To the Heart

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Summary

The secrets of the Millennium Ring were never meant to be uncovered, but that wouldn't stop its host from digging. Meanwhile, an alliance formed between the Spirit of the Ring and a certain tombkeeper makes the matter all the more complicated.

A rewrite in which Malik and Bakura form their partnership before Battle City, spanning from there until Millennium World. Generally follows manga canon with some anime elements mixed in.

Notes

I've been wanting to do something like this for a while now. Updates won't be regular since I barely have any free time but the plot is mostly planned out. We'll see if I actually stick to it, haha.

Again, this work will be thiefshipping, and it will have a redemption arc for a certain character (three guesses who that is). It may or may not also include smut so the rating could go up? We'll see.
Chapter 1

'Spirit...'

The hallway was quiet, permeated only by the voice speaking from the back of his mind and the almost imperceptible buzz of the Millennium Ring. A pause, and then he lowered the Item slightly, one of the golden tines still rigidly pointing straight ahead.

'Why are you awake?' He thought back, eyes narrowed. 'I told you I wasn't done yet.'

'How long has it been?' The voice pressed, sounding more alert by the moment.

'Three days.'

'Three days?!

Bakura cringed at the sudden pitching of his host's voice. Even though no one else but him would hear it, it still sounded far too loud in the dead air. He resisted the urge to snarl back, teeth bared in warning.

'I needed more time.'

How he wished he could silence Ryou, force him down under his subconsciousness like he used to be able to. Instead, he was forced to cooperate, to appease his landlord, but talking to him for too long set him on edge.

'Just go back to sleep. The Item is close. I'll grab it and we'll be headed back to Domino soon.'

'Headed back to...? Spirit, where are we?'

Ryou's teeth were going to be ground to stubs at this point. Bakura didn't like the constant questioning when he was trying to concentrate. His ears were trained, alert for any chances in his surroundings, but Ryou's voice was like a static interference.
'Would you like to arrive back home in one piece?' He hissed back in their shared mind.

'What do you m-?'

A noise to the left. Bakura jerked his head to see two figures appear, donning bizarre robes. One of them took notice of him and opened his mouth to call out. Bakura growled, the Ring blazing. With a flash, the two of the men were knocked out, but more were sure to be on the way. In fact, he could already hear rapid footfalls making their way down the other end of the hall.

'Spirit, where are we?!' Ryou repeated, but he went ignored as Bakura broke into a run.

As he rounded the corner, he nearly collided with a thick mass lurking in the gloom. Bakura stepped back to look up at the man, spotting a bald head, an unimpressed gaze, and some odd scar pattern running down one side of the stranger's face. He was about to reach for the Ring's power again when another sort of aura surrounded him. Bakura's eyes widened as his body locked up of its own accord, and then was tossed like a rag doll against the nearest wall.

His head cracked against the stone, consciousness bleeding from both of their minds. The last thing Bakura saw was a flash of gold and a black boot entering the corner of his dimming vision.

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His head swam, vague light and noise filtering in through the lifting fog of unconsciousness. There was a throbbing near his temple, his forehead sticky with something – blood most likely. The sensation was nothing more than a mild pressure in his skull for him, his spirit never sitting quite right in his host's nerves.

Bakura's eyelids fluttered, the light seeping through them from above finally reaching his muddled brain. His head was craned back over something, an uncomfortable kink in his neck. Was he lying down? No, the angle didn't make sense. He had to be sitting in a chair of some sort, his arms firmly set on the rests at his sides. When he tried to move, he found he couldn't.

There were voices, but he couldn't make them out. They dulled to a quiet pause when Bakura stirred, finding it easier to awaken once the situation began to dawn on him. He groaned and jerked himself semi-upright, his head falling forward with a resounding crack. It was really quiet now. He opened his eyes and blinked a few times to clear away the blurriness.
The room was decently lit – he was likely still in the same compound he broke into; there wasn't a drastic change in architecture. However, he wasn't nearly as interested in his surroundings as he was in the hooded stranger standing before him or, more importantly, what they held in their hands.

“Who the hell are you?” Bakura's words came out slurred and not as sharp as he wanted to deliver them.

“I should be asking you that question,” the stranger said. Blond hair fell around lavender eyes, highlighted by the gold sitting upon his forehead. “Mind telling me why you broke into my hideout?” He jabbed a finger at Bakura's chest. “And why you have that?”

Bakura scowled, glancing down at the Millennium Ring his captors had so foolishly left in his possession before he looked back up at the stranger. “Mind telling me what you're supposed to be dressed as?”

A metallic click sounded from directly behind his head. He didn't need to look to confirm there was some manner of firearm aimed at him, but he did anyway, only managing to catch a glimpse of some goon's leg before his head was shoved forward again. He growled at the barrel pressing against his skull, more irritated than anything else. Was he supposed to be intimidated? All it would take was a little tapping into the power of the Ring and the men behind him would be finished.

“You really should give me a reason not to blow your brains out now.” The stranger pulled off his hood, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. “Something tells me you don't have that little self preservation.”

Bakura found the Rod aimed at him. He realized the position he'd been put in. He could focus on the men behind him, or he could focus on the brat playing mob boss in front of him, but he knew he couldn't target one without leaving himself open to the other. The brat knew it too. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Sobering up and bit and straightening in his seat, Bakura pressed his lips into a thin line and eyed the stranger.

Still, he hadn't been killed yet, so the stranger must have had some sort of interest in him. May as well play along and see where it went. He couldn't afford to have Ryou's head splattered on the neatly polished floors. He didn't travel all this way to be executed.

“Bakura.”
The stranger lowered the Rod slightly, blinking at him. “What?”

“You can call me Bakura,” He said with an easy shrug, looking quite comfortable where he sat. “I broke in because I wanted to take the Millennium Rod.”

“Why do you want the Rod, Bakura?” The stranger sounded genuinely curious, not at all affronted by the notion. Bakura smiled.

“I'm a collector of sorts. I don't just want your Rod, I want all of the Millennium Items.”

“I doubt you want them for decorative purposes.”

Bakura's smile grew wider, lips pulling back to expose teeth. He supposed the stranger was thinking something along the same lines as he was: how much does he know about the Millennium Items?

“Of course not. Anyone who collects all of the Items unlocks the power beyond anything you could imagine.”

After a seconds had passed, the stranger dropped the hand holding the Rod back to his side. He seemed to be in thought, not taking his eyes off of Bakura.

“Malik.” He finally said. “My name is Malik Ishtar.”

Bakura inclined his head slightly. He didn't know why this Malik thought he cared for his name.

“Well, Malik, if you're so concerned with me escaping, why haven't you just taken my Millennium Ring away?”

At that, Malik grinned, mirroring Bakura's expression.

“There's not much sport in that, is there?” He raised the Rod, examining it absentmindedly. It was the
picture of deviousness; Bakura wondered what he was up to. “That and I couldn't help but notice that body you have shares two minds. Admittedly, I got curious…”

Bakura was taken aback by that, but he didn't let his surprise show on his face. So not only could Malik use the Rod, but he'd also figured out to invade the minds of others with it. His expression locked up, anger mixing with unease as he wondered just how far Malik could probe and had probed.

“Ryou Bakura, friend of Yugi Mutou and harbouring a much darker spirit. I'm guessing that spirit is who I'm talking to right now?”

“Maybe,” Bakura shrugged his shoulders, a conscious effort to maintain a casual appearance. “I've revealed a bit about myself, now it's your turn. Why are you and your little groupies playing dress-up in those ridiculous robes and old Pharaoh's jewelry?”

Malik chuckled and shook his head as though trying not to look amused by the other male's words. “I assume you're unfamiliar with the Ghouls, but I'm afraid discussion on that will have to wait until later.” He sighed, nodding to himself – Bakura got the distinct impression he'd decided on something without asking for a second opinion. “In the mean time, I think I may have use for you.”

Bakura snorted, rapping his nails on the arm of the chair. “What if I'm not in the mood for being used, Malik Ishtar?”

Malik smiled at him again, venomous and cutting. “You seem to be under the impression that I'm giving you a choice.”

He waved the hand that wasn't holding the Rod. Bakura expected some manner of violent persuasion, but what came next took him off guard. The gun was retracted from his head and he heard the shuffling of feet as Malik's henchmen went to exit the room, leaving the two of them alone. There was a heavy thunk as the door closed behind them.

“Are you sure you should send away your lackeys? I could overpower you,” Bakura said, the Millennium Ring burning with power where it rested against his chest. He could feel the warm gold through the fabric of Ryou's shirt.

As if to insult his ability, Malik faced away from him, heedless of any danger. Bakura couldn't decide whether to be impressed by his guts or just pissed off. An Item's power was nothing to scoff
When Malik spoke again, Bakura could hear the smile in his voice.

“Maybe, but I don't think you will.”

“And why's that?” Bakura growled. He wasn't sure what was keeping him from using the Ring to break free and focusing his power on Malik. The other male turned to look back over his shoulder, something cunning in his lavender gaze.

“Because I know that simply having all of the Millennium Items isn't enough to get what you're after.”

Bakura blinked slowly. Was he lying? He stared at Malik for a long while, trying to figure him out, if there was any truth to his claims. He was beginning to find himself more interested in Malik, how he'd come to possess an Item, and why he apparently knew more about their secrets than Bakura did.

Just who was he?

Sensing that he had his attention, Malik inclined his head in his direction.

“I'll tell you this: I have no interest in the Items. Once I've accomplished what I've set out for, the Rod will mean nothing to me.”

“And what are you looking to accomplish?”

Something about Malik's expression changed, darkening somehow, like a cloud had covered the sun. “Let's just say there's a certain person I'm looking to be rid of... permanently.”

“A vendetta?” Bakura found himself smirking. Yes, this Malik was becoming more fascinating with each passing second.

“More or less.” Malik nodded. “If you agree to help me, I'll give you the Rod when I have no more use for it, as well as the secret to opening the Door of Darkness. Not only that, but I can give you the location of another Millennium Item.”
Bakura considered this. In his eyes it was a bargain for more than he could have hoped for, but it made him suspicious for the very same reason. “Seems like a lot you're willing to offer to someone you just met.”

“I've seen into your host's memories with the power of my Rod. I know he's close to my target.”

It all was beginning to make sense now. Malik saw him as a stepping stone he could use to reach the unlucky soul he'd set his sights on. There was only one person Bakura could picture it being – yet another tied to the fate of the Millennium Items.

“Yugi.” He stated.

“I see we're on the same page.” Malik's grin was back, and it somehow looked even more wicked than before. “Awfully convenient you showed up at this time. I'm almost glad you broke in.” He turned back around to face Bakura fully. “So, are you going to cooperate? I can give you several minutes to decide, if you want.”

It wasn't much of a choice. On one hand he knew he needed Yugi alive, at least temporarily, but at the same time he was curious to see how this would pan out – and no one said he had to remain loyal to Malik until the end. What Malik offered was invaluable, and he didn't have any other leads to go on. He barely needed a minute to make his decision.

“Alright,” Bakura said. “I'll agree to work with you.”

“Good choice.” Malik seemed pleased. He reached into his robes, fumbling for something for a moment, before withdrawing a small ring with a key on it. He tossed it to Bakura, who managed to catch it on the tip of his finger. It didn't take him long to maneuver the keys around so he could unlock the handcuffs. Bakura stood up, idly rubbing the creases on his wrists.

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Nothing, until the time is right.” Malik seemed to be looking at something far off in the distance. “But I can sense that time will come very soon.”
Bakura aimed a sour look at his back, not at all thrilled with the idea of waiting. “Right, so... I'll just be leaving now.”

“No you won't.” Malik turned to him again. “You'll be staying here until it's time to move out. I don't know how you found my base, but I can't have just anyone waltzing in and leaving with the knowledge of where it lies. Surely you understand?” He gave a sweet smile that had Bakura reconsidering his choice not to just kill him now.

“Won't my host's disappearance arouse suspicion?”

“Perhaps,” Malik rolled the Rod between his fingers, “but I know Ryou Bakura lives alone, his father often off on business in Egypt. He is quite socially isolated, even with his group of friends. Fabricating an excuse won't be difficult.”

“Sounds like you've thought this out.” But Bakura had to wonder how Malik knew so much about Ryou already, yet not as much about the spirit dwelling within him. Was that where the limit to Malik's power was drawn?

“Yes, unlike you, apparently.” Malik's brows climbed up his forehead. “You didn't have much of a plan coming in here, did you?”

Bakura bristled. “Don't push me, you brat.”

“Anyway, if you'll follow me, I can show you where you'll be staying.”

Malik turned and that was the end of that. He walked as though he expected Bakura to comply without question, and the most humiliating part was Bakura found no reason not to cooperate at the time. He shoved his hands in his pockets as Malik led them through the hallways, staring at his back like he was trying to burn a hole in it.

It wasn't long before they arrived at a room. Malik opened the door and allowed Bakura to step inside. It was unimpressive, merely consisting of a bed and a shelf with a few drawers, plus a closet which Bakura assumed stored utilities. Not exactly the five star treatment, but such things truly didn't matter to him.

“My very own holding cell. You really went all out.”
Malik smirked, amused. “You can think of it like a holding cell if you want, but I don't think of you as my prisoner.”

“Then what am I?”

“A... temporary associate.”

“I see.”

“I'll give you a more detailed tour of the facilities later. For now, I'd imagine you're exhausted.” Malik gestured with his chin. “There's a first aid kit in the bottom cupboard by the way.”

“Oh, how generous,” Bakura said, reaching up to touch his forehead, still tacky with blood. The wound wasn't severe enough to require medical attention in his eyes, however.

Malik turned to leave, but not before throwing one last pointed look over his shoulder.

“Remember, if you want the Items and the secret to the Door of Darkness, you'll do as I say.”

Bakura's lips curved into a sarcastic grin. He crossed his legs at the ankle, dipping in an equally as mocking bow. “But of course, your majesty.”

He could see Malik fighting not to roll his eyes and inwardly wondered just how much he could get that aristocratic visage to crack. A moment later, the door shut and Bakura was left alone to reflect on what had just taken place. He could be certain of relatively little, only that he had an alliance, however temporary or unstable, and that alliance was with a brat pretending to be royalty.

“Well, this didn't exactly go as planned...” He mused under his breath, prodding the other mind connected with his own. “Oi, landlord.”

There was a responding stir in the back of his mind, his host only just recovering from the mild head trauma they'd both sustained.
'What... happened...?'

Bakura clicked his tongue against his teeth. He hated having to speak with Ryou, and only did so out of necessity. He sat down on the edge of the bed, elbows resting on his knees.

“Long story short, we're going to be staying with someone for a bit. If you wake up in an unfamiliar room, don't be alarmed. I have it under control.”

'Spirit, what did you do?!

Bakura felt Ryou's energy swell, chafing against him, the sensation unpleasant. His jaw clenched in irritation, knowing how demanding Ryou could get with details. He only hoped he could sate him with something to show for all of his efforts soon. “Nothing. Shut up and go back to sleep.”

'Where are we? Who are we staying with?'

Bakura didn't answer right away. One of his hands brushed against the Ring dangling from his neck, fingers twirling the gold in slow deliberation. As the tines produced a haunting chime, a grin crawled across features that were not his own.

“Some little upstart that goes by the name Malik Ishtar.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

In which Bakura does some dumb shit.

The door opened a crack and a single maroon eye peered out at him, looking far too wide, far too bright to be the spirit's. A second later, the door slammed in his face and Malik scowled, offended. A muffled voice spoke from behind the door, but he couldn't make out the words it was saying. It seemed to be arguing with itself, and then it just stopped.

The door opened again, all the way this time, and Bakura stepped out – the Bakura that Malik was familiar with. Bakura took one look at Malik and wrinkled his nose as though he couldn't believe he were wearing normal clothes in the place of that garish purple robe.

“So the king makes his appearance without his crown.”

Malik tilted his head, considering him as if bored. “If you want, I can lock you in that room and have my servants bring you whatever leftovers they can scrounge up from the kitchen. Then you really will feel like a prisoner.”

“Mm, not sure if that was a joke or just a piss poor attempt at intimidation.”

Malik offered him a biting smile. “Bit of both, maybe.”

Bakura rubbed at his face, hand dragging through his hair. “It's too early in the morning for this. What the hell do you want?”

“It's half past noon.” Malik pointed out. “Anyways, I was going to give you the grand tour. Or at least, show you where the kitchen is. There really isn't much else to see.”

“Oh, right.” Bakura snorted, recalling Malik saying something about that. Without another word, they were traversing the hallways again.
A few men passed, and Bakura couldn't help but take notice of the glazed look in their eye, as though they were hypnotized by an unseen force. He wondered what Malik had commanded of them.

“Ghouls, eh? Is that what you called them?” He watched one of them bump into the wall as they rounded a corner. “Apt title...”

“I'm not surprised you don't know about us. We run a... very special business.” Malik glanced back over his shoulder. “I assume you're familiar with Duel Monsters?”

Bakura rolled his eyes. That was like asking if one was familiar with the sky. “Who isn't?”

“Well, our primary motives lie within that market,” Malik continued. “I'm searching for a certain set of rare cards, and I've already obtained two of them.”

Bakura paused. He didn't think he'd ever be surprised after seeing what lengths Seto Kaiba went to for a game, but he was proven wrong. “You run a crime ring that specializes in hunting for fucking trading cards?”

“There's a lot more to it than that. I don't think you realize the power these cards hold.”

“Enlighten me then.” Bakura already had some idea. He'd felt it ever since first laying eyes on the cards, sensing that something ancient lurked just beyond their image. Unfortunately, his memory failed him in more places than he liked to admit. “If we're gonna be working together, we should establish some trust, hm?”

“And what exactly have you done to prove you're trustworthy?” Malik threw back at him, not pausing in his step.

“What exactly have you done?” Bakura narrowed his eyes, picking up his pace to catch up. “How do I know you won't simply dispose of me once you're done using me for your plans?”

Malik grinned at him, shouldering his way into the hall beyond. “Oh look, we're here.”
“Don’t ignore me, Malik,” Bakura growled.

“We’ll continue this discussion later.”

Bakura threw a glance at the cafeteria, smiling mock-pleasantly. “Oh, like over lunch?”

“Please, you think I eat here?” Malik sniffed, turning on his heel. “Tell you what, when I have the time, we can talk in my quarters. I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“Anything?”

Malik leveled him with a flat stare. “Within reason.”

Bakura hummed. “Still seems a bit too generous. What’s the catch?”

“You’ll find out.” Malik waved uncaringly before moving to leave again. “I’ll send a servant when I need you.”

“Tch, fine.” Bakura shoved his hands in his pockets. “You better not take long. If I get bored here I might just say screw it to your deal and leave.”

“But you won’t,” Malik called back over his shoulder.

Bakura was left staring at him until he disappeared around a corner. Only when Malik was gone did he finally turn away, hissing under his breath. “Arrogant bastard…”

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Half the day was occupied with snooping around the hideout, though Bakura didn’t find much of interest. He found a store room of rare cards, which held little value to him, and crossed paths with many of Malik’s underlings. Other than that, there wasn’t much to discover.

Except for one room. It appeared to be an archive of some sort. He didn’t have the patience to dig
through it for anything useful, or even anything he could translate, but he did make note of it for later.

The longer the day wore on, the more restless Bakura grew. Malik had made a very grave error in assuming he’d wait around to be summoned. When he grew bored of combing the hideout, he searched for the room Malik must have been occupying.

A few hallways and half a dozen knocked out Ghouls later, Bakura crept towards the bedroom and silently pushed open the door.

The sight that greeted him made him stop in his tracks. Malik sat on the edge of the bed, back turned to him. He was bare except for pants, curling in on himself, one of his hands wrapped around to rub at his shoulder blades. Bakura could hear him hissing in what he could only assume was pain.

He could hardly make sense of the pattern etched into Malik’s skin. It couldn’t have been a mere tattoo, could it? No, if he looked closer he could see the indentations where skin had been removed. It was carved into his back.

Bakura felt something uncanny wash over him as he scanned over the hieroglyphs, letting him know that what he saw wasn’t anything ordinary. But before he could really examine the carvings, Malik twisted around, expression falling open in shock. There was something immensely satisfying seeing him so taken off guard.

Malik had lunged for the Rod lying beside him a moment later, but Bakura was faster. Malik's body locked up as a dark aura surrounded it, and then he was thrown to the floor.

“Awfully stupid of you to let your guard down like that, Malik,” Bakura said, advancing on him and using his weight to keep him pinned to the floor.

“Are you insane?! Get the fuck off of me!” Malik choked out, fingers still outstretched for the Rod lying out of reach. His features were twisted in pain, but he glared burning hatred up at Bakura.

“Not until we have our little *talk,*” Bakura sneered back. “Yeah, it's not so fun when you're the one tied down, is it?”

Malik gave a wordless snarl of rage, but it sounded wounded, a fact Bakura didn't linger on for long.
“Now, let’s establish some things. I am not your lackey, nor can you order me around like you do with the rest of these shambling zombies. I won’t sit quietly until you have use for me, and your flippant attitude is sure as hell starting to piss me off.” Bakura smirked. “Unfortunately for you, you’ve piqued my interest and I want to know what you’re hiding, and what role you play in all of this. Starting with... those scars on your back.”

“Fuck you!” Malik screamed, thrashing wildly, no longer paralyzed by pain. “I’m not telling you shit!”

“Shh,” Bakura growled at the noise and reached into his pocket, flicking out a switchblade and holding it to Malik’s neck. “Calm the fuck down or I’ll cut your throat.”

A flash of panic entered Malik’s eyes as he saw the blade. He fell silent, but his sights remained defiantly fixed on Bakura. “I know you won't do it. My end of the deal is too valuable to you.”

“Guess I’ll just have to take a closer look for myself.” Bakura snorted, the shadow magic surrounding Malik flexing, helping to turn him onto his stomach.

Something in Malik seemed to break just then, like someone had punched a hole in his chest and let all of his panic spill out. An animal noise sounded from him, so sharp and so sudden Bakura had no idea what to make of it, or what he’d accidentally uncovered. Malik was thrashing and howling and even with the help of the Ring he was hard to hold on to.

All at once it just stopped.

Ryou’s nerves were strange to him and there was always a disconnect between spirit and body, but that didn't prevent him from feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise. A different sort of static charged the air, thick with a presence that wasn't quite Malik.

Bakura hadn’t realized he'd stopped exerting his power until Malik's arm abruptly shoved at him, throwing him off with a surprising amount of strength. Bewildered, Bakura only watched as Malik calmly went to scoop up the Rod. Blond hair obscured his eyes and framed a feral grin stretched over teeth.

“What the hell is so funny…?” Bakura grumbled, wondering how one person could be so full of surprises.
It was like something else had slid under Malik's skin. Bakura wouldn't say he was perturbed, but he was wary enough to take a step back. Malik had his back to him, which was odd because he'd been so adamant in hiding it. The voice that drifted from him may as well have come from another mouth.

“Damn, you really pissed him off...”

Bakura cocked his head, brows furrowed. Why was Malik referring to himself in third person?

He didn't have much time to question it because a dark energy began to fill up the room as Malik raised the Rod.

“Thank you, Bakura. Now die.”

Movement in the doorway drew the attention of both of them over. Bakura recognized the bald man he'd seen earlier standing there with shock written all over his face.

“Lord Malik?”

There was a sharp metallic clang as the Rod fell to the floor, an agonized scream tearing itself from Malik. Bakura's head whipped back over to see him drop to his knees, clutching his head.

Bakura felt the burning glare of the bald man on him. The man looked like he wanted to make Bakura suffer as he pushed past him to get to Malik's side, but Bakura wasn't about to stick around that long.

Feeling distinctly like he'd uncovered more than he'd been willing to deal with, Bakura backed out and retreated from the room, more confused than before.

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Rishid dropped to his knees by Malik's side, hands tentatively hovering around his shoulders. To be cautious, he kicked the Rod even further out of reach.
“Lord Malik... are you alright?”

Malik’s hands were still fisted in his hair, teeth clenched in pain. The sound of his brother's voice seemed to snap him out of it and he raised his head, blinking. Rishid let out a small sigh of relief.

“Rishid... what happened?” Malik glanced around the room in confusion. “Bakura was... and then...”

“He fled when I came,” Rishid assured, passing him the Rod and helping him back to his feet. He shook with a silent, subdued fury. “I'll kill him. I swear I'll kill him for this.”

“No.” Malik shook his head, glaring at the floor. “Not until I've used him. By the Gods, after that stunt, I better get some use out of him, if only if it's to torture the vessel while the Pharaoh's friend's watch.”

Rishid gave him a long look, anger retreating back under a mask of impassiveness. He bowed his head.

“... Understood, my lord.”

...

Feeling oddly displaced, Bakura opted to investigate another part of the hideout. That was until the same bald man appeared in the corner of his vision.

“Lord Malik wishes to see you.”

Bakura turned, squinting at the man.

“That's surprising. I thought he would have wanted me gone or dead.”

Rishid said nothing, but Bakura could see a vindictive flare in his eyes. He was far too protective to
be a mere servant. Bakura smirked up at him as he passed.

It didn't take him long to find the main room. Malik stood at the center, fully dressed this time, back turned to him. One would have thought he'd learn by now.

Bakura approached him, his mouth opening and some smart remark waiting on his tongue. That was when Malik whirled around. There was a flash of gold and then pain exploded across his cheek.

Bakura hit the floor, holding his face where it throbbed. He ran his tongue along his teeth, tasting blood but finding none of them loose. Everything seemed to be in working order. Gods only knew the bitch fit Ryou would throw if it wasn't. A low chuckle sounded from him.

“Alright, I guess I deserved that.”

Malik stood over him with a burning glare, the Rod clenched tightly in his hand.

“I should have you killed.”

Bakura pushed himself back to his feet, working his jaw a few times to get the feeling back into it. He spat a glob of red tinged spit to the side.

“Can't kill what's already dead, but you're more than welcome to try.”

Malik bristled, looking like he wanted to hit him again. “I've killed for less. You should be thankful I'm pardoning you. If you ever try something like that again–”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Bakura cut him off impatiently. “You got a lick in. Are we even now?”

He could see how steamed Malik was becoming over such flippant remarks, but he wouldn't humour it. Malik's eyes narrowed to slits.

“Hardly.”
“Don't leave me with nothing to do next time.”

Malik scoffed. “I'm not your goddamn source of entertainment.”

“Some host you are.” Bakura rolled his eyes. “I get the feeling you're not used to being talked back to between your ghouls and the bald guy who's as big as he is spineless. You like feeling important on that throne?”

Malik grit his teeth. “You are really pushing your luck.”

“And you're really pushing me.” Bakura felt his impatience beginning to get the better of him. “Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on here yet?”

Malik’s disposition shifted from anger to intrigue, a smugness seeping through, like he realized he still held the advantage.

“That's it, huh? You're desperate enough to stick around for information.”

“Who ever said that?” Bakura growled. Malik eyed the Rod in his hands absentmindedly.

“If you really wanted to leave I don't doubt that you could have done it already. My suspicions were correct,” He said, sounding like he was making observations to himself more than anything.

“What are you on about?”

“Nothing, just musing.” That smirk on his face told otherwise. “So I can't kill what's already dead? Maybe not, but I can destroy it, bury it in the depths of oblivion never to be seen or heard from again.”

Bakura had to laugh at that. “Is that a threat?”
“I'm not referring to you.” Malik continued, rousing Bakura's interest once again. “You see, Bakura, a dead man has had far too much power over my life despite being dead, and I will find a way to kill him for good. The very thought of him. The very concept. I'll scatter the pieces of him into the darkness.”

“You're not really after Yugi's life, are you?” Bakura felt a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. Malik shook his head.

“No. The Pharaoh within the Millennium Puzzle is my real target. Yugi is merely a vessel.” Malik closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again, their lavender burned fiercely. “You want answers? Fine. I come from a clan that has served the Pharaoh for thousands of years. Or rather, served the idea of the Pharaoh. We were forced to live underground, never to see the light of day. Generations of people, families, men and women, all dying in the name of a man we didn't even know existed for sure. We were told to wait until the Pharaoh had revived, but how would we know when or if that would even happen?”

A bitter laugh fell from his lips. He stepped over to the throne he had set up on one end of the room and took a seat. The regal air surrounding him, the purple, the gold - all of it suddenly made sense. It was a mockery, a sign of contempt for the system that had wronged him so deeply.

For a fleeting second, Bakura saw crimson. A flutter of a robe, the spray of sand, the flash of a razor grin. The vaguest impression of a memory that was gone far too quickly for him to linger on it.

The one thing that stuck was understanding. Bakura remained silent while Malik ranted because he understood.

Malik leaned his cheek into his fist, crossing one leg over the other. “So the greatest honour is serving the Pharaoh? I beg to differ. I see it for what it truly is: a curse.”

“And those scars on your back?” Bakura asked without missing a beat. He hadn't forgotten what he'd seen earlier.

The look on Malik's face told him it was a touchy area, perhaps a weakness to exploit. “They're a sort of initiation, a rite of passage for tombkeepers. I do not bear these willingly.”

“So the servant has turned on the master...” The expression on Bakura's face said he found it nothing short of delicious.
“The Pharaoh will *never* be my master,” Malik snarled. “I intend to destroy him and take the throne. Only then will my people and I be freed from this curse.”

“I don’t doubt that.” Bakura replied airily. “But until you destroy him, you’re just a false king playing pretend on a mock throne.”

Malik looked like he wanted to hit him again, but Bakura continued on, hands raised in mock surrender.

“We want the same thing, really – the destruction of the Pharaoh’s soul.”

As annoyed as Malik was, Bakura could see the intrigue there clear as day. The feeling was mutual. He offered another smirk and a chuckle.

“You have my cooperation, Malik, so don’t make that face at me.”

But Bakura truly didn't mind because anger was not a bad look on Malik at all.

…

It seemed odd to Malik, definitely not coincidental that two spirits tied to Millennium Items would exist at once. He knew anger, greed, bloodlust; he'd seen it in the minds of many of the men and women he'd controlled, and he'd seen it in Bakura's eyes when he'd pledged his allegiance.

And Malik knew better than anyone that such things didn't exist without reason.

Perhaps that was why he found himself reaching out with the power of the Rod, searching for that piece he'd left in the host’s psyche. When he'd searched the mind of Ryou Bakura before, he could sense the presence of something else. The other mind, the darker Bakura, was unlike anything he'd ever seen. Instead of a separate consciousness attached to Ryou's, it was something like a pit, a pure black gateway that led to nothing. At least, as far as he could see.
Consumed with his own agenda, Malik had ignored it before. Now he was more curious, standing before the opening and peering into the mass of shadows.

“You’re not going to be able to go in.”

Expression unchanging, Malik turned to see the host standing there. He assumed Ryou would have been sleeping at this hour, but it didn’t truly matter either way. Ryou was the furthest thing from a threat.

“Believe me, I’ve tried.” The reserved way Ryou held himself, the softer tone he used - it was almost impossible to believe he and the spirit fit in the same body.

Malik smirked, absentmindedly bouncing the Rod - not the actual Rod, but the mental substitute for it in the abstract dreamspace they currently occupied - in his hand as he turned towards him. “So you’re the host, eh?”

“Ryou Bakura.” Ryou didn’t deliver the words with a harsher tone, but Malik could see the tightening of his jaw.

“I know.” Malik tilted his head, unsure of what to make of this boy. “I didn’t think you were awake.”

“I wasn’t, until you intruded.” Ryou sighed. “I would really like to go back to sleep now. The spirit barely rests when he uses my body and I would like to catch up.”

“So he’s let you out for now?” Malik raised a brow. “How generous of him.”

At that, he saw the corner of Ryou’s mouth twitch. It wasn’t quite a smile, and yet he seemed amused all the same.

“Malik, was it?” He said, looking Malik directly in the eye now. “You seem to have a large hole in your understanding of the situation so let me fill you in. The spirit does not ‘let me’ do anything; I let him out.”
Of all the things Malik should have expected, that was not something he'd even considered. He'd always assumed the spirit's control went one way, but it appeared the situation ran deeper than that. Malik stared at Ryou hard, his image of who he was having suddenly become murky.

“Why would you do that?”

Ryou seemed to be grimacing now. “Because it's the only way I'll learn more about him and what he’s promised me.”

Malik nodded his head slowly. If he could draw one solid conclusion about this boy, it was that he had little self preservation. Both sides of him did, really. “You’re an interesting one, Bakura. Or perhaps just foolish.”

Ryou heaved a sigh. “Think what you want. Can I use the phone?”

“What for?”

“I want to call my friends and tell them I’m not in any danger.” He paused. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to tell them about you. Whatever you’re planning won’t work anyway.”

Ryou said it so bluntly and with no change in his polite tone that Malik had to chuckle.

“Is that so?” Malik put a hand on his hip. “Fine, you can use the phone, but I’m still monitoring you.”

Ryou seemed to accept this, nodding but making no attempt to continue their sorry excuse for a conversation. Malik eyed him, finding himself more fascinated by the boy Bakura referred to as little more than a puppet.

Perhaps he should not have been brushed off so easily…

The Rod gleamed where it hung from Malik's hand, eye studying Ryou with the same scrutiny its owner had.
“I wonder how much it would take to break your mind and bring you under my control…” Malik hummed, musing aloud.

Ryou met the thinly veiled threat with a snort and a blatant disregard for the other man. If nothing else, it was incredibly gutsy.

“With a headmate like the spirit, you’ll have to get creative.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Tfw the ghost in your jewelry drafts you into the mafia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bakura wedged the point of the knife under his nail, occupying himself by picking away the dirt. He sat on the edge of the table, elbow propped up on one knee.

“So what’s the plan?”

Malik sat across from him on his prissy throne in his prissy robes holding his Rod like he was emperor. Knowing his motivation, Bakura found it all the more amusing now.

But that didn't stop him from being cautious. He hadn't forgotten about the incident in Malik's bedroom. He wasn't entirely sure of what he'd seen, what creature had slid into the other man’s skin. Perhaps the power of the Rod had gone to Malik’s head.

