, not even through scribes and priests.

“What can say?” Bakhura keeps his voice steady. “It is not my place to question the actions of my master, only to fulfill his instructions.” He tries another smile. “Perhaps he does intend to copy the library, but to have his students do it!”

He is rewarded with a smile from the overseer. “If that is so, then you have my sympathy, and my pity! Two dozen, you said?”

Bakhura nods, the sweat at his brow and in his hair beginning to prickle. “Yes. And a basket if you have one, Mereruka.”

The overseer nods as he turns away to gather up his request. It’s not long before a large basket stuffed full of scrolls is slung over one of the boy’s shoulders and he is giving his farewells to Mereruka for the final time. There is no sadness in the thief’s heart as he leaves the workroom, only relief as he walks away with his largest prize yet, and all without raising suspicion. His steps are light under the weight of the basket, his mind spinning a little in the euphoria of his success.

It is perhaps this euphoria which, when his eye wanders to the temple, turns his feet to follow the direction. He has been into the temple before, and in the guise of a student he is able to go those places a common visitor cannot. There is one thing within the temple he had thought of taking again and again but never had the daring to attempt before.

Today, his last day of coming to these buildings, he has the daring.

The temple is not so familiar to him as other places, but it doesn’t take him long to find his way to the room he wants. The library. The House of Life.

Within are rows, stacks and jars all stuffed full of rolled and carefully preserved papyri, all of them full of writing, all of them meticulously organized. There are also many students, ranging in age from perhaps a year younger than him to a mere two years older. All of them were seated at low tables, their palette boxes open, brushes out and working diligently. All of them work at individual scrolls, while referring back to other, complete papyri.

All of them scribes in training, just as he is meant to be, and all of them set to copying to improve their skills.
After a moment in the door to orient himself, Bakhura strides in and begins searching the shelves. Iumeri has told him much of what goes into the formal education of young men, and of scribes in particular. Bakhura suspects that he enjoys using the tales as an example of why he should be grateful his own education is so comparatively lenient; or he might simply enjoy reliving his glory days and uses those tales as his excuse to speak aloud of them. Amid all of his rambling he also told Bakhura a great deal on the keeping and organization of libraries. Along with his beloved Thoth, Iumeri is a devotee to Seshat, the archivist to the gods and mistress of organization.

Not every library is exactly the same, but the rules of organization all follow a similar path, or so it is according to Iumeri. As Bakhura walks along the rows, squinting hard at the scrolls, reading what he can of their attached tablets that give their contents, the old man appears to have been right.

Save for the incidental noise of a dozen or so students at their work, the library is silent. Everyone is too concentrated on their tasks to note one more seeking out a scroll, yet Bakhura feels the pressure to hurry building. He could have been well away by now, and yet here he still is, surrounded by enemies, risking all for what might not even exist.

He does not give in to the mounting paranoia that his deception has already been discovered, that in moments a search will reach him, discover him, and he will be taken. He puts down his heavy basket and, working as quickly as he can dare, searches the scrolls.

At the end of half a sun length the boy is gathering up his basket once again. He did not find what he most wished to, but he found other prizes. Those he stuffed deep into the basket; hidden among twenty-four blank papyri are four filled with writing. Filled with knowledge that will soon be his, as soon as his skills improve.

Settling the weight of the basket across his shoulders, Bakhura leaves the library, the temple, and finally the compound, and heads back to the temporary home where he and Iumeri stay.

For them, all homes are temporary.

Bakhura isn’t sure he will ever be comfortable in the desert. The gaze of Ra is harsh and unblinking and the breezes few. When they do come, sand is blown into faces, eyes, clogging noses. It is easy to see why the people of the desert adopted their face wraps, and while he and Iumeri travel with them he wears the same cover.

They have stopped for the day, the tents have been put up, offering shelter and shade, and the camels lain down. A few goats, really a small herd, is being fed and watered, the children of the desert people running in play or assisting the adults to settle for the night by turns. Small fires are being set and dishes brought out to prepare the evening meal. The pot of water is already out and awaiting the heat that would brew the hot, bitter drinks the travelers seemed to favor so much.

Bakhura helped as he could, as he was asked, but he is for the most part superfluous and knows it. The little tribe is well organized and each member knows what they are meant to do. An extra pair of hands is more of a hindrance than a help, and he knows to step away. Instead of assisting the tribe, Bakhura assists Iumeri, who shares his distaste of the open desert, but whose body is much less capable of weathering its punishments.

The old man had endured well enough on the first day, but by the end of the second he had slid off the back of his borrowed camel like a limp rag. Bakhura had been riding in front of him on the same mount and had to get down quickly in order to help him, preventing him from collapsing completely into the sand.
Now the disgraced scribe is sitting deep in the shadows at the back of a tent, a cup of water held limply in one gnarled hand. Bakhura examines him for a moment, judging his condition. He does not like what he sees. Iumeri’s skin is pale and hangs too loose on his frame, the khol around his eyes smeared with sweat, and his jaw is slack. He sits loosely on the tent floor, the cup in his hand wavers through the air, the desire to drink at odds with his weakened body.

This may be the last time they can travel among the desert people. The old man is too weak to handle the heat and the physical deprivations. When next came the time for them to find a new home they would have to remain close to the river, where even in summer it was more forgiving than the desert sand.

He ducks into the tent and snatches the cup from Iumeri, who startles as though he were dozing.

“Water is precious out here, iawri rehew,” he says, with less violence than he normally would. “It would be a shame, not to mention an insult to our hosts to waste it on their floors.”

Iumeri’s eyes are bright and seem to have trouble focusing on him, his head weaving on the end of his neck like an overripe seed pod on a reed. “Think you to teach me the ways of the Bedu, Sebau,” he replies, his voice weak but still managing to snarl. “Twas I taught you their ways, how to gain their trust and hospitality without earning the edge of their knives, oh yes. Forget not who it is that is older and wiser.”

The boy sits down beside the old man, not minding his lecturing tone. He is used to it by now, and if he still possesses the strength to gripe he cannot be so very ill. It is a small comfort he takes gladly. “I am not like to forget, Iumeri. One fact is impossible to escape, and you are fond of reminding me of the other.”

The old man only grunts. He may be capable to speech, but he is exhausted, and conserves his strength. Without speaking another word, the boy holds up the cup to Iumeri’s lips, encouraging him to drink. The old man accepts the water, sucking at the moisture greedily.

Bakhura grimaces at the spectacle but continues to assist his elderly companion. He has no particular love for the man, but he does not hate him and is grateful for what he had done for him over the last three years. He has no desire to see Iumeri suffer, and watching as his body flags bothers him more than he cares to admit. The desert is too harsh for him anymore. They will have to remain close to the river from now on, even if it did present a different kind of risk.

A trickle of water escapes Iumeri’s lips, and the boy catches it on his fingers, rubs the moisture across his wrinkled brow. He hums a little when the boy fans at his face with his hand, cooling him for a moment. A small skin of water sits near at hand, and Bakhura carefully refills the cup once it is drained.

“Can you eat? They’re preparing the evening meal, and I believe there will be a little meat.”

Iumeri stirs, opens eyes he had allowed to drift closed. Bakhura is relieved to see that they already appear less fevered than before. “Goat meat?” He asks, referring to the small herd the Bedu keep with them. Bakhura shakes his head.

“A couple of the boys felled a hare this afternoon. Do you not remember?”

Iumeri’s face clouds for a moment, and then clears. “Ah. That commotion this afternoon, yes? Well, good. I think we could all use the strength meat could provide, oh yes.”

“Have you the strength to eat? I can assist you if you require.”
The words stir the old man back into wakefulness, and he looks sharply at the boy. Moving with more speed and coordination than the boy would have credited him, he takes the cup back from his hand, spilling a drop or two in the motion. “I am not some invalid to be cared for or spoon fed, boy. ‘The only thing that is humiliating is helplessness,’ and I am not helpless. Understood?”

The boy holds up his hands in a placating gesture. “Nor ever did I think you so--“

“Find your palette box, Sebau. As you have no use about the camp and no need to nurse me, you may as well practice what little I have managed to beat past that thick skull of yours.”

Bakhura sighs, but moves to obey. Iumeri is right, though he is also irritable. With nothing else for him to do he might as well practice his writing. Out of their few possessions, most of which were rolled papyri, he finds his little palette box which contains his brushes made of reeds, a hard compact of pigment and a hollowed out tortoise shell. In addition to this he finds the shards of broken pottery wrapped in a cloth and a rolled papyrus.

He settles himself as well as he can on the floor of the tent, setting his supplies out in a familiar pattern. There is still enough light to work without lamps, and the boy is soon ready, reed in one hand, pottery shard in the other, tortoise shell with a few drops of water in its bowl to wet his brush and then the pigment, and the papyrus open where he can see it.

This papyrus is one of the four he stole from the House of Life nearly a year ago, and while the simplest in contents, has proved the most useful to Bakhura’s education. It is a scroll full of symbols and signs arranged in rows - all of those needed in order to write and to understand what was written. There are many Bakhura still does not know, but those grow fewer every day, and in the space of less than a year he has learned more than half of what was previously unknown to him. Soon he will be able to read those other scrolls he took from the House of Life.

He works for a time in silence, copying out characters and reciting their sounds in his mind, all the while watching Iumeri with half an eye. The old man, while still obviously deeply fatigued by their journey, is holding himself more comfortably than before, and he looks less as though he might collapse at any moment.

After a little time, as the shadows begin to lengthen in earnest and the sounds outside the tent to quieten, the boy speaks without raising his eyes from his work.

“Tell me again about the Millennium items, iawi rehew.”

The scribe grunts. “Have I not told you all there is to know, all that I know, khered? Concentrate on your brush, lest you shame Thoth with your inattention.”

“I can practice my letters without the use of my ears,” the boy retorts gently. “Fill the silence, Iumeri. Tell me of them, what it is they do.”

The old man sighs and shifts in his place. A moment passes as he drinks from his cup, and then begins to spin a tale Bakhura has heard many times, and yet never tires of. Iumeri tells him of the seven magical items created by the Pharaoh’s brother, created in a time of great need for the whole land. Seven golden items which possess the power to turn back armies, as well as smaller but no less impressive feats. A pendant, an eye, a ring, a scepter, a taulk, a key and a set of scales made up the Millennium items, and they had been bestowed upon six high priests, save the pendant, which belonged to the Great Pharaoh himself. These are the items for which the village of Kul Elna was sacrificed; these seven trinkets are all that remain of the ninety-nine souls that once resided there.

Listening as Iumeri’s words filled up the tent with a comfortable roll, his reed brush moving across
the surface of broken vessels, Bakhura feels the dull, constant rage set in his bones begin to flow with new life. It is good to remember, to recall what and why was done to his people and to feel the fire flow afresh within him. It reminds him that he, of all his people, is the last. That he is alive, and by that gift of life he was given an obligation. An obligation to see that those deaths did not go unheeded, unheard, unanswered. Unavenged.

He listens, the rage trickling through his veins and his hand steady in its work. In his mind he constructs scenarios on how the spirits of Kul Elna might be avenged, how those who took their lives might be made to suffer. None ever quite fit, none seem plausible enough to be achieved, but still he dreams. One day he will be strong enough, smart enough to bring home justice to the murderers of Kul Elna, and on that day his dreams will be the plans to a new reality.

Deep in his belly, he feels the little god stir, feeding on the hate and rage that quietly fills him.

On the day when justice is at last brought to those who deserve it, Bakhura knows he will not be alone.

When the shadows become too deep to make out his own brush, the boy cleans his tools and packs them all away. He might use one of the lamps even now being placed in a few key places around the camp to work by, but he can smell the food, hear the clink of plate and ladle.

Before the old man can protest, he helps Iumeri to his feet and leads him to the fire, where their hosts are already gathering. Bakhura does not think he will ever understand the way the Bedu dress, the amount of cloth they drape over their bodies even in the desert. He and Iumeri have both donned head wraps and long, loose robes as a way to protect their flesh from Ra's unforgiving eye, but beneath those additions, they each wear as little as possible. The Bedu, on the other hand, prefer to layer themselves in cloth from head to toe, with hardly an inch of skin to show beyond their faces and their hands. Bakhura cannot comprehend it, and shudders to think how uncomfortable it must be.

They take the same relative positions around the fire as they did the night before, close to the leader of the tribe that he might speak with his guests easily. He nods to Iumeri, and soon the food is being passed around. Again before Iumeri can think to protest, Bakhura settles him down to the ground and goes to retrieve their plates. On his walk back he carefully eyes the plates and hands the one in which he sees more meat to the scribe. The old man needs the strength more than he, and if he collapses Bakhura will not be able to carry him.

Chatter fills the dark, quiet and easy as bodies cross the fire, fetching food, finding places to sit. Out in the night Bakhura can hear the sounds of the goats settling, the camels complaining to each other. Occasionally a silhouette in the fire will flash with a metallic reflection - the jewelry worn by the women of the tribe, and any sense the boy might have had that he might, given time, come to enjoy the lifestyle of the desert dwellers evaporates.

As soon as the last of the Bedu is given a plate, the leader calls on Iumeri in a voice meant to be heard by all, requesting he share tales of the cities, of the people he has known, the events he has seen. This is a portion of their payment to travel with the tribe. To share their food and their water, they must trade with news and stories. Fortunately it falls well within Iumeri’s inclinations and his skills, and he readily obliges.

Bakhura tunes out his voice now. These tales do not interest him, and he would rather continue his daydreams of the future, gazing up to the heavens as Nut’s body became bejeweled with stars.
man is seized in one of his odd fits.

Sighing, he puts down his burden of food and wine. They are supplies he has bought rather than stolen, but bought with stolen coin. It is a matter of opinion if it still counts as theft to Bakhura’s way of thinking. He listens for a few moments to the sounds coming from deeper within the hut. He pours a little wine into a cup and tops it up with water and grabs a loaf of bread. Bracing himself for what he knows he will see, Bakhura walks into the main room, where the two of them worked and slept.

Seated on the floor at his low table, his palette box burst open and contents strewn haphazardly around him, the old man writes in the center of own storm of chaos. Jars stuffed full of papyri surround him, some opened so he might refer back to them, some still rolled but close at hand. The scroll beneath his brush is already half full of the old man’s neat, detailed characters. Looking close he can see that Iumeri has chosen to write in hieroglyphics rather than hieratic - the easier, flowing script. Whatever it is he has decided to write is obviously of great import. Bakhura is a little surprised. When such fevers take hold of the old scribe he is often in such a hurry to pour words onto the scrolls that his reed brush flies. For all their beauty, hieroglyphics are slow to write legibly.

He comes in quietly, settles into a crouch within Iumeri’s sight and waits. He has seen the old man in the grip of such fits many times, and knows better than to interrupt a flow of thought before he is ready. He also knows that, even though he might see him, Iumeri may not notice him for several minutes. So he waits, listening to the sound of brush across papyrus and the near constant, distracted muttering.

It is not too long, not as long as it has been in the past, before the old man’s eyes, dull with the cloud of what he is writing, turn to Bakhura. His mouth convulses. It might have been a smile. “Khered,” he rasps, and Bakhura knows that he is deep into the fit. It has been years since he has called Bakhura a child - not since he surpassed him in height.

The old man coughs, and Bakhura hands him the watered wine silently. It would not surprise him if Iumeri had not drunk all day. He often forgot to when in the grip of his fevers. The man takes the cup and drinks. Given that he does not pause for breath until the cup is drained, Bakhura knows he is right that Iumeri has not drunk since he rose just after sunrise.

When he is finished he takes a deep, shaking breath, coughs, and hands back the cup. When he looks at Bakhura his eyes have cleared, showing almost too bright beneath his heavy brows.

“What is it that occupies your brush today, iawi sesh?” He hands the man the loaf and turns away to refill the cup, this time with a touch less water. Wine is expensive, but its muddling effects will be good for Iumeri, to calm his mind.

Iumeri looks over his scrolls, as though taking his eyes away for even a moment caused him to forget. “I am recording the histories, the private histories of Aknamkanon and of Aknadin, oh yes. As much as I know and can recall, yes, all of their lives to be put down and remain forever.”

Bakhura scowls as he turns back, casting his own eye over the papyrus where the ink still shines wetly. Hieroglyphics still offer him challenge, even after five years of study, but he is able to read well enough to see that what Iumeri writes has to do with the named brothers and how they interacted with each other as young men. He passes Iumeri the cup, scowl still in place. “Why bother?” he asks, his own voice gruff. “Why put down what those assholes were like in private? All that matters is what they have done to others, the things they have done.”
The scribe shakes his head. “Not so, Sebau. All futures have their pasts, all presents their reasons for being what they are. Oh, yes. To know which way the path bends, one must also know the shape it has taken before.”

Bakhura snorts. Iumeri has tried to tell him tales of the brothers before, tales of them as youths, before Aknamkanon took the double crown. He seems to find that time of their life fascinating, and the time just after Aknamkanon became Pharaoh, and Aknadin his advisor. He seems to think that period important, having some bearing on what came later, on what came so many years later in a small village in the hills, on the edge of the desert.

He does not agree. To Bakhura’s mind all that matters is the moment in which they decided that the murder of innocents and the enslaving of their souls was justifiable. Whatever came before that moment is so much sand on the wind, useless and lost. What does it matter that once they were men, when now they are monsters, their hands reeking of blood?

The old man drinks again, more slowly now, and chews into the loaf of bread. Bakhura takes the moment to pour himself water and wine as well, his own cup having far more water than wine, at least for now. They eat and drink in silence, and Bakhura is pleased as Iumeri’s movements become slower, heavier than they were when he returned. Wine alone will not be enough to completely disrupt the fever of writing, but it will be enough to slow it down, to prevent it from injuring the old man.

“The path matters little,” Bakhura says when his cup is dry. “And the origin not at all when the destination is filled with the ghosts the villages one has burned along the way.”

“Mmm…” The wine seems to have taken its effect already on the old scribe. Bakhura’s words take some time to reach him, and then some time more before he is able to respond. “One cannot… know a man by his actions alone. One must not judge the body of a man by the shape his sandal leaves in the sand. No man is the sum of a single act, but greater than the sum of all.” Iumeri squints at him, wine and tiredness making him nearsighted. “What would your sum be, khered, if one took only what they could see and none of what is hidden?”

The question catches him off guard, and he blinks. Memories of the last few years come alive on the inside of his mind, and he cannot help but note a theme to what he sees. Theft, vandalism, deception… a few dead bodies…

He knows the reasons for all he has done; the consequences that would have come had he not acted as he had, as well as what would happen were he ever caught. To anyone other than himself and to Iumeri, though, he is little more than a disturber of Ma’at, a spark of chaos threatening the fabric of order that they all clung to. Nothing but a villain.

“Tcha!” Bakhura stands, his previous desire to simply sit washed away. “It doesn’t matter! It doesn’t matter what others see, what they think, when I know the truth!”

“Yes, yes! Truth!” Iumeri’s previous energy, muffled by wine, returns all at once. “Truth, Bakhura! That is what matters! To know, to understand and acknowledge the truth! It is what I write, boy. The truth. Oh yes, the truth. Written down, formed in words, given shape, and by its shape given more truth.” The old man’s hand comes down on his arm, hot and dry and heavy, fingers gripping him hard. “Words, Sebau! Words give shape to our world, our reality! It is by words that others will remember, and cast you into a shape as well.”

He holds the old man’s look for some time before shaking off his hand. “What does it matter what shape I am given when I know what shape I have always been?”
“So says youth,” Iumeri mutters to himself, loud enough to be heard. Bakhura freezes as he remembers Iumeri’s position; his disgrace, and how that disgrace has followed him, ruined him, and all because of how he is perceived by others. By the shape he has been given.

An uncomfortable feeling settles in the pit of Bakhura’s stomach. Suddenly angry with himself and with Iumeri for making him feel so, he snatches up the vessel of wine and strides to the door, intending to spend the rest of the evening on the roof of the hut, in the breeze, away from old men and their words that make him question everything he knows is true.

Before he can quite make it out the door, Iumeri calls out to him, his voice cracked with tiredness and slurred with wine.

“You are no longer a child, Bakhura. You are a young man, and every day the path you set yourself, it firms beneath you, becomes harder to turn away. …I worry for you, boy. I have seen some of the ends to your path, and I don’t believe any serve you as you believe they will.”

Bakhura grips the frame of the door, halfway between the inside and outside, between shadow and light. He stares at the lintel, at his dirty and cracked nails rather than at the old man.

“What would you have me do,” he whispers.

“Know yourself, and know your path.” He pauses, and Bakhura begins to wonder if the wine he has taken a firmer grip on him. When he speaks, it is to recite one of the many proverbs he loves. “If you would know yourself, take yourself as starting point and go back to its source. Your beginning will disclose your end.”

After a moment, the sound of a brush on papyrus, moving slower than before, begins again.

Bakhura listens for a time, and then steps out into the dying light and lengthening shadows to be alone with his thoughts.

It’s emptier than Bakhura remembers it, and much smaller.

A wind sweeps through the hills, through the abandoned village, moaning as it explores the empty and crumbling houses. In the eleven years since the death of everyone who had once lived here, the land has worked hard to reclaim it. There is no sign left at all of the tiny gardens and irrigation systems that he dimly remembers. There are no cloth hangings left after so much time, and while there had never been proper doors or shutters before, it seems as though there are more cracks in the crumbling walls than he remembers.

He breathes deep, closing his eyes as he casts his mind back in time, further back than he has dared in years.

It has taken him much time to find this place, the empty shell of Kul Elna, his once home.

He had never really planned to return. There seemed little point when he knew there would be nothing but vague memories from his youngest childhood and one very vivid night. Why return when there is nothing to return to, when nothing awaited him but empty sand, emptier buildings, and the bleakness of an empty future? It is only due to Iumeri’s occasional urging that he is returned now. Left to his own… no, he does not think he would have come.

Simply finding the dead village had proven a greater obstacle than he had thought it would. The path backwards into his past was thickly shadowed by long years and terror. He can barely remember those days and nights of flight, when he had run blindly into the darkness, away from
the light bearing torches that brought death. What he does remember is the muddled confusion of a child, hardly a reliable map. Bakhura had not even dared to ask anyone along the way which way to a village called ‘Kul Elna.’ He doubts that anyone will remember a village so long gone, and which had been so insignificant before it had been destroyed; but anyone who would remember would know it as a den of thieves rightly destroyed by Pharaoh. They would remember also any tattered youth asking for its direction, possibly mention it to others, so news of him travelled to the wrong ears. No, he dared not ask the way to his doomed village.

Bakhura relied on his memories, confused and dark as they are to find his way back, and now, at last, he is here.

Home.

As he forces his feet to make the journey from the edge of the village to walk between its buildings, along narrow gaps which had once been roads, his heart thumps hard in his chest. The sun is high in the sky, leaving only slivers of shadows, save inside the buildings. There the shadows nest together, forbidding his eye to see anything within. Small signs that, though humans have long been gone and never returned, animals have used the empty village over the years can be seen. Small bones, the leavings of predators, tracks of paws coming and going. Bakhura does not doubt that the empty village has acted as a kind of haven for the various wildlife over the years. With no men to drive them away, the empty homes would provide them the same they once had their original inhabitants - shade, coolness, some protection against other hunters.

_Some protection._ Bakhura thinks, stepping over a skull sporting fangs. _But not always enough._

He wanders through the village slowly, cautiously. Now he is here, he has small idea what it is he wishes to do. Iumeri’s instruction, such as it is, is only to return to his beginning so he might better know himself, and somehow better know the path to his future. How he is meant to determine so much from a collection of crumbling jackal burrows, he does not know. He had been so focused on how he was to find his way back, he had given no thought to what he would find in Kul Elna itself. Perhaps he had hoped that on returning a memory might be triggered, or he might have some sudden insight to his people and that of the Pharaoh and his dogs? He does not know what he had hoped to find before, but all that awaits him in Kul Elna is ghosts.

There’s a clatter behind him. Bakhura leaps, turning in midair, his hand at the knife tucked into the waistband of his kilt. His eyes darting, heart pounding in his ears, he looks round for the danger, the threat come to claim him, claim him at last in this place he escaped once already--

There is nothing to meet his eye. No threat, no jackals or lions, no omen with flashing blades, no looming shadows come to swallow him whole… Nothing at all.

All that might have been the culprit is a chunk of wall of a small house, fallen away from the rest to the rocky ground.

Bakhura trembles in place, his breath coming too quick and harsh, pulled in and out through clenched and bared teeth. It takes some time before his muscles unlock, allowing his body to move again. When he can move, he continues slowly, even more cautiously than before, his eyes flicking to every shadow, scrutinizing every stone.

Bakhura is afraid. He had tried to deny it before, but the village of his birth terrifies him. It is not the threat of stumbling across a den of lions or jackals, nor the entirely ludicrous imagining of there being, after all these years, one last dog of Pharaoh waiting for him to return so he might finish his task at last.
He does not fear hungry ghosts, those spirits of the dead who had not been properly lain to rest and whose souls wandered, searching for the warmth of life to consume. If there is anywhere in the land where they might be present, than this is the place, but it is not for fear of them that Bakhura’s blood runs cold and his limbs all tremble.

With no other goal in mind, he tries to locate the empty shell of a home which had once been that of himself and his family. He has at best only dim memories of the place, but perhaps if he sees it again, stands inside its walls, something will happen. Perhaps he will gain whatever it is he has come for and he can leave again, this time never to return. His memories, though, while just enough to lead him back to the village, are not enough to recall the house in which he once lived and slept. He passes by every one, and none call to him with even vague familiarity.

Bakhura tries to remember, or even to just imagine the village as it must have been. Never very bustling, it is - was - too small for that, but there would be people. Faces he would have recognized, names he would have known, perhaps even friends he would have played with. He casts his mind back over the years. Had there even been children other than himself? There must have been. However hard he tries, though, he cannot picture it. He cannot see anything but an old, empty ruin, and cannot feel anything more than what he already does for the people who had once called this place home. The anger remains, the memory of their screams, of their bones and flesh being rendered with terrible magic, those do not allow his rage to die. But he feels no pity, no anguish, no pain for their loss, and the loss of whatever love he might have held for any of them. He still feels only hate and rage, and the abrasive wind offers no balm.

Ra has passed His zenith by the time Bakhura has explored all and seen all. Kul Elna is dead, as he knew it was, its corpse picked clean and lived in only by scavengers. Coming back after so many years has done nothing to reveal his own nature to himself, save perhaps to convince him of just how much of a fool he is, to follow the mutterings of old, sick men. There is nothing, Kul Elna is nothing. The one human soul that might have given it some life has gone for eleven years, and no longer considers this place home.

Kul Elna is dead, a tomb for memories.

Looking around the old husk, Bakhura is disappointed. He cannot shake the feeling that in coming here something ought to have happened, that he ought to have gained something. That he would be returning to Iumeri exactly the same, unchanged in every way, frustrates him. What was the point in returning? He feels no real connection to this place, only a nagging fear telling him that he should be gone.

Even the fear is becoming easier to ignore, and Bakhura makes what he decides will be his final circuit of the village. The entire trip, all the effort in rediscovering his lost village, is all a waste. It’s frustrating, and yet Bakhura does not feel angry. He has been led astray by memory and proverb, hoping to find more meaning in his own life, in himself, and found nothing but emptiness. What he is, is all that he is. There is an odd kind of comfort in the thought.

As Bakhura makes his final walk around the perimeter of Kul Elna, something catches his eye. It is not much, not even an old, disused path, but more a place that would be easy to walk along. If it could be said to lead anywhere when it is so indefinite about its own shape, it leads away from the village and into the hills. Into the hills, Bakhura sees as he shades his eyes, and between two that seem particularly steep, the maybe-path diving between them like a frightened hare.

At last a memory springs up at the sight. It is a not-really-there path leading between two hills in a place where there are many nearly identical hills, but to Bakhura it is all distinct. Unique. He remembers that path and where it leads. He remembers, and in that memory his fear finds a new
hold and grips his heart.

For an instant the world before him changes, takes on a new shape. Ra is gone from the sky. Instead the moon hangs overhead, casting the landscape in silver-edged shadows. Bakhura shivers; the air has lost all of its warmth, the darkness pulls away at him like a ravenous thing. Around him the empty homes have become hollow-eyed skulls all staring, accusing him of he knew not what. But he feels the weight of those stares across his shoulders, pressing him down, pressing him forward. Down the narrow path that is no true path, he thinks he can see something - a waver of gold amid the slivers of silver and soft pools of black. Down that way that was so familiar, he can hear the sounds of voices echoing back to the emptied village. Voices calling for mercy.

Only Bakhura hears them, and--

--he blinks, Ra returning to the sky, his skin burning under His eye--

--and he is far too late to answer them.

He folds at the waist and only just avoids collapsing to the dirt completely. He has not moved, but his heart is racing and his breath is ragged and labored as though he’s just run a mile. His limbs are shaking, and though the sun is hot on his skin he feels cold, the sweat clinging to him chilly.

When next he raises his head, the path between the hills has not changed in the least. It is as unremarkable as before, empty and barely distinguishable. There is no hint of fire light, no whisper save that of the wind, which stirs nothing but dust. There is nothing there but his own memories. Ghosts of the past.