Whatever the case, Malik's issues were his own, and he hadn't shown any sign of falling to it again so Bakura didn't bring it up. A watchful eye was the most attention the matter brought.

“Not much of one, really,” Malik said, cheek leaned in his palm. “I told you, we’ll simply be meeting up with a source who claims to know the location of the final God card.”

“And you trust this source?”

“Not particularly, but it’s the only lead I have on Obelisk. We’ll see how this goes…” He seemed to be considering something, perhaps checking for holes in his plan. Judging by expression alone, he was quite sure of himself. “It’ll just be Rishid, me, and you.”

Bakura tilted his head. “Will that be enough?”
Malik snorted. “More than enough. I could handle this on my own, but Rishid insists he stay with me, and you insist on acting like a neglected child so this will give you something to do.”

“Fuck you.”

Ignoring Bakura's glare, Malik pushed himself up from his seat and made for the doorway, throwing his partner a smirk as he passed.

“We'll be leaving shortly so be ready.”

…

The dull thump of music echoed up the stairwell. Malik led the way, about to step inside when he was halted by a burly man. Bakura couldn't tell what they were saying, but he could guess it had something to do with his presumed age.

Of course, Bakura's eyes were soon drawn to the gold behind Malik's back. It didn't take long for the man’s eyes to glaze over as he mindlessly stepped aside for them.

As the dim light engulfed them they found their way to the back of the club, a much more secluded section waiting for them. Bakura glanced over to see Malik talking with one of the female servers. The girl smiled brightly at him, and Malik returned it with a smirk and a lidded gaze. She soon giggled and ran off.

Bakura flung himself upon the provided couch. He tilted his head in Malik's direction.

“Must be easy getting people to do your bidding with a simple wave of your magic wand.”

Malik took a seat adjacent to him while Rishid sat on his other side. He grinned.

“Please, my natural charms can do the job just as easily.”

Bakura realized Malik wasn't touching the Rod; he hadn't controlled that girl after all. He rolled his eyes. “Well your looks can at the very least. Shame about your personality though.”
Malik patted a few strands of hair down, looking like a bird preening a few ruffled feathers. “You have a strangely backhanded way of giving compliments but I’ll take it.”

“So where is this guy anyway?”

“He should be… ah, there he is.”

Bakura glanced over to see a man approaching them, little of particular note about him. If he was nervous about meeting with Malik Ishtar, he didn't show it. Probably for the best as revealing any weakness was like asking to be killed, or driven out of his own skull at the very least.

He sat down and the meeting commenced, but they spoke in Arabic and Bakura could barely understand it. Bits and pieces of it resonated with Ryou's vocabulary, a vocabulary that Bakura held little connection to.

Then again, he was sure there was little reason to listen in anyway. Only a couple minutes had passed and Bakura was already leaning his chin into his hand and fidgeting in his seat. The man stood up and left to take a call, which Malik looked unamused by.

Bakura took the opportunity to groan loudly, stretching his arms up over his head.

“This is boring.”

Malik arched a brow, leaning back in his seat. “What were you expecting?”

Bakura wrinkled his nose. “I don’t know. More guns, more threats. The poor fuck kissing your gold rings. Shit a mob boss does, you know?”

Malik tilted his head with a frown. “… Perhaps you watch too many movies.”

Bakura dropped his arms. “Why not just extract the information from his mind?”
“I prefer not to waste the energy when he’s willing.” Malik waved off Bakura's question. “I just have a few business matters I need to discuss with our friend before we go.”

“Such as why this bar has cleared out in the last ten minutes?”

*That* prompted Malik's head to shoot up, realizing that the place was in fact barren of occupants where it had been moderately populated before. Bakura had found it suspicious, and for good reason.

Rishid got to his feet right as a dozen men armed in riot gear flooded the place, their guns drawn on Malik.

Bakura and Malik weren't so easy to get out of their seats. Bakura was grinning ear to ear - now *this* was exciting.

Malik looked bored in contrast. He surveyed the men with a slow, unconcerned nod of his head.

“But he’d sell me out.” He got to his feet as well, withdrawing the Rod from his belt as he did so. There was a shout of Arabic but it went ignored. “No matter.”

The air filled with a thick smog, one invisible to the naked eye. The soldiers seemed to have picked up on it, however, many of them glancing around warily, unsure of why their lungs were being compressed under the sheer weight of the shadow magic two items in the same vicinity brought. Bakura could see it, tongue flicking over teeth ravenously. It would be easy to kill them all, but he wanted to see what Malik would do first.

“Maybe it's time to turn yourself in,” he cooed to his partner. Malik smirked at him, eyes glinting like he'd caught onto an inside joke.

The men dropped like dominoes, a wave rippling outwards with Bakura and Malik at the epicenter.

The man from before was revealed, eyes wide in shock as he watched his guns fall. He took one look at Bakura and Malik before turning tail and bolting. He didn't get very far however, as Malik was too quick.
Soon their lead knelt on the floor, eyes glazed over. Malik stood before him, glaring down at him like he were nothing more than an insect.

“Who put you up to this, I wonder?”

There was a heavy silence. The Rod gleamed and Bakura waited for Malik to finish searching the guy's mind.

“Well?”

Malik drew back, chuckling to himself, though there was little humour in the sound.

“Seems like he wanted the bounty over my head for himself, but the tip about the God card came from somewhere within the Egyptian government... He was looking to collect the reward for doing their bidding as well.” He turned away and began to walk towards the exit. “How pathetic. Rishid, you know what to do.”

Bakura followed after Malik, increasing his step to catch up with him, smirking.

“It must be so hard to find good help these days.”

“I'm glad you understand.” Malik smiled back, tucking the Rod away. “I have a feeling I know where that tip came from...”

“Oh?”

They left through a side entrance, the cool night air sweeping around them as they headed for Rishid's unsuspecting Jeep.

“My dear sister appears to be pulling some strings behind the scenes. It's too bad nothing will stop me from getting what I want.”

...
It was another day of planning, though Bakura could hardly call this planning. It was more like Malik stating his own stupid ideas with the utmost confidence.

“Let me get this straight. We're going to be walking right into a trap?”

Malik nodded, apparently seeing nothing wrong with the notion.

“We are.”

Bakura stared at him for a long while “You're either the most fearless person I've ever encountered, or the most stupid.”

Malik chuckled, waving him off without concern.

“There's no way to advance in the game unless you move forward. If your opponent is on the defensive, the only way to make them vulnerable is to spring their trap card.”

Bakura scowled. “I suppose there is some merit to that, but this isn't Duel Monsters.”

Malik leaned his chin into his fist, eyes closed as if bored. “Whatever the case, we'll be ready to move in a matter of days.”

The more Bakura was around him, the more punchable Malik's face looked. Nothing seemed to throw the bastard off his game. It was admirable in some ways - utterly grating in others.

Perhaps a change of tactics was in order…

Bakura's hands found their way to either arm of Malik's throne, bracing his weight as he leaned in. His teeth flashed in a grin that was unwholesome even by his standards.

“All business, aren't you?” He spoke lower, edging towards a purr. “You're such a young little thing, yet you're consumed with such ruthlessness...”
Malik's eyes opened again, raising a brow at Bakura's sudden proximity. The words made him narrow his eyes.

“I didn't choose this. I—”

“Can't truly be free until the Pharaoh is dead. I know, you've told me,” Bakura cut in. “And I understand. Really, I do.”

“Is that so?” Malik's eyes flicked over his face, searching for something he wouldn't find. “You haven't spoken at all of what drives you.”

Bakura snorted and gave Malik his personal space back, only to plop himself down on the armrest of the throne, arms crossed over his chest. Malik looked vaguely offended, tempted to shove him off. Curiosity was the only thing that stopped him.

“There's nothing to say. The Items are my one goal. The Pharaoh's destruction will come after that.”

Malik tilted his head. “I see. So you intend to use their power to destroy the Pharaoh?”

Bakura's shoulders hitched in a shrug.

“More or less.”

Malik hummed, wondering what was with the strange attitude all of a sudden. “For someone who demands answers, you never seem to give a straight one yourself.”

“All you need to know is that it's nothing to worry about.”

A silence fell over them. Malik could feel the heat from Bakura’s body pressing against his side, finding it interesting how well he could pretend to be alive. By all accounts, he looked like a regular human, if one could ignore the malevolent aura surrounding him.
He had to wonder just how far that pretense of humanity stretched. Even spirits had to get bored from time to time - Bakura made that perfectly clear.

Malik tilted his head up at him. “If you really think I'm all business, perhaps you should come with me.”

“What?”

Malik suddenly pushed himself off the throne, causing Bakura to fumble with his balance for a fleeting moment. A moment was more than satisfying. “You must be feeling cramped in here. Why not get some air?”

Bakura regained his composure a moment later, and Malik was fine with that. It only enticed him to want to throw off this bizarre contradiction of a man even more - that was the game and he was eager to play it.

“What did you have in mind?”

Smirking, Malik turned and waved him out of the chamber.

“I'll show you.”

…

A slow whistle slid from between Bakura's lips as he took in the gleaming red beauty before him. A lot of love and care obviously went into the motorbike; Bakura could not see a scratch on it. It really gave a clearer image of just how far Malik's extravagance went.

“Someone likes to live in style.”

Malik grinned at him. “It's the only way to live.”

Ironic considering the bike had the word ‘DEATH’ etched into its crimson paint, a touch Bakura could appreciate.
Bakura's eyes intently followed as Malik moved over to start the machine. He had to admit he was impressed, doing little to hide his growing fascination with his partner. “Suppose I can respect that sentiment. If you see something you like, then take it.”

“You ever ridden before?” Malik tossed over at him while he checked the bike for imperfections.

“Not specifically motorcycles.”

Malik suspected a dirty intent behind the grin Bakura wore, but chose not to humour it. It wouldn't be that easy to gain a lead in the game. Looking Bakura directly in the eye, he twisted the key in the ignition and watched with smug satisfaction as the other flinched from the piercing roar of the engine.

“So this'll be a first for you.” He picked up one of the nearby helmets and held it up by its strap. “Here, tell me if this fits.”

Bakura took one look at the thing and scowled. “I'm not wearing that.”

Malik rolled his eyes. He had to be difficult on everything it seemed. “I'm trying not to get you killed, idiot.”

Bakura crossed his arms. “Are you suggesting your driving is bad enough to get us killed?”

“It's a precaution.” Malik ground out. Not waiting for Bakura to agree, he stepped over and shoved the thing over his head, clicking the strap together before he could protest. He then pulled at the back to make sure it was on securely, dodging away when Bakura swiped at him. “Good, it fits.”

He had to laugh at the way Bakura glowered at him. He looked like a cat that had been dunked in a vat of water.

“You'll die a horrible death someday,” Bakura growled, reaching up to fuss with the helmet.
“Hey, this is for your sake. You want to risk your host potentially being put out of commission? Be my guest,” Malik hummed.

He could see Bakura had some sense in him. With a grumbled curse aimed in Malik's direction, he finally conceded and dropped his arms. Malik swung his leg over the bike and gestured to the seat behind him.

“Keep your feet up on the pegs at all times, don't lean too close to me, and don't try and 'help' me turn – that's a sure fire way to get us to crash. Got it?” Malik explained as he clicked on his own helmet.

“Got it.” Bakura climbed on behind him and propped his feet up where Malik told him to. He searched for a hold, eventually settling on the belt around Malik's hips. Unable to help himself, he leaned in, tone dipping into something more suggestive. “Is this gonna be an easy ride then? It is my first time after all…”

He would have expected the other to be uncomfortable by now, but much to Malik's credit, he only shot Bakura another nonplussed glance over his shoulder and revved the engine. And then the bike was moving forward and Bakura was quick to discover it was very different than when they were stopped. His grip unconsciously tightened and he growled when he noticed Malik snickering to himself.

Malik guided them out of the garage at an easy pace, the transition from cool shade to harsh sunlight blinding Bakura for a moment. The vast expanse of the desert road stretched before them.

“Don't let go.”

Bakura could hear the smirk in Malik's voice, and it was the only warning he received before they were off like a shot, his organs feeling like they'd all shifted back towards his spine. He scrabbled for a better grip, hands shifting around to Malik's front and digging in between the leather of his belt and material of his pants. He held on for dear life - or rather, he held on for Ryou's dear life.

The visor of the helmet protected his eyes from the wind but he felt the urge to close them anyway. There were speeds no being made of flesh and bone was meant to travel by, and Bakura felt like the thin glue holding Ryou together. Perhaps his spirit would be thrown out of his body and left in the dust.
Dust.

Sand kicked up in his wake. Horse hooves thudded the ground, a dim echo from another time. Bakura heard the shouts of pursuit behind him, a name - no, a title - screamed to the wind.

*The King of Thieves*.

Bakura said he had ridden before and the answer had come automatically rather than consciously. He wondered if it had been true.

Without the time to give thought to whatever memory had consumed him, he blinked over Malik's shoulder as he noticed traffic approaching up ahead. They must have been nearing Luxor. He glared incredulously at the back of Malik's head when he realized they weren't slowing down at all.

*This bastard is trying to get us killed.*

Clawing at Malik's stomach like a malcontent cat, he ducked his head down, unable to watch as they hurtled towards certain death. He could hear Malik laughing at him over the rushing of cars they weaved past. Malik threaded them through the spaces between the vehicles expertly and by the time Bakura noticed they hadn't ended up a stain on the road, they were leaving the thick of the traffic behind them.

A horn blared at them but Malik was still laughing, a free and exhilarated sound. Bakura felt it spread into his own lungs, filling him up until it spilled over the top. Unable to hold it in, he tossed his head to the sky and cackled, feeling the blood rushing in his veins more vividly than ever before.

Perhaps it wasn't as familiar as the thunder of hooves or the rocking of a galloping horse, but it was a thrill all the same.

By the time they reached the city and found a place to park, the excitement was only just beginning to wear off. Malik undid his helmet and climbed off the bike, beaming at him. Bakura could see a small tremble running through him, nerves still alight with energy.

“Well? What do you think?”
Bakura smirked, dismounting the bike as well. “Little rough for a first time, eh?”

“You sounded like you were enjoying it.” Malik's eyes grew lidded and sly. “But I could always be more gentle next time if you're so fragile.”

Bakura snorted as he pulled off his helmet. At least the asshole had the humour to joke back at him now. Bakura considered it a victory.

“Where are we going anyway?” He asked, glancing around where they stopped. Malik only motioned for him to follow.

They found their way through a back alley, sneaking in through a door Bakura was positive wasn't open to public access - not that he minded. Soon, a rooftop opened up to them, the perfect vantage point for the market below.

“It's been a long time.” Bakura said, realizing he was speaking from a point in the past, a memory that wasn't quite conscious but still very real to him. It was strange how often it had been happening recently. Perhaps hanging around Malik was useful in that regard. “It was never as loud before, nor was the air as clogged.”

Malik smiled, the expression more innocent than Bakura had ever seen him look - than he felt he had a right to look.

“I like the smells and the noise. Underground there is nothing in the air but dust and death.”

Bakura could see the fire in his eyes, brighter than the sun above them. Such a foolish move on the Pharaoh's part, caging such a volatile, pretty thing. The royals had a talent for sewing their own downfall.

“A tomb, only for the living and not the dead.”

Malik glanced over at him, mouth pressing into a thin line.

“No, many of our dead are buried down there as well.”
Bakura merely offered an enigmatic grin.

“Consider it a blessing. Not everyone is lucky enough to be buried.”

There was a pause, Malik's eyes lingering on him for a long time, trying to sort meaning from the taunting implication of Bakura's words.

“I've been thinking...” Malik began, easily sliding into another topic. Something told him any guess he could make about Bakura's statement would not even scratch the surface of the grim, horrible depths that made up the spirit. “If the Pharaoh's soul has been sleeping in the Puzzle for thousands of years... how long have you been in the Ring?”

Bakura peered out far over the heads of the crowds below, leaning his weight on the roof's edge. “How long indeed?”

That information was vague and muddled inside his own head, but Malik didn't need to know that. Malik was entitled to nothing as long as he was going to be stingy with his own secrets.

But Bakura could already see that wouldn't stop him from being persistent. He felt Malik's presence move up beside him, also using the edge to brace his weight.

“Did you have a life before this?”

Bakura turned to face him, one arm still easily resting on the stone. His smile was like a mask, wide and unnatural, the look in his eyes just as haunting. He leaned in close, voice sliding lower until the purr rolled off his tongue, lids dropping.

“Why don't you wave your magic wand and find out?”

Malik looked like he wanted to, an angry twitch in his jaw. He liked being strung along as much as Bakura did. A satisfied rush of amusement flooded through Bakura, making him laugh as he drew back.
“You've tried it, haven't you? I know you were in my host’s mind the other night.” Bakura tilted his head, smug. “Snooping? Or trying to figure out how to get rid of me so you can have another mindless doll to yourself?”

Malik narrowed his eyes, and then he stepped back with a shake of his head, giving a helpless shrug. “Oh no. You caught me. But I did find out something interesting while I was there…”

His smirk returned, making Bakura's own vanish. “Really, you should have told me you take orders from sweet little Ryou.”

Bakura jerked back, bristling in offense and not liking the sudden shift in power.

“I do not take orders from him!” He growled back.

Malik didn’t look convinced, the words airily rolling off of his tongue. “Oh? Enlighten me then. What exactly is the deal with you two?”

With an angry huff, Bakura shoved his hands into his pockets, clearly not content to talk about this.

“After a certain incident, I could no longer take over his body while he was unwilling, but he can't get rid of me either. We have our own agreement. I pay him rent and he lets me use *this*.” Bakura spread his arms to indicate the body he inhabited. He shot a sideways glare at Malik. “It's none of your business anyway.”

Malik stepped closer to him again, reaching behind his own back as he did so. “Oh but it is my business if your host becomes rebellious.”

“Believe me, I have it under control,” Bakura ground out. At the very least, he could pretend he did.

The Millennium Rod glinted almost blindingly in the harsh sunlight. Malik held it coyly, smile still in place.

“Perhaps I can help you out…” He turned the gold over in his hand. “Suppressing Ryou Bakura should be a simple task.”
Bakura eyed him, wariness mixing with intrigue. Perhaps Malik’s offer could have been useful, but it also brought his pride into the question. It didn’t sit right with him for Malik to have total reign over his landlord’s will, and that in itself could present a new problem.

Bakura jerked his head away as though Malik had presented him with roadkill or something equally as disgusting.

“Stay out of this. I don't need your help.”

Disappointed, Malik shook his head and placed the Rod back into the loop of his belt. He conceded far too easily; it would not be the last time this matter would come up.

“If you insist…” Malik glanced out over the marketplace again, searching for a place to cause trouble. “Are we going to sit up here all day or do you want to do something?”

Bakura inclined his head, following Malik’s gaze. After that blood-pounding introduction to his partner’s motorbike, any other activity they could think of seemed dull by comparison. He tossed Malik another smirk, accompanied by a mocking curl of his lip. “Why mingle with the rabble? Seems unfitting for a king.”

Malik laughed again, either catching on to Bakura’s sarcasm or choosing to ignore it.

“I'm flattered you think of me as such.”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will probably take longer… I had these three drafted before I wrote them all but I haven't drafted the next section yet since I wasn't sure how to structure it leading into Battle City. Anyways thanks for all the feedback so far and hopefully we can get somewhere soon lol.
Footsteps thundered on the pavement, noise and smell and heat assaulting every sense. Even through Ryou’s dulled nerves, the spices and perfumes were sharp in Bakura’s nostrils. There seemed to be too many bodies, the crowd barely spacious enough to dash through - but not even the thick air and compressed space could stop them from panting out their laughter.

The distant shouts of the shop owner could be heard, the poor soul surely realizing by now he'd been tricked. Bakura and Malik didn’t stop, ducking into a narrow alleyway between buildings, the shade providing a suitable cover.

They were hushed, trying to keep their heavy breathing as muted as possible, nerves alight with energy. Their pockets were heavy with stolen goods - gold mostly. It was petty by their standards, but they'd been looking for entertainment, not wealth.

The shop owner came into view, an angry scowl twisted into his face as he searched for the thieves. The two moved deeper into the alley.

Bakura could see a twitch at the corner of Malik's mouth as they braced against the opposite walls of the narrow passage, prepared to run again if necessary. Bakura couldn't resist smirking as well, lips tightly pressed together to quell the giggle waiting in his throat.

The crowd was too thick and after less than a minute, the man gave up and cursed the sky. He stomped his feet and swiped at a hanging tapestry before storming off and disappearing.
Malik nearly bent himself in half against a wall, one arm wrapped around his stomach, the other attempting to muffle the laughter that burst out of him. The grin was genuine, breaking through his visage like sunlight through clouds - Bakura thought it more suitable for the young man he was, rather than the God he was trying to be. The spirit openly stared, fascinated by the sight. It felt like a rare thing, rarer than the jewelry they'd stolen.
“Did you see his fucking face?!” Malik was making a clear effort to keep his voice hushed. “I can't believe he fell for that!”
“Yeah,” Bakura snorted a laugh of his own, finding it hard not to let Malik’s excitement rub off on him. “I told you it would work. You don't need to abuse your Rod to trick stupid people.”

Thieving had always come naturally to him - perhaps he was eager to show that off.

Bakura's hand fell to where one of the bangles he'd taken was digging against his leg. He slid the thing out of his pocket and held it before him, watching it glint in the dusty pale sunlight streaming into the alleyway.

Some smart remark about keeping a souvenir for his host faded on his tongue. The light seemed to transform the gold, steeping it deep in the colours of another time where a child of white hair crouched in the dirt, clutching the gold between his filthy fingers like it was his salvation.

And it was, if the ribs sticking out against skin were any indication. He could trade it. Eat. Survive
for a while longer.

Bakura blinked slowly, mouth pressed into a thin line as the image faded, the present time bleeding back into view. The uncanny feeling of familiarity remained and he scoffed. He could be certain he existed as a mortal in the distant past. Now if only he could remember something useful.

He realized Malik had said something that hadn't reached his ears, glancing back up. Malik had regained his composure and was squinting at Bakura oddly.

“What's wrong with you? You keep spacing out.”

Bakura's nose wrinkled. He tossed the gold bangle away where it bounced off the concrete and landed somewhere in the street.

“No I don't.”

Malik pushed off of the wall, hand on his hip.

“So ancient spirits aren't just vague,” he leaned in as he passed Bakura, “they're immature.”

Bakura snorted and moved to follow him, heading towards the other end of the alleyway. It was probably better they got out of here before any authorities showed up. “Like you're one to talk.”

“At least I have the excuse of acting my age. How old are you now?” Malik's tone suggested he was amused rather than truly irritated. “A couple thousand years?”

Bakura shrugged. Even if he had an answer, he wouldn't give it.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

…

Ryou came to in his bed, an immediate wave of hunger fuelled nausea and fatigue sweeping over
him. He was still wearing his shoes and his pockets felt heavy, making him wonder what damage the spirit had caused this time. When he dug into his jeans, a dozen gold rings and necklaces spilled out. He didn't want to know where they had come from.

Groaning, he pushed himself up onto his elbows and glared down at the Ring innocently sprawled over his chest.

“It wouldn't kill you to eat something if you're going to use the body.” Ryou pulled the cord of the Ring over his head, quietly snorting. “Well, it wouldn't kill you anyway because you're already dead, but it would kill me and that would just be so inconvenient for you, wouldn't it?”

His gaze was icy as he eyed the gold, holding it up before his face.

“Did you find out anything interesting?”

The Ring’s eye stared back at him, enigmatic as ever.

“Silent treatment, huh?” Ryou’s gaze averted, a delicate frown pulling at his features. “If I think you're hiding something from me, I'm not putting it on again…”

As though the Ring itself were huffing its frustration, the metal flared to life, growing suddenly hot in his hand.

“There's hardly anything in this place that's worth much.” Each word was begrudgingly - satisfyingly - pried from the spirit. “There's a room with records of some kind, but that's about it. Happy?”

“Records…?” Ryou tilted his head in thought. “Anything else?”

A scoff could be heard from the spirit.

“Watch yourself around Malik.”

And that was all Ryou would get out of him for now. The metal became cold once again, signalling
the end of their conversation. Ryou sighed and shoved the thing into his pocket.

“I could have guessed as much…” He muttered to no one, wincing as he pushed himself up off the bed. Did the spirit not feel the horrendous strain he put on his body? How did he expect to get anything done when he was always on the verge of passing out from exhaustion?

Ryou made his way out into the hallway, one hand holding the wall for support. He made it to the kitchen with little issue. It was late at night and very few of the odd robed men were about - those that were skulking around ignored Ryou anyway.

After raiding one of the fridges and sucking down a bottle of water, he felt much better. He leaned against the counter, the hum from the appliances surrounding his thoughts.

His mind began to drift back to the matter at hand, and the room the spirit had told him about. Could it have contained any useful information? Malik holding the Millennium Rod was proof enough that this wasn't just any crime ring. From what he had pulled from the spirit, Malik's motives ran much deeper than that.

It was worth a try. After prodding the Ring once more for the location of the room, Ryou set off through the halls, locating the records before anyone had a chance to see him. He slipped inside, an old, dusty smell hitting his nostrils.

There was a table at the center of the room and, oddly enough, it was already covered in scriptures and notes, as if someone had already been pouring over the information. A bad feeling settled in his gut, but curiosity outweighed it and he pressed forward, hand touching the edge of the table. Bracing his weight, he leaned over and studied the characters before him.

“Valley of the Kings…?” He murmured to himself, a shudder running up his spine. That place seemed cursed, the epicenter of everything that had gone wrong in his life, yet Malik treated it like his playground.

His eyes scanned over several pages, afraid of touching any of them for fear of leaving evidence. Even if he wasn't fluent in the language, several things seemed to jump off the pages. Egyptian God ka. Guardians of the tombs. A tablet of memories. He was sure he saw something about the Millennium Items as well.

His hands shook with possibility. He wondered what the odds were that he could successfully sneak
any of this out and get far away from Egypt to translate it on his own time.

He was so absorbed in running over the chances in his mind that he didn't notice the figure step up beside him.

“Looks like we have a rat in our ranks…”

Ryou nearly jumped out of his skin, head whipping to the side to see Malik standing there. A pit of dread formed in his gut.

Malik grinned at him, nothing good in his expression. “A little mouse, rather.”

“How did he know? Ryou was sure he hadn't seen anyone on the way over here.

Malik chuckled, pointing to the side. “I have eyes everywhere.”

Ryou glanced over and paled when he saw a large shadow between the shelves. The scarred, bald man was so silent and still, and Ryou cursed himself for not noticing earlier.

Few things could truly frighten Ryou after what he'd been through, but that didn't mean he wasn't incredibly wary of Malik. It wasn't hard to see how powerful he was.

He lowered his gaze to the floor, feeling like he'd been caught with his hand in a cookie jar.

“I was just…”

“You can read it, can't you?” Malik was peering down at the open scriptures in thought.

“No.”
Malik fixed him with an unimpressed look that said he didn't care for Ryou's lies. Ryou swallowed and amended his statement.

“Well, not all of it.” He stared at his shoes, wracking his brain for a way out of this. Meanwhile, he continued to speak, if for no other reason than to stall for time. He could hear Malik stepping closer to him. “My dad has been taking me to Egypt ever since I was little. I'm pretty fluent in Arabic and I know some demotic-”

“Has the spirit told you about our agreement?” Malik cut him off, stopping right in front of Ryou.

Ryou grit his teeth, hair shielding his eyes. “Yes.”

Malik tilted his head. “So you understand why I can't have you snooping through my things?”

“I won't do it again,” Ryou tried to insist.

“I know you won't.” The smirk could be heard in Malik's voice.

When Ryou looked up, he found himself face to face with the wings of the Millennium Rod.

“You said you were tired due to the spirit using your body, didn't you? So rest.”

Ryou's eyes widened as a dark swirling energy poured off of the gold and surrounded him, but they dulled just as quickly. His mind slipped away and soon he wasn't standing in the same room as Malik. He wasn't anywhere. He wasn't anything. He was just… floating.

Malik slipped the Ring out of Ryou's pocket and placed it around his neck. Ryou offered no resistance, limbs limp, mindless as a doll. Pleased with his work, Malik patted his cheek.

“Sweet dreams, Bakura…”
Consciousness trickled back slowly, and with an aura of wrongness. Bakura slid back into Ryou's skin without any sort of resistance, sitting up on the bed. Daylight streamed in through the tiny rectangle of a window near the ceiling, signalling the night had indeed passed. He remembered leaving the body here, and nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but where had his host gone?

“Landlord…”

The word echoed into the furthest recesses of their mind. If Ryou heard him, he gave no response.

“Oi,” Bakura tried again, scowling. With a sharp hiss, he twisted on the bed, nails digging into the mattress. There was only one person he could picture being behind this.

Malik.

He blazed out of the room, the Ring leading him to the culprit. He found Malik strolling down one of the halls and marched up to him, seizing him by the front of his shirt and jerking him close.

“What did you do?” Bakura growled in his face. Malik blinked at him slowly, nonplussed.

“Good morning to you too, Bakura. Did you sleep well?”

“Don't play dumb with me, Ishtar. What did you do to my host?”

Malik gave an infuriatingly casual shrug. “Made a few adjustments. Do you like it?”

Bakura narrowed his eyes. “You brainwashed him.”

Malik grinned. “You should be thanking me. You have the body to yourself now.”

Bakura released his shirt and shoved him back with a scoff of disgust. “Keep your filthy fingers out of our mind!”
“You can't really complain though, can you?” Malik replied with airy confidence. “You were having a hard enough time controlling him. I'm just helping you out.”

Bakura didn't believe for a moment that Malik had done it out of his own generosity. No, he was likely just looking for another way to put a leash on Bakura since he couldn't control him directly with the Rod.

It was coward’s play.

“Bastard…” Bakura snarled. Malik laughed.

“Relax, I'll let him go when our deal is done.” His eyes glinted beguilingly. “You still want what I've offered, don't you?”

Bakura's shoulders reluctantly dropped. He hoped Malik enjoyed his time while he had it. There was only so much yanking on his chain that Bakura would tolerate.

“Don't think I'm content with this,” he snapped. Malik having control over half of him was not ideal, and he was beginning to question if it was worth the reward from their partnership.

As if to add insult to injury, Malik gave his cheek a condescending pat as he walked by.

“You don't have to be content, you just have to do what I say.”

…

Bakura's teeth ground together, fingers restlessly clawing at the purple silk around his shoulders. He had been fussing with it all the way up to their objective and would likely continue fussing with it long after they left.

“Why do I have to wear this gaudy thing?” He growled. Malik snorted and yanked the hood over his face.
“It'll cover your hair. You don’t want to get poor Ryou in trouble, do you? So shut up and stop complaining.”

Bakura bristled and swatted at him but Malik had already pulled away. He readjusted his the hood of his robe and patted his hair down as they made their way inside the building. The front door had already been cracked and they were able to just stroll inside. The place was quiet - suspiciously so. Bakura had no doubts in his mind that this really was a trap set for Malik, the fact only setting him more on edge.

“I could rob this place blind in my sleep.” Bakura said as they made their way past the main hall. The half dozen or so Ghouls they had brought with them stayed and secured the perimeter. “Just tell me where your stupid card is and I'll go get it.”

Malik snorted. Even though they kept their voices low, they still sounded like thunder in the still air. “Your enthusiasm is appreciated but don't be so hasty.”

“You’re just slowing me down. I could’ve been in and out faster than you could have walked your zombies to the front door.” Bakura snapped back. “And if by chance the card isn't here, you'll know quicker.”

They proceeded down the wide hallway, passing various treasures and artifacts that held little value to them. At the end lay a door, but not any mere door. It didn’t have a handle or even a lock. It may as well have been another wall - a solid sheet of reinforced steel blocking their path. Bakura realized that no matter how good his thieving skills were, he never could have bypassed this. Malik threw him a smug glance.

“You were saying? You may be a ghost but I don't think you can pass through walls.” Malik said. Bakura shot him a side glare. “We do things my way.”

“Awfully tight security for a fucking card…” Bakura scoffed. Malik gave a hum of agreement.

“Pegasus had no idea what sort of forces he was toy ing with when he created these. He had them hidden away because they were far too powerful in the right hands.”

Bakura’s lips curled in a grin. “Or the wrong hands.”
Malik closed his eyes, an indication he was communicating with his men. By the time almost a minute had passed, Bakura was tapping his foot on the floor impatiently.

“Well…?”

Malik opened his eyes. “My Ghouls have confirmed the location of the card. They have a visual on it from the security room.”

Right as he said that, the sound of something shifting echoed from behind the door, like gears clicking out of place. A moment later, the heavy gate gradually pulled open, revealing the hallway beyond. They stepped inside.

It wasn't long before they came to another door. This one was merely sealed with a regular lock holding together the chains on the handles. Malik gave Bakura a nod.

“You're up.”

Bakura turned his nose up at the sad display before him, expecting more of a challenge.

“Child’s play.”

He had the lock picked in under a minute, the chain falling to the floor. They proceeded into a smaller, circular room with only one artifact lying in the middle. Bakura glanced around, spotting a few cameras in the corners of the room.

They stepped up to the case. It was also sealed with a lock, but the glass clearly displayed its contents. The God card sat in the middle, dim light reflected off its foil. Bakura narrowed his eyes, the dark blue shape of Obelisk striking something uncanny with him.

He ignored the feeling and dropped down to crack the second lock, opening it in record time. Even as he worked, he felt like all of this was too easy, but his accomplice didn't seem concerned. Malik's eyes lit up as he stepped forward, reaching into the case and withdrawing the card - only for his expression to drop as he touched the paper.
He held it up, and Bakura could see that it was too flimsy to be a legitimate Duel Monsters card. The paper crinkled as Malik crushed it in his hand and tossed it aside.

“It’s a fake.”

Bakura sucked in a sharp gasp and stared at Malik with wide eyes.

“I am shocked.”