He knows what is down that way, what he will find should he decide to follow that half hidden path into the hills. There is no way he would ever be able to forget what lies that way, what he saw the night of screams when he had decided, against all of his instincts, to follow the soldiers dragging his people away into the night. He has not forgotten, nor ever believed that it had all been some warped product of his own imagination. It happened, and if he found the way back to that underground place, he would be able to stand in the very place where his friends and family had been reduced to something less than human.

He never thought he would find the way back so easily. Even after so much time spent in searching for Kul Elna, Bakhura had not spent much time in considering the secret temple, nor in the idea of finding it. Even as he stood in the streets of his once home, his thoughts had not turned that direction.

Now his thoughts are facing that way - there is nowhere else he can look.

And still he hesitates at the idea of following that path. He can think of many reasons why such a venture would be pointless; how it would merely be an extension of his experience in the village, how no new memories would spring up if he went, how there would be nothing at all to find, the soldiers would have cleaned it out entirely before they left...

But it is the trembling which truly stops him. The trembling and the cold feeling he can feel even now as it crawls up his spine. He does not wish to see that place again, not ever. And yet, if he does not, then will the entire point of returning to Kul Elna be lost?

If he runs away from them again, will the people of Kul Elna rise to consume him?

Before he can think too much on it, he straightens and begins to follow the faint line which might, possibly, be a path.
The way is not so long as he remembers it. He wonders if any at the village ever knew of the existence of the temple tucked in the hills so close to them. He had not, but he had still been very young. If they had known of it, what had they thought of it? What had the temple been used for before it had become their slaughter house?

The way is curiously empty of even any sign of life, even more so than the village itself. It’s an observation which does nothing to settle Bakhura’s nerves.

When he is faced with the temple itself he freezes. In the light of day it should seem less imposing, less threatening than it had that night when he had been no more than a child, but it does not. In Bakhura’s mind, it’s just as it was all those years ago, and it’s harder than ever to think a good reason to continue.

He inches forward, eyes and ears open, his head growing lighter with every step.

When his sandal takes the first step across the threshold, there is a familiar but unexpected feeling of tearing, of separating from himself.

A moment later, Bakhura is looking into a face of fine white scales and a pair of violet, reptilian eyes.

A little of the fear crawling under his skin leaves at the sight of the serpent. He sighs, and reaches for the triangular head. “Little god,” he whispers fondly.

The serpent, who is far from ‘little,’ accepts the caress silently, the violet eyes slipping closed as Bakhura’s hand roughs its scales. Since its first appearance to him as a child, the little god has grown well beyond the proportions of any snake Bakhura has ever seen. When it rears up as it is now, its head comes up evenly with his own, making it so they can look one another in the eye. If he were to spread out his palm and fingers across the top of the little god’s head, the tips of his fingers would not reach the outside edges of its skull. His most trusted companion and guardian, the little god has rescued him or assisted him in countless adventures over the years.

It is good to have the little god with him now.

He looks back into the temple. The light does not go far before being pounced upon and smothered by shadows, and Bakhura can no longer make out more than dim outlines of the walls. He also sees, though, a few old torches lying on the floor. Doubtless they had been cast aside there by some of the soldiers as they were leaving the temple.

Moving slowly, as though something still lurks in the shadows, waiting for him, he retrieves one of the torches. As he squats down to attempt lighting it, the white serpent follows him, and after a brief moment goes on into the darkness without waiting for Bakhura. He feels the loss of his companion immediately, but does not wish the serpent back. The little god is intelligent, and has scouted ahead of him before. He trusts his ethereal companion, that the serpent goes ahead of him to protect and not to abandon.

Once the torch is brought back to life, Bakhura follows after the little god, red-golden light spilling over the walls and floor, chasing back the darkness. There is not much to the temple before he comes upon the stairs leading down into even deeper darkness, just a large and empty chamber of stone. In the fine drifts of sand that the winds have blown in, Bakhura can make out the unmistakable track of the little god slithering down the steps. The torch throws only enough light for him to see four of the steps before the blackness becomes impenetrable. Of the little god itself, there is no sign at all.
His heart beating so hard it makes his limbs tremble, Bakhura descends the stairs, the crunching of sand beneath his soles echoing.

When his feet reach the bottom at last, Bakhura stops and looks around. Somehow the light seems to cut into the darkness more now that he is within the underground chamber, and he can see as well as feel that the space around him is vast, open and… empty.

When last he had crept down the stairs in the dark and looked into this chamber, it had been full. Full of soldiers and priests, full of bodies both struggling and still, full of flickering shadows, moist heat, incomprehensible chants and noisome smells. This was a chamber which had been crowded with death and evil magic. Now it is utterly empty.

Even in the furthest recesses of his imagination, where wild speculation is wont to roam freely, Bakhura had never expected there to be any sign of human remains in the underground temple. Anything that survived whatever arcane rituals the priests had used would have been taken away with them for some sort of disposal, either to hide them, attempt to appease the dead or both. They would not be left in the temple. But he had been expecting some sort of evidence that people had been here, some kind of sign of what had transpired eleven years ago. It seems wrong that such a thing as that night of screams could occur and leave no mark behind.

But there’s nothing. No dropped weapons, no abandoned scrolls, no discarded bit of clothing… even the great vats are gone. Bakhura is very glad that those, at least, are gone.

In the darkness he sees a glimmer, which is quickly followed by the head of the little god. It looks up at him with an expression he feels to be curiosity rather than reads. God or not, it is impossible to read the expression of a serpent.

He takes a moment to breathe, to steady the hammering of his heart which has not calmed since seeing the façade of the temple. When the torch in his hand is no longer trembling so violently and the shadows stilled in their dancing, he takes the last step into the chamber and begins to walk through the room. The little god comes close and keeps pace beside him, the white gleaming bulk of its body a silent comfort to him.

Bakhura and the little god make a complete search of the chamber. It is large but uncomplicated, a few pillars scattered around offering the only real variation. There are no side rooms, no furniture, no signs of the horrors committed here so long ago. It’s not until they come near the center of the chamber, away from the walls, that they find anything besides pillars and a few hieroglyphs chiseled into the stone. Here the floor rises up in a kind of square slab, and atop this is another, round slab of stone. A little apprehensive, Bakhura climbs it to look upon the second slab, which even in the darkness appears more complex than a simple circle. When he sees what rests there, awaiting him, his breath catches.

Made completely of stone, there’s what looks like the outermost layer of a sarcophagus. Face peaceful, eyes closed and hands held close to its chest, it certainly looks like a sarcophagus. There’s an air of ceremonial finality about it which speaks to Bakhura of ritual death. It’s not until he’s examining the writings carved into the stone that he realizes that there are odd, deeply cut depressions into the figure. The depressions are far too deep for the stone he sees to be the lid of a container - it would be penetrated all the way through.

He examines the depressions, which are really more like holes. There are seven of them, and while the shapes of some of them give him very little idea what they are meant to be, some others are clear. A scepter, a scale, a ball, what might have been a flail…

Suddenly he realizes what these depressions are for, and he stumbles back, away from the slab,
nearly tripping over the little god and tumbling from the raised area.

The holes in the sarcophagus are places where the Millennium items may be placed. Now he knows what it is he is looking at, he can see the sense of the other shapes - a ring, a pendant, a tauk, and what he thought was a flail must be the key. Bakhura stares at the sarcophagus, his mind racing. Why would such a thing be here? Why would the soldiers and the priests leave behind something that is obviously closely connected to the Millennium items they slaughtered an entire village for? It looks as though it’s important, as though it serves some function requiring the items. Why would they not take it with them?

He examines the hieroglyphics in the sarcophagus, but the reading of much more than a few words is beyond him. There is a ring of other symbols set in the stone the sarcophagus rests on which he assumes is writing, but every character is unfamiliar to him. He silently curses the years of teaching he’d received. Why hadn’t Iumeri taught him the words he needed? If some clue as to the function of the sarcophagus and its places for the Millennium items is left in writing, those secrets are still hidden from Bakhura.

There’s a pressure at his knees. The little god has come close and is pressing itself to him. The violet eyes flash in the torchlight, a black tongue flicks out into the dead air. Looking into the eyes that are his own, Bakhura feels a measure of comfort, but also frustration. In coming to Kul Elna he had hoped, though not much expected some sort of clue to himself. Some glimpse into his past that might provide a guide to his future. He had come and found nothing but the echoes of memories that were never very far from him anyway. There was nothing in the village to give him any peace or insight, and though the place made him tremble, the same is true for the underground temple. Or at least it was.

When all there had been to find was emptiness, that was less than he had hoped, but it also made things simple. All he had to learn of himself was that all he was he already carried with him, then. He is no more or less than he always was, and while that can be its own problem, it made things simpler. There was no need to rethink who he was.

But now there is a mystery. Even worse than discovering a forgotten truth or gaining an insight, a mystery throws him into uncertainty with no kind of handhold to steady himself.

Distractedly, Bakhura strokes the smooth, warm scales of the little god’s head. “What is this place?” he whispers to the serpent, who does not respond other than to tickle the underside of his wrist with a tongue flick. “What is this thing, and what does it mean that it is here? What purpose does it serve?”

He does not expect an answer to his question. In all of the time Bakhura has known the little god it has never been able to communicate with him, though it has often given the impression that it wished to. This time, he is shocked when his question is answered, and even more so when he sees that it is not the little god who replies.

_This is the key to the revenge you so crave. It was an instrument in the destruction of Kul Elna, and it will be an instrument in the destruction of your enemies._

This time Bakhura does stumble back. His feet tangle around each other and he falls backward, off of the slab and to the stone floor. The torch flies from his hand, clattering to the ground as weird shadows flicker around the empty chamber. He tries to sit up, to reach for the torch, which is already diming as it lies on the ground, but he cannot move. He landed heavily, stunning himself and knocking the wind from his lungs. Instead he can only lie still, eyes flicking from side to side, trying to see what it was that spoke as the torch he cannot take hold of slowly gutters and the
darkness crowds closer.

When something light and slightly cold brushes his cheek his heart freezes. In the dimness he is just able to distinguish the little god’s triangular head, the dull gleam of an eye. For a moment he thinks the voice he heard came from the serpent, but he does not sense that from the little god. The strange, subtle connection which they share does not resonate in that way.

Finally his body thaws, and he sucks air into his starved body, throwing himself into a coughing fit. When at last he can breathe easily, Bakhura rolls to his feet, crouching in the darkness. The torch is several feet away, out of his reach, but he dares not rise to retrieve it, even as it continues to dim and the shadows lengthen. The little god slithers around him, forming a protective loop of coils, his head weaving in the dark, tongue flicking as it seeks the source of Bakhura’s distress.

There is nothing. Nothing that can be seen falls into the dying light, no sound other than his own labored breaths can be heard.

With the threat of complete darkness making quick strides towards them, Bakhura makes a decision. “Who is there? Who is it that lurks in this cursed place?”

*I? I am one who exists only due to the meddling of those you hate. It was my power whey wished, and yet my power they feared as well. They abandoned the final magic, that which would have given them all they could desire. Fools, all.*

Bakhura listens to the voice, his head swinging back and forth in the dark in attempt to locate where the speaker must be standing, but no direction is louder or clearer than any other. As he listens he realizes that the voice had no echo, no hollowness as his own does, as should any while in this chamber.

The voice is coming from within his own skull.

“Your power…?” He breathes out harshly, one realization coming hard on the heels of another. “They- the priests, the soldiers- they were summoning something? I thought that all of this was for the Millennium items?”

*So it was, the voice says, and Bakhura trembles. The voice is deep and rough, like the grind and crack of boulders, and sinks straight down into his guts. And where is it you think such pretty trinkets get their powers, their heka? The items are all keys, keys to this lock you see before you. To he who can unlock this door, he will receive all of my powers of darkness. Enough power to achieve anything. Anything they wish.*

The light continues to gutter and to dim as the torch dies, but he cannot force himself to move, to leave the coils of the little god. His eyes are drawn, almost unwillingly, back to the sarcophagus, now lying above him.

“Anything?”

*Anything they could wish.*

The rise and fall of the little god’s breathing is steady, reassuring in the near blackness as he listens to this strange, grinding voice in his own head. With everything else feeling as though it is coming apart at the seams, Bakhura is glad for its scaly presence. “It was for you, then, that Pharaoh’s men came. It was for you my village was killed. And then they did not even take you?”

*Fools, all,* the voice repeats.
His heart is still beating hard, but now it beats with anger as well as with fear. The memories of
that night have been brought close, so close that he thought he could see the shadows of his past
out of the corners of his eyes. And with the memories has come the old fear and the sickening taste
of bile, the rage at what had been done to him and his family. The rage chases back a little of his
fear, enough so he can rise out of his crouch and stand tall in the pressing shadows. He turns his
face towards the sarcophagus, choosing to treat it as a ‘source’ of the voice.

“If it was your power that they wished for, then it was for you that all in Kul Elna was killed! You
are the reason they were all murdered in the night!”

To reach my power requires sacrifice, the voice rumbles, unconcerned by Bakhura’s rage. Your
Pharaoh chose who it was to make that sacrifice, made it, and acquired all he needed to take my
power into his hands. And yet he did not. He chose the paltry powers of the keys, of the Millennium
items instead. The true power he could have taken remains.

Bakhura comes up short. “The power remains?”

Indeed it does, child of Kul Elna. The power remains for any who wishes to take it. The voice of
grinding stone takes on a coy tone. And who better to claim this power, paid for with the blood of
Kul Elna, than one of Kul Elna?

Bakhura tries to think. It is strange, speaking with a disembodied voice, deep underground as he is.
His instinct tells him that the voices is far from benign, that it has wishes and desires of its own,
and those run deep and dark, however it might be presenting itself. He does not trust this voice, and
yet what it is saying to him, it tugs at him. More than it should.

“How would one claim this power for their own, then, Kheru? What other village would you have
slaughtered and drunk before such a gift be given?”

An odd sound comes to him then, which he decides is a chuckle. None, child. The sacrifice is
made, the blood all drunk. All that remains to be done is the unlocking. He who brings the seven
Millennium items to this place and places them all within the sarcophagus shall unlock the door
and receive my power.

Bakhura frowns in the dark. The torch is nearly gone out, but he no longer cares. It does not seem
so important anymore, the light. “That is all?”

Do not take the task so lightly. ‘All’ will include gathering those items for yourself, and those who
hold them now will not give them up so easily.

This does not phase Bakhura much. He has always known that any revenge he wished to take
would eventually involve the Millennium items. Even were they not so powerful that they would
be best in his hands rather than those of his enemies, they are inexorably bound to the fate of Kul
Elna, and so to himself and to those who he wished to punish. No, the theft of the Millennium
items does not bother him. Something else bothers him more.

“And what are you, Kheru? What are you that has so much power that all would desire? A
monster, a rogue ka, a demon?”

It is not like a shout, for there is no sound, only what he hears in his own skull, but that is suddenly
loud, reverberating in his mind so strongly that Bakhura falls back to the ground, clutching his head
to keep it from flying apart.

I am the great God, Zorc Necrophades. I am a God to rival all who sit in Their miserable
heavens, captured and bound in this prison. Release me, child of doomed Kul Elna, and I shall see that they who died will at last rest.

Bakhura lies still in darkness which is now complete, panting from whatever it was that washed through him. Bound or not, this god is strong. It feels as though the river has raged over and through him, leaving nothing behind but a vague memory of who he is or even what shape he is meant to be.

I saved you once, child of Kul Elna, the voice - Zorc goes on, quieter. Though you may have no memory of it. I saved you that night, and I can help you avenge the deaths of all the others.

The little god is coiling close, concerned and confused, hissing into the dark against a threat it cannot see. Bakhura tries to laugh, to laugh at the unbelievably of it all, but can only cough. “And what a ‘great god’ you are, Zorc Necrophades! Save one child while all the rest are killed, and offer revenge for them later. What good is revenge to the dead?”

Why do you not ask them yourself?

The chamber, one moment so dark there was no hope of seeing his own hands, lights up with an ethereal light. Bakhura looks up, and skids backward on his hands before slamming into the solid side of the little god, who is hissing fiercely.

All around them are blue specters, glowing gently as they swoop around the chamber, around pillars, about the ceiling, through the walls. They are mostly shapeless, but each possesses a face, a horrid, melted parody of what they must have been in life. Eyes empty, cheeks hollow, and jaws stretched in silent screams, the dead of Kul Elna swirl around him, the last survivor.

Bakhura shrinks back, away from the muuet of Kul Elna. He was the only one to survive the massacre of the village, do they resent him for it? Will they consume him now so that their number might be completed at last?

Kul Elna, he thinks. My beginning and my end.

Fear not, child of Kul Elna. You do not end here, not now. The spirits here bear you no grudge. They know it is that has earned their wrath. Their grudge is your grudge.

You are far from friendless, Bakhura. Together, we may bring justice long denied upon those who truly deserve it.

Bakhura looks about him, the chamber now full of the muuet of Kul Elna, his people. They do seem uninterested in him as prey. A few come close, loop around him before moving on, their faces never changing from their frozen anguish. None move to harm him, and after some time he even begins to think that they are almost friendly to him. The little god at least does not appear to be bothered by the spirits, merely tracking their movements but never lunging when they come close.

Perhaps the old man and proverbs have at last been useful, and he’s found the path to his future by returning to his past.

Lit by the light of the underworld, encircled by the scales of the little god and the voice of a greater god in his mind, Bakhura smiles.
For anyone who is actually trying to keep track of how old Bakhura is at this point, he’s sixteen. Which just happens to be the age Ryou was when Yami Bakura began speaking to him. What a coincidence!

**Seshat:** Literally ‘the female scribe,’ She’s a goddess of all forms of writing, but especially official writings and building plans. At various times She was said to be Thoth’s sister, consort or daughter.

**Bedu:** Better known to English speakers as ‘Bedouin,’ these are nomadic peoples of the desert. Their history and organization is complex, and they still exist today. I’m deliberately leaving them as fairly vague here to avoid completely misrepresenting them.

**Iwiw:** Dog.

**Iawi:** Old.

**Rehew:** Man.

**Sebau:** Student/pupil, and, confusingly, teach/teacher.

**Khered:** Child.

**Sesh:** Scribe.

**Kheru:** Voice – but this is an educated guess on my part. It comes from ‘maa-kheru’ which means ‘true of voice,’ which in turn is a phrase used to describe those who have passed the tests to reach the afterlife. I’m hoping the ‘Kheru’ makes sense as ‘voice.’

**Muuet:** ‘Dead ones,’ those spirits which have not passed on to the afterlife.

Thanks for reading, everyone! Next chapter we’re back in the present, so less butchered non-English. I think.
Part XII

Chapter Notes

And today we have a mix of scenes (and some dialogue) pulled straight from the English translation of the manga and original scenes. For anyone waiting for Ryou and Yami Bakura to actually interact, we’re there at last!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part XII

When Ryou had decided to come along with Yugi and the rest to Duelist Kingdom, he hadn’t been expecting a lot of the things that had happened to him.

On reflection he really ought to have been expecting anything. He hadn’t been present for the card duel when Maximillion Pegasus had removed Yugi’s grandfather’s soul, but he had seen that same elderly man caught inside a video recorder Yugi kept close. If he had been anyone else he would have disbelieved his friends when they told him, and even when they showed him. He would have just thought that they were playing a strange and elaborate prank. But Ryou knew better. He knew from experience the way souls could be tampered and played with. And when he heard that Pegasus had a Millennium item...

There was no way that Duelist Kingdom was meant to be a normal game tournament, or even a highly elaborate one as it was thought to be. With the creator of Duel Monsters himself as keeper of a Millennium item - an eye set in the place of one of his own real eyes, according to Jonouchi - then the last thing any of them should have expected was for the tournament to be normal.

And yet somehow Ryou was still surprised by their current straits. He had brought everything he thought might prove useful - food and water, his own deck of Duel Monsters cards, despite not being a contestant, and even his Millennium Ring.

None of it or anything else he brought seemed the least bit useful here - trapped underground and a pair of sentries guarding their only way out. The sentries wouldn’t even tell them which of the two doors that were there was the correct one - they were meant to guess or somehow puzzle out which would lead to safety. Unless there was a hidden exit somewhere in the room where they were all trapped...

So, they were searching. He, Anzu, Jonouchi and Honda, all of them were examining the walls and the floor minutely for any sign that it was not as solid as it appeared to be. All of them except for Yugi. He was still seated at the duelist’s table, staring down the sentries keeping them from freedom.

Ryou couldn’t help but wonder about that. The Yugi seated there was the ‘other Yugi,’ the one who came from the Puzzle, and he was usually very shrewd when it came to games and riddles. If he wasn’t bothering to look for another way out, did that mean he didn’t think there was one? Personally, Ryou thought the same. It made no sense to have two false doors, for the riddle they
had been handed to be a feint. No, one of those doors was the right way out, it was just a matter of figuring out which one.

He could only hope that Yugi was using the time they had been given to do just that.

Ryou examined the wall, expecting nothing and finding exactly that. Mazes and riddles, all while buried alive. He shivered a little, the chill air working through his layers of clothing.

He really didn’t want to be stuck down here forever. Surely Pegasus wouldn’t allow guests to actually die on his island…?

Perhaps if he were merely the creator of Duel Monsters he wouldn’t, but with the addition of the Millennium Eye, who knew what he would be willing to do?

The Millennium Eye… it was the real reason Ryou was here at all. He had his own deck - an occult deck, he called it - but he wasn’t a duelist in the same sense as everyone else on the island. As far as anyone else was concerned, he was just another friend of Yugi and Jonouchi who had invited himself along to provide moral support and get a ringside seat. And yes, that was a part of the reason he had come along on the adventure. Of course he wanted to support his friends - Yugi who was here to rescue his grandfather and Jonouchi who was determined to win the tournament prize money for his sister, but…

It was the Millennium Eye which really drew him here.

Ryou’s need to know more about the Millennium items had not faded in the least. In fact it only seemed to grow with each day, and when he discovered that Maximillion Pegasus owned one as well, that need had spiked into an obsession. It had consumed his thoughts, pushing him towards the island as surely as a pair of hands at his back. Sleep had been denied him until he’d decided for certain that he would tag along with all the others, and his mind finally felt as though it could relax.

Where had Pegasus gotten his Eye, and what could it do? What did Pegasus know of the Millennium items? Deduction told Ryou that Pegasus was after Yugi’s Puzzle - why else would such a powerful man target an amateur duelist, let alone go to such lengths to ensure he came to the island, within easy reach? It had to be for the Puzzle. The holder of one Millennium item would want another.

Maximillion Pegasus must know something about the items.

They had to get out of this underground trap--

*I’ll tell you which door it is…*

Ryou jumped at the voice. He hadn’t heard anyone walk up to him. He looked around; the nearest to him was Anzu, who was a dozen feet away and absorbed in her search.

“Did… you say something, Anzu…?” He asked the question, knowing what the answer must be, and speaking too quietly for her to hear him in any case.

A cold sweat suddenly prickled all over his skin. It felt as though his heart was being squeezed - beating too fast yet constrained, trying to escape but too frightened to move.

A laugh, too familiar for only having heard it a few times, echoed around the chamber. Except it didn’t. It only echoed inside his mind. *It’s me, Yadonushi…*

Ryou’s hand acted before his mind could process, before he could decide if it was a wise decision
or not. He brought out his Millennium Ring from his backpack. One of the points still stood out stiffly, in defiance of gravity and the motion of the rest of the Ring, still pointing faithfully at the wall beyond the two sentries. His hand shook, making the rest of the points swing dizzily, the light dancing off its metallic surface in a much brighter way than he remembered in some time.

*It can’t be,* he thought to himself, sweat prickling along his hairline. *Koe, the voice, it’s been gone for so long, it can’t be…*

The laugh came again, soft even in his mind, as though Koe was amused by the train of Ryou’s thoughts. He nearly dropped the Ring right then, to break any and all contact with the awful thing.

*It’s been a long time, Yadonushi,* Koe agreed, and like his laugh, his words were surprisingly gentle, different from how Ryou remembered it. *How long are you going to waste your time in this pit? The answer is very simple. Playing these stupid card games when a Millennium item is so close…! I know you’ve been wanting to learn about them. I’ve been helping you, guiding you towards them. Do you see? Even now, I look after my Yadonushi.*

Ryou trembled, his stomach clenching in a sickening way. He’d been suspicious, the first time the Millennium Ring had begun to point like a compass, wondering if the spirit within had awoken or returned. But all it ever did was point. No voice had intruded on his thoughts, no hint that the other personality had even survived the battle with Yugi. Until now.

He put a hand against the wall, needing the support. Did he tell the others what was happening? What could they do, when they already had one riddle to solve? What should he do?

*Put on the Ring,* Koe whispered gently. *Put on the Ring and allow me to see through your eyes, Ryou. I will find the way out of this labyrinth for you. It will be easy for a thief like me.*

“What’s wrong, Bakura?”

Anzu’s voice, a voice that was definitely outside the confines of his skull, startled Ryou out of his reverie. He half turned towards her and attempted a smile. “N-nothing’s wrong. I’m fine.”

He waited until the girl had turned away before he wondered why he hadn’t told her. There was no danger that they wouldn’t believe him - they knew as well as he did just how real the threat his Ring could pose was. But if they knew… they might try… to take it away from him.

Something more than just words seemed to emanate from the Ring, something Ryou could only interpret as a kind of … *sympathy.*

*I see… you’re afraid of me because of what happened before. I understand. I do. What happened back then… but you don’t need to worry, now. I’m a different person than I was then. I only want to help you. To save your friends.*

Ryou shook his head as hard as he dared, as hard as he could without attracting attention from anyone in the room.

*Stop it!* He thought the words as loudly as he could, not doubting at all that Koe could hear it perfectly well. *I won’t listen to you anymore! I’ll never put the Ring back on!*

*Won’t you? Listen to this at least, Yadonushi. If you don’t put me on, you and all of your friends will be trapped down here forever!*

The boy’s heart lurched to the side. He cast a quick look over his shoulder, to his friends all looking for a way out of their prison. None of them looked as though they were having any luck.
Would they really be left to die here, buried alive?

**Ryou…** The call was so faint that Ryou had to strain to hear, an equivalent of leaning closer. *I know you can feel me as well as hear me, if you try. I know if you try, you can tell that I am telling you the truth. I’m not the same as I was. I truly want to help you.*

Ryou bit his lip, his thumb tracing along the curve of the Ring. He could sense something of what Koe was feeling, he thought, maybe even something of what he thought. It was hard to discern, but… *it felt* like he was being truthful.

*The ones full of trickery are those two.*

He glanced over, knowing exactly who Koe meant. Their sentries, still seated, smugly grinning across the table at Yugi. They seemed so certain that they would find no way out…

*They are, Koe said. There is more to this maze than meets the eye, and they do not intend to play fair.*

*How do I know you won’t do what you did before? Ryou thought desperately. How do I know you won’t try to steal their souls all over again? How can I trust you?*

There was a pause. Ryou held his breath. Then,

*Feel me, Ryou Bakura.* A small wash of emotions, of feelings and not quite formed thoughts that were not his own came over him.

*I swear upon the Ring, and my own soul, that if you allow me your body, I will do nothing to harm you or your friends.*

Ryou gasped, first at the intensity of the thought, and then again as the wave was drawn away from him, leaving only his own thoughts and emotions behind.

Every word was true, though. Ryou knew it as surely as if he had thought the words himself. He just *knew.*

Looking round to be certain no one’s attention was on him, Ryou lifted the cord of the Ring over his head and settled the Ring back into its old familiar place…

Ryou blinked, taking a deep breath. He blinked again and swayed, a little unbalanced, and looked around. He was standing beside the dueling table, clustered with everyone else. But hadn’t he just been beside the wall…?

“What… what just happened?” He muttered, and rubbed at one of his eyes. He wasn’t sure why, but it felt as though he had just woken up from sleep. He didn’t think he’d fallen asleep, not while standing…

Yugi was standing up from the table, and Ryou noticed for the first time that the sentries wore identical expressions of angry frustration. As Yugi turned, Ryou saw the triumphant smile on his face. Ryou grinned.

“Did you just win, Yugi? Amazing!”

“Bakura, are you feeling okay?” Anzu was giving him a concerned look, like she thought he was sick. Even Yugi was watching him, but rather than pure concern, it was a wondering, wary look. It
was the way one would watch someone who they felt like they couldn’t quite trust.

Unnerved, Ryou shifted his weight. As he did, something underneath his shirt slid against his skin. He froze, remembering. The Ring. He’d put it back on. He’d put it back on and… lost time. He glanced around quickly, and was glad to see both Honda and Jonouchi were also there, both fine.

He gave a short, weak chuckle. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Just ready to get out of this creepy place, you know?”

“I hear dat!” Jonouchi leaned across the table, grabbing a key from one of the model doors on the board. Their sentries, the Meikyû brothers, both looked as though they very much wanted to slap the teen’s hands away, but they restrained themselves. Jonouchi headed towards the door marked ‘Mei,’ key held high. “Let’s get outta here, you guys!”