The same grating squeal rang out and their attention was jerked back over to the doors behind them. They could see the metal gate grinding shut, finally closing with a loud slam.

“What are those idiots doing?” Malik hissed.

There was another sound from ahead of them. Bakura looked past the glass case to see the door on the other end of the room open. A dozen soldiers streamed out, guns drawn on the two. Bakura resisted the urge to yawn. This again?

What truly surprised him was the woman that stepped out after them. Her long black hair fell around her neck, perfectly framing the gold that rested there. The eye of the Millennium Tauk stared back at him, glinting alluringly like it had been served up on a silver platter.

But, strangely, the Tauk was not the cause of yet another wave of dizzying familiarity washing over him.

“That's far enough, Malik,” she spoke calmly, her hands gently resting clasped over her front

“Sister…!” Malik seemed shocked, definitely not pleased that she had made a surprise appearance. Bakura's brows shot up his forehead.

Sister…?
“Turn yourselves in immediately,” she went on. Bakura studied her face, seeing the resemblance between the two despite their polarizing hair and eye colour.

But even more interesting than that was the fact he knew he had seen her face before, in another life. A name climbed to the tip of his tongue long before Malik spoke it.

“Won't you give it a rest, Isis?” Malik regained himself, a smirk crawling over his features. One of the soldiers surrounding them barked an order but they both ignored it. “I take it you're the official in charge of this place? So it was you who set this trap?”

He raised the Rod and the soldiers all dropped like flies. Isis’ eyes widened, but she quickly levelled a firm stare at her brother.

“You won't find Obelisk here. That God card and the Millennium Rod were never meant to fall in your possession, Malik.” Her voice rose. “They belong to the Nameless Pharaoh!”

“And so what?!” Malik shot back. “Do you forget it was the Pharaoh who caused the suffering of our clan? How can you willingly be so devoted to someone like that, sister?”

They were both speaking in Arabic, but it wasn't hard to parse what they were talking about. Bakura caught parts of it - definitely hearing Obelisk, the Pharaoh, the Millennium Rod - thanks to Ryou's vocabulary.

Malik's fist clasped tightly around his Item. “With the power of the God cards and this Rod, I'm going to destroy him and free us all from this curse! You should be thanking me!”

Isis shook her head, not at all seeming perturbed she was outnumbered by two Millennium Items. In fact, she barely even acknowledged Bakura was there at all. “No. You're only going to cause another tragedy! This isn't the answer!”

“Then what is?” A glimpse of the anger Bakura had seen during the encounter in Malik's bedroom made itself known. “Maybe you can be content worshipping that bastard, but I can't!”

Bakura finally pulled out of his thoughts completely, lips tugging into a smirk as he shot Malik a side glance.
“So this is the location of that other Millennium Item you were talking about.” He gave a low chuckle. “How convenient.”

Malik’s anger dissipated, replaced by a look of unease as he realized he had just unwittingly gave away one of his bargaining chips. Or perhaps he was just concerned for his sister’s well-being. Bakura didn’t know, and he didn’t care. All he wanted was the gold around Isis’ neck, gaze locking on her.

She seemed to acknowledge him for the first time, her eyes cold as she raised a hand to her collarbone defensively. She opened her mouth to say something but was cut off as a blast shook the air, followed by the horrid screeching of metal being torn apart. Bakura and Malik felt the wind whip by from behind, spinning to see a gigantic hole where the metal gate had been. Far beyond that, Bakura could see Rishid putting away an empty rocket launcher. An alarm began to sound as if the building had come to the comically late realization it had been broken into.

Bakura shot Malik an incredulous look, hissing, “How many times are you going to nearly get us killed?”

Malik ignored him, starting off towards their escape. “Let's go!”

He drew to an abrupt halt when he realized Bakura wasn't following him, turning to fix him with an expectant glare.

“That Bakura!”

Bakura inclined his head in Malik's direction, an airy smile on his face.

“Why leave when the Tauk is right there?” He bared his teeth, relishing the moment. “I think it's time you started following through on your promises.”

He’d barely taken one step towards Isis when Malik's voice crashed into his mind. He didn't shout out loud, instead choosing to shove his command directly into Bakura's brain.

“If you want what I've promised you then you will listen to me!”
Bakura could not be controlled by the Rod, but he stopped nonetheless, a growl building in his lungs. He knew he had more to lose than Malik did.

“Go after my sister and the deal is off!” Malik continued, his voice sounding even more grating with the alarm blaring in the background. Bakura resisted the futile urge to clamp his hands over his ears. “We can't stay here any longer anyway!”

Bakura glared at him, hating being leashed once again, and hating the smug satisfaction pouring off of Malik when he moved to comply. Malik would seriously throw away their deal for the sake of his sister?

Before he disappeared out the door, Bakura cast Isis one last glance over his shoulder. She stood silent, watching the exchange with an unreadable expression.

If there was one thing he could be certain off, it was that this was not the last they would see and hear of her.
Battle City begins in this chapter. It won't be too different but a lot of dialogue will be altered so I'm not just rewriting the manga, because that's boring.

Also Bakura is an idiot. Have I mentioned that already?

“Yeah! I'll be returning to Domino soon! Isn't that great?” Words that were definitely not Ryou's filtered through Ryou's mouth, swathed in a delightful chirp and delivered through gritted teeth. “I missed you guys so much! Sorry for disappearing like that…”

“Don't worry about it, Bakura!” Yugi’s voice sounded tinny from the phone speaker, but the smile was still able to be heard in his words. “If you need help catching up with school work, you can always call me!”

“Of course!” Bakura's lip curled around the bright assurance. Malik was watching him, the amusement in his eyes clear as day. Bakura shot him a glare, impatiently waving him off, but none of his sourness reached the demure persona of his host. He had an act to keep up after all, and he was determined to prove to Malik that he could indeed keep it up.

“Oh, I've been meaning to ask, are you… feeling well?”

“Feeling well…?” Bakura put a finger to his lips, pretending to consider the concern. “What do you mean?”

“Ah, sorry! It's nothing, just after the whole incident with Otogi I thought…” There was a pause, and then Yugi gave a quiet, dismissive chuckle. “Well nevermind. I'm glad you'll be back in Domino for the upcoming tournament!”

Bakura smoothly leaned back, hand moving behind him to brace his weight on the table. He kicked his legs over the side, shifting to hold the phone between his ear and shoulder. “Heh… Kaiba sure seems like he's trying to outdo Pegasus, doesn't he?”

“That's Kaiba for you!” Yugi laughed. “Guess I'll see you around?”
“Bye, Yugi! See you soon!” Bakura sang before promptly jabbing the call-end button. Immediately, his features hardened, the faux politeness sliding off like mud down a hill.

“You're not a bad actor when the situation calls for it.” Malik said, grinning at him from where he sat on his throne, cheek leaned into his fist. Bakura rolled his eyes.

“Oh, shut up. You have no idea how often I have to be around them.”

Malik hummed, nodding slowly. “It must be awful.”

“You're gonna have to get used to it if you want your little plan to work.” Bakura snorted, setting the phone down with more force than necessary, the plastic clicking against the table. “I told you their bond won't be broken so easily.”

“If they can buy your disguise, I'm sure they will buy mine.” Malik ran his fingers through his hair, self assured and confident. Bakura hated the smug look on his face - it made him nauseous with frustration.

Well… something was definitely making him nauseous. Bakura could only assume it was Malik given he was the most sickening thing in the room. He ignored the sensation, but it still prickled at the back of Ryou's nerves.

“Yeah, they are pretty stupid.” Bakura replied, the conversation trailing off into silence as he began to mull their situation over. “Battle City, eh?”

Malik lifted his chin. “What about it?”

Bakura tilted his head. “... You still don't think it's odd a tournament like this just springs up after that woman makes off with the Obelisk God card?”

Malik considered him for a moment, and then he smirked like he had everything under control, and Bakura wanted to throttle him for it.
“I don't think it's coincidence, of course, but it doesn't matter. So many targets will be gathered in one spot. Even if my sister did manipulate Kaiba into throwing this tournament, she won't be able to stop me from claiming the prize.”

Bakura narrowed his eyes. Malik had ragged on him before for not having a plan, and now this. This was hardly a plan. It was blindly following a whim at best. What if the last God card wasn't even going to be in the tournament and this was just a giant waste of time?

“That's what you said last time and you still walked away empty handed.”

Malik closed his eyes, undeterred. “I also said you can't advance in the game unless you spring your opponent's trap. Now there's nowhere else to go for my dear sister.”

Bakura held up his hands. Arguing with Malik on this was going to be pointless - that much was painfully apparent.

“You know what? It's not my business. Do what you want.” He didn't care what Malik did after all, as long as he followed through on their deal. “Just don't embarrass yourself by losing your precious cards in the first round.”

Bakura pushed himself off the table, hands braced on the edge as he steadied himself. He expected to be able to stand up straight and walk away without issue, only… the room wouldn't stop swaying.

The nausea struck back hard. He blinked, squeezed his eyes shut, reopened them. Slowly, he let go of the edge and took a step back, feeling Ryou's blood shift uneasily, like he’d been knocked off his feet instead of merely climbing off a table. Bakura didn't realize how fast his breathing had become, how much Ryou's lungs needed the air.

“Are you… okay?”

Bakura turned his head to see Malik giving him an odd, vaguely concerned stare.

“I'm fine.”
That's what he would have said if his tongue didn't feel so thick and clumsy in his mouth. Why weren't any of his limbs responding? Why was his vision dimming? He considered that perhaps Ryou had broken free of Malik's spell and was reclaiming his body - but then again, Ryou probably would have prevented what happened next.

The body gave out all at once, crumpling to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut. Malik's voice said something from far away, but Bakura didn't hear it, succumbing to the dark veil that pulled over him.

…

He came to with the ceiling of the same room above him, along with Malik's face. Bakura groaned, still feeling sluggish and unresponsive. It was not a nice way to wake up.

“What did you do to me?” He growled, managing a weak glare up at Malik. This had to have been his fault somehow.

Malik gave an offended shake of the head. He sat crouched on the balls of his feet beside Bakura, elbows resting on his knees as he looked down at him.

“Me? I haven't done anything to you. You just passed out for no reason.” He explained. He didn't seem to be lying, Bakura noted. “You were out for a few minutes.”

Bakura reached up to rub a hand over the dull throb in his forehead, and even that took more effort than it should have.

“Ugh… I don't understand…” He mumbled. “Why isn't… this body…”

Malik squinted at him for a long while, and then his eyes slowly widened as he came to a sudden realization.

“Bakura… when was the last time you ate?”

Bakura glanced up at him, scowling like the question didn't make sense to him.
“I don’t… When Ryou was last in control?”

Malik just stared at him. Hard.

“That was a week ago.”

Bakura growled, unsure of what the issue was here.

“Why does it matter?”

“... Are you kidding me?” Malik shook his head in utter disbelief. “And you wonder why you're feeling weak and tired.” He paused, pulling a face as he realized how close he was to Bakura. “... You don't smell too great either.”

The blood rushed to Bakura's face, which he hoped was an unfortunate side effect of this dizzying spell that had fallen over Ryou's body.

“Fuck you,” he hissed. “This is your fault so fix this .”

“It's not my fault you can't function to save your life. Well, your host’s life.” Malik frowned, reconciling that some of the responsibility did fall on him for forcing Bakura to have total control over his flesh prison - something he was clearly not used to. “Okay, okay. Gods, you're pathetic. At this rate I'll have to control your host's basic functions so that you don't die .”

“Don't you dare ,” Bakura snapped. Malik rolled his eyes.

“Take care of yourself then.”

He shifted to work an arm under Bakura's shoulders to help him sit up, only for Bakura to pull away.

“What the fuck are you doing?”
Malik wanted to throw his hands up in frustration. There was no winning here.

“Helping you like you asked! Gods, you're so difficult!”

Bakura, with great reluctance, allowed Malik to guide him into a sitting position, but not without a few complaints grumbled under his breath. Malik took one of his arms and hooked it around his shoulders so Bakura could brace his weight on him as they got to their feet.

Malik took him down the hall and into the kitchen, letting him slide off his shoulder so he could plop down into a seat. Malik then opened the fridge and grabbed a small white bottle, setting it down before Bakura.

“Here, drink this to start.”

Bakura eyed it suspiciously. “What is it?”

“Kefir. It's good for you.”

“Hmph. Or poison.” He peeled off the top and took a sip of it regardless, giving no reaction to the taste. Malik snorted.

“What good would poisoning you do? I showed you where the kitchen was, didn't I?” Malik's eyes widened as he came to a sudden realization. “You're telling me all this time you haven't been using it?”

Bakura drained the bottle, giving Malik a resentful side-eye. He tossed the empty container towards the wall where it bounced off and landed in the trash.

“Ryou usually handles this worthless shit…”

A sharp, obnoxious peel of laughter cut through the air as Malik bent over, clutching his stomach. He wiped a tear of mirth away from his eye. “Oh my God! You're the most useless spirit I've ever seen!”
Bakura's blood boiled, making him dizzy in his current condition. His nails dug into his palms as he clenched his fists. “I have eaten so quit acting so smug!”

Malik sobered up, back straightening once more. “Oh yeah? What?”

“Uh… coffee?”

Disregarding the fact that coffee was not a meal, Bakura knew that couldn't have been the only thing. His scowl turned thoughtful as he scratched his head.

“I've swiped things from the kitchen a few times…” Gods be damned, he just couldn't remember what. It wasn't important to him so he forgot it almost immediately. “And I have eaten a meal. At least one since getting here.” Was that not enough?

“You need to eat three every day. Here, try this.” Malik waved and a Ghoul came out of nowhere, sliding Bakura a plate with a thick stack of a sandwich on it before shuffling off.

Something twisted in his stomach when Bakura caught the scent of meat, Ryou's body practically begging him to take the sandwich. After shooting one last sour look Malik's way, Bakura grabbed the thing in both hands and tore into it like he was ripping the neck from a fresh kill.

Malik wrinkled his nose as a tomato seed landed on his bicep and he flicked it away. “I don't know what I expected…”

He let his chin rest in his palm as he watched Bakura eat. There was something oddly fascinating about it. Bakura was content to ignore him.

“You can barely act like a person. It's a wonder anyone buys your disguise…” Malik scoffed, and then he paused, eyes softening in thought. “Or were you ever…”

“The hell are you mumbling about?” Bakura grunted around a mouthful of roast beef.
“Were you ever a person?”

Bakura shot Malik a strange look, chewing and swallowing before he even thought about answering.

“Why do you care?”

It was odd. One moment Malik was as in control and sure of himself as a king could be ruling over his subjects, and the next he was leaning over the table and peering at Bakura with the childlike sparkle of curiosity in his wide gaze. The juxtaposition was enough to make Bakura remember just how young his criminal accomplice was.

“I just find it hard to believe you existed as a spirit and never anything before that,” Malik went on, lacing his fingers together and resting his chin on them. He tilted his head. “Or is it that you don't remember?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Bakura pointedly took a bite of his sandwich, thoroughly put off by this line of thought. “I thought you wanted to feed me, not interrogate me.”

“Doesn’t matter, huh?” Malik said. “I don’t believe that. What you were is the reason for what you are now, is it not?”

Bakura gave him a long, prickly stare. He didn't understand what Malik hoped to gain by prodding at him like this.

“I suppose so.” He set to finishing the sandwich, tucking in the last few bites and then picking at a seed that had gotten stuck between his teeth. “But you'll be disappointed to know I remember next to nothing about the past.”

“That’s strange…” Malik continued, resigned to the fact that Bakura had some of the worst table manners he had ever seen. “Because when we were out the other day it sounded like you spoke from a place of clarity. Perhaps your memories are there… you just aren't holding onto them tight enough once they surface.”

Malik could have had a point, but it begged the question: why had such memories only begun to stir around Malik? And he always did try to hold onto them whenever they surfaced. He didn't know what else he could do. This whole conversation felt like it only served to drive home his own
inability. Maybe the visions were completely useless and there was no point in grasping at them after all.

Bakura leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms, clicking his tongue.

“Perhaps.”

…

Bakura jerked awake, staring at the cabin ceiling above him as though it might reveal some long lost secret. The blood was still coursing through his veins, heart thudding against the inside of Ryou's ribs.

Sleep was a bizarre thing. He only ‘slept' in the Ring, but he also didn't dream in the Ring. With Ryou's mind suppressed, he found himself stuck inside the skin they shared, forced to take on all of its functions.

It was sickeningly human.

Perhaps it wouldn't have been so irritating if he could just recall what dream he had been ripped out of just moments prior. But, then again, the human thing was to barely remember even the most disturbing of nightmares. He’d had about the same amount of luck trying to recall any useful details from the past.

Bakura sat up, a hand fisted in his bangs as he glowered at the opposing wall.

It wasn't like he remembered nothing, but what he could conjure to mind amounted to little of coherence. A flash of fire, of blood, of gold. Nothing more than dim snapshots with the edges burned.

The desire that lay embedded in the center of it all was the clearest thing he had to hold onto - the sheer, unrelenting will to tear a hole in the universe and let the black swallow everything. It festered like a wound left open for too long, blazing at the core of his soul, perhaps the only thing that kept him living through another's flesh.

And the memories, the visions - they swam beneath a surface of thick, ink-black darkness, one that
not even he could pierce.

He wondered if this is what it felt like all the time, in that damn Puzzle, wandering that maze endlessly.

“The Thief King…” he muttered the words slowly, no real meaning behind them, just to see how the title tasted. It was the only solid thing that had resurfaced.

He threw the blanket off of himself and climbed out of bed. If one thing was clear, it was that he wasn’t going back to sleep. All of this was too aggravating. Maybe he would go and bother Malik again, the fact that it was the middle of the night be damned. There was a certain sport in pissing off his temporary partner.

He left his cabin, the boat silent as he crept down the short hallway. It didn’t take him long to find the bow, the gentle lapping of waves reaching his ears as he opened the door and stepped out into the cool night air.

Someone was standing there already. Bakura cocked his head, thinking Malik looked rather ridiculous all poised and dramatic under the moonlight, but what did he expect?

Malik turned his head slightly in acknowledgement, the cut of his profile visible for a moment, outlined by the pale light. And then he turned his attention back to the vast expanse of deep blue before him. His voice held an awed, softened quality that Bakura had never really heard before, like a child taking their first breath of the outdoors, realizing just how big the world truly was.

“There’s so much water.”

“Yes, it is the ocean,” Bakura answered dryly.

Malik tossed him a smirk more familiar to Bakura. “Don’t be smart. After growing up in the desert your whole life, you learn to appreciate sights like these.”

“I know,” Bakura answered without really thinking about it, blinking once the words left his mouth. Perhaps he did think it was true - it did seem like something a little runt growing up in the desert would dream of, knowing nothing but the harsh, dry climate.
“Oh? And why's that?” Great, now Malik's interest was piqued. “Do you remember something?”

“You're so annoying.” Bakura snapped back. “I don't have to tell you anything. That wasn't part of our deal.”

“Calm down, Bakura, it was only a question. And here I thought we were becoming such good friends.” A note of mock hurt entered Malik's tone. “I don't understand why you've been sulking so much lately.”

Bakura snorted. “Being around you is depressing.”

Yet he didn't do the sensible thing and leave Malik alone on the deck. Instead, he moved up beside him and leaned on the rail.

Malik raised a brow, amused. “Ouch. So scathing…”

They turned their attention towards the sea again - Malik did; Bakura quickly grew bored with watching the gentle waves, so he watched his partner instead. As much of a nuisance Malik was, there was something equally fascinating about him. Perhaps it had something to do with the constant fire burning in his eyes. He was pleased, Bakura could tell, and the mood was easy to pick up on. Perhaps there was truth to Malik boasting about his charisma and charm.

He stared for far longer than he should have.

“What's got you in such a cheerful mood?” Bakura asked after a while, breaking the silence. Malik snorted like he had stated something redundant.

“The Pharaoh’s demise will come soon and finally my clan’s grudge will be satisfied.”

The fire took on a bloodthirsty quality, smouldering black behind Malik's gaze. It was far too reminiscent of something Bakura had shoved to the back of his mind.
“I suppose that would raise anyone’s spirits…” He paused, deciding to finally venture into the matter. “You really don’t remember the other day then…?”

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific.”

“Weeks ago when I entered your room, you didn’t seem quite… yourself.” Bakura tilted his head, wondering if this was even worth bringing up.

“What do you mean?” Malik scowled at him. “I was angry after what you pulled, of course. Did you expect me to be in a good mood?”

“But do you remember what happened between me pinning you down and that bald guy—”

“Rishid.”

“Whatever. Do you remember what happened right before he entered the room?”

Malik opened his mouth to answer, but then stopped as though coming to a sudden realization. He glanced downward, brows creased in concern. He rubbed his forehead.

“Sort of? I… I black out sometimes. Rishid is always there when I wake up. It just… happens.” He finally admitted. Bakura narrowed his eyes at him, feeling like he was missing something but not seeing the point in pressing. Malik had shown no signs of lapsing again, so Bakura didn’t care what he did as long as he came through on their deal.

“I see. Better make sure you don’t ‘black out’ in the middle of your plan then.”

“Please.” Malik scoffed at him, offense replacing his worry. His hands clenched into fists around the railing, as if he were envisioning himself wringing the Pharaoh’s spirit from Yugi’s lifeless body. “We’ll be arriving in Domino tomorrow, and then the real battle can begin “

… 

When Bakura next awoke, their ship was already docked at the piers of Domino and Malik was
banging on his door, urging him to get ready. Just to spite him, Bakura took his sweet time getting out of bed.

“Pandora has fallen against the Pharaoh,” Malik explained as they stepped off the boat, lip curled in displeasure. “Not that I ever expected much from him to begin with…”

“Pandora?” Bakura yawned, scratching at his blizzard of hair, still groggy from the rude awakening. “Battle City has already begun? What the hell?”

Malik shot him a nonplussed glance. “Yes. It's almost noon. Duels have been happening for a while now. I had Pandora stationed in the city already. He was one of my Ghouls.”

“Guess we're fashionably late then.”

A group of Ghouls waited for them at the bottom of the ramp. Malik paused and turned to Bakura.

“Speaking of… This is where we part for now, Bakura.” Malik put his hand on his hip. “I have business to do and you have 'friends' you need to go take care of and-”

One of the Ghouls caught his attention, holding some strange contraption in his hands. Its shape was somehow familiar to Bakura...

“Lord Malik.” The Ghoul offered the contraption to Malik, who took it and bounced it on his palm as though weighing it.

“Huh, so this is one of Kaiba’s duel disks… It's so light.” Malik fit the duel disk in his forearm and it gave a click. “As I was saying, you'll need to enter the tournament for the next stage of our plan.”

He waved and other Ghoul came over, a second duel disk in hand.

“Here-”

Difficult as always, Bakura turned his nose up at the offer, making no move to take the thing.
“Hmph. I don’t need your help. Showing up with that thing would only rouse suspicion anyway. I’ll find my own way in.”

“Fine, just make sure that you do in a timely manner.” Malik huffed a sigh. He then tapped his temple. “Remember, I won't be far.”

Bakura scoffed. Malik's condescension only made him more willing not to take his ‘assistance’. If it was a question of pride, he worked better on his own anyway.

“Yeah, yeah. Later, bastard.” He turned and made to leave the boathouse, giving a careless wave over his shoulder.

It seemed odd being on his own again after so much time spent with the brat, but he was glad to get away at the same time. There was only so much Malik Ishtar he could tolerate.

Bakura was in no hurry to go and locate his ‘friends’. He cut back to Ryou's apartment, taking the opportunity to change his clothes and brush his hair so he could achieve some semblance of normalcy. The motions felt odd, too human for a spirit to properly slide into, but unfortunately for them both he was more spirit than human right now.

He clicked his tongue. Never would he say that he missed his host's company, but he did prefer that Ryou take care of all this… nonsense.

He grabbed their deck before heading back out, hands shoved into his pockets. The afternoon sunlight greeted him, but only the bare minimum of its warmth reached his nerves. He decided it was time to head to the center of the city, where most of the action would undoubtedly be.

The Millennium Ring gave a sudden, violent thrum. Bakura jerked his head up, realizing he was passing the museum, and his eyes narrowed. An Item was close, and judging from the signature it was giving off, he had a feeling he was already familiar with it.

“The Tauk…” He muttered, spinning on his heel with the Ring clutched in his grip. The tines clawed for the entrance of the building and he started for it at a steady pace. “That woman is here after all.”
He wasn't sure what he was going to do. Malik's deal was still valuable to him, and going after his sister would surely compromise it. But he was also curious about the possible information he could pry from her.

He had to wonder… Did she have memories of her past self as well?

He made his way through the building, following the pull of the Ring. Just when it was vibrating with such force he knew he was mere steps away, something caught his attention.

Stone carvings lined the wall of one of the exhibits, numerous images and hieroglyphs assaulting his eyes. There was no one else in the exhibit and his footsteps loudly punctuated the silence as he stepped up to the tablets.

The piece that drew his eye the most depicted two figures, both of them familiar. One of them was unmistakably the Pharaoh - but that didn't surprise him. The other… the other had to have been Seto Kaiba.

Bakura's intrigue grew. So Seto was yet another that had been there in the past as well? He knew it to be true. He could see the priest, a distant memory flashing behind his eyes.

The tablet depicted a battle of some kind, one that felt uncannily reminiscent of the tournament taking place in Domino at this very moment.

The whole thing… it was laid out like a plan. Bakura's lips peeled back over his teeth, feeling like he had stumbled upon something bigger than him, bigger than all of the players put together. He was both vexed and excited.

What was even more thrilling was the fact that he felt he wasn't supposed to see any of this. It was too late for that. The priestess hadn't guarded it well enough.

“Now… it's just a shame I can't read a damn thing,” he muttered with a low chuckle.

He stored the information in the back of his mind for later, blinking as he remembered what had drawn him to the museum in the first place. The Millennium Ring sat cold and limp against his chest and he went to tuck it back under his shirt.
The priestess had gotten away.

…”

“Bakura! We've been looking all over for you!”

Bakura glanced over, wiping the sinister look off of his face and replacing it with something much more approachable. He ground Ryou's smile between his teeth, welcoming Anzu and Yugi's grandfather over as warmly as he could.

“You missed all the opening duels!” Sugoroku said.

“Yeah, where were you?” Anzu put her hands on her hips.

Bakura rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “S-sorry, my flight was delayed!”

Anzu’s expression softened, annoyance becoming a gentle smile. “How was Egypt by the way? Do anything interesting?”

Bakura gave a small chuckle, the lies flowing out smoothly. “Oh, I was just helping my father with some work related stuff. It was kind of boring actually…”

Anzu eyed him for perhaps a moment too long, and then she bumped his shoulder playfully. “Give us a little warning sometime, eh?”

Bakura nodded, drawing back slightly and resisting the urge to rub away the feeling of her nudging him. “You got it!”

She huffed a sigh. “We have to find Jonouchi. He promised to meet us at eleven but of course he didn't show up. Come on!”
She led the way onwards, but it wasn't long before they hit a roadblock. Numerous people were gathered around something in the middle of the park, making Bakura think it was a duel. Upon closer inspection, the crowd was too tightly knit. Bakura felt a strangely familiar energy coming from the center.

“What's going on?” Anzu said.

Bakura took the initiative to shove his way through, hearing the awed murmurings of the crowd as he pressed by.

“This guy’s been standing there for a whole day!”

“He hasn’t had anything to eat or drink. That has to be a record!”

Scowling in confusion, Bakura finally broke into the inner circle, finding nothing but a bizarre looking man standing on a bench. He was motionless like a statue, but his eyes were wide open and unblinking.

“A mime?” Bakura muttered. A freak act in the streets wasn't exactly uncommon, but the look in this person’s eye, glazed and lifeless… Bakura knew it well by now.

He crept closer, even going so far as to plant a foot on the edge of the bench and push himself up so he could stare eye-to-eye with the mime, and waved a hand before his face.

“Heh heh… I can see you, Bakura.”

Bakura couldn't say he was surprised by the voice sliding into his skull, but he grit his teeth anyway.

“Should have figured this was one of your tricks.” He answered mentally, knowing Malik could hear him. A chuckle echoed back to him, bouncing around his head.

“Quit messing around with the Silent Doll and go do what I asked.”

“The Silent Doll?” Bakura snorted, shaking his head as he hopped off the bench. “Bite me.”

Anzu was already waving him along. “C’mon, Bakura, we have to go and find Jonouchi!”
Sugoroku scratched his chin in thought. “It’s noon already… Maybe he went to get lunch?”

Anzu snapped her fingers, eyes bright as she came to a sudden conclusion. “Aha! I should have known!”

She dragged them to a noodle place, barely reaching the doors before some kid burst out, tailed closely by Jonouchi. “What the-?!"

Jonouchi shook his fist as he tore down the road, and Bakura noticed the kid held a duel disk in his arms, clutching it like a thief would clutch stolen bread.

“Come back here, ya little creep!”

The chase took the two of them around the corner and out of sight. Anzu stood there dumbfounded, her arm still outstretched for the handle of the shop. She brought her hand to her forehead, sighing. “Oh no…”

She hurried off after them and Sugoroku was quick to follow. Bakura stood there for a moment, rolling his eyes towards the sky and wondering how he got roped into so much nonsense. Would it be too suspicious if he slipped away already?

Huffing in irritation, he followed after them as well.

He caught up just in time to see the thief sat down on a bench, Jonouchi apparently talking morals into him or whatever it was Ryou’s idiot friends did. Bakura caught parts of the conversation, amused at the sob story the kid made up to avoid the heat. Bakura's eyes were lidded, almost certain the kid was lying, though he didn't know why, and he didn't care either.

Jonouchi sent the kid on his way with a slap on the wrist. Apparently, Bakura wasn't the only one that caught onto how sketchy the situation seemed. The old man had the balls to call it out as well.

“I think you should check your deck and make sure he really didn't steal anything,” Sugoroku said.
Jonouchi looked exasperated. “I'm sure he didn't! The kid was just in a bad place because someone stole his cards! Honestly, you have to learn to see the good in people… He went to go get the culprit right now. I'll teach him a lesson and then everyone will be happy!”

Sugoroku scratched at his chin. “If you say so…”

Bakura's attention wavered as Jonouchi’s voice blended into background noise - some spiel about his sister and the innate goodness of people. He didn't care. He was more concerned about his deal with Malik, trying to figure out how he was going to go about infiltrating the tournament.

“Hyoo-hyoo-hyoo!”

The most obnoxious of laughs cut into his thoughts and everyone turned their heads to see a familiar teal-haired menace standing there. Bakura narrowed his eyes. The aura that poured off of Insector Haga was devious and crafty, sort of in the same vein as Malik - but unlike Malik, this one was just a harmless fool.

He had a feeling Malik would have hated him for being compared to this brat. Bakura smirked.

“We meet again, Jonouchi!” Haga jabbed a finger in his direction. “It's been a while since Duelist Kingdom, hasn't it?”

Jonouchi faced him completely. “Lemme guess, there's only one reason you could be here, and it's not to catch flies…”

“Guess you're not as dumb as you look.” Haga snickered, punching his deck into the slot of his disk. “Let's duel!”

Jonouchi did the same, raising his arm to the challenge. “You're on!”

“You can't be serious, Jonouchi!” Anzu interjected. “This is the same creep that threw Yugi's Exodia cards into the ocean! Don't give him the honour of dueling him!”

“Battle City rules! You can't refuse a duel!” Haga shot back.
“I've got this, Anzu.” Jonouchi turned to reassure her.

“Doesn't it seem odd that that kid was so willing to go and find Haga for you?” Bakura decided to speak up, gaze a touch colder as he made his observations. He couldn't help it. There was no way they could be this stupid. “It does seem like they were working together…”

Jonouchi's expression faltered for a moment and Bakura had to take satisfaction that his idea of everyone being 'good' was being challenged. He brushed it off just as quickly, however.

“Whatever the case, I'm not going to lose!” Jonouchi declared.

Bakura sighed, wondering why he thought anyone would care about what poor Ryou Bakura had to say.

Haga was thrilled, grinning wide as he went to draw his cards.

“Let's duel!”

…

Bakura regretted not slinking away when he had the chance. Now he was stuck watching the duel with no plausible excuse to leave. It was made even worse by the voice barging into his mind again without so much as knocking.

“Well? Have you found a way into the tournament yet?” Malik purred, clearly taking satisfaction in being insufferable.

“No, I'm stuck with the Pharaoh's entourage so fuck off.” Bakura snapped back. “This whole thing was your idea anyway.”

Malik laughed, voice circling him like a vulture. “Well you better hurry…”

Bakura felt like he was swatting away a very annoying fly. “Shut up and go bother someone else!”
“Bakura?” Anzu's voice startled him from his mental conversation and Malik's presence evaporated. “Are you… feeling alright?”

Bakura unclenched the tension he hadn't realized he had been holding in his jaw. Shit, he must have been glaring too. Damn Malik… Was that bastard trying to sabotage his own plans?

Bakura forced a pleasant, sheepish smile.

“Yeah, it's just a bit of jet lag…”

Anzu looked like she wanted to say something else, but she was interrupted by Jonouchi declaring his final move. He had managed to take Haga’s spell card and use it against him, putting the nail in Haga’s coffin. His lifepoints dropped to zero, signaling Jonouchi’s victory.

Bakura had to admit it was a pretty good play. He kept it in mind should Jonouchi become a problem later.

“Alright! Who’s my next opponent?” Jonouchi said, proudly walking away with his spoils of battle. He held up his duel disk arm, pressing a button on it. “Luckily this thing comes outfitted with a duelist sensor…”

He made a show of ‘dowsing’ for his next challenge, thrilled when the device gave a resounding beep.

“Duelist, twelve o’clock!”

He took off running down the road. Anzu sputtered as she and Sugoroku hurried to follow their spastic friend.

“Wh-what?! Hey, Jonouchi, wait for us!”