Honda and Anzu both followed him, but Yugi hesitated, still watching Ryou. Under that intense stare, Ryou froze. He did his best to smile reassuringly, wondering if he should try to say something to put Yugi at ease, to erase that look of mistrust from his face. Before he could think of anything to say, though, Yugi turned away and was joining the others. After a second’s hesitation, Ryou followed.

On the other side of the door was a passageway that wasn’t manmade, but altered, made smooth and lit up near the doors. There was only one direction to go, which Ryou appreciated. If the labyrinth had continued beyond the door he would have had to bring out the Ring to figure out which way to go. The others would see that he had put it back on.

Ryou listened with half an ear as the others talked ahead of him. One hand strayed to his shirt front unconsciously as he tried to remember what happened right after he put the Ring on. If he focused, he could just about remember walking from where he had been searching the wall to rejoin the others. It was a foggy memory, though, like the memory of stumbling to sleep after staying up all night. Why couldn’t he remember anything else?

It’s because you weren’t in control just then.

Ryou tripped, caught himself on the wall. No one seemed to notice his stumble.

Don’t worry, Yadonushi. I was only in control long enough to assist in our escape, just as I promised. You will recall the lost time soon enough.

How? Despite the outward silence of the conversation, Ryou worried someone would notice, and couldn’t help the instinct to ‘think quietly.’ If you were in control, then the memory of that time is yours.

True, which is why it will take some time for you to remember them. But remember you will. We are two souls sharing a single body, yes? We will be able to remember each other’s memories, almost as though they were our own. …Hadn’t you already noticed something similar, Yadonushi?

Ryou was about to deny it wholeheartedly - he had no recollection of being a spirit trapped in a piece of jewelry - but then he did remember something.

Dreams. Dreams of a boy in Egypt, many, many years ago. A boy without a family who made the best living he could along the Nile, stealing where and what he could while avoiding capture or falling prey to the predators of the desert.

The dreams had begun not long after that tabletop game. At least, that’s when he thought they had started at first. They had seemed familiar to him even after the first night. He’d thought they were
just the result of his subconscious spinning stories from all he had ever seen or heard of Egypt from his father. Were they actually memories from the spirit? Was that who the spirit had been when he’d been alive, a child?

_It’s good we can communicate again. I am glad you decided to listen. It’s a rare gift, this ability, and would be a shame to waste it._

Ryou’s eyes strayed to Yugi, who was walking at the front of the group. He was coming to recognize when it was actually Yugi and when it was the spirit that was in control of the small body. Even from behind, there was a way the spirit held himself that almost made him seem taller than Yugi did. He wondered, with a slight rush of trepidation, if it were so easy to see when he, Ryou was in control of his body or when it was Koe.

_As rare as the Millennium items, Ryou thought, wondering if any of his thoughts were actually private while wearing the Ring. Yugi and the spirit of his Puzzle..._

Something like a disgusted grunt came through to Ryou.

_They have a bond like ours, yes. And in some ways it is stronger than ours. Theirs has not been so... tumultuous as ours. But remember, they cannot speak with one another. They do not share each other’s thoughts, and I doubt very much that they share memories. And Yugi has had the Puzzle even longer than you have had the Ring, remember._

Ryou shuddered. Koe had just listed off two bits of information which he had to have plucked from Ryou’s memories. Yugi had spent some time not long after the tabletop game telling him about his Puzzle and one or two of the adventures he’d had since solving it - though Ryou could tell there was still plenty more he had left untold. And then he had revealed to them all just before they had left for Duelist Kingdom that while he could now feel what the spirit of his Puzzle could feel if he listened, there was still no direct communication between them.

Yugi had held the Millennium Puzzle for eight years, but it wasn’t until he solved it that the spirit within had made itself known. So far as Ryou knew, the spirit in his Ring had been in contact with him all of the six years he’d had it. Was that where the difference lay?

The still fresh memories of the tabletop game intruded on him. The helpless feeling of knowing, of seeing what his body was doing and not being able to stop it was one he was not likely to ever forget, nor the effort it had taken to find a way back to his own skin and help his friends. He could still remember the pain of taking back control, piece by tiny piece. The pain which still gave him nightmares of the spirit fighting him, impaling his hand on a model castle spire, the Ring’s points digging into his chest and refusing to let him go, like some sort of parasite...

And on the other side of the table, facing against the spirit of the Ring, the ‘other Yugi.’ The spirit of the Millennium Puzzle. He had fought, as well. Fought hard and cleverly against Koe, fought at the side of and for Yugi, the one who harbored his soul.

_That was where the difference lay between the spirits of the Puzzle and the Ring, and there was where lay the difference in the bonds they had with the ones who held the items they were trapped within._

Yugi and his spirit, they had both been put in danger by the Ring, by him. They could have been killed, and it would have been at least partially Ryou’s fault. And instead of blaming him, they had saved him. They called him a friend, even after all of that. They had freed him from the Ring.

The Ring rattled softly beneath his shirt. He put a hand over it to silence it, eyes on Yugi’s back.
He felt like a traitor, betraying the trust so undeservingly given to him and the work and pain which had gone into saving him. After all that had been done for him, he repaid it by once again wearing the Ring. By communicating and colluding with the spirit that had tried to kill them all!

*I should take it off again,* he thought. *As soon as the others are a little further away, I will.*

He knew that Koe heard the thought when he felt the spirit start slightly, as though stung. For a second Ryou expected to feel the piercing pain of five points stabbing into him, making it impossible for the Ring to be removed, and he flinched reflexively, his heart racing. But it never came.

*You should not,* Yadonushi. Koe was surprisingly quiet, nothing like the outrage Ryou had expected. *You should leave the Ring just where it is. I can still be of use to you here. I can sense the other Millennium item, and its holder. He is ruthless, Yadonushi. From here on, things will only become more and more dangerous for you. If you take off the Ring and something were to happen, I would not be able to protect you. Please, leave it in place.*

Ryou hesitated. He could feel the points against his skin, knew their sharpness, could remember how they had scraped over bone when they dug in… but they lay inert, now. Even as he considered tearing off the Ring and shoving it to the very bottom of his backpack, it gave no sign of life. In his mind, Koe gave no sign of returning to his old habits.

His eyes strayed back to Yugi.

*But if they find out…*

*They would not understand,* Koe agreed. *Of course. We could not expect them to understand. They know me only as I was before. They do not have the link that we have, they cannot know how you know that I have changed. There is no way for them to feel the truth of it the way you do.*

*If I explained it to them, they might understand,* Yugi might. *He has a bond like ours. He would know what it is like to know.*

*He might…* Koe said slowly. *But it would be a difficult thing to believe, even now. Even you are not fully convinced, Yadonushi. I can feel it. No. Let us wait a little, until I have had a chance to prove how much I have changed.*

Ryou still hesitated, uncertain, the words to call out to Yugi and tell him everything poised on his tongue but not quite decided to emerge.

*You can trust me. You have my oath that I will harm none of you.* Not even, he added, even more quietly than before, *should you decide to remove the Ring.*

The hand over his shirt trembled, the words on his tongue clamoring for freedom. Memory and instinct all pushed him in one direction… but something else, something deeper pulled him the opposite way.

Ryou dropped his hand, swallowed the words gathered in his mouth and walked along after his friends.

*Thank you, Yadonushi.*

Ryou put down his bag with a groan and rubbed at one shoulder, then at the other. He never thought he would be so glad to return to an empty apartment, but it was good to be back home.
Duelist Kingdom had been exhausting, physically, mentally and spiritually. He doubted that even if one removed all of the supernatural elements which had cropped up, that any other tournament could be said to be even half so tiring.

He stretched. There was school the next morning, and it was already late in the afternoon. He ought to unpack and organize his school books for the next day… But there was one thing in particular which Pegasus’ island had lacked and he had been looking forward to for days.

A few minutes later Ryou sighed again contentedly as he sank into the hot water of the bath. His dirty clothes, practically stiff with the dirt and grime gathered from hiking around the island for days, were in the hamper and a fresh set of ‘at home’ clothes waiting for him. There had been a shower at the castle which Ryou had taken advantage of, but it just wasn’t the same as a hot soak. Ryou was lucky to have an apartment with private facilities. He didn’t mind public baths, but it was nice to relax alone.

As Ryou’s aching muscles slowly unlocked one by one, he thought over the time he’d spent on that island with his friends.

It had all been a bizarre experience, there was no denying that. The tournament itself, which even the media had trouble covering without using terms any stronger than ‘odd,’ had paled into the background with all of the other drama taking place on the island. It seemed as though every time they met someone an old rivalry was reignited and fought out. Most of them Ryou had been ignorant of until they blew up in front of him, the most notable example being whatever history existed between his friends and Seto Kaiba. Something called ‘Death-T’ had been brought up, and Jonouchi in particular appeared to still bear a grudge over whatever had happened. It all served to remind Ryou that in his circle of friends, he was something of an outsider. He was the newest in a group which had been established a long time before his arrival and whose history he was ignorant of unless he was told.

Tomorrow, Ryou decided, he would ask Yugi to tell him more about the things that had happened to them all before he’d come to Domino High.

Even with all of the strange things going on at the island, though, Ryou felt his own personal experience was probably a little stranger even than that of any of his friends.

Ryou glanced over to the counter and sink, where he’d put the Millennium Ring while he soaked.

Koe hadn’t really spoken to him since the underground labyrinth, but he had still been aware of the spirit’s presence. He could sometimes feel a second consciousness riding along in the back of his mind, and if he paid careful attention, the way Yugi said he did with his spirit, Ryou could just about make out what Koe was feeling.

More than any feeling or sense of the spirit riding along with him, though, the rest of their time on the island had acquired a strangely disassociated quality, dream-like at times. After a while Ryou had come to the conclusion that it was another symptom of Koe still being with him. The more hazy reality seemed, the more Koe was present, using Ryou’s senses.

It had been disconcerting to think about, that the voice in his head could partially possess him without Ryou having to lose consciousness. In a way it was better than the alternative, to be completely unaware as Koe took his body to do with as he pleased, and yet it somehow felt more invasive to be aware of the possession while it was happening. And there were some times where Ryou had no memory at all. Such as when he’d woken up in the grand dining room after going to sleep in his bedroom, or brief moments scattered throughout the night when he and Honda had searched the lower levels of the castle to rescue Seto’s little brother Mokuba. The blanks concerned
him, but the time was already beginning to fill in as Koe’s memories bled into his. He had done nothing bad while in possession of Ryou’s body, only gone to examine a painting which featured another Millennium item and done all he could to help Honda with Mokuba. It seemed as though Koe had been telling the truth when he said he wanted to help Ryou and his friends.

Ryou wondered if Yugi ever went through anything similar with the spirit of the Puzzle. Did Yugi experience the same kind of haze when his spirit was close at hand? Was there ever any mistrust between them, or did Yugi ever have to question the motives of his spirit? Then he remembered, he had seen with his own eyes something like what was happening between himself and Koe.

The spirit of the Puzzle had been willing to kill Seto Kaiba to win a game - more willing than he was to lose. If it hadn’t been for Yugi intervening, wresting control of his body back before the spirit could declare his attack, then Seto really would be dead. It was the first real sign of disharmony between Yugi and the spirit of the Puzzle that Ryou had ever seen, and a rather impressive example of how ruthless the spirit could be in order to get what he wanted.

Yugi and his spirit seemed to come back around to some sort of understanding before too long, but the incident was insightful for Ryou. He had thought the relationship between Yugi and his spirit had been as smooth and easy as could be desired - the opposite of the relationship he had with Koe. That one, violent division was proof his assumption had been very wrong. And that the spirit seemed so willing to kill, it made Ryou think. Was there really so much difference between the spirits? The one within the Puzzle seemed to have a more than adequate violent streak, and Koe was insisting that he had changed.

Yugi could find it in himself to trust his spirit after a near murder. Could Ryou do the same with his?

He soaked a while longer before deciding that he had better leave or he would find himself waking in the middle of the night in freezing water with no one to blame but himself. The Ring lay safe beneath his shirts, cool against his skin.

Ryou felt tons better for his bath and the clean clothes, which were like silk compared to the clothes he had sweated in for days. He felt refreshed, while at the same time incredibly sluggish. The hot water had sapped whatever remaining strength he had, making him feel thick and clumsy. Would he even have the energy to eat before going to bed tonight?

He unpacked his bag slowly. Anything cloth went automatically into the hamper, his deck of cards went to his desk, and most of what was left of the food was put away in the kitchen. There wasn’t really all that much, but with his slowed body it took some time.

It wasn’t until the bag was nearly empty that Ryou spotted something he didn’t remember putting in. A small golden ball.

Frowning, Ryou pulled it out and into the light. As he turned it around he found himself staring at a shining eyeball, its stylized iris and pupil of gold instantly recognizable as a brother to those on the Millennium Puzzle and Ring.

Ryou was startled, and it took him a moment to remember that he had asked Yugi if he could keep the replica Eye which had appeared in Yugi’s soup. It was a hazy memory, so it had been Koe who had really asked for it, but Ryou didn’t need confirmation for that. They were interesting, a unique memento, he supposed, but he wouldn’t have asked for one of them himself.

Pegasus, and his Millennium Eye… Ryou shuddered, remembering some of the power the man had shown while they had all been on his island. It had been Ryou’s main reason for going to the
island, to find out more about the items. Before he had retired to his private rooms, Pegasus had told them all some of his history with the items, and how he had come by his Eye.

He’d said an evil power lay within the Millennium items, an ‘evil intelligence.’ As he’d listened Ryou had felt a guilty jolt go through him. He’d instantly thought of Koe, who was also listening to Pegasus with alert attention. He didn’t seem disturbed by the implication, and on reflection Ryou had to conclude that an ‘evil intelligence’ could just as easily refer to Yugi’s spirit. Or it might refer to no spirit at all, but just a vague idea of intelligence which guided the items. It did seem very coincidental that so many ancient artifacts were all appearing in the same area of a completely different country, all at the same time. Some kind of outside power might very well be guiding the movements of the items and those who bore them.

There were seven items all together according to Pegasus. The Ring was one, the Puzzle another, then Pegasus’ Eye, and then there was a set of Scales Pegasus had seen while in Egypt, and a Key which was worn by Shadi, the one who had ‘given’ Pegasus the Eye. That left two more, whose shapes and locations were unknown.

Ryou rubbed his cheek. So many items, and he was still no closer to knowing what they actually were or why they had been created, or any of the other mysteries he had hoped to solve by going to Duelist Kingdom. Though what Pegasus had to say about Shadi and how he had behaved with the items was suggestive of something dark; dark, and much more complex than Ryou had ever suspected. He tried his best not to remember what Pegasus had said of the man he had seen who had been made to wear the Ring, which had still been in Egypt back then.

It was a difficult thing to forget. Apparently the man had been deemed unworthy by the Ring to be its bearer, and had been burned alive. Did that mean Ryou was worthy somehow? In what way was he worthy of the Ring?

Would he have burned all those years ago, if he hadn’t measured up?

The replica of the Millennium Eye was really quite good, Ryou thought. Better even than he remembered when Yugi had handed it to him. Pegasus had gotten it to shine with that same peculiar liquid shine that was so distinctive to the Ring and the Puzzle. Even the weight felt right, heavy for something which he knew was hollow.

Ryou turned the eye over in his hands, looking for the place where it would come open. It appeared seamless all the way around. Ryou couldn’t even tell where the hinge was meant to be.

As he was turning the orb in his fingers, examining closely along those raised places where the front design was formed, he found an odd stain. He frowned, scraped it away with a fingernail. It crumbled away in a peculiar way.

Before Ryou could decide what the ruddy brown powder on his fingers was, a memory which was not his suddenly broke over him and he knew.

Blood.

Dried blood.

This wasn’t a replica. It was the Millennium Eye, plucked out of Pegasus’ head!

Ryou screamed and dropped the Eye. It hit the floor with a solid thump and rolled away.

Ryou didn’t realize he was backing away until his shoulders thumped against the wall. His heart was beating too fast, his breathing was too harsh, and while he never took his eyes from the golden
sphere on his floor, he didn’t see it.

Before his eyes Ryou saw Pegasus, seated at a dueling table and frowning at him. He said something, but Ryou couldn’t make out the words. He felt himself reply, but still could hear nothing, nor could he remember what words his own mouth had shaped. Pegasus looked alarmed, made to stand, but froze. Without quite knowing how he knew, Ryou was sure it was the power of the Ring that kept him in his seat.

He watched his own body as it moved, his hand as it reached out to the Millennium Eye. He saw as Pegasus’ other eye widened in realization and horror, as he struggled against the invisible bonds of the Ring, to lean away from the hand nearing his Eye.

Ryou hadn’t heard Pegasus when he spoke, but he heard him fine when he screamed.

Ryou’s stomach lurched. Covering his mouth the boy ran for the bathroom and made it just in time. There wasn’t much in his stomach to empty out, but he stayed there, heaving long after even the bile and acid stopped coming.

He wouldn’t be eating before he went to sleep tonight. He might be lucky if he slept or ate ever again.

When he was finished vomiting, he stayed on the floor of his bathroom, trembling too much to trust his legs to support him.

That was a memory he had just relived, but not one of his own. That one was one of Koe’s memories, spilling over into Ryou’s awareness just like he said they would. It was a memory Ryou had no idea existed until it came crashing over him all at once. There was no haze hanging over it, no confusion as to who was looking through his eyes at the time.

Koe had to have been in complete control. He’d taken full possession of Ryou’s body without him even being aware of it, gone to Pegasus and…

Ryou’s stomach spasmed again. All that came up was saliva.

Pegasus was dead. There was no question of that, no room to doubt Maximillion Pegasus was dead, the Millennium Eye dug out of his skull and a replica left on the table before him.

It wasn’t left with the expectation that it would fool anyone, Ryou knew that. It was left in a mocking way, as though to compensate the dead man for what he’d lost.

It took some time before Ryou could convince himself to stand, to go back to his living room where the Eye lay in a corner, staring sightlessly into the room.

He should pick it up, put it somewhere, hide it. What if Yugi or the others visited and saw it, how could he possibly explain? He supposed he could always say it was the replica, but that lie would come apart the moment anyone handled it.

He didn’t want to touch the thing. He had a suspicion that if he did then he might remember even more of what Koe had done while in his body.

Instead of the Eye, his hand went to the Ring, still tucked safely beneath his shirt. It had grown warm lying against his body, giving the impression of its own life.

“Koe,” he croaked, then cleared his throat. “Koe,” he called again, his voice reverberating in the empty apartment. “Koe! What did you do? You lied to me back on the island! You said that you
wanted to help me and my friends, that you wouldn’t hurt anyone. But this,” he glanced at the Eye. “This proves you were lying to me. You killed Pegasus, stole the Millennium Eye. You haven’t changed at all, Koe!”

_Not true, Yadonushi_, Koe finally answered. _I have changed, and for the better. I’ve already done so much to help all of you. You will see soon._

“Help us?” Ryou was beginning to feel a little hysterical, a feeling which was not helped by the very certain knowledge that he was speaking aloud to someone who wasn’t there. “You call murder helping us? How does Pegasus’ death ‘help’ any of us?”

_The Eye, _Koe said. _I had to take the Eye from Pegasus._

Ryou looked over at the golden orb again. He tried not to think of the last time he had seen it, where only the design on one side had been visible as part of a face. It hadn’t quite seemed like an artifact, then, just a part of Pegasus. Even now it was a little hard to shake the impression that he was staring at a body part lying on his living room floor.

“Why,” he whispered, forcing down another wave of nausea. “Why did you have to take it from him? What do you want to use it for?”

_Not me. The spirit of the Millennium Puzzle. I cannot say why just yet, but I know a time is coming when he will need all of the Millennium items together. All seven, it would seem. Now there are three all close to each other. Koe paused for a moment. Even you know this on some level, Yadonushi. The thirst for knowledge compels you, but that is not all. You have been touched by one - by more than one Millennium item. You can feel the pull of the rest, the need to seek them out._

He wanted to deny it, but he could feel the truth of what Koe said. Even now there lay a kind of itch, a restless feeling that he ought to be moving, seeking out the next Millennium item. Perhaps the Key, as he at least had a name to use as a clue to finding it: Shadi.

“But… Did you have to kill him? Couldn’t you have asked him for it? Or… or forced him to give it to you somehow if he wouldn’t give it up?”

Ryou felt a small jolt of surprise at his suggestion of force, but ignored it. If it meant Pegasus would still be alive, then he would agree to less friendly means of acquisition.

_I did not intend to kill him, Yadonushi. I only intended to take the Eye. Even when he struggled, I did not mean for him to die. But he had bonded too closely with his item. You know he had the Eye for seven years? Seven years of being in constant contact, of using its powers nearly every day. I didn’t take that bond into consideration. It was the forced separation that killed him._

Ryou stilled. It was the separation from the Eye which had killed him? Koe had mentioned a bond between himself and Ryou, and Ryou had come to think something very similar existed between Yugi and the spirit of the Puzzle. Had Pegasus had something like that with the Eye? Did another spirit reside in the Eye? Yugi said he had the Puzzle for eight years, even longer than Pegasus. If he were ever forced apart from his Puzzle, would he also die, or was it the constant use over years that did it? Yugi had held the Puzzle for nearly a decade, but had only solved it recently.

And what about him? He’d had the Ring for six years, and he had worn it daily in that time.

Would he die if the Ring were taken from him, or if Koe were stripped away? Was he trapped with the spirit no matter what?
“Ryou.”

It took a second for him to realize he heard the word with his ears, not just on the inside of his head. He spun round so fast he almost lost his balance and found himself staring at--

Himself.

Ryou blinked, his mind a blank. It was like looking in a mirror. From the long hair all the way to the tee shirt and sweatpants, Ryou was staring at himself. And yet it most certainly wasn’t him. It was like seeing the difference between Yugi and his spirit, it lay mostly in how he held himself, the way he stood, the expression on his face. There was a look in this double’s eye which Ryou didn’t recognize in himself at all.

It wasn’t quite like looking in a mirror. It was like looking into another world, where another Ryou Bakura had lived another life and become very different from the one he knew from the inside.

His hand went to the Ring, as much to assure himself of where his own body was as to be sure of the item.

“Koe?”

His doppelganger smiled. It wasn’t like the smiles Ryou had seen himself give in photos. More of the illusion that he was speaking to himself crumbled away.

He shivered, his nails digging into his palm as he made a fist, hanging on to his courage. “Who are you, spirit? Who were you before you were trapped?”

Koe shrugged. Even that looked strange to Ryou, not quite right. “You already know that. A thief, a survivor, a prisoner. You have seen for yourself who I was in life, you’ve lived my memories as though they were your own.” A brief smile flickered across his face. “Were you not paying attention?”

Even the voice was subtly wrong. Ryou had heard himself on recording before and knew what he sounded like. Koe was using the voice of Ryou Bakura, but it came out as someone else, someone older, stronger and… someone more ruthless.

Ryou shook his head, wrapping his arms around himself. He bowed his head, hiding the double from view with a curtain of hair, as though that could block out reality. But this wasn’t reality, was it? It couldn’t be. He was dreaming, for years he had been dreaming all of this up and would surely one day wake. Or he’d long ago gone insane, and was either raving at shadows or raving in a ward somewhere. Being insane would be so much easier to accept than that all of this was real. His reality.

“Ryou.”

He jerked his head back up. Koe was much closer than he had been before. Too close for comfort, yet somehow Ryou didn’t dare to try backing away. He stood his ground, trembling.

Koe was looking at him intently in the eye - with Ryou’s eyes. The impression that he was looking into himself, his fractured soul seeking out pieces of itself settled into his mind. He wished he hadn’t thought of it. It made him dizzy on top of everything else.

“You feel as though it’s all bad,” Koe said thoughtfully. “But… Hasn’t your life gotten a little better, a little easier, since I’ve become a part of it?”
Ryou gasped and nearly fell backwards. The mirror image of himself had snuck a hand under his shirt, all without breaking eye contact. Ryou hadn’t noticed until fingertips were resting lightly on his belly.

They were cold fingertips, and so was the palm that Koe pressed into him. The chill slid up his abdomen, feeling strangely unreal for something that also felt solid. Ryou began to shake everywhere, his cheeks heating up as he kept his eyes locked on Koe’s, as Koe’s hand continued its path upwards…

There was a gentle tug on Ryou’s neck; the cord for the Millennium Ring. Koe had hooked a finger through the Ring beneath his shirt and given it a little jerk. Koe smiled at him. “Since the Ring found its way to you, its true owner?”

Ryou took a breath, unable to help the thought that in this case ‘ownership’ seemed to go both ways. He wondered if it was a thought Koe heard.

“Better,” he managed after a minute. “You made me into a liar. A thief. A killer. How is that better?”

Koe looked surprised. For a moment Ryou thought he might be angry and braced himself for whatever might come of that, but no. Instead of anger, Koe gave a brief nod and bowed his own head. His hand dropped away from Ryou, as cold as ever, and yet Ryou felt colder still with its absence.

“I see why you would view it so. Yadonushi, Pegasus was very far from a good man. You know some of what he was capable of, but believe me when I tell you that he was capable of much more besides. He was no stranger to murder himself, nor to other crimes, some even worse. Kidnapping, blackmail, manipulation, the taking and using of others’ souls to his own selfish ends… I did not intend his death, but do not doubt that he was undeserving of life.”

Koe believed what he was saying. Ryou could feel the force of his conviction clearly, as well as see it in his face and hear it in his voice. He truly believed Pegasus deserved to die and felt no remorse for his lose. Because of the link between them, Ryou felt it all as though the emotions were his own. He had to concentrate to keep them separate, to remember his own convictions and not allow them to be drowned by Koe’s.

“He may not have been a good person,” Ryou said slowly, “but he was still human. He couldn’t have been completely bad. He loved his wife so much. He loved her and mourned her loss terribly. It was really what started him along the path he wound up on, why he did all he did - to get her back. Surely that proves he deserved a second chance?”

“You think so?” Koe’s voice was low, a dangerous edge to the words. Ryou noticed that his stance had changed slightly, gone rigid. Ryou’s heart beat faster.

“Do you really think that, Yadonushi?” The words were barely more than a snarl. “You believe that intentions count more than actions, that a noble end can justify or even legitimize an abhorrent means?”

Koe looked up, and Ryou did finally take a step back when he saw the look in his eye. “Pegasus took the souls of living humans in the hope of bringing back one dead one. Had they been willing sacrifices, then it might be defensible, but they weren’t.” Koe took a step towards Ryou, closing the gap the boy had put between them. “The stealing of souls is worse than murder, Yadonushi,” he said lowly. “By their theft and eventual destruction, he would have been denying them their immortality.”
Ryou swallowed, trying to think of some way to respond, but no words would come. Koe sneered.

"Who was he to decide how a soul was to be used, or that it should be used at all?"

A flicker of memory, an old one that smelled of heat and sand, tugged at Ryou. He couldn’t quite bring it close or see why it had chosen to wake just then, but it left him with the very definite impression that Koe was not speaking only of Pegasus.

When Koe looked him in the eye again he was calmer, but there was still an angry tilt to his brows, in his shoulders.

“You are tired, Yadonushi. It has been an exhausting tournament.”

He reached out and touched his cheek with an icy finger. “Sleep, Ryou Bakura.”

When Ryou woke he had no way to confidently sift through his memories. How much of what he remembered was real, and how much had been dream? Had Koe possessed him as he slept? Had he dreamed the whole experience?

Was what he was experiencing now real, or a dream?

When he went to check for the Millennium Eye, it was gone, and Ryou couldn’t find it when he went searching. He thought about asking Koe where it had gone, but decided against it. He’d spoken with the spirit enough for a while, whether asleep or awake.

Still feeling exhausted, Ryou went back to bed. He could only hope he would be the same person when he woke.

Chapter End Notes

If you haven’t read the manga, then there are a few things that are probably a bit different from what you remember at this point.

**Pegasus:** In the original manga, Pegasus died. He never came back later to hang out with our main characters as a reformed good guy. Ah, well. I liked that guy.

**Yadonushi:** Pretty sure we covered this already, but - ‘Yadonushi’ is the name Yami Bakura uses to refer to Ryou, and it means ‘landlord.’ However, this particular word can also mean ‘host,’ both in the sense of a host of a home and one harboring parasites. Charming.

**Koe:** From what I understand, this is the word Ryou uses to refer to Yami Bakura in the original Japanese, and it translates as ‘voice.’ (coughKherucoughparallelscough)

**Meikyū brothers:** In the anime they were called Para and Dox (haha) making the Paradox brothers. They were fairly pathetic villains in the anime and more or less useless in the manga as well, but they did have one interesting role. That being offering up an impossible riddle for the mains to solve, after which they would… I dunno, be left to die underground. (Probably get dragged back up to the surface, but you never know in this series just how deadly the games are likely to get.) The riddle was mostly the same in the manga, but Yami Bakura helped out slightly in solving it.
Mokuba: It was an addition of the anime that Yami Bakura wanted to use Mokuba as a new vessel because he had no soul, as Ryou’s body did. I thought about bending my ‘manga continuity’ rule to include this, but decided against it.

Yamis: As I’m fond of pointing out, in the original manga, Yami Yugi was a scary dude. I went through and counted up the deaths that could be attributed to him in the original run (before the turn of the plot to focus on Duel Monsters) as well as people driven to insanity by his penalty games. It was pretty high for a supposed hero. The original focus of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* was meant to be horror rather than long running card game advert, and it shows in the early issues. Because of this, Yami Yugi and Yami Bakura are not nearly so far apart in character as later issues and traditional narrative would have you believe. Me being me, I take perverse delight in bringing this to the fore and twisting it to my own nefarious purposes. Because I can.

Eye: The Millennium Eye was definitely taken by Yami Bakura. The scene in which Ryou discovers this was heavily inspired by a scene in the doujinshi *Please BE DEAD* but by LECHE. I have a weakness.

Tendershipping: The ship of Yami Bakura x Ryou Bakura. Tendershippers may rejoice in the tiny bit of fanservice that made it into this chapter. I personally ship just about every combination of Bakura and Yugi (and goddamnit, *YGO* for making it so that there’s more than one combo, what with multiple spirits and reincarnations…) and I’ll be indulging in a few of them to various degrees throughout the story. This was the first real glimpse of that.

The next chapter is going to have some additional warnings for some graphic material, so be prepared and take care of yourselves, guys.

Thanks for reading and have a safe New Year, everyone!
Part XIII

Chapter Notes

I was intending to give myself a late Christmas/birthday present by getting this and a chapter to another story posted before the end of 2017. Then I got sick, so that didn't happen.

THERE IS AN ADDED TRIGGER WARNING FOR THIS CHAPTER! The first portion of this chapter includes animal violence which, while not gory, could still be difficult to read. For this reason, the rating of the fic is going up to an 'M.' If you'd like to skip violence, then hit 'ctrl' and 'f' ('command' and 'f' on a Mac) and search for (+). After that, the rest of the chapter picks up with only vague references back to the scene before. If you'd like to skip the scene itself but get an idea of what happened, I'll include a very dry summary in the post chapter author's note. Take care of yourselves, everyone.

Historian's Note: This story takes place before, during and (eventually) after the original story through Millennium World, following the canon established in the manga. There will be spoilers, so proceed with caution.

Soundtrack: ‘Haunted’ on 8tracks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part XIII

Bakhura trembles, and attempts to block out the sound coming from the next room. It’s difficult, and not entirely effective. The particular quality of these screams is just at the perfect pitch and shrillness to slice through every one of his nerves. It’s fair, it’s what the screams are meant to do.

This is the first time he has attempted what he about to do, and the nervousness of getting it wrong in some way is almost as intense as the trembling of reluctance stealing over his limbs. He has read of ceremonies similar to this one, and with a little creativity it wasn’t hard to design an all new ceremony using the old as a template. It should work. He hopes it will work. He would hate for all of this to have been for nothing.

Moving with deliberate slowness, resisting the urge to hurry through the ritual in order to silence the noise, and ignoring the second urge to drop everything, cut the bonds of his captive and flee back into the light himself, he goes about the final motions of preparation.

His thoughts skitter away from his actions even as his body is forced to remain, and he finds himself thinking of Iumeri. The old man is growing worse as the years go on and on before him. He is no longer able to sit so long in the hot sun, plying his trade to passersby, nor to keep such careful track of his thoughts. It must be of particular frustration, Bakhura thinks, to have a wandering mind when before it was one accustomed to orderly lists. But such is the state of the elderly, disgraced scribe, and all Bakhura can do is watch as he falls further and further into senility.
The one thing that seems to bring the old man peace is the very thing to which he dedicated his life and which Bakhura secretly thinks assisted in baking his brains. Writing. The fevers come upon him more frequently, now, where he is possessed with the need to write out every detail of every bit of history that he knows. Bakhura has come to appreciate and to dread the fevers. On one hand they prove that Iumeri’s mind is still his own, and he has lost none of his vast knowledge or his personal passions to the ravages of time. On the other hand, the violence of his fevers are growing, sending him into such states of agitation and activity that he is left useless as a limp rag for days or weeks after they pass. Several times Bakhura has wondered if this would be the fit that finally exhausted him beyond recovery, or possibly the next, and Iumeri would slip away to the afterlife, leaving him alone once again.

One of his fevers had just broken when Bakhura rose out. He left the old man limp and exhausted, reasonably certain that he would both survive his recovery, and yet be too tired to get into any mischief while he is gone. It’s a small consolation that Iumeri does not know where he has gone or what he is doing. He is certain that the old man would not approve of his actions, would be upset if he knew, and might be thrown into a new kind of fit.

He murmurs words in the dim light, words he stole from books and made his own. He washes the blade again and again in a basin of water as he speaks aloud in the darkness. The knife is also stolen, and one of his best acts of thievery. Priests are not given to relinquishing their ceremonial daggers, and to sneak into a chamber where such tools are kept takes more than the disguise of an apprentice. No, he had snuck within the walls of their temple, completely undetected and with the help of the little god - Diabound.

Diabound. The name of his ka, the god that rests in his soul, who comes to the fore when danger threatens him. Finally, they had grown in strength enough to make communication possible, and at long last they both have names.

The handle of the knife is smooth against Bakhura’s palm, polished by the countless hands of High Priests as they gripped it, offering up the gift of life to their chosen Gods. Now it is he who holds it, who is to sacrifice to his chosen God as His only worshipper and High Priest by default.

Another tremor runs through him, his stomach clenches. Taking a steadying breath, he grips the knife tighter, concentrates on the words his mouth must form, and tries to ignore the cries, which have become piteous mewls.

- What? -

He has planned for this moment for some time. He has gathered all of the necessary tools, memorized the words, found a perfect place and the… proper sacrifice… and he is determined not to be dissuaded now. Not even by his own misgivings.

Bakhura has known compulsion in his young life. In the years he has walked the land, he has known driving need and want, destitution and the pain of not having what is needed to survive. The drive to live on, and to do what is needed in order to live on is an old friend of his, familiar if not necessarily welcome. He knows the impulse to lash out, to cause pain and havoc for its own sake or simply to strike a balance with how he feels within himself. This is different.

Since discovering the God Zorc Necrophades in the buried temple at Kul Elna, he has often felt the presence of Him riding along in his mind. He does not hear His voice, or feel him in the same way he had while sitting in the pressing darkness of the temple, surrounded by the spirits of Kul Elna, but He is there. Bakhura can sense Him, listening to his thoughts, looking out through his eyes… And he can sometimes feel it when his God wishes something.
This is something that He wants. He had told Bakhura that no sacrifice was needed in order to open the door to His power, but this is not for that. Zorc does not require a sacrifice for the acquisition of His power, He simply desires it for Himself. And His desire has passed on to Bakhura, the want of a God, pressing on him until he can no longer resist.

A fine sweat has broken across his skin, though the air around him is cool. He shrugs it away. He has come so far, what is the point of stepping now?

He goes over the steps in his mind. They are simple enough. The most complex of them he has already done. He must remember, though, not to burn the body. To burn the body of the sacrifice would carry it up to the Heavens. This sacrifice is not for those Gods. He must dispose of it in another way, bury it or leave it out for the jackals in the desert.

Swallowing hard, wishing his stomach to stillness, Bakhura turns away from the cleansing basin and walks towards the source of the small cries and whimpers of distress.

The place he has chosen is old and abandoned. Once it had been a place of worship, but for some reason now is empty. He does not know which God it was that was worshipped here, not does he care. It does not matter. Even if the God has remained longer than Their worshippers, he will still steal Their space for a time.

In the center of this room there is a table. The table is too large for his needs, but that’s fine. All around the table he has placed lamps and candles, lighting his work in the otherwise pitch blackness. It is very late, now, and there is no light save the glow of dancing flames. The light is enough to see by. Enough to see the feebly struggling figure he has tied to the table with many pieces of rope and twine.

A normal sacrifice to a God would be that of a goat or a bull. Sometimes smaller gifts are also given, many of them bloodless. Bakhura has even heard of some priests giving their Gods the blood of human. But Zorc is no ordinary God, and no ordinary sacrifice will be enough for Him. To Him the great pantheon is but a great collection of annoyances and enemies, Beings to be conquered and consumed.

The sacrifice He would most wish for would be that of a God.

Or a piece of a God.

When it sees him come into the room, the cat renews its howls. In the dim light the eyes gleam, the teeth flash and there is the wet shimmer of the open mouth. The low throated howls echo and bounce weirdly about the room, creating dozens of felines in terror out of shadows.

- No... -

Bakhura turns his face away, the grip upon the knife tightening to the point of pain.

Even more dangerous than his theft of the ritual knife, or of the books explaining the magic that goes into such a ritual, was the theft of his sacrifice.

There are many cats throughout the land, the great majority of which would go unnoticed if they went missing. Cats are as revered as they are useful, and even the poorest citizens could be said to ‘own’ a cat. They are excellent hunters, and do much to reduce the population of common pests such as mice and rats, and even some deadly ones such as scorpions. Cats are everywhere, easy to find and easy to take unnoticed.

Yet it was not just any common cat that would do for this ceremony. The ritual needed a piece of a
God to be the sacrifice, and for that would require a representative of a God. There were many who
took the form of animals. None were quite so revered and easy to transport as a cat, who is an
avatar of the Goddess Bastet. Any cat could be said to be Her avatar, but Bakhura needs to be
certain of the connection between avatar and Goddess.

The cat now bound to his table is a petite, sleek animal, well fed and pampered. It is a cat that has
known no hardship save that of a meal served late. He stole this cat from a temple of Bastet, where
the creatures are allowed to roam freely. This particular one had been blessed by the priests, made
a vessel of their Goddess, and treated as Her personal pet, or even She Herself should She decide to
visit Her worshippers. It was as close to a God as he was ever likely to get on his table.

And he had stolen it. Stolen the cat and bound it here. The cat has never known unkindness or
cruelty before, and is as angry as it is frightened.

It is a suitable sacrifice, the feeding of one God to another, and in a way an even more powerful
gift than had he stolen one of the priests to bind to his table. And yet it ought to be easier to carry
out than the killing of a human. It is just a cat, after all, an animal incapable of begging for its life
with words. It should be easier.

One of Bakhura’s knuckles snaps as his grip continues to tighten. It’s nearly done. He only has a
little longer to endure.

- No. No no no. -

He takes a deep breath, and begins the second part of the prayer of sacrifice. It’s a prayer he has
learned through his reading and heard once in practice. He knows the proper rhythms and
cadences, and any place where the words do not quite suit the situation he changes as he needs.
The result is a rougher prayer than what he heard the High Priest speak over his sacrifice, but it
still works. Like a hand in his gut clenching into a fist, he can feel the heka taking hold. If only he
can steady the tremble in his voice.

He suspects that his intention builds the heka more than his words. The words are important, but
not so much as the intention he imbues them with as he speaks, and his intention -

- horrible intention. Stop, you don’t have to do this -

He walks towards the center of the room, towards his makeshift altar and its captive, the dagger
raised before him like a shield. It does not stop him hearing the feline howls, whose volume has
redoubled as his own volume increases, building towards a crescendo.

- Bakhura! -

The echoes of the yowling and of chanting spawns even more cats out the darkness, more Bakhuras
reciting the prayer of offering. Will the duplication increase the power of his offering?

- God, why can’t I just wake up? -

He stands before the altar, before his sacrifice. As though sensing what it about to happen, it
struggles against its bonds, its yowling becoming desperate and wild. It is no use, though. He has
secured the cat too well, and it only does damage to itself as it thrashes.

- Bakhura, please, you don’t want to do this. -

The knife rises up in the darkness, handle slick in his grip. He comes to the final words of the
prayer, shouting them into the shadows and -
- Don’t! -

- stops.

His hand is frozen in the air, his shoulder locked in place. Trembling, on the very edge of bringing down the blade, he looks down on the animal. His vision is blurred, but there is no mistaking the knowing terror in the cat’s eye. Can a mere animal know what is about to befall it? Can he coldly bring down the blade on a creature that sees its own end?

- It’s alright. You don’t have to. -

Zorc requires no sacrifice. There is no reason for any of this save the satiation of an appetite. Is that reason enough to take a life, even a small one?

- Just… just let it go. Please. -

Long moments pass, frozen in that tableau. His arms raised, holding the dagger; the cat below him struggling feebly, still crying out in terror and pain. Within him, Bakhura can feel the built up heka writhe impatiently, awaiting its final release. Balanced on the precipice, his mind races so quickly it’s almost peaceful.

Then, his grip on the dagger grows tight again, every muscle in his body becomes taut and his mind sharpens with renewed force.

- Wait, no! -

There is no question in what he does. Zorc is the key to the retribution of Kul Elna, his and their only path to justice. Zorc is the way, and if He is the key, then it is only right that he should sacrifice in His name.

- Bakhura, please! -

It is right that a hero spill a little blood in the name of his cause.

- Bakhura! -

His hands tremble only a little, his vision still blurred -

- Stop! Stop! -

- a red, wet, glistening mouth opened wide to yowl -

- Please! -

- a flash of metal in the dark -

- the unholy screams of dozens of cats -

- No! -

Ryou woke to oppressive darkness, his heart hammering in his chest, panting like a sprinter at the end of a track -

And vomited.
Once the final bell rang, Ryou quickly gathered up his books and supplies and left before the usual gang clustered up before heading home. He doubted that anyone would really notice that he wasn’t there. Any group that included Jonouchi and Honda was guaranteed to get loud, and Ryou was naturally quiet and reserved. Unless some sort of miracle happened and those two happened to be calm today, no one would take much more than a passing note of his absence. It wasn’t something that got much remarked on any other time when he wasn’t a part of the group.

Trotting at an easy peace, Ryou moved through the crowd of students all heading the same way as he was. He wasn’t fighting the whole school out the doors, thankfully. There was a good percentage of the student body who remained to take part in clubs or after school committees. Those who were leaving as soon as they were able were those who had commitments to neither. So it was a rather mixed crowd Ryou walking through, made up mostly of two types: the slackers and delinquents, and the quiet shut-ins.

Of the two, Ryou supposed that he fell into the second category. He didn’t properly count as a shut-in any more, not with the friends he now had and just how often he would leave his apartment when it wasn’t strictly required that he do so. But he had managed to avoid joining any committees, despite the strong encouragement of classmates to become a part of the student council, and had never gotten around to joining any clubs. It might have been wiser to join a club, even a small one, just so he would have that extra bit of connection and involvement with his peers, but he just hadn’t been able to find the motivation to do so. Now it was too late to join any clubs, and Ryou found that he was not sad for the missed opportunity.

The crowd around him all moved towards the gate of the school in a flowing tide of humanity. Moving so as to draw as little attention as possible, Ryou broke away from the current and ducked around the side of the school building. His bag bounced against his side heavily as he walked, its unusual contents making it so the strap almost cut into his shoulder.

Technically he wasn’t meant to be in this area. Technically no students were, as it was where the bins for garbage, recycling and the school’s incinerator were all to be found, as well as some storage sheds. That didn’t stop a good majority of the school still using it as a shortcut from the front of the school to the back. It was also sometimes used by the cliques of roughs as a hangout spot to cut periods and smoke. None were using the area at the moment, which was a bit of a relief. Oddly enough, he wasn’t worried about running into any of the roughs in the sense of his own safety. He had a feeling he could handle himself if something happened.

He went along until he came to the storage sheds used by the athletic clubs. Inside would be all of the balls, bats, rackets, hurdles, nets, and who knew what all else, shelved and boxed carefully for students. Ryou had no interest in the contents of the shed, and walked around to the back. It was a little narrow, set close as it was to the wall encircling all of the school grounds, and was an area ignored even by the most determined of delinquents. Once he was sure he was out of the line of sight to anyone, Ryou slowed his pace.

He scanned the ground carefully, running his eye along where the shed met the earth. Soon he came to a spot where the ground dipped down, leaving a gap to the underside of the shed. The newer outbuildings of Domino High didn’t have proper foundations, but were instead readymade boxes set and secured at the corners. The little gap, Ryou knew from past investigations, led to a small space beneath the shed. A small pocket of air hidden away from all of the students and faculty who walked by every day.
Ryou sat down close to but not directly in front of the gap. Moving slowly and quietly, he opened his bag and dug out the extra items he had packed that morning.

Before long, there were four small bowls set out around him, two full of water and two with meat in a sauce. Beside Ryou lay an empty water bottle and two empty cans of wet cat food. He backed away a little further from the gap, around which he had arranged all of the bowls, and clicked his tongue, calling out.

It took a little time and a few more tries at calling, but eventually Ryou’s patience was rewarded with a small noise, and then a small furry face emerging into the light. He kept still as first one, and then more cats came out from the little den beneath the shed. The first was the largest by far, a long haired calico of mostly orange and black with wary eyes. Behind her trailed a small band of what he assumed was her litter. There were three of them. One was another long hair, orange with brown patches on his head and the base of his tail, the smallest was gray with a white chest and only a nubbin for a tail, and the last and largest was short haired and solid gray so dark it was almost black.

They all trooped out, the kittens following their mother closely, nosing around curiously but remaining behind her protective bulk. The mother, who Ryou had begun thinking of as Yua, watched him narrowly as she approached the food bowls. As Ryou never moved, never reached out for her or her kittens, it wasn’t long before she was eating, her litter quickly joining in.

Ryou smiled, listening with satisfaction to the sounds of four mouths working hard at the food he had brought. He’d noticed some time ago that there was at least one cat that hung around the school on a daily basis. Whether anyone else had taken particular note he didn’t know, but he’d watched her whenever he spotted her. It had almost been an accident the day he had seen where she liked to hole up on campus.

He didn’t think she could have always been a stray. Yua was wary around people, but she had allowed Ryou to stroke and pet her a little in the past. She was more guarded with the litter of kittens, but still not completely averse to human contact, or of humans being near her and her brood.

She was better about humans being near than the strays that like to hang around his apartment building. Those were all extremely people shy, and he had yet to coax a single one near enough for a scratch behind the ears. For them, all he could do was refill their bowls and hope that they were alright.

As for Yua and her kittens… He’d toyed with the idea of taking one or all of them home with him if he could calm them to his hand enough to get them into a carrier - and sneak a carrier onto school grounds. But he wasn’t sure he wanted four cats all banging around his apartment, or that the landlord would allow four. He might allow one, and then the rest… maybe he could find homes for them. Probably the kittens, as they would have the best luck at being adopted. Though Yua was so pretty, she would probably be taken in quickly if he asked around. It would be a chore, finding homes for so many cats, but it would be better than them remaining on the streets.

One of the kittens, the medium orange and brown, finished eating and, after a look at his mother, trotted over to Ryou and rubbed at his hands. Ryou smiled and petted the furry little head. For some reason, out of the four of them the orange kitten was the friendliest. He was the first of the kittens to come close to him, immediately after he saw his mother do so. As Ryou rubbed around the fuzzy triangles of ears he began to purr, a ridiculously loud buzz for such a small cat. If it ever came down to a matter of choosing, then Ryou knew he would probably take the orange boy. He was too sweet, and melted his heart every time he came near for attention.
“Well, that’s a surprise.”

Five heads all jerked around at the sound of the voice as Ryō and every cat looked. The gray kitten actually ran halfway back to the gap before stopping, while, to Ryō’s surprise, the rest remained fairly calm.

What surprised him more was the sight of Yūgi standing at the ‘threshold’ of the space between the shed and the wall. He stood, thumbs looped under the straps of his backpack, a bemused kind of smile on his face as he looked over the scene of Ryō and the four cats.

“Yūgi! What are you doing here?”

The smile went a little crooked at the question. “Finding out what you’re doing here,” he replied. He nodded back towards the main building of the school. “I saw you from the window, and wondered what was so interesting.”

“Oh.”

Yūgi shifted a little from foot to foot, casting a glance over his shoulder like he was nervous. “Would it be okay if I, ah, came in?”

Ryō froze for a second, taken off guard by the question. It seemed rather formal for just asking if he could squeeze in behind the sports equipment shed. “Ah… yes. Just move slowly. They still scare pretty easily.”

Yūgi nodded and followed the instructions, moving slow, watching to see how the cats were reacting to his presence, stopping whenever it seemed they needed an extra minute to adjust to him. When he was just beside Ryō he stopped and sank down to the ground with him. The cats handled the appearance of a second, unknown person well. Only the gray had retreated back to the den, and was already peeking back out curiously. The little orange never left Ryō, though his purrs stopped for a minute. They were already picking back up again.

They sat in silence for a while as Yua and her kittens settled and resumed eating and drinking. Ryō cast a curious glance at Yūgi, but he was just watching the cats, a little smile on his face. It was definitely the ‘normal’ Yūgi, he thought, looking at the Puzzle hanging round his neck. There was none of the sharpness of the other Yūgi about him just now, none of the dangerousness he had come to recognize as the spirit contained within the Millennium item. Ryō was glad it was just Yūgi he sat with. It was easier.

After a while Yūgi spoke, his voice low and soft for the sake of the cats. “I just wanted to see what it was you were up to, you know? You left class so fast and all…”

Ryō frowned, realizing that Yūgi was repeating himself. When he looked back at him again, he had an embarrassed expression on his face, his eyes half lowered, teeth digging into his lower lip. It was a strange way for Yūgi to act around him. It was almost nervous, and Yūgi had never been nervous around him before, never had a reason to…

And then he remembered. Things were different now.

“Oh.” Ryō did his best to sound off hand, collected as he replied. “Well, you know. I wanted to get down here before anyone else. If people saw me, they might come back here like you did, and a lot of people would scare the cats.”

Yūgi nodded at his explanation, accepting it without any further questions, but there was still a line between his brows, a cloudiness to his eyes that told Ryō that he still had reservations.
Ryou wanted to clear that expression, to do away with the doubts he saw lurking behind Yugi’s eyes. He wanted to have Yugi look at him and see only a friend, his expression free of doubt or worry. But he could think of nothing he could do which would work such magic. All the things he could think of to say would only make things worse. All he could do for now was wait and hope.

Because Yugi knew now. He knew that Koe wasn’t gone, that he still resided in the Millennium Ring, and that Ryou had not only kept the Ring, but worn it again. He still didn’t know how long ago Ryou had decided to put it back on, nor that he wore it every day under his shirt, but… he knew.

It had taken a little while for the memories to come to him, it being one of those times when Koe had taken over his body completely. Yugi had gone missing during the opening of the Black Crown game shop, a store belonging to the family of a new classmate, Ryuji Otogi. The whole of their group minus Honda had gone to the opening, and all of them had noticed the loss of their smallest member, but the employees had been unhelpful to say the least. They’d had to leave without Yugi, just hoping they had missed him leaving and that he would turn up again. Ryou had left with everyone else, uneasiness twisting his insides.

Apparently his disturbed state had been enough to alert Koe that something was wrong, and he’d stepped into Ryou’s body. What happened next had taken a couple of days to remember, and was still a little fuzzy in places. Yugi had explained a lot of it to them later, so Ryou thought he had a pretty good picture, but… there were still gaps.

There had been some sort of feud between Mr. Otogi, Ryuji’s father, and Yugi’s grandfather years ago. Ryou still wasn’t certain what it was, exactly, but it was enough to have Mr. Otogi seeking revenge, even using his own son in pursuit of it. His plan was to have Ryuji take the Millennium Puzzle from his enemy’s grandson and somehow use the Puzzle against him. He knew something of the power held within the artifact, it seemed, though Ryou seriously doubted he had any idea of the extent of those powers.

Koe knew the man was clueless, and a fool. He had returned to the Black Crown after it closed, forced his way past the remaining employees, and found Yugi, Ryuji and Mr. Otogi in a back room, playing a new kind of game with the Millennium Puzzle as a prizing. Koe had been angry at the scene laid out before him. Yugi sat across from a smug Ryuji, his gloating father standing at his shoulder, and the Millennium Puzzle, once again in pieces between them. The anger that anyone would be so presumptuous had run through him like hot lead. Even so long after the event, it was frightening to remember the heat of that rage.

Tempering that anger, though, was the unshakable conviction that Yugi would come away from it all fine, with his Puzzle in hand. It surprised Ryou when he found that conviction, felt it for himself secondhand and knew that it came from Koe. He wouldn’t have thought that Koe, of all people, was capable of putting such faith in one of Ryou’s friends. Yet he did. There was no mistaking the feeling and no hiding it, not from Ryou.

He had stayed there, standing at Yugi’s side as he fought Ryuji, acting as his advocate and supporter. No matter how dark and unpromising it had looked for Yugi, Koe had remained stalwart, never once swaying in his belief, and never once allowing Yugi to doubt himself. Looking at it as he did from the outside, long after it was all done, Ryou couldn’t help but draw the comparison between Koe and the spirit of the Puzzle. It was almost as though when Yugi lost the presence of one, the other had stepped in to take up the role, never permitting him to falter.

Yugi had won against Ryuji, of course, despite the odds stacked against him. Just as with the rage and the conviction, Ryou could still feel the swell of pride as though it had been him standing
there. So proud of the young man, the holder of the Millennium Puzzle.

After that was where Koe’s memories became a little hazy to Ryou. There was the great feeling of pride and… something else Ryou couldn’t quite identify. He helped Yugi to gather up the pieces of the Millennium Puzzle, his mind a bit of a cloud, whatever he had been thinking only coming to Ryou in tiny pieces. Something about remaining near Yugi, watching over him, and the memories of a king.

It was only a couple of minutes between Yugi winning the game and Koe’s memories cutting off, picking up again when Ryou ‘woke up’ in the dim back room, disorientated and confused. Only a couple of minutes. Not much in which anything could have happened.

Ryou still worried.

Ryou couldn’t blame Yugi for looking troubled when he looked at him. Despite what Koe had said to him, that he had changed and was now Yugi’s friend, and despite how he had stood by his side as an ally, he was still the one who had nearly stripped Yugi and all of his friends of their souls. It was only natural that he be wary. It was the smart thing to do. After all, Ryou shared headspace with the spirit and still couldn’t be certain of him.

It was probably just as well that Yugi still didn’t know some things about the spirit, about the Ring. About him. He didn’t know how long ago Ryou had put the Ring back on, or what he had done while Koe had been in control. He didn’t know about Pegasus, or the Eye. He didn’t know that Ryou still wore the Ring even now, hidden beneath shirt and jacket.

Guilt crawled up Ryou’s spine, making his shoulders hitch up higher. He wanted Yugi to trust him, to have no reason to distrust him, yet he hid so many things from him. Important things. And when given the opportunity to stand beside him as a friend himself, perhaps absolve himself a little of his repeated betrayals, he had failed. When the time came to prove that he was a better friend than the traitor he considered himself, he’d dropped the ball.

Ryou tilted his head, glancing at Yugi as inconspicuously as he could manage. He still had a couple of bandages on his face, a band aid or two and one square patch on one cheek. His hands were still pink and sensitive looking, and just visible beneath the leather collar he liked to wear, Ryou could still make out the edge of lightning bruises around Yugi’s throat.

Battle scars from what had come after the game. Ryou’s guilt spread across Yugi’s body.

Koe had left after standing in support of Yugi, perhaps giving him just the boost he needed in order to see the game through to the end. He had left, and Ryou had returned to himself in time to see Mr. Otogi, deranged with his wrath denied him, attack his friend. The old man had taken hold of the chain round Yugi’s neck and choked him with it before dragging him away to another room, locking the door behind them. It was there where, somehow, a fire had broken out. A fire which had consuming the entire building before being extinguished, and nearly killing Mr. Otogi, Yugi, and Jonouchi, who had stayed with Yugi when he refused to leave without the Puzzle.

Yugi had gone to the hospital for his burns, the smoke inhalation and the damage done to his throat by the chain. He had only been released in the last few days to return to school.

And Ryou hadn’t done anything in order to prevent it.

*Koe* had stood by Yugi’s side, but when the time came for Ryou to do the same, what had he done? Nothing.
Useless.

He wondered if Yugi ever felt like this, like a second fiddle to the spirit sharing his body, superfluous in his own body. He wanted to ask, to talk about the shared experience of playing host to long dead ghosts, but realized that there was no good way to ask that sort of question. Apart from everything else, it would mean admitting that he didn’t think his own spirit was all bad. It was the truth, but he didn’t think he could stand the scrutiny, the inevitable questions that would follow. He wasn’t even sure he could explain it to himself, let alone anyone else. Let alone Yugi.

He already dreaded Yugi deciding to ask him why he had decided to put the Ring back on, why he hadn’t told anyone he had. Answering that question would either mean a good number of uncomfortable revelations or straight up lies. Ryou wasn’t ready for either.

The silence went on, uncomfortable to begin with and only stretching on into truly unbearable territory. The only consolation was how the orange kitten climbed into Ryou’s lap, settled down and purred like a bandsaw. After a while and many careful sniffs, the short tailed one came up to Yugi, who stroked him carefully and slowly. Even Yua stepped close enough for an ear scratch, with her final kitten pressing close at her side, opposite of the looming human he kept a constant watch on.

Yugi shifted, and Ryou tensed more than any of the strays arranged around them. But rather than any of the dreaded questions he had been expecting, Yugi came out with, “They’re really friendly for strays.”

Surprised but pleased, Ryou nodded. “They are. I think the mother must have been abandoned recently, and her attitude towards people has rubbed off on the kittens.”