Bakura couldn't say he wasn't thankful. He let them get lost behind a gaggle of people before quietly slipping in the other direction. Shoving his hands on his pocket, he made his way down the street, the crowds thinning. Perhaps he could pick off someone weak…
“Look at this!”

A voice bounced down the alleyway he was passing, bringing his attention down to a small group skulking in the shadows. They were clearly tournament participants, if the duel disks on their arms said anything. The tallest of the three held something small and shiny out - a Duel Monsters card.

“Pretty cool, right? ‘Diabound Kernel’. I just won it from some kid.” He proclaimed. “Clearly he just wasn’t fit enough to own a card like this!”

Bakura stopped walking.

One of the other two laughed, a bit too loudly. “Damn, Takeshi, you really scored!”

Bakura couldn't place what had rooted him to the spot. He couldn't even see the card from where he was standing, and yet he knew it would depict a great white creature that was half man half naga.

But more importantly, he knew the card didn't belong in this brat’s hands.

Bakura grinned, cutting and sinister, before it gave way to something softer and unsuspecting.

“Excuse me!” He called out as he stepped into the mouth of the alleyway, shadow marring the pale concrete. “Takeshi, was it?”

The tallest glanced up, face falling into a scowl, clearly not pleased about his bragging being interrupted.

“What do you want?”

Bakura reached into his pocket and took out his deck, holding it up with a hopeful smile. “Do you want to duel me?”
There was a beat of silence as Takeshi considered him, looking like he thought the request was a joke. He burst into laughter and waved him off.

“Beat it, kid! You don't even have a duel disk.”

Bakura resisted the urge to snarl. Perhaps under regular circumstances he wouldn't have given the luxury of trying to play fair, but there was something different about this card, something that compelled him to challenge its current holder. It was like it were another God card.

And God cards had to be won after all. Merely taking it wouldn't satisfy him. He had to prove himself worthy, and if he couldn't even defeat this bastard to take back what was his, then he didn't deserve to have it.

“Well, with a tournament as big as this, practice could never hurt.” Bakura continued on calmly despite the ridicule. “You may even have to go up against top duelists like Seto Kaiba. I hear he has a new secret weapon, one of the most powerful monsters in the game.”

The other two had joined in laughing with their leader, but all three fell silent at the mention of Kaiba. Bakura knew he had them, judging by the looks on their faces.

“Please? I just want one duel. I'm sure you'll probably win.” He gave a coy tilt of his head. “If you're too scared though, I understand…”

Takeshi narrowed his eyes, but he still looked unsure of himself. However, Bakura could see his two friends looking at him with expectancy and he inwardly smirked.

“You could kick this scrawny prick’s ass in no time!” The shorter of the two insisted.

Takeshi broke, clearly unable to handle slightest bit of peer pressure, lest he appear weak. “Okay then. Lend him your duel disk.”

“What?!” The shorter one balked immediately. “But we were gonna go get lunch…”

“I'll catch up with you later. It won't take me long to wipe the floor with this punk,” Takeshi grunted.
When his friend hesitated, he snapped at him loudly. “Just do it already!”

The shorter one winced but huffed a sigh, slowly taking his duel disk off his arm and trudging over to Bakura. He shoved the thing into his hands, mouth tight as he glared up at Bakura. Then he and the other lackey left, leaving Bakura and Takeshi alone.

Bakura snorted as he fitted the duel disk on his arm. That was easier than he thought.

Then again, all bullies were the same.

“Hope you know what you're getting into…” Takeshi said, shuffling his deck and then shoving it into the slot.

Bakura followed suit, the disk giving a metallic whirl as it activated and the lifepoint counter flashed. His eyes narrowed, darkening to their regular shade, voice slipping away from the pleasant lilt he had put on.

“Oh and, if I win, you'll give me your locator cards, right?”

Takeshi scowled. “Why the hell would I agree to that?”

Bakura chuckled, the sinister noise rebounding off the alley walls, every bit as nasty as it had always been. There was no reason to keep up a meek appearance any more.

“Well if you can't even beat any random that challenges you, you don't really deserve a spot in this tournament, do you?”

“I'm gonna kick your ass…” Takeshi growled. If he looked unnerved, he didn't show it - yet.

“Draw!”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Somehow these chapters keep getting longer... oh well. I don't think anyone would complain about that. Anyways, the plot is going somewhere probably

“‘The planchette moves to spell the final letter!’” Bakura declared, pointing above him to where the Ouija Board punched in the ‘H’.

“‘You're finished!’”

Dark Necrofear rose out of the graveyard and wiped Takeshi’s side of the field clean with her piercing gaze. He cried out as the blast knocked him to the ground, sending his cards scattering.

“Th-that's not fair...!” Takeshi whined as his life points hit zero. “You tricked me!”

The holograms vanished and Bakura took his deck out of the slot of his duel disk - his duel disk because he had no intentions of returning it.

“I challenged you fair and square. If you didn't like it, you didn't have to agree.” Bakura advanced on the fallen teen and held out his palm expectantly “Now hand over your locator cards. And I'll take Diabound Kernel as well. It's the rules of the tournament.”

“What?!” Takeshi glared up at him. “Screw you! I'm not giving you anything!”

Bakura smirked. Somehow he had a feeling it would come to this.

“Don't you know what happens to people who can't play by the rules?”

The alleyway suddenly seemed a lot darker, like the sun's light could never reach it even if it was just steps away. From under his shirt, the Millennium Ring began to emit a sinister glow, and Bakura reached inside to pull it out and let it's aura fill the air.
Takeshi looked around warily, picking up on something being horribly off. He jerked back, away from Bakura, like the very shadows would reach out and drag him away.

“What the hell are you-?!”

Bakura's smirk widened into a grin, teeth exposed as he leaned forward, Ring swinging from his chest like a pendulum.

“They get a penalty game.”

...

The holographic foil shined back at him as he tilted the card this way and that. Bakura didn't realize that he was smiling - a reverent, softer thing instead of his usual poisonous smirk. The trading card itself meant nothing to him, but what it represented… Bakura felt it was worth more than the God cards, somehow.

It was his. He didn't know how it ended up in the grasp of the moron he left drooling in the alley, but he supposed he couldn't complain.

He slipped Diabound into his deck, placing it and the locator cards he had won into his pocket. That done, he decided it was time to wring the shard Malik had left in his mind by the neck.

“Oi, great news,” he said over their mental link. “I entered myself into the tournament. I have two locator cards already, so you can quit barging into my mind.”

Malik's voice took a moment to answer him, but when it did, Bakura nearly cringed from the crackling, fierce energy that flooded his mind.

“That's not important right now!”

Bakura drew to a sudden halt, nearly causing someone behind him to run into his back.
“What the hell are you talking about? I did exactly what you asked!” Bakura hissed back. “Now it's 'not important'?”

Malik huffed an exasperated sigh.

“I mean there's another phase of my plan in motion. We're going to rendezvous right now.”

Bakura raised a brow. What the hell was up with him? Shaking his head, he began to walk again.

“You seem stressed. Something's got you in a bad mood.”

“Go to the aquarium and don't keep me waiting.” Was the curt response he received before an empty silence filled his head.

When the aquarium was in sight, Bakura felt a familiar presence approach from behind. He turned to see Malik standing there - and he did not look happy at all.

“Damn, did you lose your God cards or something?”

Malik just stared him, dark and dead-serious. Bakura's eyes widened.

“You did.”

He wasn't sure whether to laugh or punch Malik across the face, but he couldn't say he didn't see this coming.

Malik growled and glared off to the side.

“The Pharaoh beat me and took Osiris. It doesn't matter because I still have Ra but-”
Bakura's laughter broke out of his chest. “And you say I'm useless!”

Malik lunged at him, pressing him back against the alley wall and slapping a hand over his mouth.

“Shut up!” He hissed, gesturing with his head. “They're right there!”

“Mn?” Bakura turned his head, peering out the alley and spotting Jonouchi and Anzu near the front of the aquarium.

“I need them for the next part of my plan,” Malik went on, keeping his voice low, “which means your main use has finally come.”

Bakura pushed Malik off of him so he could speak.

“Doesn't dueling the Pharaoh contradict us infiltrating his little peanut gallery? He'll recognize you right away.”

Malik scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Don't be stupid. I duelled him through a puppet of mine. He hasn't seen my face.”

Bakura's mind instantly went back to that strange mime Malik had stationed in the city for some reason. “Of course. How could I forget your cowardly mannerisms?”

“Wipe that look off your face. We have work to do.”

Malik stepped forward, heading for the end of the alley and Bakura blinked. That was their approach? Just walk up and say hi? It seemed so mundane, but then again anything else probably would have come across as sketchy. And speaking of...

“Oh, I should probably tell you they're likely already suspicious of me.” Bakura said, causing Malik to stop. “I don't think they entirely bought Ryou Bakura's excuse. That and they're probably going to question me about disappearing earlier…” Bakura's lips curved up, smugness radiating off of him, “which I only had to do because of your orders, mind you.”
Malik bristled with the realization that the plan they’d had for weeks could be compromised so easily.

“... Are you kidding me?” He snapped, rounding on Bakura. “If you can't pull this off then you can say goodbye to our deal.”

Bakura's smirk didn't falter. In fact, he was quite sure they would be able to move forward with the plan, even if the method was unconventional.

He wasn't in any mood to be questioned, and playing pretend around Yugi's group was exhausting. That was why he had already thought up an alternate route while Malik was busy fretting over the holes in his meticulously laid out schemes. The longer they wasted time trying to appeal to Yugi's friends by talking, the more suspicious they would appear. There was always a faster way to do things, and that was how Bakura liked it - quick and dirty, and to the point.

Reaching into his pocket, he flicked out the switchblade, bringing the steel to his mouth and flicking his tongue against the flat of it.

“Relax… I said I'd lend you my host, didn't I?.”

…

“Th-that's…!” Anzu cut off with a gasp as she caught sight of the two figures coming into view, one leaned on the other for support. Droplets of blood made a trail on the pavement, falling off of Ryou's arm every few steps.

“Bakura!” Jonouchi called out as they rushed over, like flies to paper.

“I found him like this!” Bakura had to give Malik credit for sounding convincing; he really wasn't a bad actor either. “I treated him as best he could but he needs to go to a hospital.”

Bakura made a show of swaying into Malik's side, a weak groan spilling from him as he hung his head. It really didn't hurt all that much, but his arm did feel like it had lead weights tied to it. Malik helped lower him so he could sit on his knees. He adjusted the makeshift bandage on his arm,
murmuring some words of comfort as the others crowded closer.

“Hey! There he is!” Someone shouted. Bakura's brows furrowed. Why did he know that voice?

He risked a glance over, spotting the other two that had been with the meager excuse for a duelist he had faced earlier.

“That’s the punk that beat Takeshi and stole my duel disk!”

Heh. Whoops.

Said duel disk was still sitting on his arm because he’d forgotten to take it off, but thankfully Anzu and Jonouchi’s attention was on more important matters at the moment.

Malik’s eyes widened when he saw the two teens heading straight for them, jumping to his feet and spreading his arms. “Stop! You've got the wrong person! He's injured!”

“You mean he's gonna be!” The teen pulled his fist back and cracked Malik clean across the jaw. Bakura hurriedly dropped his head again so he couldn't be seen snickering to himself.

“Whoa! Are you okay?” Anzu rushed to Malik's side and helped him back to his feet.

“I'm fine…” Malik grumbled, sour.

“Hey! I'll give you boneheads something to pick on!” Jonouchi rolled up his sleeves, marching forward. After he left the two in a heap, he headed back over to the group crowded around Bakura, flashing Malik an apologetic glance. “Sorry you had to get involved in all of this.”

Malik gave a humble nod of his head and smiled. Bakura was almost sickened. It was like something unholy had crawled beneath Malik’s skin and taken his place. Malik didn’t even have the excuse of having another soul inside him he could hide behind. He was a naturally gifted slimeball. “No, it's alright. I'm just glad I could help.”
Bakura turned his head to see Yugi’s grandpa appear beside him with the clear intention of helping him to his feet. It looked like that was his cue to get out of here. Malik’s plan was entirely in his own hands now.

“I’ll grab a cab and take him to the hospital!” Sugoroku said, putting Bakura’s good arm around his shoulders as they made their way to the road. “Don’t worry, Bakura, you’re going to be fine.”

Bakura risked one last glance over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of Malik’s true colours in the final, smug stare that passed between them. A moment later, ‘Namu’ turned back to his new friends, and Bakura hung his head low, an unseen grin on his lips.

But you won't be.

…

Malik didn’t want to acknowledge he was losing his grip. One after another, his plans had been failing. His Ghouls had failed to even wound the Pharaoh, he’d lost Osiris, and now he had to deal with the humiliation of losing control of both their last duel and Jonouchi on top of everything.

It was fine. It was fine. The main event was yet to come and he still had the most powerful God on his side. He hadn’t lost yet - he wouldn’t lose. It was nearing the finals, but first he had to deal with a certain loose end.

The hospital loomed over him, cutting a grim shadow against the backdropping of the city lights. It was all too easy to slip inside and find the room he needed, deterring anyone who would ask him questions with a flex of his will. He cracked open the door and slipped inside, surprised to find Bakura asleep on the bed.

Malik drew closer, suspecting he had been faking - Yugi’s grandfather was still in the building after all. However, Bakura didn’t stir. Perhaps his body had finally succumbed to both exhaustion and injury. It wouldn’t have been the first time. Bakura had passed out a couple of times after pushing his body to the limits after Ryou’s mind had been suppressed, but he had looked dead as a doornail when that happened. Dead, and peaceful.

Now… something was wrong. Bakura’s brow was creased, his jaw tight with tension. If Malik listened closely, he could hear his breath coming out in short, choked puffs, like he were trying to stave off pain. But Malik had never seen Bakura look close to pain before, not even when he’d
plunged that knife into his own arm. In fact, the dumbass had been laughing at the time.

What dream was causing Bakura such distress? Did spirits even dream? Was that possible? Malik found his own curiosity rising to the front of his thoughts. He’d only been able to get close to Bakura’s subconscious mind once, and Ryou had stopped him that time.

But there was no Ryou now. Malik withdrew the Rod, the gold glinting in the light of the moon streaming in through the window.

He had always suspected Bakura was hiding something from him - perhaps not even consciously - and, right now, Malik was determined to find out.

Seeing no better opportunity, he closed his eyes and he pressed.

He expected resistance, but Bakura’s mind yielded to him like a needle through wet paper, perhaps weakened by his current condition. Malik was startled by how easy it was, almost thrown out of his concentration. He slipped into darkness, but not one that felt empty and dead like the void he had stared into before. No, this was more like the calm that came right before the storm, a darkened sky before lightning split it in half.

The lightning flashed, striking through Malik so intensely it was almost painful. His skull split open, light and sound and colour filling the crack. Smoke filled his nostrils, choking his lungs and making him gag. It carried with it a scent of cadaver, of burning flesh, as it curled towards the deep blue expanse of the night sky.

He saw shapes, men carrying spears shoving hordes of people down the stairs, herding them like cattle. Something boiled at the bottom, a sweet, molten honeyed colour. There was chanting, almost certainly an Egyptian dialect but not one Malik was familiar with.

Then Malik saw the child, a small, scrawny shape hidden in a corner. Half covered in shadow, only the mouth was visible, curved down and hanging open in silent, horrified awe. Shaggy hair fell around the shoulders, stained a dark grey with the ash that swirled in the air, but promising a brighter colour beneath.

And finally Malik saw the shapes. Seven of them, all encased in stone. The molten honey poured down and filled them, one by one, until each eye stared back. This world felt cold, a memory he could not affect even if he wanted to, something that was as solid and unmovable as the gold
hardening in its cast.

But the gaze of the Millennium Ring felt like it was real, more vivid than anything else Malik had just born witness to. It cut through the vision, swallowing everything else until Malik felt like it was peering into his very soul. It held him captive, and he could not look away no matter how much he wanted to. Staring at it like this, Malik felt like it was the only thing standing between him and the dreadful sea of darkness waiting just beyond.

The world shattered, coming apart at the seams, and Malik was thrust back, nearly bumping into the IV pole. He was back in the hospital, sweating and panting for breath, his heart feeling like it would burst out of his chest with how hard it was pounding.

What was that? What the hell was that?

He pressed a hand to his forehead as he attempted to gather himself. He felt like he had just seen the making and unmaking of an entire world, and yet, glancing at the clock, not even half a minute had passed.

“Shit…” he breathed to himself as he returned the Rod to his belt, shock making his nerves jitter.

Bakura gasped as he jerked awake, eyes blown wide in a panic. They were not the cold, dead eyes of the spirit that Malik had come to know; there was something different about them, lucid and alive. But it was gone a moment later, evaporating into thin air so fast Malik couldn’t be sure of what he’d seen.

But what he did know was that the visions that had swept through him were not to be brushed off so easily.

Bakura’s hardened, pissed-off stare settled on Malik and he forced himself to sit up on the bed, growling. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Malik didn’t realize how tense he was until he forced himself to relax and not appear like he’d just been treading where no soul should go. He expected Bakura to start screaming at him at any moment for snooping in his mind again, but it never came. Did Bakura… not realize what he’d been doing? Was he that truly that blocked off from his own memory?
“I was just- I mean-” Malik stammered, clamping down on his own tongue. He had no business making a fool of himself now. What he’d seen had been… Gods, he didn’t even know, but it would have to be a matter to deal with later. He recomposed himself and addressed Bakura again. “I’ve come to check on you like a good friend should.” He snorted, crossing his arms. “... And also to make sure you didn't think injuring yourself would help you get out of our deal. We still have work to do.”

Bakura’s lips curled in a sneer. “Of course.”

He reached for his arm and grabbed the IV drip, jerking it out in one haphazard motion. Malik winced at the sight.

“... One day you really will kill your host.”

“He can handle it.” Bakura said, sounding oddly far away and monotone, and Malik had to wonder if he had seen the vision as well - if he was shaken by them. If he had, he certainly didn’t show it. Bakura’s eyes flicked to Malik again, narrowing. “Why do you care anyway?”

“I don't. It just becomes more of a liability for me.”

Bakura shook his head. “Tch. It's because of you I'm like this in the first place.”

Malik tilted his head, amused despite himself.

“I'm not the one that forced you to stab yourself, am I? That was all you, I'm afraid.” He strode over and took a seat on the chair that was beside the bed. His gaze fell on Bakura's arm, which had been properly bandaged by now, only a bit of pinkish-red showing through the gauze. Reaching forward, he gave the injury a loose grip, the bicep scrawny enough for Malik’s to be able to wrap his whole hand around it. “Or were you trying to impress me with this little display?”

He expected Bakura to swat him away, but the most reaction he got out of him was an irritated grunt. In fact, he didn’t seem to notice Malik had touched him at all.

“Get out of here, you annoying brat.”
“I came to tell you that you're going to have to hurry up if you want to enter the finals before all the slots are full. You still need four locator cards.” Malik went on. He brushed his thumb down the bandages over the wound, able to feel the ridges of the stitches that lay beneath. Still, there was no reaction, and Malik’s eyes became lidded in thought. Perhaps he was being ignored. On a whim, he bent his thumb and dug it against the wound, not hard enough to cause damage but definitely with enough force for it to hurt any regular person.

Then again, Bakura was not regular in any sense of the word.

“... You really don't feel that?”

Bakura finally looked at him, and then his lips curved up in a shadow of a grin, haunting in the pale, dim light. It was an angry rictus of teeth, very little humour in the expression. After what Malik had just seen, it came across as unsettling.

“It tickles.” Bakura said with measured slowness, paused, then pushed Malik’s hand away like he just remembered doing more damage to Ryou’s body was probably a bad idea. “Locator cards. Yeah, yeah. I already know.”

“I can help you,” Malik offered even though he knew it would be wasted on someone as stubborn as Bakura.

“I don't want your help.” Bakura shoved the blankets off of himself and turned his body so he could stand up. Malik got to his feet as well.

“I thought so, but I meant I can drive you around to find challengers. There's not going to be many left at this point. Certainly not enough to get to them fast enough on foot.”

Gods above, it looked like Bakura was actually ready to listen to reason and make things easy for himself this time. He seemed to consider Malik’s words, and then nodded.

“Alright, but you better be driving at sensible speeds, unless you want me ending up in the hospital again.” Bakura started for the door, peaking out left and right to check for nurses before motioning with his head for Malik to follow him. “Let's get out of here.”

Even after Bakura disappeared out the door, Malik lingered in the room for a moment longer, eyes
on the space where he had been.

All of the images he had just taken in were starting to catch up with him, his mind working to process everything. If there was one thing he could be certain of, it was that he had just seen the creation of the Millennium Items.

More specifically, he had seen it through Bakura’s eyes, and that had to mean…

Was it possible Bakura had truly been there when it happened?

Perhaps if they weren’t in the middle of a tournament, he would have stopped Bakura to ask him about it, see if he could pry anything else from him. He didn’t think it was likely he’d be able to gain any new information, however; Bakura seemed just as lost as he was. As it were, it would have to wait. Malik sighed and hurried after Bakura, but he couldn’t stop leering at the back of his head the whole journey out of the hospital, as if hoping it would reveal some lost secret to him.

Who are you, Spirit of the Ring?

...

Bakura chuckled to himself as he strode down the alley, leaving his newest victim lying face down in the dirt. He counted the locator cards he had scored off of him - four, enough to secure a place in the finals.

Malik was waiting for him at the end of the road, arms crossed as he leaned on his bike. He smirked as Bakura approached.

“You're really not a bad duelist even if your tactics are a bit… sporadic.” Malik actually sounded impressed, and Bakura unconsciously puffed his chest out.

“Please, you haven't seen anything yet.”

Malik pushed himself off his bike, about to turn and mount it when he paused, eyes on Bakura's bad arm. “... Perhaps you shouldn't have flailed your arm around so much.”
Bakura blinked, glancing down to see a bead of red running down to his wrist. There was an ugly red blotch marring the otherwise pristine white of the bandages, and it wouldn't be long until they were completely soaked. Well, damn. He scowled at Malik.

“I was not flailing .”

Malik rolled his eyes. “I can see how this is going to end.” He walked around to the back of his bike and opened one of the side packs, rummaging around for something.

“Yeah, with me having to collect all the God cards for you because you suck .”

Malik wrinkled his nose at Bakura's immaturity. “I do not suck.”

“Oh yeah? Then why haven't I seen you duel yet? Discounting the round you lost .” Bakura laughed. “You probably had your Ghouls collect locator cards for you, am I right?”

Malik glowered at him. “I'm a very busy person.”

He yanked something out of the sack and walked over to Bakura, dragging him to a nearby bench and giving him a pointed shove. “Sit.”

Bakura shot an offended glance at Malik, then the first aid kit he held in his hand, then Malik again. “The hell are you doing?”

“What I meant when I said I know how this ends is you running your body into the ground again.” Malik snorted, giving Bakura another shove until he begrudgingly plopped down on the bench.

Malik sat beside him, setting the kit down and opening it before going to remove the dirty bandages.

“You're going to push yourself too hard, collapse before you even make it to the finals, then you're going to claim it's my fault, and demand I fix it. I'm pretty familiar with how you work by now.” Malik sneered, yanking away the gauze with more force than necessary when it clung to the stitches, which were already torn from Bakura's previous antics. “Let's forego steps one through three, shall we?”
Bakura hissed, the sting more annoying than actually painful - definitely made worse by the fact it was *Malik* manhandling him. “Dickhead.”

“At least wait until after the finals are done to bleed out.”

Bakura idly scratched at an itchy patch of skin near the ugly gash. “Oh, you're so thoughtful, *nurse Malik*.”

Malik swatted his hand away and shoved a clean cloth to the wound.

“Shut up.” He growled, leaving Bakura to keep the cloth compressed to his arm. “Hold that.”

Luckily there weren't many people around to question the makeshift patch up job Malik was doing out in the open. Soon enough, Bakura's arm had been cleaned and bandaged up again. Malik tossed the bloodied gauze and cloths into the trash.

“There's not much I can do about your stitches but you should be okay as long as you don't move your arm around too much or…” He trailed off as he turned back around and saw Bakura prodding his bicep curiously. “…touch it.”

Bakura raised a brow at him, like he hadn't even heard Malik at all. “What?”

Malik huffed a sigh, starting towards his bike again. He knew a lost cause when he saw one. “Forget it. Let's get moving already.”

Bakura wouldn't say he was nauseous, but the rush of the wind and the speeds the bike reached as it tore up the road were a little more pronounced than usual. The ache in his arm had also grown enough to be irritating as he clung to Malik. It wasn't anything he couldn't handle, but he still gave a low groan of complaint against Malik's back, the sound swallowed by the roar of the bike.

He was confused when Malik pulled over to the side of the road. KaibaCorp’s stadium was visible in the distance, so why had they stopped this far from it?
Malik turned to glance over his shoulder. “I'll have to let you off here. There's something I need to take care of. Plus, they've probably figured out you escaped the hospital by now and it wouldn't look too good if we showed up together, would it?”

Bakura didn't even have the mind to argue. In fact, he was grateful to get off the horrible death machine. He climbed off of the motorcycle, trying not to stumble as he did so.

“Fine by me. I don't care what you do.”

Malik tossed him one last smirk before speeding off. On his own again, Bakura rolled his eyes and started for the stadium at a sane pace.

By the time he finally arrived, he was surprised to find he was the first - aside from Yugi's group. Predictably, they immediately jumped to fretting about his host.

“B-Bakura?!”

“What are you doing here?!”

Bakura plastered on a sugary sweet smile as he stepped out of the shadows clawing at the edge of the arena. “Competing of course!”

Jonouchi eyed his arm warily. “But you're still…”

Anzu frowned. “Bakura, are you feeling alright? When we heard you left the hospital we were really worried.”

They crowded closer, and Bakura’s lip threatened to curl in displeasure. He took a step back, needing the space from the band of idiots.

“Guys, I'm fine. Look! I'm all patched up!” He held up his arm to indicate the bandages, which were already tinging pink again. This ended up working out for him when he shoved the injury in Jonouchi’s face. “Want to see? I even got stitches!”
He made like he was about to undo the bandages, prompting Jonouchi to yelp and jump away.

“No! What’s wrong with you?!” Jonouchi pulled a face, looking queasy. “You were bleeding all over the place the last time we saw you! How can you just be ‘fine’?”

Bakura had to chuckle at him. A little blood was all it took to make him back off? Good to know.

“And when did you even enter the tournament?” Yugi stepped into the conversation, his brows creased in obvious concern. It took all of Bakura’s control to keep his expression neutral and passively optimistic.

“I wanted it to be a secret.” He held up his duel disk, indicating the cards slotted inside with a smile. “My occult deck turned out to be pretty strong, so I wanted to compete against you and Jonouchi!”

Yugi still didn’t look convinced, but that was the least of Bakura’s worries right now. “But…”

Bakura pretended to just notice the figure entering the stadium. His eyes widened and he pointed into the shadows, directing the rest of their attention away from himself.

“Look, someone else is arriving!”

With the eyes off of him for the time being, Bakura was safe to let his act slip, gaze hardening as he watched the next challenger approach. How very like Malik to show up fashionably late when he had been the one with the fastest means of transportation. What in the world had he been doing all this time?

“Hey… that’s…” Jonouchi squinted, and then his eyes went wide. “Namu!”

‘Namu’ greeted them with a nod and a smile. “Jonouchi, Anzu, it’s good to see you again!”

“So you’re in the finals too?” Anzu smiled, eyes taking on an odd, vacant quality Bakura knew too well.
“Yeah! Just barely survived the preliminaries though…”

*I’d call you a snake, but I respect snakes too much,* Bakura thought, knowing Malik could hear him. He caught the subtle, biting grin Malik threw him. He had to wonder how many of the other’s minds Malik had stuck his filthy hands inside, how many were being controlled.

Jonouchi definitely wasn’t one of them. He was eyeing Malik, expression closed and suspicious, like a dog when it spotted potential danger. “Hey, man. Listen…”

“Thanks for helping me out earlier!” Bakura cut in over Jonouchi, expression bright as he addressed Malik.

“Hey!” Malik beamed at him, a note of gratitude in his gaze. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine now!” Bakura nodded.

“Yugi, let me introduce you!” Anzu said, gesturing to their new ‘friend’. “This is Namu! He’s our friend, right Jonouchi?”

“I…” Jonouchi scratched the back of his head, trying to find a reason to argue but not coming up with anything solid. “Yeah…”

Yugi offered a hesitant smile, moving up to shake Namu’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Bakura was distracted from the conversation at hand when he felt the Ring vibrating against his chest.

*What the hell?*

He scowled, placing his palm over his chest and pressing the tine of the Ring back down. He hoped no one noticed it trying to poke a hole through his shirt. Why was it reacting so suddenly?
“Someone else is approaching!”

Bakura glanced up to spot a large, hulking shadow making its way towards the center of the stadium. Even if the rest of them lacked the sensory powers of the Ring, there was a noticeable shift in the atmosphere, a current of anxiety rippling through the other occupants like they sensed their impending doom. The Ghoul’s robes were enough to set anyone on edge at this point, but what Bakura was interested in was the gold dangling from the man’s hand. He squinted.

_Gave the Rod to baldy, eh?_

“He’s just holding onto it for now. I can’t keep it on my person until we’re in a more discreet area.”

Bakura didn’t ask for Malik’s commentary but he got his voice projected into his mind anyway. He turned to look over at him, finding that Malik was already giving him a cool stare.

“Don’t get any ideas.”

Bakura shot a grin back at him. He had to give him credit at least. Everyone else seemed convinced that really _was_ Malik standing there.

Kaiba gave ‘Malik’ a contemptuous glance. “So you’re the one who’s been tearing up my tournament, are you?”

“My name is Malik.” Rishid stated firmly, no room for argument - not that anyone really had any arguments to give at this point. They merely pinned the man they thought was their enemy with hateful stares, and Rishid bore it all on his back in the true Malik’s steed. Bakura had to wonder if it bothered him sometimes, mindlessly following Malik’s every whim. He would have thought Rishid was brainwashed like the rest of Malik’s men, but the look in his eyes told otherwise. Whatever act he put on, he was doing it completely willingly.

Bakura didn’t understand it, but he didn’t care enough to question it either.

“Will the seven duelists please give me your attention! I have an announcement to make!” Isono called out, raising his hand. “All of you have survived the prelims and assembled here at Domino Stadium! However… this is not the place where the finals will take place!”
A ripple of shocked murmurs ran through the group. Bakura wasn’t surprised. He thought this place looked like kind of a dump...

“The real stage shall arrive shortly!”

Now that got his attention. “Arrive…?” He muttered under his breath.

The winds began to pick up as a gigantic shape appeared over the lip of the stadium. There were gasps of surprise and awe as the blimp came into full view, descending into the arena to land.

“The first round of the finals will take place one thousand meters in air!” Isono called out. “Would all duelists please prepare to board!”

Bakura smirked. He had to admit, Kaiba certainly knew how to throw a tournament. He shot Malik another smug glance as he began making his way over to the boarding platform.

Sure hope you're not afraid of heights.

...

“A raffle.” The door to Malik’s room slid open and Bakura stormed inside, sliding shut once more after him. “It’s a fucking raffle.”

Malik raised a brow at the sudden intrusion, but he didn't move from where he was comfortably reclined on his bed.

“Good evening, Bakura. Fancy meeting you here. Can I offer you a drink in this trying time?”

“Do me a favour and shut up for five minutes, Ishtar.” Bakura hissed, stalking right up to his side and glaring down at him. “The matchups for the quarter-finals are going to be chosen at random by this machine Kaiba has set up. I snuck into one of the rooms and saw it.”
Malik sighed and brought his arms out from where they’d been folded behind his bed, sitting up. “And?”

Bakura narrowed his eyes. “And it means there’s a chance we’re going to be paired in the first round. What’s your grand plan of action then?”

Malik shrugged, answering as if it were the easiest thing in the world. “Simple, you’ll lose to me.”

Bakura felt his eye twitch. Perhaps if it were any other time he wouldn't be drilling the holes in Malik’s plan so hard, but Malik’s flippant attitude had been grating on him for weeks. There was only so much nonsense he could tolerate.

“Rendering a large chunk of our plan and my efforts completely worthless.” He bared his teeth. That was only half of the problem he had with this idea. The other half was a question of pride. “Do you really think I’m going to just roll over for you?”

Malik’s gaze hardened and he pushed himself to his feet, going toe to toe with Bakura because the other refused to step back and give him room to stand.

“Yes, you will if you want my end of the bargain.” He said, leering down at Bakura, who sincerely hated the fact that Malik was taller than him. Malik's mouth curved into that smirk that always had Bakura wanting to peel off his face. He leaned closer, condescension leaking from every pore. Bakura almost expected him to pat his cheek again - and he almost hoped Malik would so he had an excuse to break his arm. “But please, feel free to struggle. It’ll only make your loss look more convincing.”

Bakura didn't back down, growling and shoving his forehead against Malik's. “You can’t use Ra. You’ll give away your identity.”

Malik chuckled, finding his anger amusing. It made Bakura seethe even harder.

“I don’t need Ra to beat you.”

Bakura grinned up at him, the expression furious and wild.
“And maybe I don’t need your bargain, you arrogant little shit. Maybe I’ll keep all the God cards for myself.”

“They’d be worthless in your hands.” Malik snorted, planting both hands on Bakura’s shoulders and pressing him back until they were standing a comfortable distance apart. “Settle down, Bakura. Take a few deep breaths. We may not even have to face each other in the quarter-finals at all. You only need to play along for a while longer.”

And then he did it. Bakura tensed up when he felt Malik’s palm brush his cheek, giving it a light, patronizing pat. Bakura’s eyes went wide, three whole seconds passing before he felt his patience snap like a twig under a hiker’s boot.

Bakura snarled, shoving Malik back onto the bed and straddling him. He grabbed for his throat, wrapping his hands around it and squeezing - only to pause when he realized Malik’s thick, gold choker completely nullified his grip. He released him and went for his shirt instead, jerking him up by the scruff until they were eye level.

“Keep pushing me, Malik. I dare you.”