Yugi nodded his agreement. “That makes sense. …You know, if someone like Karita comes along and finds them, he won’t let them stay. He’ll just get rid of them.”

Ryou scowled, knowing that Yugi was right. Damned Karita, why couldn’t he just…? But he wasn’t the only danger, however poor Ryou’s opinion of him was. There were other teachers who would agree with the tyrannical PE teacher, and plenty of students who just wouldn’t care or who would take a perverse pleasure in seeing the cat family ejected from this small haven. They wouldn’t be able to stay much longer without getting caught anyway. He said as much to Yugi, who listened without comment.

“It wouldn’t be right to let such friendly animals live on the street,” he went on. “They’re not exactly feral, and they seem healthy and pest free. I don’t think I could stand the thought of them getting picked up by the Department of Health and Hygiene.”

“What do you plan on doing, then?”

He shrugged, stroking the sleeping kitten in his lap thoughtfully. “I think… I think I could take one in, maybe two. And the rest… I don’t know. I could ask around, quietly, and see if there’s anyone else whose could take one? There’s only a few of them. Surely there’s that many people in a whole school willing and able to keep a cat.”

Yugi looked thoughtful, his own hand absentmindedly caressing the little bundle of fluff beside him. It seemed that cats acted well as a cognitive aid.

“Honda likes animals,” he said eventually. “But he already has a dog, so I don’t know if he can take another pet. I think Anzu likes cats, so we can ask her. I don’t think Jonouchi cares for cats all that much, but maybe his sister when she gets out of the hospital? She’ll be recovering, so she
might like a pet.”

Ryou felt his heart lighten as Yugi went on, naming potential homes for the strays. He hadn’t realized how heavily it had been weighing on him until a solution was offered. He smiled at Yugi, and in his relieved state, decided to tease. “What, no kitten for you, Yugi? I thought you would have snatched one up right away.”

Yugi grinned, a little self-consciously, which told Ryou he hadn’t been entirely off the mark. “I don’t know if my Grandpa would be happy about a cat at the shop. Or my mom.”

“Oh, I don’t know. A cat could give the shop a touch of mystery and attract more customers.”

Yugi laughed softly, and Ryou grinned even wider. It felt good to make Yugi laugh. It made him feel like they were normal students, normal friends. It was nice.

He looked down on the orange body in his lap, the furry little side rising and falling steadily as he slept. *If you come with me, Ryou decided, I’ll name you Ren.*

A small sound came from behind him. When he looked he saw Yugi holding one of the empty cans, reading the label. His eyebrows went up, nearly meeting his hairline. “Wow. This is really fancy food, Bakura. Not what you’d expect to see fed to strays.”

Ryou tensed. He knew Yugi didn’t mean what it sounded like, but he couldn’t help hearing the slur. He bit down on the inside of his cheek, holding back the first retort that leapt to his tongue. He took a breath, trying to settle down. “There’s no reason *not* to give them nice food. It’s not like they don’t deserve it.”

He looked at Yugi again. By the way Yugi’s eyes widened he knew his face had darkened in a scowl.

“It’s not their fault that they’re strays.”

Yugi’s face showed surprise, bewilderment, but Ryou didn’t care all of a sudden. Old memories were trying to come up behind his eyes. Memories that were thousands of years old, memories that had set him to feeding every stray he could find. An apology which had come too late, if any apology could be enough for what had happened in those memories.

Shifting the kitten from his lap as gently as possible, he gathered up the bowls and put them back in his bag. When he stood up, the cats hardly stirred. He didn’t look at Yugi again, didn’t want to see the renewed expression of concern on his face.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Yugi,” he said, and fled.

He was fleeing more than Yugi. He was trying to flee from the resurgence of memories he had been trying to avoid, to atone for. He was trying to flee the looks and the uncertainty in Yugi’s eyes and the guilt he felt whenever he was around him. He was trying to flee the feeling that sat in the pit of his stomach, that rose whenever he thought things just might be getting better.

He wouldn’t be able to escape it, none of it. Not when the source was being carried within him.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, for everyone who skipped the first portion but want to know what happened plot wise, here's a dry summary. Bakhura, since coming into contact with Zorc, is feeling an odd kind of pressure to sacrifice to him, though he knows it's not really required. He decides to sacrifice a cat to Zorc, but a cat which is dedicated to Bastet, making it, technically, a small 'piece' of Bastet, and so a like sacrificing a god to Zorc. Whether this is actually how that works is left ambiguous. While Bakhura is going through the motions, we hear Ryou trying to convince Bakhura to stop, and right towards the end it seems like it actually works. Except it doesn't, the sacrifice happens, and Ryou wakes up and immediately pukes.

**Cats:** It was illegal to harm or kill cats, at least during certain periods in ancient Egypt, whether wild or tame, let alone those belonging to temples. Doing so could lead to death sentences, even for those who were a part of the supposedly big, scary Roman armies. As an interesting side note, it was also illegal to export cats, leading to cat smuggling and the occasional army sent out to rescue the kidnapped felines. I really want to read or watch something centered around cat piracy and the brave soldiers sent to save them. The world needs more historical cat films.

**Heka:** 'Magic.' This is also the name of the God of, appropriately, magic. I found a reference somewhere that said that heka was seen as a chaotic force, and therefore an evil force in the mindset of the ancient Egyptians, but I haven't been able to find much confirming that.

**Yua:** A name meaning love and affection.

**Ren:** A name meaning lotus or love, depending on the kanji used.

**Ryuji Otogi / Black Crown:** For those who have only seen the anime, this is Duke Devlin. As with a lot of subplots, this one was a lot different in the manga, with a lot more background in it. This particular one was a lot creepier and higher stakes than what made it to screen. The high points were all mentioned in this chapter.

**Department of Health and Hygiene:** I live in the US, so the information I can get is probably questionable at best when it comes to the accuracy and specifics of this organization, but from what I can gather this department is pretty strict about the stray animals they find running loose.

**Honda's dog:** Yes, actually, Honda (Tristan) owns a dog, and we actually get to see him! He's a German Shepherd named Blankey (wow) and he makes another appearance in the Yu-Gi-Oh! videogame 'The Sacred Cards.' (Yes, I know I'm sad.)

**Yugi's mom:** He has one. In the manga she actually shows up a couple of times, but still pretty rare.

**Kittens:** There's a reference to another anime here. Ten points to anyone who catches it.

Thanks for reading everyone, see you next time!
(Now I'm going to go pet my cats…)

Part XIV

Chapter Notes

Okay, guys, after this chapter I have two more edited up and formatted, ready to go. They’ll be going up on Thursdays, two weeks apart from each other. Huzzah, a (brief) schedule!

Historian’s Note: This story takes place before, during and (eventually) after the original story through Millennium World, following the canon established in the manga. There will be spoilers, so proceed with caution.

Soundtrack: ‘Haunted’ on 8tracks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part XIV

It would have been impossible to see had the sky not been on fire with stars, a glowing cloud of luminescent smoke from one horizon to the other which seemed to roil before one’s eyes.

Ryou stared up at the sky, transfixed. He had lived his whole life in cities, densely populated places where the light from the ground drowned out the stars until only the brightest could be seen. He had visited the country, of course, and been impressed then by the number of pinpricks he could see while out in the comparative wilderness. And there had been Duelist Kingdom, a private island with almost nothing in the way of light pollution.

Neither experience held a candle to this. Even the dimmest of stars shone brightly here, all so clear and close that he felt as though he could reach up and scoop a handful of the heavens into his palm. It made his chest ache with a strange tightness, making it hard to breathe.

The stars were so many and so bright that when Ryou was finally able to tear his gaze away, he had no trouble at all seeing the world around him. Not that there was much to see. All around, stretching away into the darkness, Ryou was surrounded by empty desert. It was not like most of the deserts he had come to know through secondhand memories, which were broken up by hills of rock, boulders, small patches of vegetation showing where there could be underground water, or at least where there had once been water. This was more the desert that was shown on television, all sand heaped in great rolling hills, limned in the light of stars. It was beautiful, but…

Where am I?

It had to be a dream. The last thing Ryou could remember was going to sleep after preparing and eating his dinner. Unless Koe had taken over his body for an inordinately long time and dropped them somewhere far from Japan, it had to all be in his mind. Koe wouldn’t strand him in the middle of a desert, not when doing so could lead to his being seriously harmed. Whether for his sake or simply because Koe needed him alive and healthy, the spirit was always careful that Ryou remained safe and reasonably whole. So unless something completely unforeseen had happened, he was asleep.
Ryou shivered in the cold, and wrapped his arms around himself.

If this were a dream, though, then there were still a few things wrong with what he was experiencing. It was rare any more for Ryou to have dreams that were just dreams, and not the memories of who the spirit had been in life. His nights were full of Bakhura, surviving as he could and planning to somehow avenge his village. Since Koe had made contact with him again, Ryou had been remembering a lot of what he could only assume Koe had been suppressing before - he had been having memory-dreams nearly every night since the day he’d gotten the Ring. Six years of living two lives at once, his own during the day and Bakhura’s at night, and he had forgotten all of it until very recently.

Given where he was and what he was seeing, this wasn’t one of those rare dreams that was just his.

He shivered again. There was no breeze, but it was bitingly cold. If this were a dream, then it felt all too real. The chill, the sand that shifted with him under his feet, the very sensation of drawing icy air into his lungs, it all possessed a weight of reality which was never found in ordinary dreams. Ryou was much more inclined to believe that he was, once again, reliving one of Bakhura’s memories. But if that were true, then where was Bakhura?

Ryou looked down at himself, and he was most definitely himself. Blue jeans, tee shirt, sneakers he could already feel filling with sand; he was as far from the proper person to be standing in such a scene as he could imagine, and there was no Bakhura in sight. Which was all incredibly wrong if this was a memory. When he relived a memory, he relived it as though it were his own, from behind the eyes and within the mind of Bakhura. Sometimes, and only recently, he was able to remember that he was separate from Bakhura and have thoughts of his own alongside those of Bakhura’s, but never had he been given, essentially, a body of his own to experience the world he was thrust into.

And it was definitely his body, not Bakhura’s. His skin was too pale, the clothes all wrong, his body too lithe, hair too long, and the Ring…

Ryou’s hand went to his chest and found nothing besides the fabric of his shirt. He looked beneath the collar and a stab of panic hit him in the stomach.

The Ring was gone.

For an instant Ryou’s mind went completely blank as he tried to process, but it refused to fit properly inside his skull. His Ring was gone.

When reality finally hit, Ryou exploded into action, searching frantically for the circle of gold. There was nowhere in the empty sand where it could hide, not even in the half light of stars, but still he looked. He patted himself down, searched his pockets, even though they were all far too small to hold the Ring. When he was certain it couldn’t be hiding anywhere on himself, he fell to his knees and began to scrabble through the sand. Fine grains flew up around him as he dug, cold and eternally dry, no matter how far down he went.

Every few seconds one hand would return to his neck, as though the Ring could have returned on its own, or he could have somehow failed to notice it before, but always his hand remained empty. Just as the sand was proving to be. Empty, empty, empty! Only when his shoulders and arms began to burn and his fingertips to sting did Ryou slow and sit back on his heels, breathing hard.

He looked around the vast, empty landscape, a horrible thought occurring to him. What if the Ring really was here, somewhere, and he had to dig every dune down to nothing until he found it? Was this some kind of nightmare, a penalty game where the only rule was to find the Ring, find his
‘other self’ in order to escape? Though his memory refused to confirm this, he could easily imagine it as happening. Perhaps Koe had taken his body after Ryou had fallen asleep and been caught in a penalty game, and taken Ryou in with him.

If that was true, then what was happening on the outside with his friends? What had happened that would put him here? Where was Koe?

As he had with the sands, Ryou dug through his mind, searching for that other presence which always seemed to be lurking around the periphery of his thoughts. He didn’t think he had ever wished so fervently to actually find Koe before, nor so disappointed when there was no sign of him.

He was gone. Like the Ring, Koe was gone and Ryou was alone.

Ryou forced himself to breathe, to calm before panic overwhelmed him. Despite how real everything felt, it was still more plausible that what was going on was no more than a dream, a nightmare of his own subconscious’s making.

When his heart finally slowed, Ryou lifted his head and scanned his surroundings again, looking for any clue as to what he was meant to do. He studied the stars, but could make nothing of them. Even familiar constellations were impossible to distinguish with so many other normally invisible stars clustered around them. He looked across the sand dunes, searching for any kind of sign, anything that stood out from the velvety smoothness of the hills. There was nothing, not even so much as a breeze to stir the sands or to steer him in any direction...

Wait. Ryou squinted, thinking his eyes were playing tricks on him, or that in desperation he was seeing things which weren’t actually there.

His heart lifted as he became certain of what his eyes were telling him. Yes. Just beyond one of the dunes, there was a faint glow, as of a rising sun or distant city. It wasn’t very much to go on, but it was something. It was a direction. Ryou stood, a little unsteady, and began to walk, slipping and sliding in the sloping sands, but determined.

It felt as though he walked for hours on the treacherous dunes. Having to be careful when going down on one side so he didn’t fall and roll to the bottom, and then having to work three times as hard climbing back up to the next dune made the distance seem much more than it was. Worse, the source of the light was not just beyond the next dune, or even the one after that, and soon Ryou was sweating in the chilly air. And yet it was hard for him to say just how much time had passed. In the darkness, with no sun and no moon moving across the sky, the desert was rendered even more dreamlike and seemingly timeless.

The first sign of there being anything else in this limbo with him almost made his heart stop. Tracks.

Ryou stared. They were definitely tracks, and looked human enough, with only two feet digging deep furrows on the ascending side of a dune and then, yes, leaving wide sweeps on the descending side. They were moving in the same direction as he was - towards the light. He looked back in the direction they had come from, a path generally the same as his own but at an angle, but there was nothing to see. Ryou decided that it didn’t really matter, especially if the rest of the desert was as featureless as what he had seen so far. What mattered was where the tracks were going, and who was at the end of them.

Ryou went on with renewed energy, following the light and the tracks together.
He followed them long enough that he began to wonder if he was somehow following himself through the desert. The thought was enough to make a small echo of panic go through him.

He was so focused on the tracks themselves that he almost didn’t see the one who made them until he was on top of him.

Sitting just below the crest of a dune was a man. He sat with his back to Ryou, and seemed to be staring out towards the light, which did at last look a lot closer. Ryou squinted. In fact he could make out individual lights of torches, and the outlines of great buildings. He stared at it a moment, taken aback as his eyes adjusted to the distance and he realized just how large and sprawling the city was.

It couldn’t hold his attention for long, however. The man, a deeper shadow in the darkness, was by far the greater point of interest.

Even from behind and in the darkness, it was easy to see that it was a man. His shoulders were broad, and he sat at just enough of an angle for Ryou to make out the firm, squarish lines of his face. His hair was white, silvery in the starlight, hanging in messy locks about his ears. He wore some kind of robe, or possibly a blanket wrapped around his shoulders of some dark color, red or blue or black. His skin was also dark, though in the shadows it was difficult to tell just how dark.

Ryou stared at him. He had gotten very close before spotting the man. Close enough for the man to have heard him, and yet he hadn’t moved at all, given no reaction to someone coming upon him out of the night.

He couldn’t be absolutely certain of it without seeing the man’s face, but he was sure that he was looking at Bakhura. What he could see of him, coupled with their surroundings, it only made sense for it to be Bakhura. More than that, though, it felt like Bakhura. Like the sense he sometimes got that told him when Koe was with him, he just knew.

So this is a memory, he thought to himself. It wasn’t a dream or some sort of penalty game he couldn’t remember being thrown into, it was another piece of the thief spirit’s life. Only this time, for some reason, he’d been given a body of his own and separated from the one whose memories he was reliving. Why or how that would happen Ryou had no idea. But if he actually sat down and thought through any of the events since he turned ten years old, none of it made any sense. It was best not to think about it too much.

Though Bakhura showed no sign of noticing him, of seeing, hearing or even sensing Ryou in any way, he still approached the man cautiously. He could hear himself, and he left footprints in the sand… possibly it was all in his mind, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that he actually possessed a presence in this memory.

He scrabbled to the top of the dune, where he paused a moment to watch Bakhura and to catch his breath. When Bakhura still not so much as twitched and Ryou’s lungs felt less like they were about to burst, he carefully stepped down until he was at the same level on Bakhura’s the side of the dune, a little more than arm’s length away, and sat down.

Ryou wasn’t certain what was going on, either with how he had arrived in this memory or within the memory itself. Bakhura had apparently come out of the desert alone and on foot, with no pack animal, no supplies, and no fire to chase away the cold, and looked as though he were prepared to sit in the sand all night, just watching the distant city. Ryou looked sideways at the disturbingly still profile. He sat on Bakhura’s left side, so he couldn’t make out the scar he knew was there, bisecting his right eye, but there was no mistaking him. He had seen that face reflected in pools and polished bronze nearly every night for six years, from the time it had been a child’s face into
adulthood. Although…

Looking at Bakhura, he looked a bit older than the last time Ryou had ‘seen’ him. His frame looked more filled out beneath the robe, less scrawny, the set of his jaw even more obstinate. It wasn’t strange for the memories Ryou relived to make leaps forward, or to skip backward, but atop the rest of the strangeness of this particular memory, this leap of time looked particularly large.

Ryou stared until it began to feel awkward to do so, whether Bakhura could see him or not. Turning his head back to the city, he wondered what was going on. What city was that, and why did it hold such fascination for Bakhura? Why was he alone and unprovisioned if he’d come out of the desert? What was he planning, what was he thinking, what was he feeling as he sat here on this dune in the cold and the dark?

Ryou wished that he could reach out and touch the man, reach into his mind and have that same, familiar closeness that normally accompanied these memories. To be a separate entity while still within them was disorientating. He had no clue of what was happening besides what he could see. And what he could see didn’t tell him much.

He wished he knew what was happening.

“So.”

Ryou jumped. He looked over at Bakhura, wondering what it was he was about to do, why he suddenly decided to speak aloud when there was no one around to speak to--

And found himself staring for the first time into a pair of violet eyes, framed by a stern and scowling face.

“Who are you?”

Ryou had felt panicked before when he was alone in the desert, more alone than he could ever remember feeling before. Now a new, different kind of fear was squeezing his heart. Bakhura was looking at him. He could see him and was speaking to him! The disbelief and the questions of how it could be possible raced and jumbled together in Ryou’s mind, leaving him unable to think coherently at all, and completely incapable of responding to the question which had - impossibly - been thrown at him. He sat in the sand, pinned by Bakhura’s stare.

When his question received no reply, Bakhura’s head tilted, his brows drawing low. There was no missing the scar on his face now, and it made him look even fiercer.

“Can you speak, or are you mute?” His voice was harsh, clipped. Ryou realized that if he didn’t answer soon, then Bakhura was likely to draw his own conclusions as to who he was and whether or not he constituted a threat. He knew from riding in Bakhura’s head what conclusions he was likely to draw, and how he would respond if he wasn’t given some reason to change that opinion.

But how was Ryou meant to explain who he was or how he had gotten here?

“I… I thought I was dreaming.” It wasn’t much. It was, in fact, pathetically weak, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say. What could he say?

Bakhura continued to stare at him, the deep night shadows only serving to make his expression all the more ferocious, rather than hiding it from view. It was the first time he had ever gotten to see Bakhura’s face directly, rather than catching glimpses of it in reflections. The change in perspective was disorientating, almost as though he had stepped out of his own body and was looking down on it. Except that this body was still awake, aware, and angry. The scowl on
Bakhura’s face did not lighten at Ryou’s words. In fact, the dark eyes narrowed at him, scrutinizing Ryou. He wondered how he appeared to the man, who had only ever known a life in ancient Egypt, with his modern clothes and pale skin. Considering, Bakhura’s response to him was rather mild, though that knowledge did nothing to lessen the pressure of his stare.

Then Bakhura did something which utterly shocked Ryou.

He smiled.

“So did I,” he said. It wasn’t a big smile, not one which showed teeth, but it was a smile nonetheless. A smile which lightened and softened his whole face, making him appear younger than he had only a moment before.

Ryou returned the smile out of relief more than anything else, the tension in his shoulders and in his chest loosening enough so he could breathe again.

But while he no longer wore a scowl, Bakhura didn’t take his eyes off of him. He studied Ryou’s face minutely, as though searching for something or dedicating his features to memory. He looked over his body as well, and his clothes, but despite how strange they must have seemed to his eyes, he didn’t linger long on those details, and soon returned to his face. Ryou had no idea what to say, thought saying anything might make his scowl return, so remained silent throughout the scrutiny.

When Bakhura spoke at last, it was with a softly curious tone, as though he were working out a puzzle someone had handed to him, and not as though he were solving the impossibility of a human appearing so suddenly beside him. “I do not think I have ever seen you before, and yet you are familiar to me. Familiar, but strange, as though I should know you, or knew you once, but have forgotten. The way you look at me, it is as though you recognize me, and then as if you do not know who I am.” He paused, and Ryou didn’t leap in to fill the silence. Instead he marveled at how he was able to understand what Bakhura was saying. Though he had relived a great portion of his life with him, Ryou could no more speak ancient Egyptian than he could speak German. When he was inside Bakhura’s mind there was no thought given to the words that were spoken or how they fitted together, it was just how one spoke.

For some reason now, it was like Bakhura was speaking Japanese, though with an odd, heavy accent Ryou had never heard before. It was strange, but not unpleasant to listen to.

“Your skin is pale,” he went on. “Almost as a fish belly. I have heard of those with skin so pale, even seen them at a distance, coming off of the slave lines. But never have I met one. But you do not look as any slave I have ever seen.” His eyes moved once again to Ryou’s clothes, then to his hair. “Your hair…”

Bakhura shifted in the sand, and reached towards Ryou. He realized what Bakhura was about to do a moment before it happened, and leaned away more out of instinct than any serious attempt to escape. It did no good in any case. Strong fingers combed through his hair, nails raking lightly across his scalp. The man appeared fascinated by the long white strands, holding some between his fingers as though it were a strange fabric. Then he leaned forward, even closer to Ryou, tugging him forward until his face was right against Ryou’s hair and inhaled.

Ryou froze. He shivered a little, but otherwise tried to stay as still as he possibly could. Was he… being scented? Like prey? It was all he could think of to explain the odd behavior, and it wasn’t a comforting thought. Though with Bakhura so close, he couldn’t help but notice how he smelled.

He smelled like spices. Strange herbs he couldn’t put names to, and a sweet, sulfurous scent, like wild onions.
His head was released and he immediately sat back, watching Bakhura and his hands in case they made some other move to take hold of him. But Bakhura simply sat back into the sand, his hands drawing back and becoming lost in the sleeves of his robe - red, Ryou saw. He looked at Ryou with an expression that was more baffled than before, but which still showed no real concern.

“It’s the same color as mine,” he said. “But softer than mine, and smells like no scent I have ever encountered.” He leaned back, almost as though he were leaning away from Ryou on purpose. “It made me think perhaps you were a brother from long ago, from when I was a child and had forgotten. A spirit come to haunt me…”

The suggestion sent a small jolt through him, that he might be a spirit. It would make for an interesting switch of roles, but Ryou sincerely hoped he wasn’t, nor would ever be one. Then he remembered - one of Bakhura’s memories, one of his early ones with the disgraced scribe Iumeri. The elderly man had said that many of those who had lived in the village of Kul Elna had sported white hair - an odd feature anywhere, but especially in a sun soaked country such as Egypt, Ryou would have thought.

His hair was just as white as Bakhura’s. Possibly he was the only other person he had ever seen with white hair since the night of screams, and he had come out of an empty desert in the middle of the night. No wonder he thought Ryou was a ghost.

He wasn’t sure how to go about denying that he was dead when, to be fair, he wasn’t completely certain on that point himself. Instead he shook his head. “No, I… I’ve had no brothers.”

Little as it was, that actually seemed to put Bakhura more at ease. He nodded and looked up into the stars, face contemplative. When next he spoke it was in that same faraway voice, but with an undercut of tension. “Then… perhaps you are my sheut.”

Ryou blinked. It was a word he was unfamiliar with, either from his own life or from the memories he had relived with Bakhura. He frowned. “Your sheut?”

Bakhura’s lips twitched into another small smile. With his head still tilted back to look up into the stars, he explained. “It was a tale told me once by an old man who was full of nothing but useless words. There are five pieces to a man’s soul. The ka, which is the vital essence of a man, and which may become a powerful ally to him - or a great monster. The ba, which is a man’s personality, his energy from which the ka pulls its strength. The ib, which is the heart, and contains all of a man’s will and thought, and will be weighed by Anubis in the afterlife. The ren, which is a man’s name - so long as it is remembered, then the soul will live on. And finally, the sheut, the shadow of a man and a mirror of himself. My sheut is the part of my soul which can go where I cannot, that part of myself that I cannot exist without, nor it me.” He paused, catching Ryou’s dazed eyes with his own. “Though, if you must ask what a sheut is, then I suppose you must not be one.”

Ryou tried to find his voice. He felt dizzy, and this timeless desert lent a touch of unreality to everything, so anything seemed plausible.

“… I don’t know,” he managed at last, his voice sounding faint and croaking. “That sounds… what you say, I’ve thought similar things myself before. I suppose I could be.”

Bakhura was quiet and still for a moment, never losing his smile. “Then that is what I will call you,” he said, in a voice so soft it was almost lost in the windless night. “Little Sheut.”

With that, Bakhura returned his attention upwards. With little else to occupy his attention, and feeling awkward just staring at Bakhura, Ryou followed his example and turned his eyes to the
stars. He wondered if Bakhura could pick out any constellations, and if they would match any he knew? There were so many of them, and so close that Ryou felt that with his head tipped back he ran the risk of the heavens pouring directly into him through his eyes, filling him with a ghostly glow.

It occurred to Ryou that the layers of strange, disconnected surrealism of his situation were only being added to as time went on. He would have thought once he found Bakhura he would have a better idea of what was going on. Which didn’t make any of it less strange from an objective standpoint, but it would at least put the strangeness into a more familiar shape. But he still had no hint of what was going on or what to expect. Bakhura himself gave no clues, as even his behavior was odd. Ryou had spent so much time riding along inside Bakhura’s head that he had a fair idea of what he could expect from him at any given time, in any given situation. And yet, despite how Ryou must appear to him, how he must sound, Bakhura had not responded in any way that Ryou would think of as normal from anyone.

Why was he acting so strangely?

As though to underscore Ryou’s thought, Bakhura spoke again, not turning his face away from the sky. “It’s curious. I always imagined a sheut was meant to be black, as ordinary shadows are black. But you,” the dark eyes sought him out again, “you’re nearly white, like moonshine. Though perhaps that’s only fitting. Here there is no sun, so to appear a shadow must be as light. Otherwise you would be swallowed up completely.” His smile canted slightly. “When you are the sheut of one so dark, you would have to be pale in comparison.”

Again Ryou’s tongue became heavy and tied into knots. How was one meant to respond to that sort of thing?

Instead of responding to the possibility that he was some sort of inside out soul piece, Ryou focused on something else Bakhura had said, and which had almost sailed right past him without him noticing. “No sun? Is there never a sun in this place?”

He shook his head. “No. In all the time I have been in this place, I have seen no sun. There has been no day to break up the night, nor even any moon to show the passage of time. There has never been any wind, or sound, or animals to offer a sign that I am not completely alone. No human face have I ever seen in this place. Until you, Sheut.”

Ryou shivered, wishing for long sleeves, for a lamp, for some sort of idea of what was going on. He was lost in more ways than one, and the one guide he thought he’d had was only heightening his confusion. “What is this place? Where are we?”

Bakhura shrugged, his robe whispering softly. “I do not know. I have been here for… sometimes it seems forever, but truly I can’t recall time actually passing. I don’t know how I got here or where it could possibly be. The desert goes on forever.” He paused, seemingly lost in a train of thought. “I can remember my life before this place, all the way back to my earliest days, but towards the end, my most recent memories, it becomes a muddled mess. And then I open my eyes, and I am here. Did I die, perhaps?” He paused again, teeth digging into his lower lip. When he spoke again his voice went from detached to agitated.

“I was thinking, who knows for how long, that I had died. That I had travelled to the underworld to stand in judgment before Anubis, and that the deeds of my heart were found heavier than the Feather of Ma’at. I believed Ammut had feasted on my soul, and that this place was where those who satisfied Her hunger were fated to wander for eternity, each alone and suspended away from time. But… if you are my sheut, that can’t be right. Sheut,” Bakhura looked at Ryou, and the expression on his face was much closer to what he would have expected to see, had he expected to
find Bakhura in this dark desert at all. It should have unnerved him, but somehow Ryou found that he could look Bakhura in the eye and not be afraid.

“Sheut. Do you know what happened to me? Am I dead?”

Ryou’s ability to hold Bakhura’s intent, searching gaze dissipated. He let his gaze slip to the sand, not able to stare him in the face. If what Bakhura said was reliable at all, then he had been trapped and alone in this place for over three thousand years. What would the certainty of that knowledge do to him if Ryou told him?

Fingers of one hand digging into the sand distractedly, Ryou tried to find some way of replying that felt truthful without delving into everything he knew. “… I… don’t know exactly what happened to you. I know some of your life and what it was leading to - but I don’t know how much of it you remember yourself.” He took a deep breath and forced himself to meet Bakhura’s gaze. He knew his eyes were violet, and in the starlight he could imagine he saw a hint of it, but in truth they just looked black. Patches of the night sky, bereft of stars, made a part of Bakhura’s being.

“I know about Kul Elna, and how it met its end. I know how you survived that night - the night of screams. I know how you planned, how you worked to get revenge for yourself and for Kul Elna on the Pharaoh, who was the one responsible for it all. …I know why the people of Kul Elna were killed. Sacrifices made against their wills to forge the seven Millennium Items, keys to a power Pharaoh Aknamkanon used to save his kingdom when he was too weak to do so himself. And I know of the deal you struck with the being to whose power the Millennium Items were the key: Zorc Necrophades.”

Bakhura’s face shuttered and then cleared. The expression left behind was an odd one, almost guarded. “Ah, yes,” he said, voice raw. “That name is familiar. Yes, I remember Him. And I remember that His presence was very much there during the final muddle of my memories. How he fits in, though…”

Ryou regretted telling him almost immediately, but still wasn’t certain exactly what kind of effect the knowledge was having on him. He didn’t seem shocked or upset, or even curious why it was his ‘sheut’ would know an even more limited version of his past than he did. But while Ryou had no idea as to the actual details of Bakhura’s final days, all of the signs of what must have awaited him were there. Whatever had happened, it had resulted in his soul being trapped in the Millennium Ring for thousands of years.

He touched the place where the Ring ought to have been hanging, his chest feeling oddly hollowed out with it gone, and wondered.

“You see the city there?”

Ryou blinked, pulled out of his thoughts, and looked. This place was still disorientating. He had only let his attention wander for a moment, yet coming back to the present took so much effort it felt as though hours had passed. How had Bakhura stood it so long, when Ryou had only been here - he thought - a couple of hours and he already felt as though he lost his grip?

He looked to the dark city nestled in the dunes, its fiery lights hinting at its shape and size. The flickering movements of those lights, Ryou realized, were the only things that really moved in this place besides Bakhura and himself. Other than the two of them, sitting in the cold sand on the side of a dune, the city below appeared to be the only source of life anywhere, a bastion of light and warmth in a place utterly devoid of both.

Except that wasn’t quite true. Some of those lights he saw down in the city couldn’t come from
torches or lamps, they were too cold and steady for fires. It took a moment for what he was seeing to resolve itself into something that made any sort of sense. When it did, his jaw dropped.

What he was seeing was the stars wending their way through the city. No, not the stars, but their reflections, tossed back up to the sky by the wide, gently curving ribbon of a river. The city was built on both sides of it, coming right up to its banks so the river, carrying the images of stars on its surface, travelling between the buildings.

A certainty came over Ryou, then. A sort of secondhand familiarity that told him what he was looking at. In Bakhura’s memories, he had only ever referred to it as ‘the river,’ but Ryou thought he could put a name to it: The Nile.

“That,” Bakhura said, “is the city Waset, home to Pharaoh of the Two Lands, and seat of power. So close to us now that should one of its people rise from dreams and pass before the lights we would see their shape. But they will not. None of the sleepers ever rise from their slumber, if any sleepers even exist within.”

“Haven’t you ever gone down to look?”

Bakhura snorted, a human sound in such an unreal place sounding strange and out of place. “Where we are right now is as close as we shall ever get, Sheut.”

Ryou looked at him, brow furrowed. Perhaps Bakhura’s vision was better, or he was just expecting it, but he seemed to read the question on Ryou’s face.

“I have tried to go down to the city, many times. I have gone forward with the intent of combing Waset for any other soul in this barren place, of hunting down Pharaoh in his bed, of taking that revenge for my village you spoke of while all of them slept. It would be a fitting justice that the same horror visited upon Kul Elna should come to them while they think themselves so safe.” In the darkness, Bakhura’s eyes seemed to burn as he stared at the distant shape of Waset, hatred of a kind Ryou had never personally seen before rising up in him within moment.

Just as quickly as it came, though, the fury dissipated. “But no matter how many steps I take, Waset never comes any nearer than this. I could walk for hours, and still it will be just as far away, and behind me will be a mountain where there had only been a hill before. A mountain which I must climb up again if I want to escape sight of Waset.” He shook his head, glaring out over the dunes. “Wherever this is, it has no wish for me to reach that city. Perhaps because it knows my heart, and what I would do if I should ever reach that place. And yet, neither does it want me to forget the city and its people.”

“What do you mean?”

“For as many times as I have walked down the dunes towards Waset, I have also walked away. I have walked towards the darkest, deepest part of the desert, never stopping for what would be days if days existed here. And yet, never once did I lose the faint glow of the city. I could look back the way I had come and still see it, as though Waset lay just beyond the next dune.”

“It seems,” he said, his voice empty as the desert around them, “I am trapped here, no matter how long or in which direction I travel, always with that city within my sight, yet beyond my reach.”

Ryou stared at Bakhura, and then down at the city, a knot forming in his chest. He didn’t like the idea of a slaughter, the concept of ‘an eye for an eye’ kind of justice, but he understood it. There had been too many times where that exact kind of justice would have been very welcome in his life for him not to understand the appeal, but that wasn’t who he was now. He could empathize with
Bakhura’s desires, but his scruples had him rejecting them.

At the same time… he had been Bakhura for almost half of his life. More than just witnessing the events of his life in Egypt, Ryou had experienced them, he had lived them just as Bakhura had done. He could remember those events of a past life the same way he could remember the events of his own life, the two running parallel to each other. In a way, Ryou felt that he was Bakhura contained in a second skin. Looking down on Waset from their place on the dune and knowing Pharaoh and his Court must sleep within, Ryou felt as Bakhura must feel. The desire to sweep into Waset and lay waste to it all pressed hard into his guts, a tingle of raw energy running into his hands. There Waset lay, helpless, and whatever the part of him that was still Ryou Bakura might feel, he wanted very much to see it burn.

To have such a temptation lain before him, and then to have nothing he could do about it, either satisfying the bloodlust or in turning away to escape it, was a sophisticated kind of torture.

Perhaps he hadn’t been so wrong as he thought before. Only this wasn’t his penalty game. It was Bakhura’s.

“I am glad… that I got to meet you, Bakhura.”

He looked over at Ryou. “You know my name.” It was a blank statement, inflectionless.

“Of course.”

He nodded, his expression thoughtful. “That is good. To be remembered is to live on. To be forgotten…” he trailed off for a moment, blinked, and again looked at Ryou. “Glad I am to have met you, my Sheut. In this dark place it is good to be greeted with light.”

Something that felt suspiciously like a blush came to his cheeks. He was suddenly grateful for the cold and the dark. “I don’t know how long I’ll remain here. A few moments or forever. And if I go, I don’t know that I’ll ever return. But I am glad that, however it happened, I was given the chance to see and to speak with you. The other part of my soul.”

A smile came to Bakhura’s face, crooked but soft. He reached out and patted Ryou on the shoulder, and then let his hand rest there. The heat of his palm soaked into Ryou, reminding him this was not a dream. This was more than a dream and less than reality, and somehow, he felt, more true than either of the others.

They sat in silence, heads tilted back. The sea of stars above them was the only witness to this strange meeting, and bound never to tell the tale to anyone.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, this is a chapter I’ve been looking forward to writing since I first conceived of this terrible fic. It’s been years in coming…

Also, my beta hates me a little for this chapter. I give her hardcopies to scribble on, and for this chapter she left me a LOT of sticky notes, most of them consisting of single cuss words per sticky, demanding that these two idiots talk more (and other things). I’m a proud author. ^^
Waset: This was the ancient name for Thebes, (whose ruins are within current day Luxor), and was the capital of Egypt roughly during the Middle and New Kingdom ‘eras.’

Parts of the soul: This is… a bit of a mix. From all the info I’ve been able to find on the ancient Egyptian beliefs regarding souls, this is about as streamlined a distillation as I could get. Fairly accurate, I think, if simplified, and incorporating the (silly) changes made in the original YGO canon to fit in with that. The major changes to lore to fit canon have to do with the ka and ba, in case anyone was wondering.

Sheut: I. Am. So. Frigging. Happy! I finally get to use this little headcanon of mine, where the original soul of TKB gets to use a nickname for Ryou. Every other part has their own names for each other, (Koe, Yadonushi, etc), so I’m pleased I finally get to share what I came up with for Bakhura to call Ryou. :3

Where are we?: Despite Ryou’s guesses, we’re not in a penalty game. This is actually Bakhura’s soul room. The reason that option never occurred to Ryou is that he’s never seen one, and I choose to believe he’s not heard of the concept from Yugi, who has seen them. What would Ryou’s look like? Dunno.

Thanks for reading, everyone, we’ll be back with Part 15 in two weeks!

You can follow me on tumblr here!
Okay, so there’s an internet outage at my place for at least a few days. I’ve smuggled my teeny tiny netbook into work and I’ve squeezed myself into the least noticeable corner to jack the internet at my workplace to try and get this posted on time. My netbook hasn’t been connected to the internet in YEARS and has no virus protection, so I’m praying that A) this works and everything goes up smoothly, and B) my poor little computer doesn’t catch interweb plague. Fingers crossed.

**Historian’s Note:** This story takes place before, during and (eventually) after the original story through Millennium World, following the canon established in the manga. There will be spoilers, so proceed with caution.

**Soundtrack:** ‘Haunted’ on 8tracks.

Part XV

Bakhura knows as soon as he returns that Iumeri is dead.

He’s not entered the little hut that is their current home, but he doesn’t need to. He knows what he’ll find inside. Dogs are pawing at the door, trying to dig their way inside. There’s evidence that this has been something they have attempted numerous times. As Bakhura approaches the hut, slowing his ‘borrowed’ camel, a couple of cats leap out of the window.

Bakhura knows what it is he will find inside the hut that had so recently been their home, their place away from the rest of the world. He knew before he’d even begun the long trip back. He’d felt it in his heart that something was wrong. He’d known even before he’d left, in a way, that his goodbyes then would be the last time he saw his teacher and friend alive. He’d known, and still he had obeyed Iumeri’s instructions to leave.

Iumeri’s fevers had become so frequent that they were nearly constant. One long fever broken by moments of lucidity, the man who had rescued him from the river and reminded him of his name had disappeared, glimpsed only briefly when the shadows cleared from his eyes. It was during one of those breaks that he told Bakhura to leave, to go and fetch him more papyrus scrolls, more ink and reeds, more jars to store his completed writings.

He was no fool, nor was he blind. He saw death hovering near his mentor, could sense that the time of his crossing was swiftly approaching. It was not a difficult thing to see, the specter of it had been hovering for some time. And even had Bakhura been so blind as to miss it, Iumeri had not been. Even riddled with fever and long stretches of obsessive preoccupation, the old scribe still knew what was coming. That was what Bakhura had seen in his bright, bloodshot eyes, clear for the first time in days. Iumeri had seen his death coming, and had sent Bakhura away.

Bakhura gets down from his mount slowly, looping the reins to a bit of broken wall not far from the door. This home that he and Iumeri have claimed for themselves is a crumbling old heap, one
of a half dozen poor old structures which might have once belonged to an extended family. There is
evidence that at least one home had been that of a potter, and another a weaver. The rest looked to
be farmers, working to bring life to the land around them.

He cannot guess what it was that could have motivated them all to drift so far from the river, so far
from neighbors and safety, but he does guess that is why they are all gone. Bandits, animals,
weather, hard conditions, or just loneliness, something happened to those who had once lived here
to drive them out and leave their homes to crumble.

Whatever it was that drove them away, Bakhura is grateful for the lack of residents to fight for the
space, and he is grateful for the long distance from any other human beings. It’s difficult to bring
water so far, but it’s worth the privacy it affords. Privacy to come and go, to hide, to plan…

For Iumeri to make his final journey.

He does his best to prepare himself for what he knows he’ll find inside, but his guts are already
turning to water. He tries to detach himself, reminding himself that he knew this moment was
coming, knew that this would be his homecoming, his final homecoming to this particular home.
He knew it all the moment he’d left, had heard it in the old man’s voice that he was sending him
away deliberately so he wouldn’t be around during the moment itself. So he could die alone.

He knows all of this, but it does not make the walk into the little hut any easier. The knowledge of
what must be is not the same as confirming it with one’s own eyes, and there is still a small,
childish part of him that wants to believe that if he does not see the truth, it will not be.

His feet carry him forward, even as his head tries to form some sort of excuse not to, to turn away
and never return.

The smell comes to him before the sight does. He cannot be long dead, but the days have been hot,
even indoors in the shade. Iumeri is, just as Bakhura thought he would be, kneeled before his little
writing desk, his upper body thrown across in and any writing he had been laboring on when the
moment finally came. Even sick as he had been, Iumeri never ceased in his writing, his task of
ensuring that truth be remembered. Bakhura was of the opinion that his ink and brush were all a
part of his sickness. The only way he could envision the old fool dying any other way would be by
physical force, by someone dragging him away from his palette. Even then, it would be a question
who would win.

Standing in the door, staring at the body of the man he’d known since he was barely more than a
child, Bakhura is struck dumb with a strange sense of… emptiness.

After some time passes, he doesn’t know how much, he realizes he has work to do. He cannot
leave Iumeri as he is. It would not be right, it would insult his ghost… and Bakhura has enough
hungry ghosts riding his shoulders as it is. Steeling himself, Bakhura sets to the task of readying his
friend for burial.

He has not been long dead. While there is a heavy smell of death, the… body… is in relatively
good condition. No vermin have desecrated it save a nibble or two from the cats and a few flies.

Moving him away from his table, Bakhura sees that Iumeri must have seen the very moment. There
is nothing held pinned beneath him, no final papyrus over which he had been working when death
stilled his heart. All of his scrolls have been moved carefully away, the labor of his life safe from
his final throes. All, save one small scroll, barely as wide as Bakhura’s spread hand, held tightly in
Iumeri’s. Prying it loose, he sees his own name inscribed in a shaking hand on the outside.
Bakhura stares at it, and then thrusts it away. It can wait. There are more important things to attend to for now.

He has never prepared a body for burial before, but thankfully the needs of a common man are not so arduous as those of a Pharaoh or even a highly ranked politician. All that Iumeri needs to make a safe journey to the afterlife Bakhura can provide.

He undresses and cleans the body, using some of the water he had brought back with him and a few sweet smelling herbs. He tends to the small wounds done him after and before death just as he would were Iumeri still alive, and then grooms him, shaving head and face and cleaning his nails. In a few hours, Bakhura undoes the ravages of many weeks upon the old man. As he does he tries to ignore the unnatural pallor of his skin, the way the flesh beneath his fingers does not move the way living flesh does. It’s like working with a doll made of heavy clay, cold and stiff, and it’s easier than ever to forget that this is Iumeri’s empty corpse.

When he is finished cleaning the body, he dresses it in the finest of clothes Iumeri owned, the best shoes, the wig he loved the most, and the few bits of jewelry that they had not already sold. Then, working carefully, he paints Iumeri’s face as it would have been done were he calling on some great person.

It is the finest Bakhura has ever seen him.

He is tired, but still he is not done. Carefully, Bakhura arranges Iumeri’s limbs and wraps him in blankets, cocooning him from top to bottom, totally concealing him. Once wrapped, he secures the wrappings with ropes.

Bakhura looks up from his work. It’s getting dark outside, the shadows racing across the desert. The burial itself will have to wait until morning.

Certain he will be unable to sleep with Iumeri’s body so close at hand, Bakhura instead sets about organizing the few belongings he and the old man had. He won’t be returning to this place, he might as well prepare for it now.

When Ra once again mounts into the sky in His chariot of gold and scarlet, the hut shows almost no sign it had played host to a couple of wandering vagabonds. Bakhura has gathered all of their pathetic belongings into bundles, and all of Iumeri’s precious scrolls he has organized into jars and sealed to protect them. Even with how little Bakhura owns, the jars will put the camel to the test for how much it can carry, but he cannot leave them behind.

Before he can leave the hut forever, though, he must attend to Iumeri. Lifting up the bundle that is all that remains of his friend, he slings it as gently as he can over the camel’s back. Unlike the jars he will have to load up later, there is no question of the beast handling this load. Iumeri weighs practically nothing. With a few other items and a shovel, Bakhura mounts up and rides out to the desert while Ra is still low on the horizon.

Bakhura, while aware death had not been far away, had not been quite so morbid as to pick out the spot where Iumeri would be buried ahead of time. Still, it does not take him long to find a suitable place. They are already far from the river, and a nearby rock outcropping serves as both a marker for the grave and provider of stones to lay over and protect him from scavengers.

The jackals will not have him.

The ground here is not the best for digging, but Bakhura still makes short work of it, and soon Iumeri’s final resting place is prepared.
Iumeri looks very small in his grave. He was not a large man, but the last few years had seen a reduction of him, a lessening which had only sped up in his last weeks. As though he were losing more and more of himself until at last there was no more body to give, and so his spirit had finally broken free.

*Is your ba fluttering near even now, iaawi rehew, he wondered? Are you watching to be certain I will not forget you? Well, fear not, sesh. I do not think I could forget if I tried.*

After a few moments of staring down at him, Bakhura climbs down into the grave with Iumeri and gently rearranges him so he lays slightly curled on one side. He climbs back out, decides he looks more comfortable that way, curses, and jumps back down with his knife in hand. Very lightly, Bakhura touches Iumeri with the knife point at ears, eyes, nose and mouth. He doesn’t know the proper spells to accompany the ritual, and hopes the motions and intent are enough to open Iumeri’s senses in the afterlife.

Once Iumeri himself is ready, Bakhura lays his grave goods with him. There isn’t much. The old man’s most prized possession, his palette box, lies close at hand. A small statuette of Thoth depicted in his baboon form is also lain near at hand, where Iumeri will find it even in the dark. He will have to find everything in the dark, now.

Beyond those two prized items, there is only what remains of Iumeri’s clothes, a couple of scrolls not penned by his own hand, and a few blank papyri. Then Bakhura sets within a few small sealed jars of water and beer, and a few parcels of food - bread, some onions and lotus roots, a fish he had cooked that morning, and one precious duck egg. Bakhura wishes he had some sort of fruit to add as well, such as dates, but it is already a lean year and fruit is scarce to those who cannot afford luxuries.

By now Ra is riding high in the sky, and Bakhura is sweating freely from the heat and his labors. He sits down in the little shade the outcropping still provides and sets about enjoying his final meal with Iumeri.

He thinks about the old man as he eats and drinks, as one does to ensure the dead may still taste as the living do. He tries to remember those times when they shared pleasant, peaceful moments, memories that involved laughter or at least some small measure of happiness… But like a tide, his thoughts are always drawn back to the moment when Iumeri told him to leave, to travel far away and leave him alone. The last time he saw Iumeri alive.

*Why did you want to die alone?*

It’s a question which sticks in his heart like a thorn. Why, at the end, had Iumeri wished for such solitude? Iumeri had never been the most sociable of people, often running to the cantankerous, a product of both personality and age.

Still, had Bakhura’s presence been so reviled that he would wish to die alone rather than in his company?

His mind thus filled, Bakhura finishes his small meal, then sets about filling the grave, the dust and the brightness making his eyes sting and water until tracks ran down his face.

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Kul Elna is the same as it was the last time Bakhura visited it. Still empty of life, still crumbling, and still full of the same sensations of not being alone.

Bakhura walks along the streets, leading the tired camel, who occasionally will snort and toss its
head as the $mnuet$ come near. That is perhaps the one thing Bakhura can say has changed since his first visit to the village of his birth, and it is a change within himself, not one of Kul Elna. Now he is aware, *more* aware of the spirits that wind through the dead village, so much so that out of the corners of his eyes he can catch the movement of them. But while he is aware of them, he does not need to acknowledge them. For now, he ignores their whisperings, their ghostly touches, his mind preoccupied with the task at hand.

It’s important that he find a good place.

Bakhura had spent a lot of time and thought to the problem of what to do with Iumeri’s scrolls. They were the man’s life’s work and arguably the method of his death; they must be treated with a level of respect for that reason alone, even if their actual contents meant little to Bakhura. But while there is no doubt that the scrolls were Iumeri’s most prized possession, burying them alongside the scribe outside a forgotten settlement seemed wrong.

He had considered sending the scrolls to some library or temple to be stored, as such places rarely passed up knowledge of any sort. He’d also considered simply destroying them to save himself the trouble of preserving them. The thought of burning the scrolls or simply leaving them to the elements twists his guts, though, and even sending the scrolls to strangers seems a questionable course at best. There is no knowing for sure whether or not those within the temples will protect the scrolls the way they should, and he knows that the information held within them will attract the wrong sort of attention. That is the whole point of them, after all.

There is only one other option Bakhura can think of. Bury them just as he buried Iumeri.

The question of where to bury them was not one Bakhura spent much time considering, at least in broad terms. There were very few places that he considered even in the least ways suitable, and of those, this was far the best. Iumeri had spent the last fourteen years of his life dedicated to ‘the truth of Kul Elna,’ putting down that truth on the papyri Bakhura now carried with him. Within those scrolls also lie many other secrets, none of which the ostensible rulers of the land would wish known. It seems fitting to Bakhura that the truth and history of Kul Elna should lie with the village itself. Perhaps, in a way, keeping the record of what happened so near would give back some of that life which had been ripped away from it. Perhaps the scrolls would serve the village itself as a reminder, so that the spirits within would not forget, fade, and drift away.

He just needs to find the right spot.

In a way, he wishes it had been possible to bring Iumeri here as well. After spending so much of his life on the secrets surrounding Kul Elna, it would have been fitting for him to be interred here as well. He would have appreciated it, Bakhura thinks, and it would have suited him better than some unmarked outcropping of rock in the desert. But Kul Elna lay more than a week’s travel over land from their hut, and a body would not have survived such a long journey. Where he lay now would have to suit him. Bakhura hopes that his spirit understands that well enough, and is not annoyed with him.

When he finds the place that feels right, it’s outside of the town itself, beyond the furthest building, and along the path leading to the hidden temple. Rather than on the path itself, the place lies in a small offshoot, nearly invisible, which leads to a blank box of stone. Altogether the place is no larger than the smallest of rooms in the village from wall to wall, but with each of the ‘walls’ rising up high over his head before opening to the sky. Standing there, Bakhura decides it’s a good place, it *feels* like the right place for the jars to rest. The tiny space and dryness will protect them, and if ever looters are desperate enough to find either temple or Kul Elna, who would ever think to look here for something buried in the ground?
Bakhura dismounts, offloads the jars and his own bundle from the camel, who immediately lays down with an air of one who does not intend to rise again anytime soon.

He sets about his digging. In some ways, it’s harder labor than Iumeri’s grave had been. Working in tight quarters as he is, and the number and bulk of the jars means that their ‘grave’ must be even more spacious than had been the grave of he who wrote them. Iumeri’s work outstripped him.

Once he is done and the jars are lowered within, Bakhura contemplates them. Iumeri had spent so much effort in their writing, in their accuracy and honesty, all in the interest that Kul Elna, the acts of the Pharaoh and his advisor might be known… and here he is, burying them all where none will think to look. Still, the possibility exists that someone might find them, someday. Someday long hence, when the current Pharaoh and his circle of double faced priests were long beyond the point of punishing anyone for such ‘slander.’ It is possible that one day will come when Iumeri’s scrolls will be discovered, and a long buried truth will at last come to light.

Digging into his own small bundle, Bakhura pulls out one last scroll. The last scroll. The last scroll Iumeri ever wrote, with Bakhura’s name scrawled on the outside in a failing hand.

Bakhura had yet to open it, and has long contemplated on what its contents might be. Given the old man’s state of mind, it could be anything, from a fond farewell to a lifelong curse to a rambling account of his life as a young apprentice scribe. There is no knowing for certain without reading it for himself, and seeing Iumeri’s final words.

It is a long, silent time before Bakhura, with great deliberation, opens one of the jars in the grave and drops in the little rolled papyrus, unopened and unread.

*If you wished me to know your final words, iawi rehew, he thinks, then you should have been brave enough to say them to my face.*

He takes a deep breath, exhales in a rush.

He had known when Iumeri had sent him away that the task of fetching more supplies had been a blind. The old man had been dying, known it, and sent him away to be alone in that hour. Bakhura had seen it for what it was, had nearly refused to leave and stayed with him the whole time, be damned what Iumeri wanted. But he had gone, had not even put up a show of resistance before leaving on a pointless chore. He’d even felt relieved as he’d left the hut behind him, knowing he would not be there for the last moments.

He is just as much a coward as his mentor.

Nodding to himself, Bakhura pulls out his own palette box and a small scroll of papyrus and folds himself to the sand. He goes through the familiar ritual of preparing his ink, using the little bottle of water and wetting his reed pen. He doesn’t offer a prayer to Thoth or to Seshat. Given his activities these last few years, he doubts there are many Gods who would be pleased to hear from him.

By the time he finishes the blind corner of cast deep in shadow, Ra at too far an angle to reach the bottom with His light. He waits for the ink to dry, then rolls it up and puts it in the same jar as Iumeri’s letter to him. His final words to the old man will go as unknown as his words were to Bakhura. They are both cowards, let that be their final legacy to each other.

After a moment’s more consideration, Bakhura packs his palette box carefully, and sets it inside the jar as well before sealing it closed.
It takes comparatively little time to cover the jars with soil and sand, and then to heap stones over the disturbed ground to be certain they were protected. Only those who truly wished to know the truth of Kul Elna would ever discover Iumeri’s scrolls, and even then they would need the luck of the Gods to find their resting place.

Even when Iumeri had lived, Bakhura had been more or less free to go about as he wished. The two of them together held no more ties to any community than either of them had separately. They had been free to move about the lands as freely as the Bedu, and with even fewer ties, as the only ‘family’ they had was each other. No community, no tribe, no family, Bakhura and Iumeri were beholden to none.

Now with Iumeri gone, Bakhura somehow feels as though he’s been cut free of a great weight, even more free than before. He had never felt so before, but it was as though Iumeri had been acting like a millstone round his neck, holding him to stillness, keeping his wandering feet in one place and his wandering thoughts on the mundanity of the reed pen and food gathering.

With him gone, he feels free in a way he had not felt since childhood on the banks of the river. There is nothing holding him down, now. He might travel anywhere; do anything, without even the small weight of the old scribe to slow.

So it seems strange to him that, with this new level of freedom, he feels more stuck in place than he ever did before. Freedom, it would seem, is its own kind of burden, the burden of endless choice, and faced with it with no old scribe to guide him either by word or by need, Bakhura finds himself at a loss. With all the world opened up to him, he cannot decide where it is he wishes to be.

Trapped in a web of possibilities, frozen by his own freedom and with nothing to guide his steps, Bakhura decides on nothing, and allows his camel to choose its own way once they are within sight of the river again. The ever present need to avenge his village, overlain with the newer desire to take hold of the power of the god Zorc presses at the back of his mind, more strongly now that he has just revisited the dead place again, but it is not a drive which guides his footsteps in any particular direction. Revenge is not a destination, hatred and power are not oases to which one might point their feet. Those desires press against him, disturbing his thoughts, but give him no guidance.

Perhaps it is simply because it lies so close to dead Kul Elna, a few days’ travel on a mount and lying astride the river itself, that the camel speeds to Waset, the capital of the land and seat of power. The home of Pharaoh. Or, perhaps, there was a part of him that knew where he wished to go, and steered the argumentative beast to its edge without the rest of him being aware.

Waset, the home of his enemy.

He has never been to the capital before, at first because it was too large and full of people competing for space and food. For one lone and small thief trying to survive on his wits it would be all too easy to fall prey to the other human predators of a city, or to be flushed out by the dogs and taken. Then, as he grew older and knew the true danger of being so close to Pharaoh and his people, of his being so close, he had avoided it even more pointedly than before.

He feels no such compunction now. The terrible liberty he has been blessed with has freed more than just his feet. His mind has also been cut free of its traces, to take wing and leave all his fears and trepidations behind. As he walks the streets of Waset, all full of jostling people and decked with colorful flowers and streamers, he wonders why it is that it has taken him so long to come.

There is nothing ominous to the city besides its size, and size is a thing which can lead just as
easily to a city’s downfall as to its protection. Large cities mean many mouths to feed, many faces on the streets, all the easier for a stranger to slip in and go completely unnoticed. Easier in a large city to lose one’s self, to become lost.

Even more along this vein, Waset appears to be in the midst of a great celebration. The place is festooned with flowers and streamers, but also with the scents of burning incense in the streets, of dozens of food stalls at any given place. Dancers cavort along the roads in costumes of bright, diaphanous fabrics, male and female bodies glimmering with sweat. Priests chant at corners, each to their own Gods and each accompanied by their acolytes, bobbing and joining in as required. The people themselves are carefree, almost insultingly so. They smile and clap each other on the back, their children run riot, shrieking and waving sticks with ribbons as they weave in and out of the legs of adults.