Malik opened his mouth to shoot something back but it was at that very moment they both registered the sound of a familiar group right outside the room. Neither Bakura nor Malik had the time to pull away before the door slid open.

“Hey, Namu, we were wondering if-”

A very heavy, very charged silence settled over all of them. No one moved. Malik and Bakura stared at the rest of group and the group stared back, shock written all over their faces.

Bakura was suddenly very aware of the position he’d put himself in, his hands still tightly clenched in the front of Malik’s sweater. He slowly, slowly unfurled his fingers and drew back so their faces weren’t inches apart.

That was it. They were caught. There was no way they could explain this away, especially with how suspicious Bakura had already been acting. Their ruse was over.

… Or perhaps not.
Bakura buried his face in his hands, shaking his head as though flustered.

“I-I’m so sorry! I should have told you!”

All eyes were on Bakura, but Anzu was the one to speak up.

“Sh-should have told us what?”

Bakura slid a glance Malik’s way, a bemused stare reflected back at him. Malik said nothing, waiting to see what lie he was spinning.

“Namu is my friend from Egypt.” Bakura went on, pulling himself away from Malik's body and sitting on the other side of the bed. He stared down at the floor, hands in his lap. “I… I’ve been visiting him for a while now.”


Anzu frowned. “Why didn't you ever let us know?”

Bakura fiddled with his hands, not raising his eyes to look at them. He hesitated, held the moment for a beat longer to make it believable.

“Because he's my…” Much to his credit, he didn't let the smirk cut into his performance, biting the inside of his lip as he thought about how much Malik would want to kill him for what he was about to say.

Bakura clenched his eyes shut, cheeks flushing a dark pink - very easy with Ryou's complexion.

“He's my boyfriend!”

Another round of shock swept through the group and even Malik paled, mouth falling open.

Anzu sputtered, shaking her head. “Y-you could have told us you were seeing someone from another country, Bakura!”

Bakura stared at his hands, twiddling his fingers absentmindedly.

“I know but…” His gaze shyly drifted off to the side. “Well…”

Malik cleared his throat, bringing the attention to him. He still looked taken off guard, but it actually worked for the new ruse they were putting up.

“This kind of thing isn't exactly safe in Egypt…” he said, sheepish.

Yugi stepped forward, finally deciding to speak up. “Well you have nothing to worry about with us.” He offered Bakura an empathetic smile and, as funny as the situation was, it made Bakura want to throttle the brat. “Is this why you've been acting weird lately?”

Bakura scratched at the back of his head. Inwardly, he was scowling. His impression of Ryou really did need work, didn't it?

“I… guess so.”

An awkward silence threatened to overtake them all, but Anzu broke it, a polite smile forced onto her face.

“Well, like Yugi said, you have nothing to worry about.” She gave a small giggle. “I think it's sweet.”

Bakura shot Malik a pointed look. Did you make her say that?
Malik completely ignored him, addressing the group. “Thank you. You're very kind.”

Jonouchi crossed his arms with a snort. “It’s not gonna be so romantic if you two get matched up in the finals though. A true Duelist shows mercy for no one.”

Malik chuckled, a flicker of irony in his eyes, reminded of the argument that came before the interruption. “Heh, I suppose not.”

“Speaking of, there's a buffet before the finals begin. Everyone else already headed down to the hall. We were going to ask if you wanted to join us,” Jonouchi went on, rubbing at the back of his neck sheepishly. “Eh… Sorry for barging in.”

“Yeah, we'll be there shortly.” Malik nodded. He glanced to Bakura, and then the group again. “... Could you give us a moment if it's not too much trouble?”

The awkward air was too oppressive for Yugi’s little posse. Bakura was almost amused at the way they all but scrambled from the room, waving as they left.

“Sure. See ya around!”

The door slid shut once more, and a very heavy silence fell over them. Bakura waited, listened carefully for the sounds of footsteps retreating to make sure no one lingered in the hall, and then he let his gaze slide back to Malik.

Malik was pinching the bridge of his nose, a humiliated sort of fury rolling off of him in waves.

“What the hell was that?!?” He hissed, pinning Bakura with a sharp glare. “Has the blood loss gone to your head?”

Bakura couldn't help it. He really couldn't. He wrapped his arms around his middle, collapsing into a fit of hyena laughter. He slapped away the pillow that was aimed at his face, snickering even more at Malik’s frustration.

“I'd say that was quick thinking on my part.” He grinned at Malik. “Why are you mad? They seemed
to buy it well enough.”

“I know but-” Malik pulled a face and - did Bakura's eyes deceive him? Was he flushed? “You're a fucking dick, you know that?”

Bakura clapped his hands, more than entertained. So a little teasing was all it took to crack Malik Ishtar? After seeing the bastard look so in control and full of himself, it was a welcome change, especially after their argument.

“Well? Did you make Anzu say those things about our relationship?” Bakura's grin turned sinister as he unwrapped his arms from around his stomach and leaned forward. He cocked his head, purring. “You think it's sweet?”

Malik huffed and grabbed for the Rod, shoving it into the loop of his belt as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Get out of my room.”

It was clear he was attempting to reclaim some sense of dignity, but Bakura wouldn't be so easily fooled.

“With pleasure.” Bakura rolled off of the bed, slinking to the door and tossing Malik one last smug remark. “See you in the arena, boyfriend.”
He couldn’t believe this. His combo was perfect. What stupid brush of luck had graced the Pharaoh and allowed him to summon his God right before the final letter of the Ouija Board could be played?

Defeating God didn’t even matter. All he had to do was survive this turn and he would win, but he had nothing. No defense, no set cards that could help him. All he could do was stare down the maw of Osiris and wait for the killing blow.

He shook, not with fear but with rage. It wasn’t fair. He was so close, and all because the Pharaoh had the blessed gift of the Gods on his side, he would win. As destiny had predetermined.

“Here I go!” The Pharaoh declared, but his voice sounded far away, filtering from another reality.

The arena flickered, vision blurring into something else - somewhere else - for a moment. Golden light filtering over a throne, the Pharaoh standing with the Gods looming above him, poised to strike. Bakura blinked, rubbed his eyes.

Had he been here before...?

Malik’s voice jerked him rudely from his thoughts.

“It’s not over yet, Bakura. Watch.”

Bakura’s eyes widened as he caught sight of a hooded figure making his way up to the side of the arena. The Pharaoh had paused mid-attack, eyeing the man he thought was Malik warily.

“Listen carefully, Yugi,” Rishid called out. “That boy is being controlled by my Millennium Rod, and I’ll show you proof.”

Bakura’s eyes narrowed and he hissed over their mental link, “What the hell are you up to?”
The true Malik smirked. “You’ll see. Just follow my lead.”

Bakura felt a shudder go through him as the mind had been shoved so far down not even he could reach it suddenly resurfaced. He felt Ryou’s energy encompass his limbs and automatically released the body, spirit sliding away from flesh and blood. Ryou dropped like a puppet with its strings cut, knees hitting the ground as his cards scattered everywhere. He cried out, clutching at his arm as pain speared through it, blood dripping off of his fingers.

“My arm…! It hurts…!” He managed to raise his head, brows furrowing when he caught sight of the Pharaoh standing across from him. “Yugi…? What…? Where am I…?”

“As you can see, that boy is badly wounded,” Rishid went on. “Attack him if you must, but be warned that doing so may very well take his life. Are you willing to do that, Yugi?”

There were yells of shock and indignation from the sidelines. Bakura even heard ‘Namu’ joining in to express his concern for his ‘boyfriend’. He also heard Kaiba yelling at the Pharaoh to get on with the duel and attack anyway, but Bakura couldn’t care about any of it right now. The pain and confusion rolled off of Ryou in waves, seeping into his intangible form. He felt the cut of the wind as it whipped by, the cold shock gripping his bones. Ryou felt faint, but Bakura felt equally as vivid.

“Your turn will automatically conclude after five minutes!” Isono addressed Yugi. “You have thirty seconds left!”

Bakura’s eyes narrowed. “I see what you’ve done, Malik. You’ve tied Yugi’s hands.”

His answer was a purr of agreement. “Indeed. All that’s left to do is run out the clock, and then victory is yours.”

“Twenty seconds!”

Bakura glowered at the Pharaoh from across the field. The fact that he even had to decide whether winning was more important than his friend’s life was quite telling of his priorities. How could Malik have been so sure he really wouldn’t attack?
“Stay put,” Malik’s voice slid into his mind once again as though sensing his unrest, setting his teeth on edge. “It won’t be long now, trust me.”

Bakura growled. Obeying Malik again, falling prey to his whims, was truly the only way out of this? Perhaps any other time he could have dealt with that, however…

His gaze fell to Ryou, still on his knees, still too injured and disoriented to do anything - utterly at the Pharaoh’s mercy, like a slave knelt before the throne of a king, waiting for his final judgement. Bakura’s fingers curled into fists, nails digging into his palms, pride burning blood-red in the back of his throat and encompassing him like a robe of crimson thrown over his shoulders.

“Tell me, Malik,” he hissed, spitting acid between his teeth, “would you bow before the Pharaoh...?”

“Hm?” There was a note of wariness in Malik’s voice, as if he had just realized his game piece may not have been so content merely being a pawn after all.

Bakura caught Malik’s eye on the sidelines and grinned, the thrill of defiance consuming him and turning his spirit to lightning. Malik’s eyes flew wide as Bakura struck, ripping control away from both him and his host in one fell swoop - it was easy with Ryou so weakened.

“Even I have ways I like to win and ways I hate to win! Stay out of this, Malik!”

“Ten seconds!”

Bakura yelled as he burst into the realm of the living again, jumping to his feet with his arms flung out at his sides.

“Attack me, Yugi!” He screamed. This duel meant nothing to him. Only the games that would follow were of importance, and he needed his host in one piece for them. “Don’t worry! Your little gaming buddy won’t die!”

The Pharaoh’s gaze became fierce again when he noticed the switch. He bared his teeth, throwing his arm out to command his dragon once again. “Alright, you asked for it!”
Bakura’s grin widened as he watched the jaws of Osiris open. Yes, a standing loss was always better than a kneeling victory. So what if he threw this duel? There was plenty of time for him to claim the ultimate prize in the end - the power of darkness.

And then, Yugi, when that day comes, you will truly die!

A blinding light built inside Osiris’ mouth, pale yellow glow reflected in Bakura’s eyes. He threw his head back and cackled to the sky as the light engulfed him, and he continued to laugh until it tore through him, ripping his soul away and casting it into the darkness.

…

Malik inwardly sighed as he watched Osiris’ Thunder Force fade away, revealing Bakura’s motionless form. He clicked his tongue disapprovingly. Of course the moron had to go and do something reckless like that, and now that Malik was his ‘boyfriend’ he had to go and pretend like he was worried for the bastard. Fucking hell, he was more trouble than he was worth.

Everyone else was already rushing to Bakura’s aid and Malik hurried to join them, climbing up onto the playing field. “Bakura!”

The Pharaoh was already cradling Ryou, who barely looked conscious. Malik could only pray Ryou would be too out of it to notice anything amiss. Thankfully, luck was on his side and his eyes closed a moment later, exhaustion claiming him.

“Bakura…” Malik murmured, cupping the side of his face. There was a slight clink as he heard Anzu walk over and pick up the Millennium Ring from where it had fallen.

“Here’s his Ring…” she said. “It must have taken over his mind again. He keeps forgetting how dangerous it is to wear this thing.”

Malik wanted to snort. Oh, if only the rest of them knew how deep the matter really went. He felt their stares on the back of his head but ignored them.

At the beginning of the match, they had questioned him if he knew anything about Bakura holding the Millennium Ring. Of course he had feigned ignorant, claiming this was the first time he’d ever seen the thing. He put on a shaken act that hopefully they had bought.
Turning to Anzu, he grimaced. “Please keep that away from him. It’d be best to hide it where he can’t get to it.”

Anzu nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I was thinking.”

Malik took it upon himself to scoop up Ryou into his arms, keeping up his ‘concerned boyfriend’ ruse. With his face hidden by his hair, he stared down at Ryou with a sour look, trying to see past him to the troublesome spirit that lurked under his skin. Great, now Bakura was a backup plan at best now that the dumbass had put himself out of commission.

He allowed himself to get swept up in the group making their way back to Ryou’s room to treat him. As they headed inside, the winds began to pick up, howling like a sinister omen hanging over them all.

…

Malik’s pride was a twisted, shriveled up thing in his throat as he directed the girl’s body to a certain room, stepping through the door unnoticed. He couldn’t care about such things right now, not after what he had learned. The only thing left for him to do was drag himself back to his partner's feet and pray it wasn't too late to prevent another tragedy.

That was, if Bakura would even listen to him.

Anzu held the Millennium Ring in her hands, eyes blankly focused on the motionless figure on the bed. Ryou slept soundly - well, as soundly as one could after taking an attack from a God.

Stepping closer, Malik had Anzu slip the cord around Bakura’s neck.

The reaction was immediate, a charged, malevolent energy swirling around Bakura, the air feeling reminiscent of when they’d been in the hospital. His limbs locked up, expression twisting in unease, his breathing quickening. Malik realized this was what happened when you shoved a restless spirit into a physical form.

Bakura’s nightmare didn’t appear to be too different this time around, but Malik didn’t possess the
Rod to see for himself. Then again, after the last time, he wasn’t so sure he wanted to see.

Before long, Bakura’s eyes flew open and he jerked up on the bed, breathing alleviating out. His frantic state settled into something more quiet and eerie, eyes hollow as they fell on Malik but didn’t truly see him.

A shudder ran through Anzu’s nerves. It was like gazing into a bottomless abyss with something unspeakable lurking at the bottom. Malik typically wasn’t unsettled by things, but Bakura… Bakura was something else.

“You want my soul too?” Bakura muttered in a slow drawl, sounding like the weight of the world had fallen on his shoulders. “You haven’t burned enough?”

“What?” Malik’s voice came out high and wrong from Anzu’s mouth. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Why was he saying such weird things? Just what had gotten into him?

Bakura shut his eyes, rubbing at them for a moment. He paused, then glanced back up, eyes lucid as they fixed on Malik. Whatever spell had come over him had lifted and he blinked as though just noticing he wasn’t alone in the room for the first time.

“… That’s a weird hiding place for you, Malik.”

Malik shook his head. There were more pressing matters than whatever was happening to Bakura.

“Listen, there isn’t much time-”

Bakura's lip curled and he threw the blanket off of himself, turning to face Malik.

“Damn right there isn’t,” he said. “You owe me, Ishtar, and I’m out of patience, so pay up. Now.”

Malik bit his lip. Of course he expected this much.
“That’s just it. I…” He glanced towards the wall. “I can’t.”

Bakura blinked at him slowly, his tone reflecting the dry, unimpressed quality of his expression.

“You can’t.” He tilted his head. “And why is that?”

Gods this was going to be one painful conversation. Anzu's body felt far too small to contain the anxiety dominating Malik's spirit.

“Because I’ve lost control of my body!” He snapped. “This whole time, the blackouts, the gaps in my memory… It all makes sense now! I’m the one that… I thought the Pharaoh did it but it wasn’t. It was me…!” He sounded utterly miserable, as much as he tried not to show such weakness in front of Bakura. “I’m the one that killed my father, and if I don’t act, my brother will die as well.”


“I have another personality!” Malik blurted, still in shock of the fact. “It happened after the ritual, after the scars were carved into my back. I… I broke.”

He grit his teeth, utterly hating this. He didn't even know why he was spilling all of this to Bakura. He probably just looked pathetic, not even worth a spirit’s help.

But instead of the ridicule he expected, Bakura had fallen silent, expression stunned. It only set Malik more on edge.

“Don’t just look at me like that, Bakura. Say something!”

Bakura’s shoulders dropped a moment later, a contemplative flicker in his eyes as if he were connecting some dots in his mind.

“Huh. I can’t say I’m surprised. I think I spoke with your ‘other self’ once, though at the time I
thought it was just you being weird.”

“You knew?!” Malik's eyes widened. “And you never told me?”

“I tried to bring it to your attention but-”

A disturbing realization struck Malik.

“And Rishid, he must have known but why didn’t he-?” He swallowed as he remembered what he came here to ask for. “Oh Gods, Rishid… Bakura, I have to save him. If I don’t do something my other personality will kill him! He and my sister are the only family I have left and I can’t let that happen!”

Bakura was silent, face like stone. Malik suspected he was drawing out the moment just to torture him.

“So you want me to fight on your behalf. I should tell you to piss off and go rot for all of the shit you’ve put me through.”

Malik winced, but he didn't have anything to say to that. Bakura was right after all.

“Or maybe I could go strike a deal with your other self.” Bakura's lips split into a cruel grin. “Perhaps he’s not as flaky as you are. What do you think?”

Malik's eyes widened and he unconsciously lunged forward.

“No! I’ll do anything!” He bit his lip, knowing how pathetic he looked. “Do you want me to start begging here and now, Bakura?”

Bakura's face fell back into a mask of neutrality.

“No, I don’t. Seeing you grovel is not as satisfying for me as you might think, Ishtar.” He snorted as if in disbelief of his own words. Malik found it odd - wouldn't something like this please Bakura?
Was there some spirit code of honour he wasn't aware of? “All you have to do is come through on our deal.”

Malik stared down at the floor, almost wanting to laugh at the whole situation. He really had nothing to lose now, aside from his family, did he?

“... I’ll tell you something about my scars. They’re the last key you’ll need, aside from the Millennium Items,” Malik said, voice much lower. He wasn’t quite sure why he was telling Bakura this, but something was compelling him to speak. “The ritual was given to us to ensure we would keep the Pharaoh’s memories safe, always carrying the weight of it on our backs.”

“I can see why you broke.”

Malik was surprised to see Bakura levelling him with such an intense stare. The spirit’s eyes reflected a bitterness Malik knew all too well. Or perhaps he was just imagining it.

“It’s barbaric, isn’t it?”

Malik didn't answer that, but he felt he didn't need to. And, like always, there was no time to ponder the endless mysteries that made up Bakura.

“If you want the Rod, you’ll have to win it from my other self. It won’t be easy when he has Ra on his side,” Malik said, gaze hardening. “But I know his deck, and I know myself. I don’t care what happens to my body, just make sure you destroy him.”

Bakura nodded, pushing himself to his feet and walking over to the bedside table. He picked up his duel disk and slid it onto his arm, where it gave an affirming click.

“Then all we have to do is defeat God.”

…

He should have known better than to trust anything Malik had to say. What did he get in return for all of his hard work? A God with zero attack points and failure after failure.
He didn’t know why he agreed to this, why he’d listened to Malik’s sob story. It wasn’t worth risking his host again, and yet something had resonated with him, leaving the choice up to reckless impulse. Perhaps it was Malik’s spirit, his past… that fire that had Bakura intrigued from the day he’d crossed paths with him.

But spirit alone could only go so far. Fire burns out, leaving nothing but ash behind.

Ra should have been sealed away, but not even the graveyard could hold the beast. Bakura and Malik could only watch, helpless as golden flames licked at the field, a phoenix rising into the sky and consuming everything in its glow.

The shape in front of him was the most highlighted by the blinding sun. He had tributed Ra for Diabound, feeling his new monster would be more of use than the weakened God. He saw now that it was a pointless effort either way. The other Malik had planned this from the start.

But that didn’t matter right now. In fact, nothing from the present mattered because the past was seeping into the edges of his vision yet again. He was growing tired of it, gritting his teeth through the pain of Ra’s fire. Malik screaming from somewhere far off was white noise in his ears.

He saw Diabound being burned away, not by the other Malik but at the hands of the Pharaoh. A pain so much greater than the flames eating at him tore through his chest and he clutched his heart, expression blank.

What was that? It felt like… someone calling out to him. No - multiple voices slipping away into the darkness, all hope of salvation gone. It burrowed deep into his heart, stuck like a nail. He didn’t recognize the voices, but somehow he knew he couldn’t let them go. He couldn’t afford to give up.

History was turning in on itself, folding over again and again. It wasn’t the first time he had experienced this - loss, pain, defeat - he realized, and it wouldn’t be the last.

The flames began to die down, the orange glow of the sun fading back into the shadows. Bakura felt even more of himself dissipate, numb to it all. He grinned, raising his head to leer at the other Malik across the field.

“Alright, I’ll let you have this win.”
“Brave words coming from you…” The other Malik smirked, still fused with the God like some parasitic growth. “It's a shame we’re parting so soon. I expected more from you.”

Bakura chuckled low in his throat.

“Don't sound so disappointed. Soon I'll be reborn… to kill you.” He could promise that much, and he sincerely hoped no one had the chance to banish Malik's other self before he did. “I originated from the darkness after all.”

At least, he was sure he had, and even if he hadn’t, was it truly important now? He’d given himself to the shadows, and all that remained was power and vengeance.

This loss didn't matter, he told himself. He would endure thousands of losses until he could claim victory, until he could regain what was taken from him, even if there was no end in sight. Like he said, he would be reborn in due time.

As many times as it took. He couldn't afford to falter.

But even with the darkness on his side, the tiniest sliver of doubt whispered in the back of his mind.

When history folded over for the last time, when flames choked the air until there was nothing left but smoke, would the Gods have prevailed over him yet again?

…

The smoke began to clear as the shadow magic dissipated into the night sky. There should have been nothing left behind, and yet a figure stood at the center of the thinning mist, his silhouette solidifying into someone recognizable.

Ryou dropped to his knees for the second time that night, disoriented and aching. The duel disk’s weight seemed far too heavy for his injured arm, but at least he wasn’t bleeding all over the place again. He idly wondered just how much blood he had left in him.

“Wh-where-?”
He was shocked at how empty his head seemed. It wasn't like earlier when he had felt both Malik and the spirit’s eyes at his back, like he was some puppet performing for them. His thoughts turned bitter as he thought of the horrid duo. Just what had they gotten him into now?

"You were supposed to disappear!" A voice cut through his hazy mind - familiar, yet he didn't think he had ever heard it before. Ryou saw a hand enter his vision and seize the front of his shirt, jerking him up to his feet so he could stare into a pair of cold, vacant eyes. "How are you still alive?"

Ryou's brows knitted together in confusion.

"Malik...?"

It couldn't be. There was something so utterly different about him, from the way he spoke to the bloodlust written all over his face. Ryou had never seen Malik look so... crazed and out of control before.

Not-Malik's face split into a grin as realization began to settle. "No. You could say I’m the new and improved version."

"You're... not him," Ryou murmured, his thoughts drifting elsewhere. That wasn't to say dealing with this darker personality of Malik's wasn't important, but he found that it was easier to remember where he was and what he was doing without the Rod suppressing his consciousness.

"And you’re not the Spirit of the Ring." Not-Malik brought his face closer, looking like a cat inspecting a mouse in its claws. "So I finally get to meet the vessel."

Ryou's gaze hardened at that last part, focus brought back to the present. He said nothing, merely fixed the other Malik with a silent, unwavering gaze.

"We had a little wager, me and the spirit. He lost the duel and disappeared. You should have gone with him..." He tilted his head in thought, nodding slowly as if fitting in a piece of a puzzle. "But, then again, your body wasn't his to bet, was it? I should have known..."

Was that the loophole that had saved him? If it were any other time, perhaps Ryou would have laughed. He supposed he could be grateful for the spirit’s recklessness sometimes.

"I should thank you for getting rid of him and Malik."
The other Malik's grin widened and he shook his head, reaching behind his back with his free hand.

"Oh, but you'll be joining them soon enough..."

Ryou's eyes narrowed when he saw the Rod - that thing was really becoming troublesome. A yelp escaped him as the front of his shirt was released, causing him to stumble and fight for balance, his body feeling like lead after everything he had been subjected to.

He glanced back up to see the other Malik pulling off the bottom piece of the Rod, revealing a hidden blade, and this time he actually did laugh. It was more of a breathless, delirious giggle than anything. He couldn't help it. After everything he witnessed - shadow games, possession, ghosts and spirits - it just seemed so mundane.

“So you're going to stab me right here and leave my body for the others to find?”

The other Malik's smirk became a scowl, clearly not expecting his victim to question his methods.

“Yes?”

Ryou clutched his arm, features soft with an enigmatic smile.

"You can kill me if you want. You'd be doing everyone a favour." He chuckled in spite of the position he was in. "It's funny imagining the spirit stuck in the Ring again, unable to hurt anyone.” Something tight and painful caught at the edges of his words. “Then again, I'm the one that lets him out to hurt people so I deserve it just as much.”

The other Malik looked like he didn't know what to say to that, scowl deepening with each passing second.

"Aren't you going to scream?" He almost sounded unsettled by the complete lack of reaction from Ryou. His free hand shot out and gripped his victim's throat, knife aimed at his jugular. "What's wrong with you?"

Ryou blinked up at him.

"What reason do I have to scream? Do you think you're scary?” He bit his lip, gaze averting to the side. "I could... pretend if you want."
A vein popped in the other Malik's forehead, grip tightening on the Rod as if he really were thinking about driving it through Ryou right then and there. A moment later, he released Ryou's neck with a scoff.

“Forget it.” He turned his back on Ryou and walked towards the edge of the arena, making the short hop to the ground below. “It’s no fun killing someone who’s half dead anyway.”

Ryou’s hand flew up to his neck, the shock of what had just happened catching up to him. He’d had so many run ins with deadly things that his survival instinct was blunted, but at least he managed to deter arguably his most dangerous encounter just now.

“You’re not going to control my mind again?” Ryou asked, incredulous that he was just going to be left alone now.

The other Malik stopped, turning to glance back over his shoulder with an offended curl of his lip.

“No? What use would I have for that?” He snorted and shook his head. “I’m not a coward like my dominant half.” Chuckling, the other Malik began walking again, the shadows swallowing him as he stepped through the doorway, leaving Ryou to stand out in the night by himself. “Then again he can’t be called my ‘dominant half’ any more.”

Ryou sat on his bed in his room, the Millennium Ring resting in his lap. He stared down at it, hard, feeling it's malevolent energy pulse stronger than before. It was like it were displeased somehow, like it had its own mind and desires, but how could that be possible with the spirit gone?

Whatever the case, Ryou couldn't wait. He didn't know how long he had until the spirit would return. He gripped the gold tighter, eyes narrowing.

"I've let you sit around my neck and use my body for far too long,” he murmured. "Now you're going to give me answers."

As if to defy him, the metal began to heat up, almost to the point of burning his hands. He frowned at it before dropping it on the bed beside him and laying back to close his eyes.

Every time he had tried to do this in the past, the spirit's mind had stood in his way. Now there was nothing stopping him from entering the Ring, but that didn't mean the sensation was pleasant. It's energy twisted and fought him every step of the way, but eventually he passed the threshold. After that it was merely... darkness.
But it wasn't hollow, empty darkness. What surrounded him was alive, had a beating heart. He felt as though if he slashed it with a knife it would bleed.

Ryou felt a cold sweat running down his face and neck. Just being here felt awful, but he was determined not to leave until he found something of substance.

As he squinted, he began to notice little glimmers of light amidst the wall of black. When he got closer, he felt the heat of the harsh desert air beating down on him, the spray of sand against his face. Images flashed by, too fast to make sense of - a hint of a dagger, soldiers guarding a tomb, a small child collapsed in the sand, fingers prying against their bony ribcage.

They were memories, Ryou realized, but he didn't have time to ponder them because the darkness would swallow them up as quickly as they'd appear.

But whose memories are they…?

As he pressed on, the darkness grew thicker as though trying to suck the air out of his lungs. That was how Ryou knew he was getting close.

What is it that you don't want me to see?

He gritted his teeth, so focused on pushing through the black he nearly walked into a thick mass of... something fleshy. He almost didn't want to think about what it was. Ryou sucked in a gasp, reeling back as shadows stuck to his skin, hungrily grasping at him. He managed to pull himself free, eyes wide. He could barely see anything - darkness like this would never allow his eyes to adjust.

However, there was something lodged in the darkness. Pieces of white stuck out of the wall of black, almost seeming to glow. Ryou risked reaching a hand out to touch it, fingertips brushing a glossy, yet hard surface. It was hot to the touch, like charred wood after a blaze.

What in the world?

He traced his palm along it, finding a ridge, and then another, and then another. And it swelled - breathed - albeit weakly. It took Ryou a moment to realize he was feeling something organic, so much larger than he thought it was. It was long - looking ahead, he noticed the white disappeared far into the darkness.

And it was lined with scales.

Careful not to touch the webbing of darkness that covered the creature, Ryou moved along its body, his heart in his throat. Being here felt increasingly wrong, like his very form would come apart the longer he stayed inside this abyss, pieces of himself lost to the Ring forever. Still, his determination won out as he found his way to the end of the white trail.

Jagged shaped pierced the black air, and Ryou recognized them to be fangs, a forked tongue lolling
against the corner of the serpent’s open jaws. It's eyes were clouded over, gleaming with a feeble, pearl iridescence. It didn't move.

Ryou suspected it may have been a proud, magnificent creature once, but it was barely more than a skeleton now. It was… hard to look at. He frowned as he walked around it, following the body back the way he came. He almost didn't want to know what lay on the other end of it. The logical conclusion would be a tail, but nothing in this realm seemed to follow logic at all.

Ryou's jaw dropped as the form began to widen out, growing into the shape of a torso, something more humanoid. He began to realize just how big the thing was. He wondered how much bigger it would have looked if it weren't covered in shadows. It almost looked like a man, yet Ryou could see wings protruding from its back, stretching far into the black.

He had been wrong - the serpent’s head had been the tail.

Ryou backed up, nearly walking into something else. He yelped, the sound swallowed by the dense air, not even echoing.

Turning, he found another patch of white jutting out of the dimness, much smaller this time. He could make out something vaguely human shaped - but just barely.
A pit of dread settled in his stomach, as though he were gazing into an alternate reality where everything had gone wrong. His chest tightened when he realized the spot of white he was seeing was hair. Hair attached to a head, attached to a body, attached to...

Oh my god.

Ryou paled. The man was growing out of the darkness, its veins wired into him like some hellish leech of a plant with its roots fully matured. Given how limply he hung, Ryou assumed the man was unconscious - or dead.

Then again, how could anything alive exist in the Ring?
Ryou cautiously drew closer, curiosity compelling him even as instinct screamed to get away. He had to kneel down to get level with the man’s face, noticing his pale grey eyes were open and staring at nothing. It was like a mirror image was reflected back at him, only some of the details were off. Ryou hesitantly raised his hand, fingers brushing against a dark vein running up the man’s jaw. His touch ran up further until he could feel the ridge of a scar beneath his fingertips.

This has to be some sick joke.

Ryou saw red - literally, there was a red cloak spilling around the man’s knees. It reminded Ryou of a churning river of blood and he shivered.

What was this person doing inside the Ring? Could it have been…?

“Hey,” Ryou said, carefully placing both hands on the man’s shoulders and giving him a small shake. “Hey, wake up!”
There was a deep, inhuman rumble from somewhere far off, which sounded impossibly close at the same time. Ryou's head snapped up and he glanced around warily, realizing he really had no idea how to get out of this place.

He turned his attention back to the man, giving him another shake. Regardless of who he was, the state he was in was awful, and perhaps Ryou could help him out of his bindings so they could both escape this place.

Just when he thought he wasn't going to get a response, the man's eyes snapped all the way open, alarm where they had once been vacant. They fixed on Ryou, a sudden fierceness burning in his gaze.

“Leave!” He shouted. “Get out of here!”

It was odd. Ryou was sure the words had been spoken in another language, and yet he understood them perfectly. But he couldn't worry about that right now because the rumbling was growing, the very air beginning to tremble. Something big was coming.

Ryou pulled away with a gasp, gaze jerked upwards as the darkness itself shifted and churned. High above him, there was a glimmer of red as two large eyes fixed on him. Ryou's mouth dropped in a horrified awe, the sheer weight of the creature's glare alone feeling like it could slice him to ribbons.

There was a hook behind his heart and he was abruptly jerked back, the back of his skull slamming into the headboard of his bed. He groaned and glanced up to see the walls of his room surrounding him.

But even if he had somehow escaped, his blood still raced, heart rioting in his chest. His skin was clammy with sweat as he hurriedly reached up to wipe at his forehead, not taking his eyes off of the piece of gold that still innocently lay beside him on the bed. He unconsciously curled his body away from it, the thing emanating a deeply poisonous energy.

He had thought finding his way into the Millennium Ring would have solved some of the questions he'd been plagued with ever since he put on the damn thing, but the mysteries surrounding the gold and its spirit were like the darkness inside - infinite. Nothing had been pieced together. It only left Ryou with more answers to look for.

...
When Malik next opened his eyes, a pale, ghostly shape of white floated above him. He blinked a few times, the blurry image solidifying into something recognizable. He groaned, the spirit's sardonic expression the last thing he wanted to see. He felt charred even though he didn't truly have a body, Ra’s flames surpassing the normal realm of pain.

“Surprise, we’re dead.” Bakura had his arms crossed, upside down as he dryly regarded Malik drifting beneath him. Gravity had no bearing on either of them, a black abyss stretching as far as the eye could see. What was this? Limbo - or some place worse? The darkness pressed in on them from all sides, like it would lung in for the kill and devour them at any second.

Bakura grinned. “Well, you’re dead. Like I said, this is all just a temporary bump in the road for me. Before that, however, it looks like we have some time to kill in the belly of the beast before we’re digested.”

Malik didn't feel dead. Then again, Bakura must have known this whole business more intimately than him. He frowned.

“There are still fragments of my soul lingering in the world of the living. I won’t let my other self win…” He could feel the part of him left inside the girl go and seek out his sister, warning her to move Rishid. He grimaced, praying Isis would make it in time. “I won’t…”

Bakura raised his shoulders in a shrug, turning right side up so he could face Malik properly.

“Have fun with that. Even if you don’t succeed, I’ll be sure to send your other half here when I’m reborn. It’s the least I can do.”

Malik knew Bakura was being a sarcastic dick like usual, but still… he appreciated the promise.