Inexperienced as he is with the day to day dealings of such a large city, Bakhura knows that this cannot be the norm. He’s come to Waset on a day of celebration, obviously, but he can’t recall the day, or even the month for certain, and is at a loss which holiday it might be to gather so many. Usually the priests and their prayers would be some clue, but there are representatives for far too many, all wearing their ceremonial masks, for it to be a specific holiday for any of them. The prayers that they chant are also of no use to him, as they all speak of prosperity, protection and glory, but all to only a vague point, not to any specific target.

He thinks of asking someone, to make some excuse of long travels and of losing track of the days - it’s not entirely a lie - but stops himself before he can. Bad enough to be within Waset, prudence if not fear dictated some level of caution. Instead of asking any of the passersby, he makes himself as much a part of the crowd as he can and listens to what the people have to say.

"-how much do you want for this scrap-?"

"-auspicious day, the gods smile on us all-"

"-the best honey cakes in Waset-!"

"-back here, you little hooligan-!"

"-Aknamkanon was so wise, turned back the enemy hordes, you know-"

"-son will be just so, once he is accustomed-"

"-priests surround him as his father, there is no need to doubt-"

"-praise our new Pharaoh-!"

Slowly, but with increasing certainty, Bakhura comes to know what it is that has the capital in such an uproar, and with no holiday on which to place the blame.

The old Pharaoh, Aknamkanon, has died. He died more than a month ago, and the country is only now coming out of its forty days of mourning. Today, of all days, is the day when his young son will take up the double crown and be named Pharaoh of the lands, a living god for the people to worship.

Standing amid the bright colors and loud voices of celebrating people, sweat running freely down his body, Bakhura suddenly feels a chill. It’s as though a coil of cold night has wrapped around him, defying Ra’s gaze to freeze his bones and muffle his senses. The crowd seems far away, himself detached from all that is going on around him as realization crashes over him.
Aknamkanon is dead. The man who had ordered the slaughter of his village, dead. Dead before Bakhura could kill him, before he could grip the old man’s throat in his hands and watch as understanding bloomed in his eyes, as he came to know just who it was that was taking his life. Already dead.

Bakhura’s stomach twists painfully, dangerously, and suddenly all of the voices, the smells, the people are all too much. There is too much going on around him all at once, all demanding his attention, all pressing on him, jangling his nerves to sing out: threat!

Moving as quickly as he can while avoiding drawing attention to himself, Bakhura leaves the street he is on in search of some other, less crowded place where he can breathe. He is disappointed, however, in that he cannot find any place that is free of bodies, of people celebrating their new Pharaoh taking the double crown and claiming his godhood. The city teems with people, even more than live here. Travelers have come to witness the ascension for themselves. At best Bakhura finds a place where the closeness of human flesh is not so much that he can feel it even through his robes. It is enough for now, and he stops, and tries to breathe.

With the Pharaoh already dead, then how is he to take his revenge for his village? How will all of those souls ever be laid to rest if the one who had slaughtered them escaped the justice he so rightly deserved?

Stupid old men, dying on him at every side! Bakhura tightens his fists until the knuckles strain, his palms stinging with the press of his nails. His stomach churns with rage and deep inside he can feel the shifting of coils, of Diabound waking to his fury.

The people around him flow away, sensing his anger, feeling it radiate off of his body, but none speak to him, hardly anyone spares him a glance. It suits Bakhura fine, too consumed in his own turmoil to care what the people see of him. He allows the rage to course through him, contains it, and slowly it begins to dissipate as other, more ordered thoughts come to him.

Aknamkanon may be dead, but his brother and advisor, Aknadin still lives. Iumeri told him, again and again, that it was Aknadin who planned the massacre, and that Aknamkanon had only approved it. That man must surely still breathe, and the same of the priests, all who held one of the Millennium Items, who used the blood of his people to rule. They all still lived when they had no right to, they all possessed the items which he must take to unleash the power of Zorc. They are all still alive, still vulnerable to his knife.

And as for this new Pharaoh…

A sudden commotion around him draws Bakhura out of his thoughts. Those around him have begun to move in one direction, voices raised excitedly, words layered over each other so he can make out none of them. He raises his head, trying to see why the sudden tide in the sea of people, but all he sees is that the shift is not just around him, it spreads out to every street he can see. Even merchants and stall owners, the frolicking children and the wizened elders, all follow the current, which seems to lead towards the center of Waset.

With almost no input from his thoughts, Bakhura turns to follow as well, his steps slow and measured to the mad dashing of every other pair of feet, so that by the time the tide slows to a stop, he is far at the back of the crown. It suits him, as the crowd has grown boisterous and unbearably close. They have gathered before the Pharaoh’s Palace, standing amid many tall, angular buildings of officials in order to stand before the Palace itself.

The Palace is a monolith of two great square halves come together to make a whole. Where the two sides meet lays the great door leading inside overhung by a wide balcony. It is this balcony
which draws all eyes, including Bakhura’s when movement is seen there.

From within the Palace emerge more priests, each resplendent in their spotless white linen and fine wigs, though these do not wear the masks that those nearer to Bakhura do. They take up positions along the balcony, barefaced, and slowly the clamoring of the crowd dies down to a dull murmur. When it feels as though Bakhura just might be able to hear his own thoughts again, the shortest of the priests takes a step forward on the balcony and raises his arms. The noise of the crowd dips down further.

“Good people! Today is a day of joy and celebration! For today we welcome not only our new Pharaoh, but a new age of prosperity in our lands! Today we welcome the new god on the nomes and keeper of our safety!”

It is obviously an old man’s voice which speaks, and yet it reaches out to every corner of the square, leaving none ignorant of what he says. Some minor heka, Bakhura decides, carrying his words out to every ear that might hear. Surely no old man could speak so clearly without the use of heka.

“Behold our Mighty Bull of Ma’at, Beloved of Amen-Re, He Who Causes Hearts to Live, The Glorious One of the Double Crown, Lord of the Two Lands, Pharaoh, Living for Ever!”

With this long proclamation, the old priest steps to a side, revealing a new figure stepping out onto the balcony.

The crowd around him cheers for their new Pharaoh, but Bakhura can only stare, his heart a stone, his guts a tangled nest of serpents. He stares up at this man, barely more than a boy, who has taken the place of his rightful prey, and his lip curls in a snarl of disgust.

It is difficult to see while so far from the Palace, but Bakhura’s eyes are sharp. He can see the youth of the new Pharaoh, can see how the double crown on his head wants to slip down his brow, can very nearly see just how this so-called Pharaoh trembles in place on the balcony as he raises his hands in acknowledgement of the cheers. This is the man - if man is the word to use - who Bakhura must consider his enemy? This stripling who wears the baubles of his dead father, as though by adding them he will add the years and experience of the departed Aknamkanon? What is this boy to him, a boy so young Bakhura doubts he drew his first breath by the time of Kul Elna’s slaughter?

The boy Pharaoh turns on the balcony, taking in all of the crowd that has come to witness his taking of the double crown, and a flash catches his eye. A golden flash, a small twinkle as something at the boy Pharaoh’s chest catches Ra’s eye.

Iumeri’s descriptions of the Millennium Items are patterned too firmly in Bakhura’s thoughts to mistake it, even at so far a distance. It is the Millennium Pendant. A thought occurs to him, and he looks to the priests, the six priests that share the balcony. He does not find all he seeks, as some are too small or just not in line of sight, but he sees enough. A set of gold scales, another pendant in the shape of a ring… these are the other six holders of the Millennium items, Pharaoh’s closest and most trusted advisors. There, on that balcony, are all seven of the Millennium items. The items his people had died for. The items which would bring them peace, and give Bakhura power.

His eyes are drawn back to Pharaoh, and his Pendant. Did the boy know its history, its potential? Or was it simply another bauble picked from his father’s corpse, just another tool with which to wield power? Even had he lived the day Kul Elna died, he could not have been more than a babe. What are the Millennium items to him, what part could he possibly play in their legacy?
He is too young to know what it is he holds, yet hold it he does, as though he has earned it. As though it is owed to him.

The hatred in Bakhura’s heart, never really gone, swells up once more to drown him. He looks on the new Pharaoh, and any sort of leniency he might have been tempted to feel evaporates. He may not have ordered the slaughter of Kul Elna, but in some ways his ignorance of those past crimes, crimes which he is reaping the benefits of, is even worse.

He sits on a throne so gilded with gold he doesn’t even realize that it’s crafted with bones. The bones of his own people - of my people.

The coils of the little god twitch within him, seeking release, to be let free so it might set upon those that cause his rage to boil. Bakhura holds it back. He would glory in the demise of Pharaoh and his closest priests right now, on the very day he has ascended the throne. Truly, what better way to show the people of the land the future they could expect than a ghost from the past, painted in their Pharaoh’s blood, taking back those items that had been meant to protect him? What better time, what greater irony?

But he cannot. Diabound has grown stronger, but not strong enough. Against seven Millennium items, all at once, they would stand no chance.

Before his control can slip, Bakhura turns away from the Palace, the balcony, the sight of those who held all that remained of the people of Kul Elna in their hands, and walks away.

He had felt directionless when he came to Waset, beset by terrible freedom that held him trapped in all its manifold options. Now he knows for certain where he must be, or if not where, then what it is he ought to be doing.

Getting stronger. Getting ready. Preparing himself for the fight that was coming, for when he came back to wipe the Pharaoh and his people off of the face of the earth. To win, they would need to become stronger, he and his little god both. He would become stronger. He would become an agent of chaos, an apprentice to Sutekh Himself. He would tear away all that this Pharaoh tried to do, rip asunder the precious Ma’at he and all the people clung to so desperately.

And when the time was right… he would be back.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun DUN.

As a personal aside, it is a pain in the butt keeping track of Bakhura’s age throughout the timeline. It might not have been so bad if I were actually writing in a timely fashion, but I’m not, so here we are.

Burial Rites: As accurate as I could make it while keeping in line with Bakhura and Iumeri’s circumstances. Normal folk got much simpler burials than Pharaohs and the like.

Buried Scrolls: Not foreshadowing.

Inauguration Celebration: There’s not much in the way of specificity wherever I
looked for what actually took place during these, so I took what I found and embellished with what I thought would be fairly likely.

Thank you for reading, everyone! Next chapter in two weeks!

I'm on tumblr, come say hi!
Part XVI

Chapter Notes

There’s a longer than usual after chapter note, so be prepared. :)

Historian’s Note: This story takes place before, during and (eventually) after the original story through Millennium World, following the canon established in the manga. There will be spoilers, so proceed with caution.

Soundtrack: ‘Haunted’ on 8tracks.

Part XVI

Considering his father was one of the owners, Ryou didn’t visit the Domino City Museum as often as might be expected. It wasn’t that he disliked the place, or was going to any particular lengths to avoid seeing his father, it just hadn’t ever appealed to him as a place to spend his time. Ryou did enjoy history, and that of ancient Egypt in particular, and since his father owned the place there was always a largish section of the Museum dedicated to Egyptology. And yet he had never felt any drive to come and see the newest exhibits, to use his connection with his father to secure himself a ‘backstage pass’ to see where all the really interesting work was done with the artifacts.

It had never really occurred to him before how odd this was, though his father had hinted more than once that his visiting would be very welcome, and that he would be allowed more or less free rein of the entire place. Ryou had never taken those hints, only coming to the Museum briefly when he had need to see his father and his workplace proved to be the most convenient place. It had never seemed strange to him that he had so little interest. He never wondered why, now that he lived in Domino City and coming to the Museum was easier than ever before, he had only come a handful of times.

Now that he was in the Museum, walking about in the private areas where the employees did all the work with and cataloguing of the artifacts, both the strangeness of his behavior and a possible explanation for it were dawning on him.

Though his interests were very much in the same vein as his father’s, he felt no need to see the latest in what his teams had found and brought in from the field because he’d lived it all already.

It was only relatively recently that he had begun to remember the dreams where he had lived in ancient Egypt, but some subconscious part of him must have remembered it all the entire time. Looking over the relics of the past when one could remember when they had been new and used in everyday life would be a pointless way to spend one’s time. Even now as he walked between the tables littered with trays of artifacts, delicate tools, recorders of various types, books and notepads, he could only summon up a desultory sort of interest. Not everything which was spread across the tables came from the same time as Bakhura, nor was all of it the sort of thing that the spirit would have been in contact with all that much, but it all possessed the same familiarity which robbed them of any spark of interest they might have had. The loss of that interest, whether or not he understood why it had gone, saddened him a little.
His father, wearing a suit he looked very uncomfortable in, stepped up beside him, his eyes scanning over the table with much more of the passion one would expect of a dedicated archaeologist. The elder Bakura was a good man to be in charge of the Domino City Museum. He had a genuine love of history and cultures of all sorts, and while he had a tendency to become absorbed in his work to distraction, he had an equal passion for teaching. It was common for the Museum to host all sorts of activities free to the public, young and old alike. Events, workshops, guest speakers on any number of topics, his father made sure to always have something new with which to engage the public and get them interested in the past and its mysteries.

Which was probably why the apparent disinterest of his own son stung so much.

After a few moments of silence, his father cleared his throat. “Don’t take this as censure, Ryou,” he said, his voice as hesitating as his body language. “I’m delighted to have you here and taking an interest in our Egyptian collection, but I’m a little curious as to the timing. Why now when you’ve always been welcome?”

Ryou shifted, unconsciously mirroring his father. He knew very well that there was more to the question than was immediately. It wasn’t just that he wanted to know why Ryou had chosen now to come to the Museum, he wanted to know why it was he had never come before. His poor father, whose life’s purpose lay with the lives of those who were long dead, and who spent so much of his life in piecing together the modes and reasons for all they did, couldn’t understand those of his own son. A not insignificant part of Ryou took a small, vindictive pleasure in his father’s confusion, and even a little in the visible distress he was experiencing as a result of Ryou’s neglect.

He hadn’t intended it, but it was a little vindicating to know that his father was feeling some of what Ryou had felt as a child.

“There was never time before,” he said, answering the unspoken question first. “I had to settle in at my apartment and a new school at the same time. New routines, more responsibilities to get used to, new friends to make, plus all the day to day schoolwork. It kept me busy for a while. You know that some of my friends participated in Duelist Kingdom, and then in Battle City? I had to be there for them. I even participated myself in Battle City,” he added, wondering if his father would show any sort of pride in an activity that didn’t have anything to do with archeology.

Not surprisingly, his father completely failed to acknowledge his mention of Battle City and simply nodded. “I can see you’ve had much on your plate. It must be difficult to live on your own at such a young age. I was never certain it was such a good plan to separate the family. You know, Ryou, that if you wanted to we could find some way to make us all living together workable. The public transport in Domino is quite good…”

“No, father,” Ryou cut in as gently as he could. “It isn’t so difficult as it was at first, and I enjoy my privacy. Unless the financial strain of my apartment is becoming unjustifiable…”

He shook his head. “No, no. No worries about that. Your apartment isn’t very expensive, and if makes you more comfortable then the expense is worth it.”

Ryou relaxed. He wasn’t sure what he would do if his father had insisted on his coming to live with him and his mother. Even if privacy wasn’t an issue he was really concerned with, there were other considerations that living with a couple of witnesses would inevitably complicate. He didn’t know how Koe would react to having his parents near at hand again, or what might happen to them if they started to suspect… anything. Best never to put it to the test in Ryou’s opinion, and to remain in his very private apartment by himself.

“So,” his father said with a bit more energy, “does this mean your routine has settled? Do you have
Ryou smiled a little ruefully. "Not really," he admitted. "I'm more settled than before, but school is becoming busier than ever, and my friends are going through some stuff I feel like I ought to help with."

It wasn't a lie, it was just a gross oversimplification. A lot had been discovered over the course of Battle City concerning the Millennium items and the spirit that resided within the Puzzle. Or at least, a lot had been discovered for the others. To them it was all new information that there were seven items all together and that something was fated to happen when they were brought together. It was a new idea to them that the items should be brought together, that it was what they had been designed for from the beginning. The identity of Yugi's 'other self,' that of an ancient Egyptian Pharaoh, seemed to take everyone by surprise, making them question everything which they had thought was true.

None of it came as a surprise to Ryou, because none of it was a surprise to Koe. He knew more than he ever really told Ryou. He could sense when the spirit was holding back or skirting around mentioning certain things, and could sometimes sense the shape of what was being withheld. He had known Yugi's spirit had once been a Pharaoh, for example. Koe had even referred to the spirit as a king to Yugi's face once. It wasn't a difficult deduction. Ryou had the advantage of Bakhura's memories to aid him as well, while it seemed the Pharaoh's spirit had retained none of his. There was no recollection at all of the Millennium items, their original purpose, or of their bloody origins.

They were heading towards a reckoning. Ryou could feel it in his own body and in the way Koe paced impatiently within his skull. The spirits of the past, their hosts and anyone else who had been directly touched by them, were all speeding down a path none of them would be able to turn away from. It had been set into motion thousands of years ago, in the dead of night and to the final screams of terror from ninety-nine throats. It had begun in death, and Ryou dreaded that it would end the same way. He couldn't stop it, though. Things could not go on the way they had for the last three millennia. There had to be a resolution, and soon.

It was coming.

His father was nodding, his face attempting to arrange itself into something suitably parental. It looked like a struggle. "That's commendable, Ryou. I'm glad you've such good friends and that they can depend on you when they're in need. Just don't compromise yourself in the process, mm?"

Ryou's smile didn't move. "I'll do my best while continuing to do what I think is right."

He didn't know what was going to happen to him, or to any of them. The looming future promised to be life changing, but in what ways exactly and what they could expect when all was said and done, he had no idea. He could only move on, move forward, and as he promised his father, to do what he thought was right.

Which brought him to the reason he had come to the Domino City Museum. Giving himself a mental shake, he turned to face his father directly. "That's actually why I'm here, father."

Eyebrows raised, his father returned his look. "Oh? How is that? You aren't in any sort of trouble?"

He shook his head, the cord of the Ring weighing heavy against his neck. "No, no trouble. I've just been thinking about my future, what it is I would like to make my career, and so what colleges I should be preparing for."
“It’s a little early to be giving such serious thought to that, Ryou. You’re still in your first year of high school.”

Ryou shrugged. “If I know what it is I want, then there’s no reason not to make preparations as soon as possible, is there?”

“I suppose not,” his father said thoughtfully. “Depending on what it is, the earlier you prep the better. And it will give you an edge over your peers. What have you decided you want?”

He licked his lips, his insides a turmoil. “I would like to go into cultural anthropology, possibly with a minor in linguistics, with a heavy focus on Egyptology.”

This time there was no mistaking the flush of pleasure that came over his father, the happy shine in his eyes as he looked at him with pride. For years Ryou had shown little to no interest in his life’s work, and now out of the blue he announced he wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps. Unless Ryou made some brilliant discovery in the future, he was fairly certain this was the happiest he would ever see his father.

“Ryou, that’s fantastic!” He clapped his hands on Ryou’s shoulders, stinging him. He worked at a desk now, but he’d worked in the field for years and was stronger than he looked. “I’m so glad to hear that! What made you decide on cultural anthropology?”

Ryou shrugged, rubbing at his arm. “It just seemed like my whole life was heading that way. But this is what I was hoping to get your help with, father, in securing a good school.”

“That’s fantastic!” He clapped his hands on Ryou’s shoulders, stinging him. He worked at a desk now, but he’d worked in the field for years and was stronger than he looked. “I’m so glad to hear that! What made you decide on cultural anthropology?”

“Certainly, if I can help, I will. What did you have in mind?”

“My grades are good at the moment, and I intend to take any course which will help me prepare for my major of choice, but schools will also view a student who takes extracurricular activities that pertain to an intended major more favorably. Especially anything that’s recognized by a third party establishment. Like a museum.” Ryou took a breath. “I would like to spend some time working with the Museum, as an intern maybe, to gain experience and show potential schools my dedication.”

He’d been wrong. It was possible for his father to look even prouder. “Yes.” It sounded as though he were having trouble speaking clearly. “That’s a… very good idea, Ryou. Any school is likely to look on such an arrangement favorably. And so long as it’s volunteer work it won’t make any difference to your high school. Yes, I don’t think it’s too much to say that working with Domino City Museum will reflect very well on you. There are more notable museums of course, but… Do you know which school you would like to enroll into?”

“Tokyo U.”

This time his father’s brows flew up to his hairline. “That’s very ambitious. You know there are many schools that offer perfectly respectable courses.”

“I know. But with Tokyo University as my school there will never be any doubt as to my credentials.”

His father frowned a little. “Just as you want. But if you don’t make the cut there, there are plenty of alternatives, and no one will think less of you for taking one of them.” He took a breath, looking around the workroom and straightening his sleeves distractedly. Any sort of formal clothing really didn’t suit the man. He was always more comfortable in clothes which were meant to get grubby, dusty and wrinkled, and which he could be expected to sleep in and still be wearing the next day.
Clothes meant to impress others always made his father look like a hermit crab trying to wear a shell that was too large for him.

“I’ll go through what we have on our plate at the moment and what we can expect to have for the next few months, and find work that you would be suited to. I’m sure none of our regulars will object - they’ll probably welcome you even more enthusiastically than me. We can always use extra hands. I’ll need a good idea of your schedule, what days you’ll be available so I can schedule appropriately.”

“Actually, father, I was hoping to work on an independent project for the museum before being handed over to your workers.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” Ryou licked his lips again. This was it, the real crux of why he had come, why he was telling his father any of this. “I know you have a large exhibition planned soon, one centering around ancient Egypt. I was hoping to design and fabricate a display for that.”

The frown returned to his father’s face, this one with something else to it. This wasn’t just his father he was speaking to, now, but the owner of Domino City Museum and careful curator.

“It is true that there will be an exhibition,” he said. “But all of the displays have already been chosen, and the layouts finalized. It would be difficult to add anything new at this point. And, not to put too fine a point on it, son, but the displays we choose all have a high cultural, aesthetic or educational value, often all three. I’m not sure what you have in mind could pass the same screenings as everything else, even if there were time for you to finish it before the exhibition.”

It was to be expected. His father might be ecstatic with him for his apparent change of heart with his career choice and eager to help him, but he was also the owner of the Museum. The image and reputation of Domino City Museum dictated its survival, so they couldn’t afford to allow anything which might negatively impact either.

Not that Ryou was ready to give up just yet. He still had his father’s happiness with him working in his favor, plus a dash of nepotism. He just had to be a little bit persuasive while he argued his case.

He nodded his understanding. “I know it’s short notice and that I’m untried, but I think you would like my idea for the display. You remember my hobby of putting together role play sets, the stages for my games using miniatures?”

“Yes?”

“I wanted to put together a sort of diorama along the same lines, depicting Thebes during the late New Kingdom. I’ve already done a lot of research on it, and I know I can get it to look very accurate. I even planned a portion of the river Nile and a representation of a poor village to act as contrast.” He smiled at his father. “I’ve been planning it out for some time. When it’s done I’ll even have the pottery peasants used all in place. It’ll be a good educational tool, a way for laymen to get a better idea of how ancient cities used to work that’s more effective than flat pictures, and it might even get the kids interested.”

He was using key words he knew would catch his father’s interest, and was pleased to see that it seemed to be working. “There’s still the question of space…”

“I thought of that,” he said brightly. “You know the disused storage room, the one just off the main
hall that no one likes to use? I could use that room to finish putting together the display, and then if
it’s good enough for the exhibition that room can be added to the map. If it doesn’t pass the test,
then all you have to do is keep the door shut. That way there’s no real risk, and there’s the possible
gain of a unique exhibit.”

His father was quiet for a moment. Then he laughed, tossing his head back and filling the
workroom with the sound. A few employees glanced up from their work. “Well,” he said once he
had quieted, “you are very persistent on this point and you have given it some thought. Alright,
then. How accurate do you believe your diorama will be?”

Ryou resisted the urge to touch the Millennium Ring hanging around his neck, but the weight of it
abruptly became much more noticeable to him. “Very, father,” he said as evenly as he could
manage. “I’ve used many different sources for reference, and if I may be allowed to finish work
here I’ll be able to fill in any remaining gaps.”

His father looked at him, smiling faintly with something that looked very much like approval. Not
pride that Ryou was finally conforming to a particular mold that he placed the most value in, but
actual appreciation for something that Ryou had done. It was a little bizarre. He nodded once, and
clapped Ryou again on the shoulder. “Very well, then, son. We’ll do just as you suggest. And
should your diorama not pass muster for the exhibition, I’m sure we will find some good use for
it.”

Ryou sighed with relief, and finally began to relax. His father was moving on to new topics, but he
only paid cursory attention, his goal achieved.

The truth was that he had only given passing thought to his future beyond high school. If he were
somehow still alive after graduation he had no idea what he would want to do. He had given no
thought to Tokyo University or his future course of study or his career. He didn’t even care if the
miniature he was creating of Waset and Kul Elna ever got public exposure - though given the
quality it might. It didn’t matter if the public at large ever saw it. It wasn’t for them. All that really
mattered was that it be made and that it be somewhere in the Museum.

It was needed for the future, something for that reckoning he could feel like the approach of an
electrical storm. It was something Koe insisted they would need - that Yugi and the spirit of the
Puzzle would need in order to recover their lost memories. Just as he was collecting Millennium
items to hand off to Yugi, it was all to help along what must be. Koe meant only well, wished only
to return the lost memories to the equally lost Pharaoh.

It was somewhat true, but Ryou could also feel the deception in what he was being told. There
were purely selfish reasons for Koe doing what he was doing that he told Ryou nothing about. But
while Koe might not tell him, Ryou had a pretty shrewd idea of what was coming.

The spirit of an ancient thief, robbed of everything including his people, the spirit of a Pharaoh who
had been responsible for it all or at least had been involved, and the seven items which had started
it all were all coming together. Koe might not say what it was he planned, but Ryou had Bakhura’s
memories. He didn’t know the future, but he knew the past, and that laid out a good roadmap for
what was to come.

Trouble was coming to his friends, and to Yugi and his spirit in particular. Koe couldn’t be
intending any sort of good by his actions, despite all he had ever said and what Ryou had once
desperately hoped was true.

And yet Ryou found himself unable to warn any of his friends about what he believed was about to
happen. He still cared for his friends and wished them no harm, and yet he couldn’t articulate the
warning that harm was coming. He was frozen.

In the end he decided that it was the memories of Bakhura which was dividing his loyalties. How could he know what Bakhura had suffered, and the reasons for that suffering, without feeling a twinge of empathy? How could he have lived Bakhura’s life, felt as he felt, and be left untouched?

He couldn’t. Bakhura had been a part of him too long, and now Ryou’s heart beat in time with the man of ancient Egypt. It yearned for justice and retribution, for revenge and for the acknowledgement of all the wrongs done to him and to Kul Elna.

Ryou cared for his friends, but what was one to do with a heart so divided?

All he could do was to help along the coming reckoning and hope that, when it arrived, everyone could somehow be saved. It seemed impossible from where he stood now, but they had all achieved so much in the past that had seemed impossible. Surely this could also be done. The spirit of the Puzzle wasn’t a bad person. Once he recovered his memories and saw what had befallen Bakhura, once that tragedy was known to him and to everyone else, surely then they would all fight just as hard to redeem the last child of Kul Elna.

It was what Ryou intended to do. He would fight for Bakhura’s redemption even if no one else did.

An image of a man, alone under a sea of stars with both revenge and redemption held just out of his reach came to Ryou and made him shiver with remembered cold.

Don’t worry, Yadonushi, Koe whispered to him as he walked beside his oblivious father. We will be setting everything to rights. You’ll see.

Ryou’s hand did stray to his chest that time, feeling the Ring warm against his skin, and the halo of old scars of the points in his flesh. He wished he could believe the voice in his head, or barring that, he could at least hate it properly.

“This is it, Bakhura! That stone tablet will be your tombstone!”

Raw heka rips through the air, igniting the dust of previous strikes before finding its target. Diabound is struck, unable either to hide or to dodge, manipulated into place by the Pharaoh and his priest. The attack strikes him full in the face and he shrieks, the unearthly sound shaking the tortured stones of the hidden temple. In a small but excruciating echo, Bakhura screams, the agony of the attack ripping through his own face.

He clutches at his eye, blood filling his palm. The world tilts with the force of the blow, with the strength of déjà vu. Rage rushes through his body, holding him up. Rage that is his own, rage that belongs to the muuet of Kul Elna, the rage of Diabound which is concentrated and focused, it all fills him, gives him strength and he knows that he will win.

He grins, tasting metal. He looks up, his vision blurred, but clear enough to see the hated faces before him. “I took that straight in the face, but it didn’t hurt at all.”

The faces are angry, frustrated. Still they do not believe that Diabound can take their blows and remain standing. Still they do not believe that their fates have been decided. Still they do not accept that this place, this place that saw so much death for those pretty tools they use so freely, will soon be the resting place for their worthless bones.

The dead priest, the one he had killed and who now is a ka himself, thrusts his staff towards them. “You will not resist this!”
The air roars to life with the force of another *heka* blast, but Bakhura only laughs. “You live with time that is not your own, magician! You will not strike us twice!”

Diabound takes up the fallen pillar, responding to Bakhura’s silent urging and shatters it, disrupting the blast and sending everyone diving for cover. Bakhura continues to laugh, the rage and the joy rising within him in equal measure, energizing him, making him giddy with power.