“He can’t hurt anyone else.” Malik bit his lip, guilt crawling up his throat like bile. “My brother and my sister... they have to live.”

If they died because of his own selfish actions, Malik would never forgive himself. Hell, he could barely stand to think of what he had done right now. A death by Ra’s fire was too good for him.
He expected Bakura to start laughing at him any moment now, to be called pathetic and hopeless, but it never came. When he next glanced up, he was startled to find Bakura's face inches from his own, the spirit's jaw set. He was staring at Malik oddly, and Malik for the life of him could not work out what he was thinking.

“I hate what you’re doing to me.”

Malik drew back, blinking. Where did that come from? “What?”

Bakura grunted, glancing away as though unsure of why he was being so candid all of a sudden.

“The more I’m around you, the easier it is to remember.”

Malik gave a bitter chuckle. “Oh, now that we’re stuck in limbo you want to talk about it?”

“What better time?” Bakura was so nonchalant and impulsive about everything, it seemed there was no true rhyme or reason to whatever he did, and Malik almost envied him for it.

“What do you remember?”

Bakura thought for a moment, and Malik wondered if it were painful for him to think about, but no real emotion registered on his face.

“Meaningless things. How I once was…”

For a moment, Malik saw something flicker across Bakura's face. Irritation, perhaps? Anger? Maybe it was his imagination but… a small, even miniscule, touch of grief as well?

“Human.” Bakura's lip curled, almost a grimace. “The fire, mostly.”

“I saw fire when I looked into your mind earlier. More than that… People being slaughtered, and the gold…” Malik said, having no reason to hide the fact that he was in Bakura's mind earlier that night. If Bakura was mad about it then so be it. He had nothing to lose at this point. He felt the darkness
“The Millennium Items. That was how they were created, wasn’t it?” Malik's eyes widened as he recalled what he had seen. Without the chaos of everything else impeding his thoughts, he found he really did want to know more about Bakura's past. “You were there.”

Instead of being furious with him, Bakura had a detached look in his eye, like he were reliving the memory right then and there.

“Yes. It was a sacrifice, blood and souls for gold and power.”

“What was that village?” Had it even been a village? It was so hard to make sense of all the flashes that had appeared before Malik's eyes, but he tried his best to order them.

“I don’t know.” Bakura answered with a slight shake of the head. Malik didn't know if he was being truthful or not, but then again, what reason did Bakura have to lie to him now? He clearly thought that Malik wasn't going to be around much longer anyway. “All I remember is that I died in that fire.”

“You were burned too? Is that why your spirit is in the Millennium Ring?”

Malik felt like it was the logical conclusion, and yet it still didn't seem quite right somehow…

Bakura shook his head again.

“No. I died in that fire, not in body but in soul.” He narrowed his eyes, cryptic words ringing in the hollow space around them. “And whatever of me was left, I gave it to the darkness.”

Malik grimaced, confused as he drifted closer to Bakura again, intent to know more.

“But what does that-?”

A hiss cut through the air, like water being thrown on boiling lava. Malik glanced over to see the
shadows claiming more of his body, eating up his arms and legs. This piece of himself would soon be nothing.

“No…”

Bakura's form was in a similar state, only he didn't seem concerned with it at all, hardly reacting as the darkness devoured his torso. It would only be a matter of time before he was spat back out after all.

“Times up, Malik.”

Chapter End Notes

Ryou awoke to someone standing over him, blinking blearily up at them and wondering when exactly he’d fallen asleep. Last night was a nightmarish blur of events he could hardly make sense of. He lay tangled in the sheets of his bed, still feeling exhausted even though he must have slept for hours and hours, given the bright light streaming in through the window.

“Bakura? How are you feeling?” Someone gently touched his shoulder.

He recognized the voice of Yugi and rubbed at his eyes, peering up his friend.

“Oh, hi, Yugi,” he said, absentmindedly rubbing his arm. It was still sore but at least the bandages were intact. “I've been better…”

Yugi flashed him a sympathetic look, sitting down on the edge of the bed beside him.

“The semi-finals are about to begin and i wanted to check on you beforehand. I didn't expect you to be aw-”

He paled, glancing at something to his right. Ryou followed his gaze and noticed the piece of gold sticking out from the pile of blankets.

“The Millennium Ring…!” Yugi jumped back to his feet as quickly as he had sat down. “Why do you still have that?”

Ryou sighed, reaching over to pluck the thing up from the bed, much to Yugi's horror. It was cold to the touch.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not dangerous right now.”
Well… maybe that wasn't entirely true. Ryou's little trek inside the Ring hadn't exactly been the safest.

“Not dangerous?” Yugi sputtered. “The spirit was controlling you in our duel last night!”

Ryou flashed him a sheepish look.

“Actually… the spirit has been controlling me ever since I came back Egypt. And not only him, but Malik as well.” His features hardened bitterly as he thought about his ‘partner in crime’. “Malik was the real problem. I… the last time I remember being conscious was probably days ago… or weeks. He used the Millennium Rod to suppress my mind.”

Before he could say anymore, Yugi had thrown his arms around him, pressing him into a tight hug while being mindful of his arm. Yugi drew back after several long moments, and Ryou felt bad because he looked on the verge of tears.

“I’m so sorry we couldn’t help! We didn’t know!”

Ryou's eyes widened, and then he gave a soft smile, resting his hand over Yugi's. It was nice being reminded that he was cared for.

“It’s fine, Yugi. I’m not being controlled anymore. Last night, the other Malik and the spirit had a duel. It resulted in both the spirit and the regular Malik being… sent away.”

Yugi blinked. “Wait, the regular Malik?”

Ryou nodded. “Yes, he and the spirit were working together. They have been for weeks now.” His eyes grew sober again. “I promise you, anything I said or did over the past several days wasn't really me.”

Yugi frowned heavily and it pained Ryou to see him so broken up over his well-being.
“Bakura, I’m really worried about you.” He said. “How did you get away from the other Malik?”

“I just… walked?” Ryou scratched at the back of his head. “He wanted to kill me, but then lost interest.” He shrugged, remembering the other Malik's off behaviour. It really had been a close call, hadn't it? “He didn't control my mind either. Kind of a gentleman really.”

Yugi looked at him like he’d lost his mind.

“‘A gentleman’?! Bakura! He put Mai into a coma!” Yugi rested his palms on either of Ryou's shoulders, looking more concerned than ever. “Are you really alright?”

Ryou sighed, lips pursed as he gazed over at a spot on the wall. Giving a truthful answer to that would just distress Yugi even more, but he really wished his friend would have a little more faith in him. He was still here, wasn't he?

“I’m as fine as can be. Just do what you have to to get Malik back to normal.”

…

Malik Ishtar had been fully prepared to die.

He had made as much peace as he could. Rishid would grieve. Isis would grieve. But they would live, and that was all he could hope for. They would even be happier without him, without his burden, after a life of chasing after him and trying to correct his mistakes.

He was fading and it wouldn’t be long until all of him had vanished into the void. It was… better this way. He could take his alter ego with him and neither of them would be able to hurt anyone ever again.

He waited for the Pharaoh to turn the tides and deliver the killing blow.

“Lord Malik!”
His brother’s voice had shaken him from his trance, cutting through the dim air and striking a new light across the field.

“You are about to throw yourself into the darkness of despair, but… you must keep living, even if your path leads into darkness!”

Malik felt his alter ego’s anger swell, desperate in his desire to silence Rishid permanently.

“This is not just the fate of the tomb guardians…” Rishid continued, “It is the fate of every human being!”

The fate of every human being…?

Rishid and Isis had stood with him, the three of them facing their fate buried beneath the surface, but it had never tried to stop them from reaching for the light of the sun. He’d have to be a fool to let it end here, after a lifetime of striving for something greater.

“It is not through death that people go into the light… There is only light in life.”

His siblings… they still believed in him. They knew he had a path that stretched far beyond Battle City, beyond hatred and revenge. After all they had done for him, he couldn't just throw it all away - he couldn't give up.

Malik welcomed the Pharaoh’s onslaught and when it was over, he stood, clinging to the edge of life with all that he had. It wasn’t over yet. Like Ra reborn from the graveyard, Malik reclaimed his body and gasped like he was taking his first breath.

He heard his other self screaming, but it was all white noise to him. He had no reason to listen to his darker half’s poison anymore.

It was time to let go, lest he destroy himself. It was time to surrender his grudge and bear the guilt in its stead, and let the light back into his soul.

He would not die.
A momentary wrongness consumed him as he placed his hand over his deck, the odd feeling of slicing away a part of oneself. It had to be done. Malik knew it had to be done.

The clouds parted. He closed his eyes and he breathed in. The loss felt like a victory in many ways, but it rang bitter, leaving him in the terrifying middle ground of not knowing what he was supposed to do next. For a moment, the idea of meeting his sibling’s eyes made his gut clench with fear, but then Isis and Rishid rushed over, faces soft with acceptance.

They could live again.

The ensuing events were a blur. None of it seemed real. He never thought he’d be standing before the Pharaoh with the intent of fulfilling his duty. What shocked him even more was how… neutral he felt about it. Perhaps it was a side effect of the shadow magic he had to fight through, clawing his way back from the brink of death; he still felt dazed by everything that had just happened.

He handed over Ra, and he handed over the Millennium Rod. Before he even had the chance to think about it, Malik handed over his final piece - his back.

Isis did most of the talking, explaining the text of the carvings. Malik heard the rest of the group gawking, but nothing seemed worse right now than the darkness that had almost consumed him, so it was easy to shove to the back of his mind.

And then he caught Ryou’s eye out of the corner of his own.

Ryou had looked on the duel, silent the entire time, his expression unreadable. Malik bit his lip and glanced away as he went to put his shirt back on. When he glanced back over, Ryou still had his gaze fixed on him, and whatever he was thinking wasn’t good.

Malik opened his mouth, feeling he should reach out in some way, but then Kaiba took the conversation in a completely different direction. He kept silent, sighing through his nose.

And then he felt something that made him tense up, like a shadow passing over his grave.

Over Ryou’s shoulder, a spot of darkness began to materialize like an error in a photo or a graphical
glitch. Malik fought the urge to rub at his eyes, knowing it would be useless. It wasn’t regular darkness taking the form of someone standing behind Ryou Bakura.

He felt a malevolent gaze pierce him and found he couldn’t quite look at the spirit, shame - perhaps unjustified - welling up like lava. He knew what Bakura was thinking. He knew.

But still, it wasn’t like Bakura could hold anything against him. He had revealed the secret he carried on his back to everyone - the spirit had to have seen it as well. There was nothing else to be done.

So he turned away and tried to collect himself. That’s all he could do - pick up the pieces and hope he could make them fit together once more.

But the odd feeling in his stomach wouldn’t leave.

Even long after they had left Battle City behind, Malik would still feel the spirit’s stare burning into his back.

…

Bakura remembered.

Not everything of course, but he recalled the massacre in perfect clarity now. The slaughter of his village, the creation of the Millennium Items - it was all the will of the Pharaoh. He had never truly forgotten this fact, but it had been buried deep under layers of darkness, fueling what had become the core of his being - revenge.

Perhaps that was why Malik's betrayal had shaken him so much. Malik had to have known what it was like - to have everything taken from you by the royals, twisted, used. How could he have just surrendered like that? And now he was content to just crawl back to Egypt and wait with his family like good little Pharaoh’s servants?

Family.

It was such a bizarre concept to Bakura. He felt as though the people in his visions were close to
him. He felt *fury* as they were slaughtered, yet it was they existed behind a wall of glass, a filter. They were faceless to him, the disconnect between his past life and present existence so broad he couldn't even recall a single name.

And when he tried to think back further, to recall the village and its people, all he was met with was an empty expanse of desert. If he squinted, he could almost make out something - a small shape, ragged and scrawny. The child staggered along, ash coloured hair framing a tear stained face. For a moment, it felt like he could feel the sun, feel the air in his lungs, feel something like a pulse beating in his chest.

**You are no longer that thief.**

There was a rumble from deep within his soul room, filling his mind and blanketing his thoughts. He watched as the child collapsed into a spray of sand, feeling the dark intelligence hidden in the Ring move up behind him.

“No, of course not,” Bakura answered. “What use would I have for being a weak, human child?”

The creature seemed satisfied with his words, but not entirely pleased. Bakura grit his teeth as claws raked over his chest.

“Why are you angry?”

The claws encircled him, gripping him so hard he gasped out. A moment later, they released him, letting him fall to his knees.

**You let the boy in.**

Bakura’s head shot up, eyes wide.

“I didn’t think…” Damn it. Ryou had been strong enough to access the Ring? “He should have been out of commission.”

There was no telling what Ryou had messed around with, or what he’d found. Not even Bakura
knew how far the depths of the Ring extended.

He put a hand to his chest. Was this why it had felt like someone had opened him up and rearranged his insides? This feeling of wrongness that had consumed him as of late… It couldn't have been coincidental.

And it had only been growing since Battle City.

**Your lack of control over the vessel is becoming troublesome.**

Bakura's face twisted in a scowl. As if he wasn't already painfully aware of the fact. He got back to his feet, narrowing his eyes up at the wall of black. He would not bow, even before his master.

**Do you possess him or does he possess you?**

Bakura felt his anger welling up, the darkness excited as it swirled around him, feeding off the negative emotion like vultures to a carcass.

“Don't doubt in my ability,” he growled. He knew Zorc was only trying to provoke him, but he didn't need the motivation. He had this under control.

**That tombkeeper will not be providing any more distractions to you. You risked far too much for so little.**

Something in Bakura's chest twisted at the mention of Malik. Fury? Spite? It felt far more wounded than he wanted it to. He jerked his head away and glanced to the side.

“I still got the eighth key, didn't I?”

**No, you didn't. You obtained a mere clue, and the Rod was given to the Pharaoh.**

Yet another fact he was painfully aware of. It was more the idea of Malik freely handing over the
Rod to his worst enemy that pissed him off more than anything - it didn't truly matter if the Pharaoh or himself held onto it right now.

And then there was the matter of the ‘key’ Malik had revealed. Zorc couldn't deny that it was an important hint. Bakura's sights focused in determination.

“I have a plan, so have a little faith in me.”

There was a long pause. Bakura felt Zorc’s unrest as if it were his own, and he didn't understand all of it. Sure, he had been cheated out of most of what he was promised, but they were still in an advantageous spot. The battle was not over yet.

**Don't forget our deal. And don't forget your hatred.**

The voice whispered from the ink-black expanse, command reverberating in Bakura’s chest. He felt its power swell and become his own.

But there was one off key, a note that fell out of place. One that left an edge of doubt ringing high in Bakura's mind.

Why would he forget his hatred?
Ryou leaned against the rail of his balcony, his hands cupped around a warm ceramic mug as he stared out at the city. There were long pauses between his sips of tea, his mind far elsewhere, lost in the clouds.

He didn't see the shape pull itself from the gold resting on the cushion of the chair that sat in the corner, but he felt a presence hover behind him. Suddenly the tea tasted a lot more bitter.

“You know, it really wasn't my doing. I never wanted Malik to suppress your mind like that.”

Ryou smirked, snorting through his nose. It was almost funny listening to the spirit dance around apologies like this. He wondered if any of his words could have been genuine.

“I wasn't planning on letting anything bad happen to the body. All I needed was his end of the deal.”

“Nothing bad, huh?” Ryou repeated, setting the mug down on the railing for a moment to poke at the bandages on his arm. “Except this.”

“It's not like it was fatal,” Bakura protested.

Ryou scoffed and went back to comfortably ignoring the spirit. He needed all the rest he could get after that tournament, and it was all the fault of his unwanted companion, so the spirit could suck it up and wait until he was fully recovered. He wasn't going to let Bakura interfere with his down time. Not now.

“Landlord.”

Ryou felt intangible fingers prickling at his arm as though trying to pry the bandages away. He didn't
turn to look, knowing the spirit was just vying for his attention.

“Ryou.”

The voice was right in his ear this time, drawn out in a syrupy smooth tone. The fingers scratched at the front of Ryou's chest, tracing over five scars he knew all too well.

Again, Ryou smirked and shook his head. He didn't know what the spirit was trying to ask for, but he wasn't going to give him it.

He waved a hand and the spirit’s form disintegrated, forced back inside its gold prison.

“Go back to your cage, spirit,” he murmured, gaze falling back down to the mug clasped between his palms, a disappointed frown tugging at the corners of his mouth.

He pushed away from the balcony edge and headed back inside. His tea had grown cold after all.

…”

Days of the silent treatment had worn down the spirit, and Ryou had to laugh seeing him act like a dejected child. He didn't visibly pout, but the energy pouring off the Ring told him everything. Bakura was restless, perhaps to a dangerous extent.

And Ryou knew better than to toy with dark forces beyond his ability, but sometimes he just couldn't help himself.

"You've been awfully quiet," he said, sitting with his legs drawn up onto the chair, campaign notes spread out in front of him. The Ring lay on the other side of the kitchen table, as though it were an old friend Ryou was having lunch with. "Never thought you'd be one to sulk."

"What reason would I have to sulk?" Bakura's voice drifted to his ears, sardonic as ever.

Ryou tilted his head. "You gained next to nothing from your partnership with Malik, for one."

"Maybe so.” The Ring’s energy shifted, and Ryou didn't like the aura it was producing. The spirit seemed far too flippant about a matter he had invested weeks in. “Things may have gone differently
than planned but I can still work with this."

Ryou had to wonder what was going through his mind, but it wasn't like he could just ask. He would have an easier time trying to pry his arm from a bear trap than he would pulling a straight answer from the spirit.

Ryou abruptly pushed the chair out and stood up, walking around the table and scooping up the Ring. He paused for a moment as soon as his hand touched the metal.

Without fail, every time he touched the cursed thing, he was instantly awash with... an odd feeling - almost sorrowful in a way. Had it always been there or was his memory playing tricks on him? Why had he only just begun noticing it after Battle City?

He couldn't give an honest answer, but he had his suspicions about what the cause of it was.

"What are you doing?"

The spirit’s voice pulled him from his thoughts and he glanced over to see Bakura hovering there, inquisitive gaze trained on him. Ryou turned and continued out of the kitchen, moving to the living room instead.

"Playing Zelda. You're not finishing that next temple before I am." He dropped the Ring onto the couch before moving to turn on the GameCube and picking up a controller. After plopping down beside the cursed jewelry, he settled down into the bright, cartoonish atmosphere of Wind Waker.

Or he tried to. His mind couldn’t have been further from the game, continuously straying back to the darkness inside the Ring. He had to wonder if Bakura was even aware he had snuck past him. If he was, then he hadn’t given any indication of it, anger or otherwise. Perhaps he didn’t care, but Ryou thought that was unlikely given how defensive Bakura was of his space. Was he being willfully ignorant for some reason, or did he really not know about the intrusion?

And if that was the case, then did he know about the strange man in red imprisoned in there? Or that great white creature?

Ryou had too many questions, but voicing them would have been useless. There was no guarantee Bakura would give a truthful answer, or even any at all. No, he had to be strategic about this.
He finally turned his head to acknowledge the spirit’s presence. Bakura sat with his arms crossed, gaze fixed on the screen. He didn't quite look bored by taking a backseat to the game, but then again it was hard to tell what he was thinking.

Ryou found it kind of funny that a millennia old spirit enjoyed such frivolous things as video games. He remembered the first time he had caught Bakura hooked onto his GameCube, the sight being so… jarringly ordinary. Then again, was it really that surprising? The spirit did enjoy RPGs after all.

“But you can't make a shadow game out of Mario Party,” Ryou muttered.

Bakura scowled at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” Ryou shook his head with a snort. "... Enjoying yourself?"

Bakura shrugged, averting his gaze. "You looked lonely."

Ryou narrowed his eyes, knowing better than to mindlessly accept Bakura’s company by now. The spirit always had ulterior motives under any of his ‘gifts'.

As much was the company was a welcomed break from the solitude of his apartment.

Ryou leveled him with an unimpressed stare."Okay, what do you want this time?"

Bakura gave a rueful smirk at having been found out so easily.

"Actually I think it's something you'll want as well. It's the final thing I'll ask of you."

Ryou blinked, an ominous feeling sinking in his stomach. The final thing? He didn't like the sound of that at all.

"What is it?"

Bakura didn't answer with words. Instead, he gestured to the glass case sitting on one side of the room. Ryou’s eyes widened in understanding. Of course, he should have known.

"... You want to hurt my friends."
Bakura shook his head. "Not your friends, but I suppose they'll stick their necks into business they shouldn't anyway."

"... The Pharaoh. You want to challenge him again." Ryou sighed, closing his eyes and considering for a moment. "And the campaign?"

"Egypt, three thousand years in the past. The board needs to be big enough to fit in the palace."

Ryou's lips curved up into a smile, his eyes opening again. "It's funny. That's where I was just thinking of going."

It was as if someone had dumped ice down the spirit's back. He jerked, sitting up straight and fixing Ryou with an incredulous stare.

"What?!"

Ryou raised a brow at him. What was with that reaction?

"I never got the chance to dig all that deeply into Malik's records. I'll need to do some research for the board you want as well. I'll kill two birds with one stone." Malik owed him, and he owed him big, after all.

Bakura was practically sputtering. "You're going to see Malik?"

"Is that a problem?" Ryou didn't understand where this strange attitude had come from. If anything, he thought that Bakura would be jumping for joy at the chance to see his 'partner'.

Bakura leered at him, getting uncomfortably close to his host. "After what he did to you, you'd go after him?"

Ryou remained steadfast, his gaze cold as he studied the spirit before him. Whatever this bizarre shift in motive was, it wasn't normal for Bakura.

"You've done worse and I'm offering to help you. It's not like you've ever given me straight answers." He took a step forward, pressing a finger into Bakura's chest even if he knew it would only pass through his body. It tingled, skin prickling with an otherworldly coldness, but Ryou ignored the sensation for now. "You've barely helped me uncover anything about the Millennium Items at all."
Bakura huffed, drawing back with a sharp glare. And then his expression shifted into something more strategic.

"You'll miss even more school." He cooed. "Isn't poor Yugi fretting enough about you already?"

Ryou felt a pang of guilt in his chest, but he forced it down. He wasn't going to let Bakura dissuade him from this.

"I think my grades are the least of my problems right now." He tilted his head. "Why are you so afraid to see Malik?"

"Afraid!?"

Even standing feet away, Ryou felt the heat pouring off the Ring. He forced himself to remain where he was even as Bakura’s voice grew to a deafening thunder.

"Do you want more blood on your hands, Ryou? I'll kill the bastard if I ever see him again!"

"You're not going to kill anyone if you want my help." Ryou stated calmly. "And if you wanted to kill him so badly, shouldn't you be jumping at this opportunity?"

Bakura’s irises burned a deep, rustic colour, posture rigid and tense. If Ryou didn't know better he would say that Bakura was deeply wounded by Malik’s alleged betrayal.

"A traitor's sorry blood isn't worth my time," the spirit growled. "He'll get what's coming to him eventually."

Ryou wouldn't lie, he was kind of amazed. No one had been able to pull such a genuine, personal reaction from Bakura - and it was personal, as much as Bakura tried to cover it up. It was like Malik’s very existence was unspooling him like thread.

And that was exactly what Ryou was counting on. He offered a soft smile, plain and innocent.

"Alright, so I'll be booking my plane ticket tomorrow."

"No you won't!" Bakura started, the heat of the Ring burning brighter.

Ryou merely bent and scooped it up, holding it by the string because it was hot to the touch. He brought it into his room and fished a bag out of his closet. Meanwhile, the tines of the Ring were flailing wildly, futile in their attempts to claw open Ryou's chest. It sounded like wind chimes when a storm was raging.
Ryou stuffed the writhing gold into the bag, effectively silencing both it and its resident spirit so he was free to pack his things in peace.

"Someone's in a bad mood."

... 

Ryou shifted in place, adjusting his grip on the phone pressed to his ear as he waited for the other line to answer. A strange, but warm nervousness built in his gut and he smiled softly when his friend finally picked up.

"Hello, Yugi!"

"Ah, Bakura! It's good to hear from you!" There was a shift in Yugi's tone, and Ryou could almost see the concern crossing his features. "Have you been feeling better?"

Ryou fidgeted with the collar of his shirt, fingers catching in his hair.

"Yes, I have. I was just calling to tell you I'm going to Egypt for a while to visit my dad, so I won't be seeing you at school on Monday." He rolled his eyes. "I promise I'm not possessed this time."

There was a pause.

"Oh... Actually we won't be at school either." Yugi gave a nervous chuckle. "It was kind of rushed, but we're going to America."

Ryou dropped his hand from his hair, expression dumbstruck.

"Huh?"

"Yeah... Something important came up suddenly. Like, save the world kind of important. We didn't want to worry you. I figured you needed the rest after..." Yugi trailed off.

"Oh... I see." Ryou's shoulders slumped, a pit forming in his chest, but he managed to weed the disappointment out of his voice. "Well thanks for telling me! I'll see you around I guess?"
He hung up after he and Yugi bid their goodbyes, setting the phone down slowly. His fists clenched at his sides, eyes squeezing shut as a tremble ran through his body.

His friends had gone off to save the world and they hadn't even told him. They hadn't planned on telling him either. He wouldn't have known if he hadn't thought to call. What was he supposed to do if they got hurt? What if they didn't come back?

“"You always worry about me when I go and do reckless things…!” He managed out between his teeth. “Why do you think I won't worry about you…?”"

He felt something brush his shoulder, a shiver running across his skin where Bakura's fingers had touched.

“Really goes to show how much they think of you as a friend, eh?”

Ryou stiffened, not even bothering to acknowledge the spirit with a glance.

"I don't want to hear it."

Bakura drifted away, a cruel smile playing at his lips.

"You think Yugi 'casually' forgot to tell you, or they just outright didn't want to deal with you again?"

Ryou adjusted the bag at his shoulder, pointedly ignoring Bakura as he went to grab his suitcase.

"We're leaving. Perhaps you can use some of that attitude on Malik instead."

…

The TV was white noise in Malik's mind as he stared up at the ceiling, eyes blankly fixed on the stucco. He lazily traced mindless patterns, finding it somewhat calming.

The argument with his sister was still ringing in his ears and he narrowed his eyes. Of course Isis always had to make it sound so easy. It had only been weeks since Battle City had ended. Perhaps Malik had been naive in assuming that he would just be able to pick up and start over, but it wasn't
Isis wanted him to build towards a future, yet how could he do that when he was surrounded by the past? There were misplaced Ghouls he had to take care of, and there were tombkeepers that lacked guidance. In many places, those two groups overlapped; a lot of the Ghouls Malik had first recruited had been members of his own clan. Whatever the case, both groups needed their leader.

Or a leader. Malik didn't think he was fit for that position anymore. That was why he allowed Rishid to take care of such issues. His brother had always been striving for that position, so Malik had no problem letting him fill it.

But if Rishid could be leader, then where did that leave Malik?

His life had been dedicated to one soul purpose, and now it was just... gone. Lost.

Nothing.

Perhaps that wasn't true. His life had another purpose, one that left a bitter trace of resentment in his blood. He didn't want to hold anything against the Pharaoh - the fact that his own hatred had taken him to the brink of death had shaken him to his core - but even so, he found it difficult to just sink back into his duty like nothing had happened.

Perhaps the only thing that brightened his spirit somewhat was the knowledge that the Pharaoh would soon be gone from this world. All he had to do was play his part, then he would be free.

The doorbell rang, sending a long, resonate chime throughout the house. Malik sat up on the couch with a start, brows furrowing. Who in the world could that be? He was sure neither he nor his siblings had ordered anything so it couldn't be the mail. Perhaps it could be some official looking for Isis, but surely they would know she was at work during this time?

Maybe whoever it was would go away if he pretended no one was home. He remained on the couch, but the doorbell rang again, and then again. By the sixth chime Malik had grabbed a cushion and shoved it over his ears.

Each ring was slow and pronounced with a long pause between them, as if the person on the other side were trying to be polite. But then whoever it was seemed to grow impatient because they started
to jab the bell rapidly, causing Malik to grit his teeth.

“Fucking shut up! I’ll be there in a second!” He snapped, finally giving in and shoving himself off the couch. He really didn’t want to answer the door dressed as he was - in sweatpants, hair thrown in a loose ponytail, eyes without kohl - but this bastard wasn’t giving him a choice. He wished Rishid was home so he could have his brother send this nuisance away.

He grabbed the handle and practically ripped the door open - only to freeze as he was met with a familiar head of white hair.

“B-Bakura..?!” Malik stammered, almost having the mind to slam the door in his face. He should have guessed his former partner would follow him here.

But as he took a closer look, he realized Bakura's eyes were different - too different to actually be the spirit's. Bakura was good at impersonating his host, but he wasn't good enough to fool Malik.

“... Ryou Bakura,” Malik corrected. He didn't know if this was worse or better.

Ryou stared at him for a moment, and then his lips twitched up in a semblance of a smile. “Sorry for showing up announced. I'm really glad you answered the door. I don't imagine your siblings would have reacted well…”

Malik squinted at him. He thought it likely Ryou hadn't notified him in advance because he didn't want Malik running off. “How did you even get my address?”

“Your sister worked at the museum in Domino. My dad owns that museum.”

Malik wanted to hit his head on the door frame. Of course. How could he have forgotten?

“Right…” he muttered, still holding the door part way shut. After a moment, sighed and moved back. “Come in then.”

The air was suffocating as the two of them made their way inside. Malik almost expected Ryou to start yelling at him, but then again Ryou had never been one to yell. The silence seemed even more
effective, and Malik could feel his stare burning into his back.

Ryou walking behind him in such a way made him uneasy and he turned around as soon as he was able to, sinking down onto the couch.

“So…” Malik began, fingers anxiously curling and uncurling. “I'm guessing Bakura doesn't want to kill me?”

He suspected he would be dead already if that were the case.

Ryou took a seat on the chair to the right of the couch. “No, the spirit does very much want to kill you,” he said with a casual shrug. “But I'm not going to let that happen.”

“Why?” Malik narrowed his eyes. Ryou should have wanted him gone too.

Ryou turned his head, levelling him with a cold gaze. His words were more blunt than Malik had ever heard him be before. “Because, unlike the both of you, I have respect for human life.”

Malik swallowed. Perhaps he shouldn't have assumed the spirit and Ryou shared similar values. He rubbed at the back of his neck, a heavy sigh falling from his lips.

“Look… I'm really sorry about what happened.”

It felt pathetic saying it. It wasn't that Malik didn't feel guilty - his other personality really hadn't been lying when he said he suppressed his guilt, now it seemed to be the only thing Malik could feel - it was that it felt worthless. What good were a couple of words to weeks of torment?

Ryou stared into space, appearing deep in thought. Malik wouldn't have blamed him if he didn't accept his words.

“No to be rude,” Ryou spoke up after a long pause, “but I didn't come here for an apology. I came here for a favour…”

“Those records, I'd like to look at them again if it's not too much trouble.”

“Oh.” Malik felt his stomach drop. “Those have all been moved back underground. Isis plans on having them translated and moved to the museum, but there's no telling when that will be.”

His gaze averted to the wall. Ryou didn't back down, however, leaning closer intently.

“This is urgent.” He grabbed for his side bag, shuffling around for something inside it. “Would you do it if I told you I had this with me?”

He pulled out the Ring, making Malik's frown deepen. Ryou gazed at him expectantly.

“You two had a deal, didn't you?”

“I…” Malik didn't want to say yes, but he didn't hold the power in this situation. He knew he owed Ryou, and Ryou knew it as well. Something told him Ryou wasn't going to let this go until he did what he asked.

Malik heaved a sigh and pushed himself to his feet, running a hand through his hair. “Fine, I'll take you to the tombs, but we're staying only as long as we need to.”

…

It was nearing dusk by the time they finally made it to the entrance of the tombs. Ryou climbed off of the back of Malik's bike and stared out into the open desert, a chill running down his spine, and not only because of the cooling air.

The energy in the air felt awful, like Ryou was treading over a grave. He didn't consider that to be an unlikely possibility either.

So this was Malik's former home…? He had never learned the depths of Malik's history, but just
from the aura of this place alone, he could tell it wasn't a happy one.

There were a set of doors embedded in the ground and secured with a lock. Malik knelt down and unchained them, opening them up to reveal a set of stairs spiralling down into the darkness.

Malik had grabbed a few flashlights from the trunk of his bike. He handed one to Ryou before clicking on his own and leading the way down.

“Watch your step.”

The stairwell seemed to swallow them. Immediately, the smell of dust was overwhelming. Ryou could see it swirling in the air that his flashlight lit up.

The air was so dry it seemed to suck the life out of everything, and the darkness was so thick that even with their lights, it seemed to press in from all sides. And people had lived down here? Ryou could hardly fathom it.

“It's so dark...” He murmured. Malik offered nothing but a bitter snort in return.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Malik immediately took to lighting up the torches lining the walls. It alleviated some of the darkness’ crushing weight.

“I must be breaking a hundred rules by doing this, but I don't think it matters anymore,” Malik said, and Ryou couldn't help but notice how oddly far away he sounded. “This way.”

They walked for what seemed like ever. Ryou noticed that they were passing some sort of living quarters, shining his flashlight inside each room.

“... Do people live down here?”

Malik shook his head. “I fulfilled the bulk of my duty. There's no reason to stay down here. Most tombkeepers followed me to the surface when I originally left anyway. However, my clan does still maintain these tunnels and the archives.”
They arrived at a particular door. Malik stepped inside and lit a lamp for Ryou, revealing the rows of shelves and familiar looking scriptures.

"Here. I don't know how much you'll be able to translate but... if there's a particular section you want me to read, just come get me."

Ryou blinked. So Malik was just going to leave him alone with priceless history? He wasn't about to complain… it wasn't like he was afraid of the dark or pining after Malik's company after all.

"I'm going to be in the next wing. It's just around the corner. I'll check on you every so often."

Then Ryou noticed how Malik's voice seemed to waver, and how pale he looked. Before he could question it, Malik turned and all but bolted from the room.

…

Ryou squinted at the writing, his eyes having trouble deciphering the text even with the flashlight. He couldn't imagine how anyone could have read down here with nothing but torches and lamplight. He rubbed at his eyes but the bleariness wouldn't seem to leave.

He was also slow with translations, and he knew he wasn't entirely accurate either. Heaving a sigh, he shoved the sheets away and glanced back at the rows of shelves. All of that could take years to decipher.

He thought coming here would reveal something to him, some long lost piece of the puzzle, but he had barely gotten anywhere.

There had to be an easier way...

“Hey.”

Ryou would have jumped if he wasn't so used to surprise scares already. He glanced over to see
Malik in the doorway.

“I was going to ask if there was anything in particular you were looking for.” Malik gave a sheepish snort, scratching the back of his head. “I probably should have asked that earlier… Then again, my memory has never been the best so I can't guarantee even I'll know if the information is there.”

It was as if Malik was on the same wavelength as him because Ryou had come to the same conclusion. Aimless searching wasn't going to go anywhere.

“I was looking for anything on the Millennium Items. Where they came from, how they were made, why they were made…”

“Oh…” Malik's expression fell, his gaze dropping to the floor. His eyes shifted back and forth, heavy with a troubled air. “The royal family entrusted the Millennium Tauk and the Millennium Rod to the tombkeepers for safekeeping. I don't believe the scriptures say anything else about their origins…”

Ryou got the sense Malik wasn't telling him everything. Malik looked uncomfortable, unsure of if he could continue on, or perhaps he was just looking for the right explanation.

“What is it?”

Malik sighed. “Bakura - I mean, the spirit seems to think the Items were made from a great sacrifice. He told me he was there when it happened.”

Ryou's eyes widened and he clutched the back of his chair with a start.

“He told you?”

“Well... it was more like I saw it in his memories.”

Ryou abruptly shoved himself to his feet, his sudden excitement causing Malik to blink at him warily.
“You were in his memories?!”

Ryou felt a flash of resentment. He had spent so long trying to uncover the secrets of the Ring, but Malik could just stroll in and get more out of the spirit than Ryou could ever imagine, all with a wave of his magic wand. Ryou could only wish he had that kind of control over his own Item.

On the other hand, Malik was proving to be very, very useful in the same regard. Ryou would be a fool to deny that Malik and the spirit had some strange connection, even beyond their Items. He could feel it in the energy the spirit radiated; even now the Ring was practically burning a hole in his bag.

“He never told you?” Malik raised a brow.

“He tells me nothing if he can get away with it.” Tiredness dripped off of Ryou's words, but he didn't disguise his intent to know more. “What did you see?”

“It was hard to make sense of…” Malik's complexion was leaning towards something ghastly again, but it clearly wasn't for the same reason this time. “It looked like a village, but the people… they were being slaughtered for some ritual. And then I saw gold being poured into this stone tablet with seven molds… I think that ritual is what birthed the Millennium Items.”

Ryou felt a chill run over the back of his neck. He cast a glance down at his bag, as if he could see the gold inside. Was it really true…?

“You're sure there's nothing about this in the records?”

Malik pursed his lips, brushing a strand of hair away from his face.

“If it was, I think it would have been something prominently featured in my lessons...” His arm abruptly dropped back to his side, eyes focusing on something far away like a realization had just struck him. “Unless it was intentionally covered up.”

Ryou didn't like the sound of this. It was as if merely talking about it made the shadows on the walls stretch, hungry to reclaim their piece of uncovered history. What would anyone have to gain from burying the origins of the Millennium Items? Come to think of it, what would anyone have to gain from creating them to begin with? They seemed to bring nothing but pain and suffering and curses.
Ryou thought of another secret he had uncovered on his own, the memory making his brows furrow. He wondered if he should even share this with Malik, but what harm could it do?

“There’s… something I haven’t told anyone yet.” He began, sinking back down into his chair. “While you and the spirit were gone, I entered the Ring.”

He reached over to his notepad laying on the table, turning it to a blank page and grabbing his pen.

“There was… someone in there. He looked like me, only his skin was dark and he had a scar down one side of his face. He wore a red cloak.” Ryou began to sketch the likeness of the man he had seen, prompting Malik to wander closer to the desk to peer over his shoulder. “Or it could have been blood… it was hard to tell.”

Malik’s brows drew together as he eyed the scarred face staring back at him. Ryou had begun to draw sloping lines to represent shoulders, adorning them with a robe.

“A red cloak…?”

“But he wasn't alone in there. When I got close, some… thing threw me out. It wasn't human.” Ryou set the pen down a moment later and turned his head to look up at Malik. “I don't know what's going on with this cursed piece of jewelry, but every time I find out something new about it, its mysteries only seem to grow deeper.”

For the second time that night, Malik turned and darted from the room, leaving Ryou alone with his thoughts once again.

“I need some air if you don't mind.”

Malik was practically buzzing with excitement, nerves frayed at the edges. It couldn't have been possible, could it? But he had witnessed Gods and shadow magic and so much more. Who was he to judge what was and wasn't possible?
His pulse was in his throat by the time he returned to the room. He found Ryou slumped over on the desk, hearing him quietly snoring. He thanked his luck because a conscious Ryou probably wasn't going to appreciate this.

Maybe he was about to sign for his own death, but Malik had a gut feeling and he needed answers. It would only be a matter of time before Bakura came after him anyway.

He quietly unzipped the bag at Ryou's hip and took out the Millennium Ring by its cord, slipping it around Ryou's neck and stepping back.

A moment later, Ryou's body began to move, but Malik knew it wasn't him in control. The way Bakura puppeteered his body was subtly less natural, sharper and more purposeful. Bakura drew himself to his feet, facing away from Malik as he spoke.

“What blasphemy! Letting a thief into a tomb like this…” He turned his head and his profile was outlined by the lamplight, a flash of teeth visible. “What's the tombkeeper punishment for that, and is it less than I would give a traitor?”

The venom in Bakura's voice was tangible, but Malik wouldn't let it sting him. His gaze hardened.

“I know who you are.”

Bakura's razor grin slackened and his gaze fell to the scriptures laid out before him, expression becoming unreadable as his attention reached the sketch in Ryou's notepad.

“My landlord is a fool. He doesn’t realize what he’s done,” he said lowly, sounding like he was speaking to himself more than anything.

Malik narrowed his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

Bakura snapped to face him completely, a sudden fierceness overtaking him as he stalked right up to his former partner.
“And then there's the matter of you,” he hissed, lip curling. He tilted his head, the Ring blazing at his chest. “What happened to our deal, Malik? What happened to making the Pharaoh suffer for what he did to your clan?”

Malik forced his expression to remain calm even in the face of Bakura's anger. He knew he was outmatched and helpless without the Rod, his fingers instinctively clutching for its familiar weight, and if he wasn't careful, Bakura would kill him.

But Bakura didn't only look angry. No, it ran far deeper than that. It was like he was deeply wounded, betrayed in every sense of the word.

Malik didn't know if that made him even more dangerous or not.

“The Pharaoh forced my hand.” He said slowly, concisely. “I couldn't have continued fighting in that situation.”

“ Forced...” Bakura snorted. “That's not what it looked like to me.”

Malik grit his teeth. He knew he had willingly surrendered, but what good would dying have done? He still had family that cared about him and he didn't want to let them down.

“What was I supposed to do?”

“Anything!” Bakura snarled, nearly bashing their foreheads together as he swept forward. Malik was forced to move back as Bakura advanced on him. “You don't give up even when you're down! You don't roll over like a dog and eat up scraps! You fight until you either die or you take your enemy down with you!”

“Is that what the Thief King did?” Malik had to raise his voice to cut over Bakura's rant.

A stark silence followed, Bakura jerking back like he had been shoved, his eyes wide.

“So you know about him.”
“That’s who you are, isn’t it?” Malik was sure it had to be the truth. If he was wrong then… he was screwed. “It only makes sense. The Pharaoh sealed his soul inside the Puzzle, and his greatest enemy would have been sealed inside the Ring.”

Bakura’s gaze averted towards the wall in thought and Malik was relieved he had been distracted from his anger - for now. “... I haven't gone by that title in a long time. I'm surprised that name has been preserved.”

“There's very little about you in the records.” Malik admitted, reeling in disbelief. The Thief King was told as more of a fable than as someone who had actually existed, a bogeyman meant to warn those of his clan and frighten them in line. A ruthless man who killed and stole to his heart’s content, who committed his crimes and then vanished into the desert like a ghost, who disrespected the Pharaoh, the order, and the very Gods themselves.

Malik didn't quite hold the same interpretation as the scriptures, however...

Bakura… really was the Thief King. He had unwittingly recruited and been working with one of the most feared entities in his clan’s history all of this time. Despite his best judgement, it sent a cold thrill through him.

“I... I looked up to you when I was younger.” He blurted before he had time to think about it. It came as a relief to say, like a great weight had lifted off of his chest. “You stood against the very people that imprisoned my clan.”

He was fairly certain he was alone in his views, and he didn't even want to think of what would happen if his father caught wind of them. In a world of nothing but unfair duty and sacrifice, harsh regimes and rules, the Thief King had represented something Malik had never even tasted.

Freedom.

Malik couldn't help the brittle smile that tugged at his lips.

“How could I not admire that...?”
Bakura searched his face, his own expression a stone mask as he seemed to consider Malik. And then, predictably, he tossed his head back and began to laugh.

"Is that so? I have a fan, do I?"

Malik expected this from him, but it still made his cheeks grow warm. Gods, why did this dick have to be the Thief King?

Bakura's cackling abruptly cut off and he pinned Malik with an intense gaze.

"And are you still content letting them imprison you?"

Malik's fists clenched at his side's. No. No, of course he wasn't. The Pharaoh may not have been at fault for the death of his father, but everything Malik had suffered was all because of the royal family. Wounds like that would not heal for a long time.

But even so, what could he do? He couldn't succumb to the darkness again. He couldn't put his siblings in danger. Therefore the only option was to... play the part of the obedient tombkeeper.

Malik's jaw set. "The Pharaoh will leave this world one way or another."

"Mm, but are you going to let him go peacefully?" Bakura stepped closer and Malik felt his back touch the wall. Bakura's lip curled as a hiss pulled itself from between his teeth. "Is that what you truly think he deserves, Malik?"

Malik swallowed. Bakura was testing him, and the wrong answer would surely cost him his life.

"No." He spoke lowly, not breaking eye contact. What concerned Malik even more was how much he meant it.

Bakura's eyes brightened, a terrible excitement flickering there. Malik could feel the heat of the Ring nearly touching him, the aura surrounding him and making his skin prickle. His breathing unconsciously quickened.
“What if I told you there was another way?” Bakura purred, tilting his head up at him, their faces breaths apart. “You tried to kill the vessel, but that's not enough. Yugi's death means nothing.”

Malik felt a bony hand press flat to the center of his chest, fingers splayed. He shuddered - and not from revulsion. Bakura's grip tightened, clenching at his shirt as if it were the Pharaoh's heart.

“You have to drag the Pharaoh out of his hiding spot and tear his soul apart piece by piece. He'll be nothing but food for the darkness by the time I'm done with him”

He released Malik and stepped away all too abruptly, leaving him disoriented. The change to dry, dead air from thick, pulsating shadow magic filling the space around Bakura was jarring.

Even disappointing.

It wasn't just the energy of the Ring. Bakura himself, the danger he radiated, the promise of something unknown and ancient and powerful - from the beginning, Malik's attention had been captured and wouldn't be released so easily.

It was intoxicating .

Malik probably should have been frightened.

He wasn't.

Bakura was scrutinizing him again, and Malik already knew what was coming.

“It isn't too late to make true on your end of the deal. If you worship me so much, then you can still help me.”

Malik's flush returned and he shot a glare at Bakura. “I never said I worshipped you! I just...”
Bakura laughed, smirk stretching into a grin. His eyes lidded suggestively. “It's rare I see you so flustered. I kind of like it.”

He extended his hand, but he didn't need to. The offer was clear enough.

“What do you say, Malik? Partners, just like old times?”

Malik stared at his hand, brows furrowing as the last of his conscience trickled away. He shouldn't take it, but he wanted to. He wanted to see where this new stretch of their partnership would take them.

It had to be better than waiting around in Egypt like a good little tombkeeper.

After another beat of silence, Bakura withdrew his hand and stepped back over to the desk.

“I’m going to let my host continue his research now. Perhaps he’ll find something of use. I don’t know. I can’t read any of this.” He waved a hand carelessly, peering back to look over his shoulder, his smile still in place. “I’m being generous here, so think about it, won’t you?”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Some sads and Bakura gives a pep talk. Also some weird spacing I'm too lazy to fix right now.

Ryou awoke with his forehead pressed into the wood of the desk, the room pitch dark. He sucked in a sharp gasp as the momentary confusion consumed him before calming as he remembered where he was. The lantern must have burnt out. Had it really been that long?

He fumbled for the flashlight, nearly knocking it to the floor, and turned it on.

There was a familiar weight around his neck and he glanced down to see the Millennium Ring hanging there, eye glinting up at him slyly. He didn't remember putting it on, so how did…?

Ryou's hands clenched into fists and he muttered under his breath. “Malik.”

Removing the Ring and placing it back in his bag, Ryou stood up and took one last glance around the room. He felt he was done here. Despite his sudden nap, he still felt too exhausted to continue researching. It must have been super late in the night as well.

"Malik...?" Ryou called out as he left the archives, his voice echoing down the hallway into nothing. He walked, trying to remember where Malik had said he was going to be, the silence swallowing up his footsteps one at a time. He wouldn't deny it was truly eerie down here, especially when all the torches had gone out. He hated the way his voice sounded in the darkness. It sounded invasive somehow, like it was disturbing some great beast’s slumber.

"I think I'm going to call it quits for today..."

Ryou paused when a glimmer of pale blue caught his eye. He peered through one of the nearby archways, realizing that this place wasn't entirely sealed away from the outside world. Moonlight filtered down through the skylight above, illuminating the atrium. But that wasn't what had Ryou's eyes widening.
There was a shape huddled in the middle of the floor, head bowed and trembling. Ryou clicked off his flashlight and hesitantly approached from behind.

"I never wanted to come down here again." Malik said, and Ryou could hear him gritting his teeth. "There's nothing else in the archives, is there? This was for nothing." He gave a broken sounding chuckle. "I would black out during my lessons so I thought that maybe... there was something I missed..."

Ryou shook his head, shifting uncomfortably where he stood

"It's fine. You didn't know..."

Malik's breathing was picking up and he spoke as if he hadn't heard Ryou at all.

"Even with my other personality gone, I'm not better." Malik clutched at his hair. "This shouldn't be affecting me so much...!"

"What...?"

Malik seemed so distressed and Ryou didn't know what to do, or what he should do. It wasn't like he and Malik were fond of each other, but still...

Another voice drifted up, sliding from the Ring as smooth as honey.

"How cruel... You didn't get the full story, did you?" The spirit clicked his tongue. "Making him come down here and face his demons like that. I never thought you could be so cold, landlord."

"I..." Ryou didn't know the full story. He knew Malik had been trapped here for the majority of his life and that alone felt like a horrible fate, but there was more to it?

He almost didn't want to find out.

"If you ever wondered where the other Malik came from... It was here." Bakura explained, and if Ryou weren't so disturbed he might have lingered on the fact the spirit sounded off from his usual smugness. If anything, his voice was bitter. "This was the place Malik lost his mind and killed his father, the place he was trapped his whole life, the place he was meant to be buried in."

Ryou's eyes widened. Malik killed his own father?

"The other Malik killed the old man, technically," Bakura amended as though picking up on his
thoughts. “But it was the fate of the tomb guardians that broke Malik to begin with. You see how the Pharaoh treats his subjects?”

Ryou moved forward, a pit of guilt sinking into his stomach. Even if it was Malik, he didn't like seeing people in pain. He knelt beside him, hesitantly reaching out to touch his arm.

"Malik... I'm sorry." He murmured. "Why didn't you say anything? If I knew I wouldn't have insisted..."

Malik shook his head, opening his eyes as they had been squeezed shut.

"No. I thought I could handle it and I hate owing people anything." He lifted his head, gaze falling on something that lay in front of them. "... This is also the place where my mother is buried."

Ryou followed Malik's eyeline, finally noticing the rectangular shape in the gloom. It was raised up on an altar, a few curled petals of old and dried flowers scattered around. Ryou's chest felt even tighter.

Malik smiled, a brittle, sorrowful thing. "I wanted to see her again even though she... probably wouldn't want to see what I've become."

"I'm sorry," Ryou said, his words thick in the deafening silence. His shoulders slumped, gaze falling to the stone beneath them. "... I lost my mother too. My mother and my sister. A car crash."

Ryou felt Malik's stare rest on him, heavy with something he had never seen from him before - empathy. Malik didn't say anything to his words, but he didn't need to.

"I never even saw her face for myself... She died giving birth to me."

Malik lifted his gaze higher, up to the ceiling, to the moon and stars visible through the skylight above.

"If there's one thing I could ever hope for, it's that she'd be proud of me." The next words were spoken softly, barely audible, as if he meant to think them and not say it out loud. "Even if that's impossible."

The shadows framed the two, a wavering form lingering just on the cusp of the moonlight. The light passed through the spirit, pulling at the edges of his legs, his fingertips, turning them translucent. Bakura's sights rested at the backs of the two, unreadable and, for once, without comment.
Perhaps a thought pulled at his consciousness, a memory flickering just at the edges of his vision, like something had caught in his eye. He stared at the back of Ryou's head, at the hair flowing down his back. Past that.

Someone else with the hair stood there, the bone white mess falling around their shoulders, perhaps shaggier than Ryou's.

A voice whispered, familiar and soothing, and for a fleeting moment there was warmth, like the sun had touched him for the first time in his existence.

Who…?

He couldn't remember.

There was nothing but silence now, nothing to show it was little more than his imagination acting up. The warmth may as well have never been there, his form swallowed up by the pale cold ambience surrounding him.

After lingering a few more moments, Bakura drifted away, vanishing as though he had never existed.

…

Malik felt a shudder run up his spine, a hauntingly familiar laugh echoing around his mind. His head snapped to the side, gaze searching the darkness for something he wouldn’t find. It was all just his imagination - that was what he told himself.

As time wore on, he grew less sure.

It was all in his head. He almost wanted to laugh.

Wasn’t it always?

“What is it?” Ryou asked, looking at him with concern. Malik sighed and shook his head, though his
nerves were still fried.

“Nothing. Come on, we should get out of here.”

Ryou didn't have any objections to that. The ride back was quiet and somber, but Malik felt better once they were away from the tombs, his chest lighter. It was easier to breathe.

He pulled over in front of Ryou's hotel to let him off, taking the extra helmet from him and returning it to the trunk of the bike.

“Thank you for your help,” Ryou nodded, staring at a crack in the sidewalk.

“If there's anything else you need, just tell me.” Malik glanced over his shoulder to the building beyond. “I can pay for your hotel if you want.”

Ryou shook his head.

“I'm fine.” He brought his eyes up to Malik's face, looking at him like he was seeing through him. “I guess I'll see you back in Domino then?”

Malik did his best not to visibly tense, merely squinting in disbelief. “What? What makes you think I'm going back there?”

Ryou snorted, not impressed by his feigned ignorance. “I know you spoke with the spirit, and if you're still alive it means he probably wants you to work with him again.”

Malik gave a wry smirk, holding his hands up in mock surrender. He really needed to stop underestimating Ryou's perception.

“Alright, fine, you caught me.” He narrowed his eyes. “Are you going to try and stop me then?”

“No.” Ryou's voice was soft, contemplative. “I actually have an offer of my own.”
Malik's brows shot up his forehead. He had to admit, he was curious what Ryou was playing at this time.

“None of us really have any reason to trust each other, but when it comes down to it… I think you should side with me instead.”

Malik blinked slowly, unsure of what that even entailed. “And why what that be?”

“I know both of you want to see the Pharaoh destroyed, but do you really think the spirit's plan stops at the Pharaoh?” Ryou glanced down at his bag as if seeing through it to the Ring that lay inside. “He's after all of the Items for their power. Who's to say he won't turn that power on you next? Or me?”

That made Malik pause. He always knew Bakura was after the Items, but back when he had first met him, he didn't care what the spirit did with them. He could see merit to Ryou's words, but Malik wasn't that naive. He wasn't going to blindly help Bakura; he had his own agenda.

Ever since Battle City, questions about the spirit had been plaguing his mind, and with the knowledge that he was really the Thief King, there was even more incentive to discover his origins. Perhaps Malik's goals and Ryou's weren't so dissimilar in that sense.

But unlike Ryou, Malik was still very interested in seeing the Pharaoh destroyed, while Ryou was on the side of his friends. He had to have known how dangerous of a game he was playing.

“If you're so worried about him reaching his goal, why are you still helping him?”

Ryou sighed.

“To be honest, I'm not worried about him reaching his goal, because I have a backup plan.” The corners of his mouth curved up in a shadow of a smile. “If he has no host, then he has no vengeance.” Ryou turned his head to eye something in the distance. “Obviously I'd rather not let it come down to that.”

Malik's eyes widened, but he couldn't say he was surprised. He too knew what it was like to go so
far for a cause, to *die* for a cause. He pursed his lips.

“... I'll think about your offer.” Malik stepped over to his bike, swinging his leg over and refastening his helmet. He supposed this was goodbye, for now. “Until then… take care of yourself.”

Ryou have him a small wave, his smile softening into something more genuine.

“I've been doing my best.”

...

Ryou took a step back from the blueprints he had laid out on the table surrounded by various maps and references of Egyptian architecture. Bakura really wasn't kidding. This diorama had to be *big*.

“Okay… I think I have almost everything laid out. Not so sure how to fill out these gaps though.”

Ryou's eyes slid over to a particular spot just beyond the Nile river. It was blank, sitting right about where Deir el-Medina was in the present day. He didn't know why the field extended this far. He thought it would be better to save space by keeping the map contained around the palace, but Bakura had insisted the area surrounding it was just as important.

Ryou had an idea of why, his mind drifting back to the conversation with Malik. He said nothing on the topic yet, however.

Turning to his notebook, he began adding to his list of supplies. Craft foam, lots of gold paint, clay… He had plenty of sand, having brought it from Egypt for a more authentic feel. He stopped writing, eyes falling on the knotted scar tissue on the back of his hand.

Perhaps he would steer away from the resin this time…

“... This is going to be a pretty barren campaign without NPCs or a plot, you know,” Ryou murmured, gaze sliding over to the Ring that rested at the side of the table.
“Then let me take over.”

Ryou’s hands clenched into fists. How very like the spirit to leave him with this task, yet give him no direction on how he wanted it done. “That wasn't the deal. This is my game and I'm building it.”

The voice chuckled, the biting noise grating against Ryou's ears. “So cruel, landlord…”

“You don't even remember much, do you?” Ryou shook his head incredulously. “You told me this was a game of memories. How do you expect to win if you can't even tell me the bare minimum of who you were?”

“I remember many things, but it's more of an instinctual feeling than something I can put into words. It'll be enough.”

Ryou closed his eyes, a smirk tugging at his mouth. The spirit was unbelievable.

“Your big chance to face the Pharaoh, and you're telling me you want to wing it?”

The energy pouring from the Ring grew tense, bristling like a cat.

“Why do you care what I do?” The voice began to move, circling to Ryou's ears and switching to a beguiling purr. “You must be exhausted. All you have to do is sleep and when you wake up, it'll all be over…”

Ryou opened his eyes, staring down at the edge of the table in silence. He hated how appealing the idea of just letting someone else take over and put him on autopilot until he had his life back was. The stress of everything - school, his friends, the spirit, warding off the Millennium Ring’s influence - it was all catching up. It was a slow, gradual panic creeping up on him. He knew he was strong, but what would happen when his strength ran out?

How nice it would be to wake up one day with all of his problems gone. He almost wanted to believe the spirit when he said that he was only borrowing, that he'd give everything back and pay interest in full.
But Ryou knew better, and that was why he couldn't rest. There was always some catch, and leaving his body in the hands of the unknown wasn't a solution.

It wasn't even an option, especially not after Malik had removed him from so much of the action. He couldn't passively wait and hope for a better tomorrow. He had to fight.

“No,” Ryou stated, his voice firm and unwavering. “I'm not going to be your game piece. You ran the game last time.” He paused before adding on, “… And you're a horrible DM anyway.”

“Oh, I'm stung!” Bakura cawed. “So blunt… I like to think I'm rubbing off on you.”

“Keep dreaming.” He wasn't going to lose to the Ring, and he wasn't going to lose himself to the Ring either. That was a promise Ryou had made to himself and he he intended on keeping it.

He pursed his lips and turned his attention back to his notes.

“So far, the only character I have is the Pharaoh…” He was reminded of another matter, one he was sure he wouldn't easily find answers for. “… Are you ever going to tell me who that man in red was? He seems like he should be a character too.”

There was no answer from the Ring this time. Ryou gave it a full minute, shuffling around papers as he waited. He sighed, exasperated, though he couldn't say he was surprised by the spirit's avoidance either.

“If all you're going to give me is silence, maybe I'll just make up my own campaign.”

Bakura grunted.

“You really haven't figured it out yet? Malik has.”

Ryou's frown deepened as he recalled the conversation with Malik. Even before then, he had a feeling he already knew who the identity of the man in red was.
“If that really is you trapped inside the Ring… then how are you speaking to me right now?”

Ryou could hear the shrug in Bakura's voice. “How indeed.”

“Unless… that was who you were in the past.” Ryou went on, nibbling at the back of his finger as he thought out loud. “Just like how the Pharaoh has memories he can't connect to.”

Bakura neither confirmed nor denied it, but Ryou didn't really expect a response.

“And what about that creature? The white one with the serpent body?”

Bakura gave a snort.

“Oh, you don't have to look far for that one.”

“Everything is a riddle with you.” Ryou rolled his eyes. “But fine. I'll play your game. I want to go inside the Ring again.”

Bakura's voice scratched at his ears like nails on a chalkboard.

“Are you crazy!? ”

Ryou huffed. “You're not helping me and it seems like the only way that I'll learn more for this campaign.”

“I'm not the only thing that sleeps inside the Ring,” Bakura growled. Ryou suspected if he had a physical form he'd be shifting in his seat with discomfort.

“You mean that other monster?” Ryou felt a shiver travel up his spine as he thought of the pair of blood red eyes and what manner of beast they belonged to. “What is that thing?”
“You should already know that. You've fought that darkness before.”

The first game of Monster World he and his friends had played stuck out in Ryou's mind. Now that he thought about it, the aura from that game and the aura from the Ring... they felt the same.

“... Zorc Necrophades,” Ryou murmured in awe. “He's real... isn't he?”

Again, there was no response from Bakura aside from that restless energy emanating from him in waves.

“... You seem more scared of him than I am.”

“Scared? You're delusional.”

“That's why you don't want me going inside the Ring again, isn't it?” Ryou pressed. “I saw memories when I went in there. Those were your memories, right?”

He thought of the brief glimpses he had seen and the way the darkness had hungrily swallowed them up, hiding them from his view. It only made him more curious.

“I can get them for you. Zorc won't even know I'm there.”

There was another long pause, but this time a shape pulled itself from the Ring. Bakura hovered beside the table, arms crossed, peering at Ryou with a mistrustful eye.

“I don't understand why you would try and help me.”

“And I don't understand you. That's why I'm doing this.” Ryou shoved himself away from the table and stood up to face him. “I don't know if you're some puppet of Zorc’s or a slave or something else but-”

Bakura cut him off with a snarl, baring his teeth. “I'm no one's slave. The darkness and I merely have mutual interests.”
Ryou frowned, not sure if he believed that. He recalled the way the man in red had been strung up, chained in the darkness like some prisoner. Perhaps Bakura and Zorc had vastly different ideas of what a partnership looked like. Who would willingly choose such a fate?

Ryou began to pack up his things, sweeping the Ring off of the table and placing it back in his bag. After slinging the bag over his shoulder, he headed for the door.

“You're not stopping me this time.”

“You're a fool.” Bakura vanished as Ryou passed through him, dissolving back into the gold.

“Maybe, but it's better than being a useless fool.” Ryou shut the door marked ‘staff only’ behind him and headed down the hall of the museum - only to collide with someone as he rounded the corner. He got a mouthful of their chest, forehead knocking against their chin, but when he stepped back to apologize, a familiar face greeted him.

“Malik…?”

…

Malik had his eyes on a display, not paying attention to the upcoming corner. Perhaps he didn't have a right to be mad when he walked straight into someone, but that wouldn't stop him from snapping at them anyway. He turned to them with a scowl - only for his eyes to widen as a blizzard of white filled his vision.

“Oh… I wasn't sure if you were going to be here or not.”

Ryou sighed, rubbing his forehead. “You probably know where my house is, there's no need to stalk me.”

“It's not like that!” Malik huffed. “I actually just came to see the exhibit my sister put up. It's still up, isn't it?”
“Yeah, but the museum is going to close any minute.” In fact, the halls were nearly empty at this hour. Ryou glanced off to the side, jaw setting in irritation. “Fine,” he muttered, and Malik realized he wasn't speaking to him; there was a conversation going on he couldn't hear. Ryou turned back to Malik. “He wants to talk to you.”

Ryou pulled out the Ring and closed his eyes as he slipped the cord over his head. When his eyes opened again, it wasn't the same person staring out of them.

“Yo!” Bakura greeted with a wide grin. “About time you showed up. I was starting to think you had chickened out. It's good to know you're not completely spineless.”

“It's good to know you're as pleasant as ever,” Malik grumbled.

“What did you expect?” Bakura snickered, tilting his head up at him inquisitively as he stepped closer. A note of genuine curiosity flashed in his eyes. “No, I'm curious. What did the records say about me?”

“Not much, just that you were a huge problem for the Pharaoh.” Malik honestly wished he could tell him more, but a criminal's history wasn't going to preserved with as much care as the royals.

“That's putting it lightly.” Bakura stepped around Malik, eyeing the various artifacts lining the walls before his gaze fell on Malik again. Gods, what was with that heated look? Perhaps the idea of having a ‘fan', as he had put it, was going to his head.

The worst part was, Malik didn't find it as irritating as he should have.

“Come on, Malik. You're in a place of history. Hell, you're looking at history!” Bakura spread his arms wide, indicating himself. “Do I not satisfy your image of me?”

Malik scowled, compelled to glance away from him for some reason. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“If you only had such little information to go off of, you had to fill in the gaps somehow, didn't you?”
Malik didn't like the direction this was taking. He did have an image of the Thief King he had created when he was younger. As for whether Bakura filled it or not...

“Well, I expected you to be taller.” Malik gave Bakura the side-eye, gaze flicking up and down Ryou’s figure. “Then again I guess it's not fair to judge your body since it's a rental.”

Bakura’s eyes brightened with a sinister gleam, grin stretching wider. “Oh? So my physique is what you thought about the most?”

Malik jerked back. “What? No!”

But his face was heating up without his permission. He would never admit it - because he would never hear the end of it if he did - but Bakura's words were closer to the truth than he thought.

“Getting defensive, are we?” Bakura went on, unperturbed, eyes hooding slyly. “It must have gotten boring down in the tombs… Don't tell me you didn't even have a few fantasies…”

Malik gritted his teeth. Why did Bakura have to bring this up?

… It wasn’t like things had started out that way, but as he got older his image of the Thief King had begun to mature as well. He didn’t want to think about this right now and, more importantly, he didn’t want to feed this bastard’s ego with some runaway fantasy of his younger self’s imagination.

Why the hell was he still blushing?

“You sound a little too hopeful there,” Malik shot back. “Whose idea was it for us to be ‘boyfriends', huh?”

“You're right, so let's go on a date.”

Malik nearly sputtered when Bakura moved beside him and rested his head on his shoulder, face angled up at him with sadistic glee written all over it. He was close enough that there was no way he could miss Malik’s darkening cheeks.
“Maybe I'll stab myself again as we take a romantic walk by the pier. Sounds nice, doesn't it?”

Malik shoved him away and Bakura threw his head back and cackled, the hyena noise echoing down the corridor.

“I don't know how Ryou tolerates you,” Malik snapped, brushing a strand of hair back into place and trying to ignore the heat rising in his blood. “What are you doing at the museum anyway?”

“Back to business, I see.” Bakura's chuckles tapered off as he sobered. He shoved his hands in his pockets as they began to walk. “We're preparing for the final game.”

“And how am I supposed to help with this?”

“I don't know yet.” Bakura shrugged. “I was going to have you take the Millennium Items back, but then I found out the idiots took them along to America.”

Malik raised a brow. “America?”

“They ran off to the states for some reason.” Bakura waved him off, not at all concerned with the random disappearance. “So I guess you're back up now.”

Malik wrinkled his nose as they reached the front entrance of the museum, pushing open the door and making a point of not holding it open for Bakura. “Seriously?”

Bakura's grin was poisonous, the rich orange light from the setting sun bringing out the cutting maroon of his eyes.

“Sucks being put on the backburner until you have a use, doesn't it?”

Malik snorted as they began walking down the street without any real direction. He suspected he would have been angry if he truly had anything at stake, but as it was he just didn't. The only thing he had to lose was his pride, or whatever remained of it.
The Pharaoh would leave this world one way or another. It all came down to whether or not Malik would help him along like an obedient servant. It wasn't ideal, but he would have to if Bakura's plan failed.

Their walk took them to a park, the air turning cool as the night set in, the street lamps beginning to flick on. Bakura stepped in front of him, bringing them both to an abrupt stop.

“Gods, you look like shit.”

Malik gave a wry smirk. Bakura didn't need to tell him. His hair was pulled into a careless ponytail, he wasn't wearing his kohl, and he wasn't wearing his regalia either. He didn't look like himself. He didn't feel like himself, like pieces of him had been displaced, floating aimlessly. “Just come right out and say it, why don't you?”

“I mean it's like you've deflated or something. Like you've lost your… you know.” Bakura gestured vaguely to him, but Malik still wasn't sure what exactly ‘you know’ was. “You shouldn't let one loss depress you so much. It's pathetic.”