So much power already with only a few of the Millennium items, and so much more soon to be his. All he needs is a few more, a sacrifice to complete that which had begun fifteen years ago in this same place, and the door to Zorc will be opened. Soon it will all be over, it will all be finished at last.

“For all of the *heka* you’ve used,” he mocked, the blood still flowing freely down his face, “all you have accomplished is making Diabound angry!”

He shrieks, his Diabound, his little God. Not so little now, no, not at all. He is huge, powerful and beautifully twisted. His God ka, the part of himself that is *himself*, the purest representation there could be. Diabound is strong and clever, and so very, very full of rage. His beautiful Diabound. They have both come so far since that day they had met beside the river, a basket of stolen food between them.

The battle rages on, Bakhura and Diabound against the Pharaoh, his dead magician and one pathetic priest. He glories in his power, in how easy it is to call forth a second ka to protect the stone tablet from any direct attacks. He takes delicious pleasure in the look on the young Pharaoh’s face when he sees it, when he understands just what it is he’s facing. There is a little disappointment in Bakhura’s heart, a small thorn of dissatisfaction that the Pharaoh he faces now is not the same as the one who sent the soldiers and the priest mages. This Pharaoh is even younger than Bakhura and he had only been a child during Kul Elna’s slaughter. It is a disappointment, but one which is easily shrugged away. He is the flesh and blood of the man who would so sacrifice his own people, and in him lies the same tainted spirit. The *muuet* will feed on him just as eagerly as his father.

After all, Bakhura *had* taken his revenge on the old Pharaoh, hadn’t he? Given him one last ride in the sun, treating him in death just as he had treated Kul Elna in life. If they could find no peace, then why should he?

And now he will have the son, this new Pharaoh who, even after learning the truth of his father and of the items, still radiates pride, arrogance, *entitlement*. Bakhura is not surprised, and feels no regret as Diabound strikes, again and again, wearing the stripling king down.

The excitement builds in him as he watches. Diabound is hidden, a part of the temple itself, and cannot be found, no matter how hard the Pharaoh squints. His clever Diabound, a part of the very shadows, he can only imagine what his *ka* might be capable of once he takes the power of Zorc.

Without the priest and his sniffing hound, Diabound is invisible, but Bakhura can feel him, knows where he is, can practically see him as he approaches the Pharaoh…

Wait. *What*?

The Pharaoh looks at him, a contemptuous smirk on his lips. “Mahado was not expending *heka* to no purpose,” he says, and has the impudence to sound smug. “He has brought light to this dark place and exposed you both!”

It’s true. He’d thought the last attack launched by the dead priest had been random, *heka* going in
all directions in hopes of a lucky hit. Bakhura hadn’t noticed most of the shots had been directed up, towards the ceiling. Light now streams into the temple where the ceiling has been broken through, stripping away the darkness, shredding shadows.

It’s obscene. This is not a place that was ever meant to be seen so clearly, the sins of the past touched by Ra’s gaze.

Diabound is also touched, and without shadows he is exposed. An instant is all it takes to understand, and in that instant he sees where it is the dead priest has gone, and what he is doing.

“Now, Bakhura, may you disappear into the darkness!”

He cannot do anything, there’s no time. No time to attack, no time to retreat. Diabound is exposed, he’s directly within the dead priest’s sights, and heka is already gathered at the point of his staff. All he can do is brace himself as the attack is launched, striking Diabound all over his body.

The pain this time rips through Bakhura, seeming to take pieces of him with it. He screams, collapsing to his knees, every place where Diabound is struck lighting up with agonizing fire. There’s more blood dripping down his face, he can feel it. It’s in his hair, heavy and warm, and he can feel it other places, rivers flowing down his body. He coughs, and a thick constellation of crimson spatters the dusty floor. Something inside is torn. For an instant his mind is taken from the moment, wondering what it was the people of Kul Elna had seen and felt just before their souls had been ripped free. Had it been something like this? Patterns of their own blood inches away from their faces, while someone who thought them less than human stood over them, holding the final blow?

Bakhura grits his teeth, willing himself back to the present, back to his feet. He is the last of his people and he is strong. He’d survived everything, and he will kill they who murdered them, who grew fat and complacent off the blood of Kul Elna. He will kill them all, take the power, and then…

He hears the Pharaoh speak, young voice tired and wary, “Is it dead?” It’s unclear who he means.

Diabound moves, rises and the Pharaoh skips backward, away from the hulking God ka. “There’s still some strength in the beast!”

Bakhura forces himself to laugh through the pain. Blood mists before his eyes. “Some? Idiot Pharaoh! In this place we have unlimited power! I am the last of Kul Elna, I am Kul Elna! Muuet, come to me!”

Around him the lost spirits of Kul Elna, forever swirling, forever restless, fly to him, sink through his skin. He shivers, the touch of so many dead freezing him from the inside out. But they fill him with strength as well. His legs are better able to support him, the strange fluttering in one lung stilling.

He can see the look of horror and disgust painted across the Pharaoh’s face, and he grins. To accept, let alone invite wandering souls to take residence in one’s own body goes against every teaching of the land, flying in the face of Ma’at. But what cares he of Ma’at? He truly is all of Kul Elna now, and they will have their revenge.

Taking of their strength, Diabound roars back up from the ground, shrieking defiance. His beautiful ka. They will have their revenge, oh so soon now.

With the muuet of Kul Elna a part of them, the battle begins anew, now much more to Bakhura’s
advantage. The spirits form a protective shield for Diabound, and with their power added to his own, he presses back the dead priest easily. He scores a direct hit on the floating annoyance, slamming him into a pillar, and Bakhura has the great satisfaction of watching the Pharaoh stumble and drop down to hands and knees.

Yes, ‘Great Pharaoh,’ he thinks. That is how it should be. You, on your knees to me. Prostrate yourself before those who gave you any true power and who the world would forget!

We will never be forgotten!

Diabound charges toward the fallen priest, claws raised to strike. One more blow is all it will take to kill him once and for all. There are no more tricks he can play with his ba and his ka to cheat death, he will be utterly destroyed forever. With him destroyed, Pharaoh will be an easy kill. Bakhura grins, the taste of blood heavy in his mouth, the excited writhing of the muuet crawling through his whole body.

“Millennium Key!”

The cry rips Bakhura’s attention to a side. He had almost forgotten the priest, who is even now summoning a new ka to save his Pharaoh. With a disdainful motion, Bakhura has his own second ka attack the upstart priest, striking him through and silencing his insolent tongue. None shall keep him from his revenge, from the justice so long denied him. Not kings, not Gods, and certainly not half competent priests.

The priest is easily felled, defenseless as he is. The Millennium Key flies from his hand, quickly snatched up by the muuet and brought to Bakhura’s waiting hand.

Three items, now; the Ring, the Pendant and the Key. Bakhura feels the throb of power within the Key, but it is distant, not flowing into him as the Ring and Pendant. It doesn’t matter. He has more than enough power with two items and the dead of Kul Elna to deal with one collapsed boy and his failing ka.

Diabound attacks, crushing stone, the whole temple trembling under his might. Bakhura’s heart leaps with delight. The priest is dead at last, dead! And because he had foolishly made himself Pharaoh’s ka, his death will be the instrument of his beloved Pharaoh’s death as well…

The dust clears. There is no body.

What?

A motion catches his eye and he raises his eyes. There, rising through the air is the dead, crippled priest, being dragged along by some girl… The priest’s apprentice when he had lived.

Bakhura growls low in his throat, is echoed by Diabound, a sound like boulders grinding together in a landslide. Beyond Pharaoh and the spectacle of the dead priest he can see four figures, all priests, enter the hidden temple. With their dead comrade and the one hanging limply from Pharaoh’s shoulder, this makes up all six Millennium priests. All of those trusted with the items and their powers gathered round him.

All but one.

As the priest and Pharaoh meet and regroup, Bakhura finds himself smiling once again. He wants to laugh, but a stab of pain beneath his ribs warns him. Instead he calls out to the priests, taunting them. “So you have come, iwiw priests. And you’ve fetched me some beautiful gifts as well! How thoughtful!” He straightens, raising his head and holding the Millennium Key aloft. “Three of the
items are already mine. When I defeat you and take the final four, there will be no power in the world that can stop me!”

The priests respond with typical, expected arrogance, defying his claims with threats of their own. Blood both fresh and drying painting his face, Bakhura grins fiercely at them all.

He will take the items from their hands, and this time it will be the blood of priests that flows in sacrifice!

Opposing sides clash, the priests pitting their many and varied *ka* against his Diabound. They have the advantage of numbers, but they are nothing to Diabound’s strength, their attacks useless against the protective shield provided by Kul Elna’s dead. They attack, are repelled, regroup and attack again only to be repelled a second time. The laugh comes from an uncontrollable place inside Bakhura, tearing him and bringing the fresh taste of blood, his mirth flavored with copper.

Diabound lashes out, pushing back the assembled *ka*. One takes the brunt of the attack, and Bakhura hears the priest attached to it cry out in pain. Bakhura’s grin widens. It is only a matter of time.

But then, one of the priests steps forward, wielding the Millennium Scales. He speaks, but his voice is lost to Bakhura in the sounds of battle, the groaning of tortured stone. He does something, holding the Scales aloft. There is a blinding flash, in the center of which he thinks he can see the shapes of the priests’ *ka* twisting, flowing together, *merging*...

When Bakhura can see clearly once again, the many *ka* are all gone, and instead there is only one left. An unfamiliar *ka* that radiates power and menace, a plated dragon creature wielding a blade.

Bakhura’s stomach drops at the sight, understanding coming quickly. *They fused their ka?*

The priest with the Scales steps forward, proud face dark with anger or effort. “This is the secret of the Millennium items, *itja!* It is the power of unity, to bring our hearts and spirits together. It is a power you could never wield, never know!”

He grinds his teeth together, making him grin. It is now two *ka* against two *ka*. Fewer enemies to fight, but each of them strong.

*Fools,* he thinks. *Do they not see who it is they fight? I, who am many; I, who hold all of the souls of Kul Elna; I, who am an entire people in one skin? It is I who knows nothing of unity? Truly these priests are blind, seeing only what suits them. It is good they are about to die.*

The fused *ka* of the priests and Diabound attack at once, their *heka* meeting in the air and stopping, their power stalling either from overpowering the other. Surprise runs through Bakhura, but more than that, pain. The abrupt stall has sent a tremor through Diabound, and so on through. The sensation of liquid running down his body, soaking his clothes makes itself felt once again. There’s an odd fluttering in his chest as his breath grows shorter and shorter. Something is wrong, he can feel it on the edge of his attention, overpowered by the battle but growing more insistent. He must finish this soon, must take the last of the Millennium items and gain the power of Zorc. The power is the key, the answer, the solution to it all. He must have it, must have it, have it for his own, or there will have been no *point,* no point at all...

He directs Diabound to attack with both of his heads. The increase in raw *heka* forces the fusion back, back, on the verge of being destroyed by its own fire...

The priests are desperate, driven to a corner, Bakhura can see it in their faces. He is so close, so
close to finishing them all off and at last taking what he’s worked so hard for.

He can see the priests confer, and they make a desperate move, sacrificing a limb of their *ka* to get off a clear attack on Diabound.

It is a pointless sacrifice, wasted as the *muuet* of Kul Elna rise up to fend off the attack. Bakhura laughs, his head spinning. “Weep, priests!” He screams across the temple. “Weep for what remains of your lives, for your pathetic excuse for ‘unity’! Weep, and go to the underworld in despair!”

A jolt goes through Bakhura. He looks, disbelieving, as the attack leveled at Diabound actually begins to damage the *muuet* barrier!

*How? How is it possible?* He can feel the rage, the hatred and despair of his people. *How is it that anything could break through?*

That priest with the Millennium Scales, there must be more to its power than first met the eye. It is his fusion of the *ka* which does this.

He must be put down.

Bakhura hardly needs spare a thought to have the second *ka* attack. The priests do not expect it, they are too concentrated on Diabound, on breaking the barrier which surrounds him to remember that Bakhura has a second *ka*, and that this *ka* is just as capable of lashing out.

The *heka* is upon them before they can react, before they even realize there is a danger, and the priest holding the Scales is lanced clean through the chest. A fine mist of scarlet erupts behind him, bathing his comrades with his life.

“You focused too much on the serpent,” Bakhura murmurs. “And so were stung by the scorpion.”

The Scales tumble from the priest’s dying fingers. Before it can even clatter to the stones it is caught by the spirits. He holds out his hand and it flies to him, slapping against his palm.

Four Millennium items. Only three left. He is almost there.

Without Scales the fused *ka* can no longer exist. It dissolves as he watches, its attack disappearing right along with it. He looks down at the Scales, probing at it with the senses he has become aware of through contact with the other items. There is power within the Scales, great power whose limits even its wielder had failed to utilize. Like the Key, though, that power is recalcitrant, flowing into him only at a resentful trickle.

He grits his teeth. *Why* are the Millennium items so miserly with their power? He doesn’t understand… but he doesn’t *need* to understand. He just needs the items.

Bakhura looks up in time to see the priest he struck breathe his last, and for those around him to cry out in dismay. The mad rage within him bubbles up in another wild, painful shriek of laughter.

“So much for your ‘unity,’ Pharaoh! For all your fine words, there is no power you have that was not first forged from the blood of my kin!”

The laughter leaves him, and in its wake Bakhura must catch his breath. The air is not so choked with dust as it once was, but it’s still heavy. He can’t seem to draw enough in to be comfortable, to calm his shuddering heart. “All that remains…” He struggles to make himself loud, to be heard, but he can’t get enough air. “All that remains… is for Diabound… to send you all to the afterlife.” He manages a smile. “I hope your souls are ready.”
Pharaoh stands over the body of his fallen priest, his face dark. Even through the haziness of the air, Bakhura can see the rage writ in every line of him, the murderous intent in his eye. “You will not find it so easy as that!” His shout is loud in the lapse of battle.

Bakhura’s voice, when he speaks, cannot match it. “And what… could that mean, I wonder? Well… my ‘Great Pharaoh’?”

The Pharaoh’s face twists in contempt. “Look at Diabound,” is all he says.

Bakhura does. At first nothing seems out of place, there is no damage to his beautiful ka, and even if there had been he would have felt it.

And then he sees it. A hole ripped through the muu et barrier, leaving Diabound exposed on one side. Bakhura’s heart lurches at the sight, a glimpse of the near future trailing across his sight and filling him, for the first time, with dread.

“You see, our unity is more than enough to break the defenses of you, kinless one!”

There is no time. No time to defend, no time for his second ka to gather the strength for an attack, no time for Diabound to retreat to the shadows, not even any time to scream defiance. The dead priest is there, raw and swirling heka in his hands--

- pain -
- light -
- heat -
- noise -
- pain! -

Bakhura doesn’t realize that he’s screaming until he chokes, trying to gasp through a throat clogged with blood. The entire inside of his skin feels as though it’s been roasted over a fire. Somewhere in his body he feels something dropping, but cannot tell what or even exactly where it is.

He chokes, coughs, his trembling legs still somehow managing to hold him upright. The dust at his feet is pattered and pocked with his blood. He sees it, running freely down his hands, dripping from his face, practically pouring from his mouth.

His body feels far away, but he forces his head to rise. Through eyes that will not focus, he sees Diabound - his Diabound, his beautiful ka - fade into nothingness. As the last vestiges of him are lost, Bakhura feels something within him collapse, and his knees buckle.

He is dead. Diabound, his little god and companion of his youth, is dead. He feels it, knows there will be no returning this time. Pharaoh and his priests have utterly destroyed his ka, leaving hollowness within him that no other loss had ever managed to achieve.

And just as he knows that Diabound is dead, he knows that he, Bakhura, is also dead. The certainty slips into his mind like a sliver of ice. He’s already dead, and it’s only a matter of minutes before his spirit joins those of his people, lost and roaming for all eternity. In truth, he’s been dying for some time, his rage and heka the only things fighting off the pull of the underworld, and only Zorc’s power offering him any way to survive.

Bakhura lifts his head, heavy as though stuffed full of stones, and peers at the shifting shapes he
knows to be Pharaoh and his people. The flame of rage within him, flickering but never doused, burns a little hotter.

*I must… kill… Pharaoh…*

Thoughts are sluggish, hard to grasp, but that is one he can take hold of. Pharaoh must die.

In his hands he still holds the Scales and the Key. Round his neck hang the Pendant and the Ring. Three are still missing, but he has more than half. Sluggishly, an idea forms. Had he been fully cognizant, he would doubtless have scoffed at it. But now, it’s all he has, and there is no more time.

*But there could be.*

Using a strength he finds wondrous, Bakhura half stumbles, half crawls his way to the Millennium stone. As he drags his way there, he can feel his life draining away. Pharaoh and his priests, probably recognizing the futility of what he seems to be doing, do not attempt to stop him, not even so much as to shout.

The world is one of shadows, darkness dancing on the edges of his vision. Bakhura must feel where it is the items fit the stone, fingers shaking, metal rattling. He is dying, but he must live just a little longer. Just a little more for one more trick, one last thing to steal.

*I… am the king… of thieves,* he thinks, fitting the final spike of the Ring into place. *There is nothing… nothing… I cannot steal.*

It is done, but still there is more. His hand heavy and gloved in his own gore, Bakhura takes hold of the knife at his belt. The same knife he stole all those years ago, the one imbued with sacrificial heka and one he has used in ritual himself. The handle is slick in his palm, its shining edge a crescent moon in the encroaching darkness. He lifts the knife before him, darkening eye drawn to the glittering curve…

Slowly, he falls forward over the stone, his blood running over it, over the Millennium items. The darkness is all he can see.

It seems an age passes before he knows anything more. A sound - a step - coming closer. The darkness parts, and a face peers in on him. A familiar, hated face.

It is the last of his strength, the last possible reserve of his failing body, and he uses it all at once. With one hand Bakhura swipes forward, seizing the hand parting his hair, doubtless to confirm he was dead, while the other drives forward, crescent blade leading.

There is resistance, not much, a surprised cry, and then the satisfaction of blade sinking into its target, of warmth not his own washing his hand.

In the distance, Bakhura hears the shouts of the priests, but they don’t matter now. All that matters is Pharaoh, staring in disbelief at the knife in his guts.

“Think not to escape me, Pharaoh,” he whispers, words for his hated enemy alone. “Not now, and not ever.”

Pharaoh looks up at him, and he sees a reflection of himself. Blood from the battle covers his young face, and in eyes shaded like the death of Ra’s light, lies the same ferocious hatred that has driven Bakhura since childhood.

He smiles in Pharaoh’s face, delighted in the twin he has made of this boy.
He pulls Pharaoh closer, until their faces are nearly touching. It’s growing difficult to see, and he must see, the Pharaoh must see, and he must hear.

“Listen, Pharaoh. With this I make a sacrifice of myself, the last of Kul Elna, the final soul to join those who have gone before. I make of myself this sacrifice so I might live on, and complete what I have begun. And you… of you I make sacrifice as well, but also this curse. You will never know peace, nor rest, nor oblivion. I bind you into eternity with me, never again to taste the fruits sprung from the murder of others.”

He grins at the fury in Pharaoh’s face, the way his body shakes as he twists the knife. Blood trickles from his mouth.

“You will never be free of me, my dear Pharaoh.”

The Pharaoh coughs, blood flowing faster. “Itja,” he manages. “You will pay for these crimes…” He draws a breath, sobbing and full of pain.

“Now, now, Pharaoh. There is no point in so distressing yourself. For you see…” He rips out the knife, pulling sideways to leave a wide gash. Pharaoh’s hand goes to the wound, but he cannot hold back the tide of gore and viscera. Without resistance, Bakhura takes hold of his other hand, slams it to the stone, his own hand lying atop it, holding it in place, and drives the knife through them both.

“You’re already… dead…”

His strength gone and the shadows rushing in from all sides, Bakhura lets himself fall beside the Pharaoh. He has no doubt that his sacrifice will be accepted, that what he wishes will be granted. Kheru - Zorc will not allow one so faithful to be wasted in such a way.

He will survive somehow. He will steal time from the very gods and none will be able to stop him.

Head heavy, it falls in the direction of Pharaoh, and their eyes meet again, locked together as they each depart the world.

“Even you…” he murmurs. “Mine… now…”

He wants to laugh, one final chuckle in Pharaoh’s dying face, but he cannot. The tide is pulling him away, that same familiar pull that once nearly carried him away to the underworld. Against its inexorable tug, Bakhura cannot laugh. All… he can do… is…

...

...

The endless desert is cold, empty and soundless. There is peace here, of a kind. It is the peace of the never changing, of void and of infinity. Overhead is an ocean of stars, bright and distant, below nothing but sand. Sand, a winding river, and a city whose streets are lit with flickering torches.

The city of Waset, home to the Pharaoh of the Two Lands.

Bakhura sits, watching the city. In his heart hatred still burns, but now it is more an ember, a coal whose flame lies beneath its surface, flickering in a liquid dance. Within rests the potential for a great, all consuming fire. He has learned to be patient, to find this waiting stillness in himself. He has been a part of this unchanging reality for longer than he could ever guess, always faced with his enemy and never able to approach.
One must learn to adapt, or one would go mad.

So he waits. He waits for his time to come. And he begins to forget.

He does not forget all, but some. Time wears away the memories until only the sharpest and the most painful remain. Under a black sky full of stars, Bakhura begins to reflect them, becoming a thing emptiness scattered with pinpricks of light, with memories shining out as a rough map to his past.

Except… things are changing. Memories are relighting in the darkness of his mind. He does not know why it is so, but the why does not matter.

He is patient. He waits. He watches.

The embers of his heart stir to life.

Within the vault of his memory more lights come to life, and Bakhura stirs. He picks up his head and looks around. There is a familiar scent in the air, a presence in the darkness he knows in a way he cannot explain. He looks around, but nothing meets his eye. He frowns.

“… Sheut?”

Ryou wakes with a calmness which surprises him.

He blinked in the dark, staring up. He didn’t know what to expect to see at first; a stone ceiling broken with the attacks of a spirit monster, or an endless celestial sea of untouchable stars? But no, neither met his eyes. Only his own ceiling, plain and familiar, half hidden in the darkness of his apartment.

He didn’t move, but just ran through all of what he just experienced. It wasn’t often that he could remember so much directly after waking up, and it takes a little while to process.

He ought to feel disturbed, he told himself. He’d just witnessed- no, experienced the murder of several people, and then Bakhura’s suicide, all as though he had done it himself. In a way, Ryou had felt what it was like to die; the pain, the heaviness, the panic and understanding - like the last instant just before falling from a cliff, just as gravity takes a full grip on the body and pulls it down. He’d felt the blood, smelled and tasted the gore all around him. But that wasn’t what bothered him.

The look in the Pharaoh’s eyes when he looked at Bakhura. The words he had thrown at the thief, the sheer venom in him, the incandescent hatred he leveled towards the last stray of Kul Elna. Ryou knew he ought to be just as disturbed by Bakhura’s hate, if not more so when considering where that hate promised to take him… But it was the Pharaoh who occupied his thoughts. The Pharaoh who was the spirit who occupied the Puzzle, who was Yugi’s and all of their friend, was the same man who faced down Bakhura with murder in his heart. Whatever his motivation, it was still a hard thing to see. The next time he saw the spirit of the Puzzle, would he be able to greet him, speak to him, or even look at him the same way as before? Or would the image of him, blood stained and raging, always be what he saw when Yugi was possessed with the spirit?

Yugi… how was he affected, really, by the Pharaoh’s spirit? How much would he be affected when the Pharaoh’s memories returned, and he remembered who he was? Would Yugi, as Ryou knew him, survive the remembrance?

Ryou sat up, expecting his body to scream in protest, but it didn’t. He wasn’t injured, he hadn’t
spent hours in a grueling battle. It always takes time to fully remember where and when he is whenever he experiences one of Bakhura’s memories.

Once he was certain he knew where he was, he closed his eyes. Uncertain that what he wished to do was even possible, he tried to reach inward, towards the place where stars hung and the sun never rose.

_Bakhura…? Bakhura?_

He didn’t know what to expect, had never tried to reach the spirit within the Ring in such a way before. There’s no real reason to think that it would work, but still he tried. He wanted to speak to Bakhura, to sit with him again. After what he’d just experienced, he wanted very much to reassure himself that the spirit was still… around.

_Bakhura. Bakhura._

_And just who do you think you are calling with that name?_

Ryou froze. He should have expected _that_ if nothing else, he supposed.

He swallowed. “Bakhura. The man who once lived in Kul Elna and intended to have his revenge for what happened there.”

_That one, Koe said after a moment. I’m afraid he is gone, Yadonushi. A thing of the past and best forgotten._

Ryou paused, a frown beginning to form. It would be easy to think of Koe as Bakhura, Bakhura after millennia trapped in a Millennium item, just as Yami was the Pharaoh, altered by his long imprisonment. But after reliving so many memories, and after so much time having Koe in his mind, Ryou had a different thought.

“Aren’t you Bakhura?”

There’s something like a chuckle in his mind. _In part, perhaps. A piece of him remains, but as for the man himself, he is dead and dust. Only your memories of him linger on._

Ryou heard the falsehood - felt it - but didn’t call it out. After a moment of silence, Koe went on.

_Get some sleep, Yadonushi. It’s a busy day tomorrow._

He made a sound of agreement, arranging his thoughts carefully so they reflected nothing but concurrence. Eventually he felt the presence of Koe withdraw.

What Koe said reflected what Ryou suspected, but he suspected more. There _were_ aspects of Bakhura within Koe, no doubt of that. But Ryou also saw there parts of _himself_. Koe was a creature of many pieces taken from others, a Frankenstein’s monster of souls. But there also had to be a central core there somewhere, someone who had been individual before the additions.

With the help of Bakhura’s memories, he thought he knew who that could be.

_Zorc Necrophades._

Chapter End Notes
I kinda hated writing this chapter. Not for the writing itself, but because of my routine I end up re-reading it all a minimum of five times, and ow.

**Volunteer Work:** I’m making an assumption on this point that those high schools that have a problem with their students holding down jobs (as we know Domino High does, since Anzu had to hide her job for the five minutes she had it) would be more lenient when it can to volunteer work. And if they weren’t, Ryou can always frame it as just helping out his dad.

**Tokyo U:** Okay, I’m going to level here, I have no idea if Tokyo University would have the courses Ryou’s mentioning. I tried looking it up, but found nothing definitive. So we’re just going for a common cliché and calling it good enough.

**Independent Project:** Ryou was indeed the one who created the tabletop miniatures representing the past. While it is explicitly mentioned in the manga, this was an inspiration taken from - yet another - doujinshi. This one was **Please be DEAD but** by **LECHE.**

**The Final Battle:** For those who want to read this in the manga, it spans Duel #35 - Duel #41. For those who have read this section, there are some pretty noticeable differences right at the end. Notably, that in the manga Bakhura melts into sand and Atem doesn’t die. While I was sticking pretty close to the manga, even down the dialogue, what appears in the manga is technically a recreation of the past with new players interfering. What we’ve got here is what I’ve always thought really happened, without Yami Bakura and the rest of the gang getting in the way.

**Stung by the Scorpion:** This is a Kemetic proverb, but I have no idea just how old it is. The exact wording goes, “Because we focused on the snake, we missed the scorpion.”

**Ryou Present Tense:** This isn’t a typo, it’s done quite deliberately. I’m not sure how many have noticed, but times spent in ancient Egypt are always written in present tense. In this chapter, Ryou was also done that way very briefly. For Reasons.

**Future Chapters:** By my count we have five more chapters to go, an epilogue, and possibly a bonus chapter. The bonus chapter will depend on how pleased I am with the results I come up with. :)

**New Edition!** It has been… a long time since I first started writing this story. (Embarrassingly long, considering how relatively few chapters I have to show for it, honestly.) I’ve had plenty of time to learn and grow as a writer, and also plenty of time to look back at early decisions and cringe over them. I’m toying with the idea of going through and cooking up an updated edition, which would be posted up after this edition is finished and live.

Overall, not too much would be changed. Some editing and a continuity error or two - including Ryou’s mother still being alive. The biggest change, and why I’m considering this in the first place, would be changing ‘Zorc Necrophades’ to ‘Apep.’ For anyone who’s read ‘the Nomenclature article by Fictatious,’ she lays out a pretty good case why the god/demon Apep of Egyptian mythology is a better fit for the role filled by Zorc, and makes a good point for why he ought to be used (that the name Zorc Necrophades is dumb and dumb in the ancient Egyptian context specifically). I agree with the sentiments, and after spending some time buried in books reading up on the Egyptian pantheon, I agree with the conclusion as well. This change will end up
being a lot more involved, including a complete overhaul of the prologue and lots of fixes throughout the story.

As I said, I’m still toying with the idea. *This* edition will remain available regardless, and if the new edition is posted, it will probably only be posted up on AO3. I welcome any thoughts on this either way!

Thanks for reading, everyone! This was the last of my already-prepared chapters, so no schedule for future updates. But we’re almost done!

I'm on tumblr if anyone wants to come say hi or chat about nerdy things! ♥

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!