“I don't expect you to understand.” Malik's gaze turned fierce, fists clenching. It wasn't the loss to the Pharaoh that had him this way. The humiliation from the defeat couldn't hold a candle to the guilt he felt. “I lost control of myself. I almost destroyed the last of my family.”

Bakura's mouth pressed into a thin line. “I'm sure they'll be thrilled when you help me destroy the bastard that imprisoned you all.”

“They don't bear the same grudge I do.” Malik shook his head. “Believe me, I'd love to see the Pharaoh dethroned, but I don't want to lose control like that again.”

Bakura hummed contemplatively, tilting his head at Malik. “Didn't you get rid of your other personality?”

“I did, but…”

“But what?”
Malik really didn't like where this conversation was headed. His gut began to churn, the stabbing pressure of something he had been trying to bury resurfacing in the back of his mind. His features pulled taut in a grimace.

“I still hear his voice because it's my voice.”

Malik felt like he would double over as soon as he said the words, like he was making them real. But holding them back was even more painful. He couldn't deny what had been happening to him, the whispers he heard in the night, the laughter. Telling this to Rishid and Isis wasn't an option either. In their eyes he was healed, he was supposed to be fine. He didn't want them looking at him like he was a monster again.

Worse yet, what if he hurt them? Perhaps Bakura wasn't his only reason for returning to Domino. If there was a continent’s distance between him and his family, there was no way he could do them harm.

“I still… feel like he's in my head.” A broken laugh sounded from Malik. He didn't know why he was telling all of this to Bakura. The spirit probably just thought he was pathetic. “And at any moment I'll lose control again and my will won't be enough to fight him. He'll take over my body and I'll have no choice but to-”

“You always have a choice.”

Malik glanced up in surprise, finding Bakura staring at him intently. He expected taunting, mocking him for being so weak. Perhaps Bakura would even laugh at him.

Bakura wasn't laughing.

“You made the choice to live and keep fighting, or did I imagine that final part of the duel between your darker half and the Pharaoh? With that kind of conviction, I can't imagine you being taken over again.” He scoffed, shaking his head. “But who knows, maybe you'll prove me wrong with all this doubt you're wallowing in.”

Malik swallowed, staring at Bakura's back as the other turned away.
“I have no time for doubt. The Pharaoh will fall, and I'll endure a thousand failures until I see it, as much as it takes.” He sounded so sure of himself Malik was envious. “The fact that you're here tells me you're already certain of your choice, so don't prove me wrong, Malik. Don't waste my time and your own.”

Malik's eyes widened in surprise. He wondered what Bakura was seeing in him to give him such assurance. How could Bakura have such faith in him after everything?

He didn't know but for now he took solace in the words for what they were. It was bizarrely comforting.

“... Right.” He nodded, gaze hardening. For the moment, the shadows lurking in his mind slipped further away.

“We have work to do.” Bakura flashed him a smirk over his shoulder, brightening when he saw Malik returning to himself. “We should probably have a way of staying in contact. Or you can stay at landlord's place.”

Malik frowned, feeling he had done enough invading of Ryou's space.

“Will Ryou mind?”

Bakura shrugged.

“... I'll keep to my hotel.”

“Suit yourself.” Bakura took a step forward, signaling he wanted to walk again, a glint of mischief entering his eye. “Show me where it is then.”
Chapter 11

Bakura and Malik get married this chapter.

Bakura gave a low whistle as he strode into the ornately decorated and furnished suite. If he didn't know better, he would think Malik was still up to his crime boss ways. He stepped forward, swiping his hand along a silk tapestry.

"You haven't lost your tastes, I see…"

Malik shut the door behind them, smirking.

"If there's one thing I can't let go of, it's luxury." He gave a bitter snort. "Over half my life wasted in a dusty cave, I deserve a damn bubble bath."

"You're preaching to the choir…" Bakura was helping himself to the mini fridge, breaking the seal on a bottle of water and sucking it down like a sink. One would have thought he'd been out in the desert for too long. He lowered the bottle after several long moments, setting it aside. "How do you still have so much money anyway?"

He tilted his head, expression sly as he figured out the answer for himself. "You didn't let go of those Ghoul owned accounts, did you?"

"Maybe not." Malik rolled his shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. Isis would have been so disappointed if she found out, but he wasn't hurting anyone so she didn't need to know.

"Bastard." Bakura grinned at him.

Malik took a seat on the couch, reclining back with his arms spread on either side of him. His gaze lazily followed Bakura as the spirit took his time exploring the room.
“What about you, Thief King? You had to scrape by somehow.”

“Please. Stealing from the tombs of the nobles let me do more than ‘scrape by’. ” Some of the humour drained from Bakura’s face, replaced with the resentment leftover from another age. In moments like these, it was like Bakura became another person - no, Malik realized it was more like he was regaining parts of himself that should have been lost to time. “Shit goes to waste down there. The common people starve while a bag of bones is sent off to the Duat with more wine and wealth than he knows what to do with.”

Malik’s nose scrunched up in disgust. “And these are the bastards that uphold the law?”

Bakura laughed, something haunting and grim behind the sound.

“Let me tell you something, Malik. There’s no such thing as good and evil.” He disappeared somewhere behind Malik so Malik let his head rest against the couch backing as he listened. “If ‘good’ is drowning in your own riches and greed and letting others die under your rule, it really makes you wonder how much worse ‘evil’ can get, doesn't it?”

The corners of Malik's lips twitched upwards. It was incredible how alike his thought processes were to Bakura's. He’d harboured the same beliefs ever since he was a child taught to revere and serve the Pharaoh's and the Gods, but what had they done to earn his respect? Was he supposed to be thankful for the privilege of being sealed away and tortured?

Malik’s blood burned with how right Bakura was, and how good it felt to hear his own views reflected back at him instead of keeping them silent and internalized. “Then what would be ‘evil’ in that case?”

He nearly jumped as palms slammed to the top of the couch backing on either side of his head. Bakura’s grinning face appeared upside down above him, a sneer edging at the corner of his mouth.

“Surviving.”

Bakura slid away, languidly circling around the couch. It was then Malik noticed the glint of gold at his wrists.

“... You really are the Thief King. I didn't even notice you swipe that.” Malik's eyes widened and he
twisted around in his seat, eyes falling on the table where the chest containing his gold rested. In retrospect, probably not the brightest idea to leave that out with Bakura's sticky fingers around.

“Swipe what?” Bakura flung himself on the couch, bringing his hands up to rest then behind his head and purposefully highlighting the bracers around his forearms.

“Very funny. Hand it over.” As irritating as it was, Malik was actually kind of impressed. He hadn't even heard the clink of the jewelry being put on. After a pause of deliberation, he added. “... Empty out your pockets while you're at it.”

Bakura snickered, clicking off the bracers and placing them on the cloth covering the coffee table.

“Shame. I was just about to pawn it off too.”

Malik glowered at him for that comment, but his eyes became rounded as he watched Bakura take an impossible amount of gold out of his pockets. “Sheesh, I shouldn't have brought you here after all. Next thing I know, everything that isn't bolted down is going to be gone.”

Bakura preened, clearly taking that as a compliment. A small, round shape bounced out of the pile and rolled off the table, but he bent down and caught it before it could disappear under the couch.

“Oh, Malik, you shouldn't have!” Bakura gave a mock gasp as he slid the ring onto the appropriate finger, waggling his digits and causing the light to flicker off the diamonds lining the gold. Malik just stared at him for a moment, and then he burst into laughter.

“... You do realize that's actually a wedding band right?”

Bakura didn't look perturbed. He only grinned wider, and Malik questioned his sanity if this was how far he would go for a joke.

“Well, you know. We’re already boyfriends. May as well take it to the next level.”

Malik snorted and rolled his eyes, trying to ignore the odd feeling in his stomach. The Thief King stealing his shit and declaring them married was not something he ever thought he would be faced
with in life. What did he do to end up with such a weird spirit? “I didn't know you wanted to be my wife so badly.”

“As if I'd be the wife.” Bakura wrinkled his nose, switching the ring over to his middle finger before sticking the latter up at Malik. “Why do you even have this anyway? Is there something you're not telling me?” He absentmindedly twisted the ring on his finger, tilting his head at Malik. “Maybe you were saving it for a surprise?”

“Again with that wishful thinking…” Malik couldn’t help but chuckle at Bakura's antics, surprised at how genuine it sounded. However, he sobered as his gaze fell on the ring again, gaze becoming like stone. “... My clan passes our secret down, generation to generation, father to son. I would have passed the initiation onto my own son. That is, if I had one.”

He shook his head, glancing away as his tone grew quiet.

“I had been betrothed to a girl from another tombkeeper branch shortly after my initiation, as per tradition. Naturally, me leaving the tombs kind of interrupted that.”

Malik was actually happy about that. Marrying a girl didn't interest him and having a son he was supposed to carve into made him feel queasy.

“Damn.” Bakura sat up a little straighter as if truly realizing the depths of how messed up the whole situation was. “She must have been heartbroken.”

“Maybe. I never met her.” Malik shrugged. “Customary to never see each other before the day of the wedding. That was the ring I was supposed to give her. Honestly, I forgot it was even in there.”

After a pause, Bakura's grin crept back into his features. He waved his hand, indicating the ring he still wore. “You wouldn't mind if I kept this then, would you?”

Malik's brows climbed up his forehead. What was he playing at this time?

“Be my guest. But why?”
Bakura laughed. “I like fucking with the Pharaoh's things.”

“I can't argue with that logic.” And Malik truly realized how brilliant it was right then. The Thief King so much as touching such a sacred part of tombkeeper lineage was unthinkable, beyond blasphemous. And him stealing Malik's hand in marriage? Fucking unreal. He liked to imagine the bastard royals that had forced this fate on him rolling around in their graves. Gods, it was petty but oh so thrilling. There was no greater revenge than pissing all over tradition.

Malik felt a shudder go through him, appreciation reflected in his darkening gaze. He shifted closer to Bakura, resting an arm on the back of the couch as he faced him. Bakura pocketed the ring, raising a brow at the sudden proximity.

A smirk decorated Malik's lips, fingers giving Bakura's arm a subtle brush. He saw Bakura's eyes lid slightly and gave a pleased hum, knowing he had his attention.

“... Tell me a story.” Malik leaned his cheek into his fist. “About the Thief King.”

Bakura snorted. “You know I don't remember much. What is there to tell?”

“You have to remember more now, don't you?” Malik leaned closer. “You recognized your own title.”

Malik felt Bakura's dry huff of laughter ghost against his cheek. “Doesn't mean I'll be able to recall enough to suit your whims.”

Malik feigned a pout of disappointment.

“How about I tell you one then?” Malik said. Bakura looked intrigued so he continued. “Legend tells that a thief once dragged the sarcophagus of the late Pharaoh into the throne room for the royal court to see, that he spoke with such poison and disrespect he should have been struck down by the Gods right there. His soul was as black and evil as the deeds he committed.” By the time he finished, his lips were nearly pressed to Bakura's ear, voice hushed as if the Gods would strike him down for daring to uncover the Thief King’s wretched actions. “You want to claim credit for that one?”

Bakura wasn't looking at him anymore. He was staring off at something in the distance, something visible to only himself. Malik could see the memory reconstructing itself before his eyes.
“Mummy,” Bakura said suddenly. “It was the mummy, not the sarcophagus.” He bared his teeth as though feeling the fire and vigor the Thief King had invaded the throne room with thousands of years prior. “They never did me the courtesy of covering up my dead, merely wore them around their necks like trinkets. I wanted to show them what it was like to have your dead disrespected.”

As he spoke, Malik began to draw back, the smile slipping off of his face as a greater, dismal feeling began to crawl over him. Soon, he could do nothing but gape at Bakura.

Everything seemed to click together in Malik's mind right there, the pieces he had been rolling over in his subconscious finally sliding into place.

*Consider it a blessing. Not everyone is lucky enough to be buried.*

Malik remembered that conversation. Bakura wasn’t just being cryptic for the sake of it - he was speaking from a real place.

And that place was that village Malik had seen. Those people, the fire, the gold… it was all a trail of blood with the Millennium Items laying at the end.

“Bakura…” Malik spoke softly, his eyes wide with the gravity of the situation. Everything felt light, like he’d float away if he didn’t let something ground him. His stomach flipped with nausea. He’d been taught the Items had been created for the glory of Egypt, that they’d been *gifts* from the Gods.

Bakura smirked, misconstruing Malik’s shock. “What's with that look? I got the message across, wouldn't you say?”

“That's not-” Malik realized he didn’t feel sick anymore. He was angry, so angry his fists clenched and his scars burned. “Those people… that was *your* village.” He grit his teeth, eyes a bright, blazing lavender. “And the royal family, they…”

Bakura's smirk contorted - it couldn’t really be called a smirk anymore because it was so grim and haunting. It was more like an angry rictus of teeth.

“Does it really surprise you, Malik?”
Malik’s jaw set. “No, it doesn’t, and that’s the worst part.”

He shook his head, opening his mouth as if to say something but too livid to put his thoughts into words. He closed it a moment later, lips pursing as a disturbed fog edged at him from beneath the layer of anger. He was trying to fathom holding onto a grudge for millennia after millennia. A mere several years had nearly killed Malik.

He had to wonder just how much of himself Bakura had lost, how much of him had rotted. It seemed unthinkable that he could still be here, speaking to Malik coherently. He almost wished he had the power to peer inside his mind again and see how he ticked, how he held himself together. In some ways, that kind of strength was admirable, and in others it was fearful. Malik thought he might lose his mind if he witnessed it for himself. He already knew first hand that Bakura’s soul was a terrifying place.

But he understood that it had to be after enduring something so horrid and cruel. Malik grimaced, unsure of what was causing the tightness in his chest. He had a feeling Bakura wouldn’t care for pity, and Malik hated being pitied himself, but this felt deeper than that.

Malik’s long silence wasn’t lost on Bakura, nor was his hard stare as he tried to work the spirit out. Bakura tilted his head.

“What is it?”

“Nothing, just…” Malik closed his eyes with a brittle smile. “When you take the Pharaoh down, I hope you make it hurt.”

Bakura seemed pleased, reclining on the couch with an air of nonchalance, blissfully unaware of the hurricane of emotions festering in Malik’s mind.

“Guess I should tell you about the game I have planned then.”

…

Ryou stood before the wall of black on the cusp of his soul room, jaw tight as he peered into it. It
almost hurt to look directly at, the darkness causing a strange, migraine like pressure in the front of his skull. Ryou was familiar enough with shadow magic to not be too bothered by it. His determination was stronger than the pull of whatever lay within.

“You're really pushing your luck, you know that?” Bakura spoke, arms crossed as he stood beside him.

“I'll be careful,” Ryou said, giving the spirit a side glance. “Why does Zorc even care if I see your memories?”

That was one thing he didn't understand. Judging from Bakura's reaction, he didn't understand it either. Bakura pointedly looked away.

“Do you want to go in or not?”

Why he was being so difficult was completely lost on Ryou. He would have thought Zorc wanted to make building the RPG smoother and easier. Then again, monsters never proved to be the most easy to reason with. “You're avoiding the question.”

“I don't know, okay?” Bakura snapped, throwing his hands up. “They're not really my memories anymore anyway.”

He stepped forward before Ryou had the chance to respond, the darkness swallowing up his form as soon as he crossed the threshold. “Let's go, before Necrophades wakes up.”

Ryou took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for the crushing weight that was about to fall on him. He stepped into the wall of black, the ground disappearing underneath his feet. For a sickening moment, he tumbled through the darkness, no idea what direction was up.

And then his knees hit sand and light burst into his vision, so harsh it blinded him for a moment. He looked up, seeing the blue expanse of sky stretching far over his head and a sea of sand that seemed to go on forever. Ryou swallowed, his throat feeling dry as the heat of the desert surrounded him. He pushed himself to his feet.

“Spirit?” He whirled this way and that, but Bakura was nowhere to be found. “Where…?”
Wisps of grey caught his attention, rising up into the sky and tarnishing the blue. Ryou cupped his hand over his forehead against the glare of the sun, eyes following the thin trails of smoke until his gaze landed on a peak a few kilometers off. Something was smouldering over there, but he couldn’t see what.

Ryou stiffened as his eyes drifted lower, spotting something else. How had he not noticed it before?

There was a small shape moving slowly across the sand, blurry at first but gradually coming into focus. It was that of a boy, ashen hair reaching down to his shoulders, pale eyes dull but recognizable.

Even soiled, Ryou knew his hair would be a purer white beneath, and knew what his face would look like when it was marked by a scar. Ryou had seen this boy before.

The child staggered along, each footstep less steady than the last. The trail he left was unevenly spaced, smearing every so often as he lost his balance. Ryou realized that if he followed the trail, it would lead back to whatever was burning behind the peak.

But the child was coming straight for him and Ryou couldn't do anything but watch. The child didn't seem to see him - in fact, he didn't seem to see much of anything, his eyes glazed and unable to focus. Ryou felt something in his chest tighten.

Fifteen feet. Ten feet. Five feet. Ryou reflexively held out his hands, expecting the child to bump into him, but it was as though he were made of air. Ryou felt nothing but a coldness pass through him before the child was behind him. His lips parted in a gasp, the true helplessness of the situation setting in.

“This is a world of memories. The past can't be changed.”

The spirit's voice permeated his ears but he was still nowhere in sight. Ryou was alone, the barren landscape feeling colder despite the boiling sun.

There was a soft thud from behind him and he turned to see that the child's legs had finally given out and he was laying face down in the sand. He didn't move.
“Don't you see? There's nothing you can do.”

Bakura's voice held a vindictive quality to it, dry like the desert winds. Ryou's teeth ground together behind his lips, his nails digging into his palms.

Nothing he could do…?

This powerlessness was hauntingly familiar. Perhaps, for a fleeting moment, it could have been someone else he couldn't save. Someone with white hair reaching to her shoulders, and a bright, pale gaze that refused to be dampened by the world.

A moment was enough.

Ryou spun on his heel and stepped over to the fallen boy.

“What do you hope to accomplish?”

Ryou ignored the spirit, dropping to his knees with a determined set in his jaw. His gaze softened when he caught sight of the boy's eyes beneath his filthy bangs, dim with fading light. Was Ryou supposed to just let him die?

Even if he had his suspicions about who the man in red was, it didn't feel right just… turning a blind eye to this. After a moment's hesitation, Ryou closed his eyes and reached out, holding his breath, holding memories of his sister close, and hoping it would be enough...

“That won't wo-”

As if to spite Bakura's words, Ryou's fingers touched something rough and scratchy and he opened his eyes to see his palm laying flat on the back of the child's tunic. Ryou moved to grab his shoulders, gingerly turning him onto his back and drawing him against his chest.

“That's impossible…!”
Ryou had never heard Bakura sound so shocked before, but that wasn't his concern at the moment. He reached up to brush strands of hair from the child's face, running his fingers through the thick texture and shaking the ash out.

“Hey,” he said, smiling when he saw the child stir, eyes finding Ryou's face. “You can't lay here. It's dangerous.”

The child's breathing caught, an aborted noise sounding in his throat, his lower lip quivering. He looked up at Ryou like he had never seen another human being in his life, a desperate sort of awe filling his eyes. He reached up, small fingers gripping Ryou's shirt, and then the white strands of hair drooped over his shoulders.

“It's okay,” Ryou murmured, thumbing away the ash caked beneath his eyes. “It's going to be alright.”

He didn't know if that was true or not but what else could he say? He wished he could do more for the boy than offer him comfort and words of reassurance. The boy's eyes were closing, face settling out into a more relaxed expression, as if Ryou's mere presence was healing him. Ryou could be thankful he could do that much, at least.

The spirit's unease pulsed through him, and Ryou felt it suddenly spike as Bakura cried out in alarm. “Shit! Zorc is waking up!”

Ryou glanced up, noticing the horizon beginning to unmake itself, the land spooling apart like thread. The sky was swallowed up by a darkness blacker than night and he suddenly felt the weight disappear from his arms. Looking down, he realized the child had crumbled to sand, joining the rest of the desert as it span off into the void. He felt something seize him, and then shove as if to fling him away to safety.

And then he was falling, falling, falling...

…

Malik jerked back with a yelp when Ryou’s hands shot out and seized his shoulders, gripping so hard it was like he intended to crush him. He’d just been checking up on him; he didn’t want to be strangled first thing in the morning.
Ryou’s eyes were wide as he stared up at Malik’s face, breathing hard like he’d just run a marathon.

“Huh?”

Malik pried his hands off, pulse still beating in his ears. “Gods, are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Sorry, I was just—” Ryou put a hand to his forehead as though it could hold in all of the jumbled thoughts trying to spill out. “Malik, I saw him.”

“Who?”

“The spirit when he was human!” Ryou snapped up into a sitting position, excitement trembling off of him. “There’s memories inside the Ring and the man that I saw, he was a young kid this time and - I’m sure of it. It has to be—”

He was speaking so fast and looked dazed enough to fall off the couch so Malik saw fit to steady him, placing both hands on Ryou’s shoulders this time. “Okay, you need to take it easy.”

Ryou collected himself, albeit slowly, taking in his surroundings for the first time.

“Wait… where am I?”

“My hotel. The spirit came here with me and crashed. I’m sorry, I forgot how much strain he puts on your body.” Malik rubbed the back of his head sheepishly before holding out a hand. “Here, I know we’re not friends but… I can take you for something to eat.”

Ryou glanced between his face and his hand as though trying to work out whether his offer was genuine. Malik couldn’t say he blamed him. He already felt like an ass for forgetting about Ryou’s situation.

“I have a feeling we’re going to be seeing each other a lot now and I’ve been thinking about your offer,” Malik went on, lowering his hand when it became evident Ryou wasn’t going to take it. He averted his gaze towards the wall. “We have a better chance of getting to the bottom of this if we
work together.”

He wasn't just saying that. Ever since his conversation with Bakura yesterday, it became apparent that there was still a lot he didn't know. The RPG was another factor, and the only way he was going to get on top of that was to go through its creator.

Distrust was still heavy in Ryou's eyes, causing Malik to shift uncomfortably. And then a loud gurgle cut through the air and Ryou's cheeks turned red as he held his stomach.

“About that food…”

...

Ryou was a big eater. In fact, it seemed to be his goal to run Malik's wallet dry. Not that Malik even had a limit to his money but the attempt was still amusing nonetheless.

The patio was nearly barren and the quiet was nice. While Ryou tucked into a second helping of waffles, Malik picked at the single scone on his own plate, too much on his mind to be hungry. He couldn't get Bakura out of his head, every mystery, every facet of the spirit's former life he uncovered drawing him deeper.

He didn't notice when Ryou paused to stare at him, the other murmuring quietly across the table.

“Do you still want to destroy the Pharaoh?”

Malik glanced back over, expression carefully blank. The question was almost crass. His instinct screamed that of course he did, especially after what he had found out yesterday, and yet… he felt there was a greater matter to deal with here, but he couldn't place what. He was missing something, some crucial detail in the greater picture, and it was driving him up the wall.

“I want to see him destroyed, but I won't be taking an active role in trying to end him myself this time. That's why I'm helping... the spirit.” Malik frowned, still unsure of what to call his partner in Ryou's presence. Would Ryou care if he called him by the same name? What even was Bakura's real name? “... But admittedly, Bakur- the spirit is what's concerning me more at the moment.”
He sighed, finding himself in an odd situation. He didn't feel he could talk to Bakura about any of what had been bothering him for fear of the spirit taking it as *hesitation*. He wasn't hesitating; he and Bakura still had similar goals, but he couldn't just pretend like he wasn't concerned about other things. “You don't trust me, and I don't blame you, but let me tell you what I've figured out so far about this whole thing.”

If anyone deserved to hear this, it was Ryou. Malik knew how hard he was fighting just to figure out what the hell was going on inside his own soul, that Ring strangling him every step of the way. Ryou blinked, but gave a nod, intent to listen.

“... There are certain records of a man clothed in red, face marred by a scar, who terrorized Egypt and nearly drove it to ruin. He stood against the royal family and was out to claim all of their Millennium Items. That man became known as the Thief King. The person you saw inside the Ring, the one you described as wearing a red robe with the scar down his face… I'm positive they are one and the same.”

If Ryou was shocked by this knowledge, he didn't show it, merely nodding for Malik to go on.

“That's who the spirit is.” Malik crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat. “I figured it out soon after you told me about what you saw in the Ring, but I wasn't one hundred percent sure. After speaking to him more… I'm positive.”

“What has he told you?” Ryou asked.

“The scriptures don't say much about him, but they do document one event in detail - the first time the Thief King challenged the royal court. I asked him about this event and he gave me a few corrections about how it went down.”

Ryou narrowed his eyes. “How can you trust anything he says?”

“I don't think he would lie about this.” Malik's expression became grim. “When the Thief King challenged the Nameless Pharaoh, he dragged the corpse of his father, the previous Pharaoh, inside the throne room for all to see after desecrating his tomb.”

“How awful…” Ryou murmured, frowning at his near empty plate.
“The spirit told me he was trying to show them all what it was like to have your dead disrespected.” Malik must have had a very severe look in his eye because Ryou's countenance shifted to worry. “You remember what I told you about that village I saw in the spirit's mind? Do you know what this means?”

Malik leaned forward, elbows resting on the table as he spoke between his teeth. “That was his village, Ryou. The royal family had them all sacrificed to create the Millennium Items.”

Ryou's eyes widened, sucking in a small breath. “That can't be…”

Malik could see it clear as day - Ryou believed him, but he didn't want to believe him.

“Think about it. Why else would he hold such animosity towards the Pharaoh?”

Ryou's lips pursed in thought. “The other Yugi wouldn't have wanted something like that… would he?”

Malik resisted the urge to huff, unpleasantly reminded of the fact Ryou was close to Yugi and the rest of them. Of course he wouldn't even want to consider the Pharaoh doing something so horrible.

“What if he did? What if it was his call on the Thief King's village?” Malik's fist clenched where it rested on the table. “The Pharaoh doesn't even know his own origins. He very well might have.”

Malik was pleased when he saw Ryou actually considering the possibility. It seemed like a rare thing when someone else saw the Pharaoh as anything but perfect.

Ryou sighed, not meeting Malik's gaze. “But still... terrorizing people like this. What good does lashing out like that do?”

Malik merely snorted, shrugging his shoulders. Maybe it didn't do any good, but what did Ryou know about being driven to such acts? He wasn't going to bother trying to explain because he felt he would only become angry again.

“You're already aware of my stance on the Pharaoh. I don't exactly hold the highest opinion of him
after what happened to my clan.” Setting aside his obvious disdain for the Pharaoh for now, Malik’s mind drifted back to another matter that had been eating at him. It was hard to explain, but Malik was familiar with darkness, and he was sure Ryou was as well. The feeling of something hanging over their heads, like the ceiling of night without stars… Ryou must have been aware of it too. “… But something doesn't feel right here.”

Ryou was silent for a long while, absentmindedly rolling around a stray blueberry with his fork, lost in thoughts of his own.

“The memory I just saw… the Thief King was a child in it. Nothing remarkable.” He finally said. “I suppose even someone like him had to come from somewhere.”

It seemed odd to think of the spirit once being a child, once being human. It was an odd thought to entertain, given how cold, biting, and detached Bakura seemed from everything.

For whatever reason, an image of gold and fire flashed through Malik's mind. It was Bakura's memory, the one of the massacre. Malik recalled seeing a shape at the edge of the chamber, a little bundle of limbs with a ashy hair hiding in a shadowy corner away from the chaos.

Malik had already seen the Thief King as a child, hadn't he?

He was jolted back to the present by the sound of the table rattling, Ryou all but slamming his forehead against the hard surface. A waiter gave them both an odd look.

“I hate this. What am I supposed to do…?!” Ryou grabbed fistfuls of his hair, groaning. Malik blinked, wondering what brought on the sudden outburst.

After a long moment, Ryou slowly pushed himself back up, mouth twisted.

“I'm not going to just let him hurt my friends, but…”

Malik raised a brow. “But…?”

“I don't want to help him, not the spirit. But that child… He was helpless. I thought he was going to
die. The spirit told me there was nothing I could do, that I couldn't change the memory…” Ryou raised his head, looking Malik right in the eye with a determination that was to be respected, “… and he was wrong. I reached him. The Thief King saw me.”

He gripped the edge of the table. “I hate being helpless like I was when…”

He trailed off, but Malik understood, remembering what Ryou had told him about his mother and sister. He merely gave a nod.

“So maybe… maybe some part of him can be rescued.” Ryou brushed a strand of hair back over his ear, adding on quietly, “… If they even are the same person.”

“You don't think they are?”

“There's something else in the Ring, Malik. The spirit called it the Darkness itself. Its name is Zorc Necrophades. The spirit is affiliated with it, or it has some sort of influence over him.” His brows furrowed. “Whatever it's after… it's not good.”

Malik felt a chill go through him. He recalled a prophecy he had learned as a child, one that told of a great darkness sealed with the Pharaoh's soul. Was it possible that the darkness had also been sealed with Bakura as well?

It wasn't only possible, it was likely. In fact, Malik was certain that was the case.

As if things weren't already complicated enough...

“We should be careful then,” Malik said. “He can't hear us right now, can he?”

Ryou shook his head. “Not unless I want him to. What are we going to do?”

“Right now? I don't think there's much we can do. You know for yourself he's dodgy as hell… it's not like we can just ask him to take it easy.” Malik paused, shaking his head as if truly realizing how bizarre this new aspect of his partnership was. “We'll just have to keep uncovering what we can and figure out what to do from there.”
Ryou nodded.

“... It's nice being with someone who gets this.” He sheepishly ducked his head. “I mean, Yugi understands what it's like having an ancient spirit with you but... my friends would be screaming and fretting over me right now.”

Malik found himself in agreement. He had fed his siblings a lie about needing space when he left Egypt, knowing for a fact they probably wouldn't let him out of their sight if they truly knew what he was up to.

Ryou went on. “I'm confident I can do this. The Ring isn't controlling me and I won't passively let the spirit use my body to play his game. I'm playing too.”

Malik wasn't sure what it was he felt for the spirit that compelled him onwards but, like Ryou had said, he couldn't just be an idle pawn. If there was a greater threat, than he had to stop it. He knew first hand that the darkness took and took and never gave back.

If it had its claws deep in Bakura, they could be pulled out. Given what Ryou had told him, given what he himself had seen, a life existed, a story underneath all that mystery and poison the spirit fronted with. The sands of time had buried it, but Malik was certain it was trying to emerge again.

He wondered if Ryou was right, if the Thief King really could be saved.

He exchanged another glance with Ryou, a silent understanding passing between them. Both of them knew they couldn't turn back, not after what they’d learned, because then it all would have been for nothing.

“And so am I.”

…

“Why did you want to meet me here?” Bakura said as he stalked up to Malik, shoving his hands in his pockets as he glanced to the nearby pier.
Malik smirked when he saw him, stepping out from where he waited under a big sign.

“Research. Come on.”

Bakura scowled, glancing upwards. “Why the aquarium?”

Malik shrugged as he led the way inside the building. An attendant stamped the back of their hands as they made their way through the gates.

“I’ve never been to an aquarium.”

Bakura paused, expression sour as he realized he had been duped into something frivolous.

“You’re unbelievably irritating, you know that?” Bakura growled, eyeing a brightly coloured display like it had personally offended him as they passed.

Malik snickered, tossing him a sly look over his shoulder. “Now you know how it feels. I’m bored. Entertain me.”

“We’re supposed to be building the RPG.”

Malik waved him off as they descended a set of stairs, his interest piqued by a sign with a large whale plastered on it.

“You can afford to take a break.” He gave Bakura an unimpressed side-eye. “Besides, Ryou is the one doing all the work.”

The deep blues and greens of the lower level began to steal Malik’s attention away. There were tanks full of shimmering fish, colours he never thought he had seen before. Colours that certainly never existed amidst the dim greys and browns of the tombs. It was a weekday so there were hardly any other people around, nothing to get in the way of Malik as he flitted from tank to tank as if his eyes couldn’t drink in enough.
Bakura trailed behind him, and every time Malik looked back Bakura's sights were always on him, as if he found Malik more fascinating than any of the exhibits. Malik was too enraptured to pay it much mind, hardly aware of the huge grin that had taken over his expression.

Even amidst his excitement, a darker feeling tugged at his insides. Every time he experienced something new like this, he was reminded of all the time that had been stolen from him. A bitter voice whispered that this was the world he was never meant to see.

Malik stopped in his tracks as he spotted something beyond the tanks. The area was wider, various benches laying before a wall that seemed to be made entirely of glass, pale blue light streaming in and enveloping everything in its glow. It was a gigantic tank, one that had to be bigger than a pool.

He dashed up to the glass, pressing his face up against it and peering into the waters, but he didn't see anything.

He was beginning to wonder if the tank was empty when his vision suddenly went dark. He jerked back to see a gigantic shape swoop up from below, mouth falling open in awe.

“Whoa!” He laughed, pressing himself back up against the glass to watch the killer whale swim away. “Did you see that? It was so big!”
He turned as Bakura walked up on his left, cheeks flaring as he realized how childish he must have looked. He forced the goofy smile off of his face in favour of something more aloof, averting his gaze.

Bakura wasn't fooled, giving an amused snort. “If looking at dolphins or whatever keeps you satisfied then knock yourself out.”

They began to walk along the glass wall, Malik trailing his hand along the surface as he peered at the whale swimming around beyond.

“You have to admit, it is pretty cool.”
“Three thousand years in existence leaves not much to impress me anymore.”

Malik turned his head, not expected to be met with Bakura's intense gaze. Again, the spirit's attention seemed to be trained on him and only him, but there was something softer in his eyes this time. It made Malik's stomach feel odd and he gave a snort to cover it up.

“Come on. There has to be something you want to see…” He bumped his shoulder with Bakura's, laughing when he received a sour look in return. “You were stuck in the Ring for all that time, weren't you? I don't think that counts.”

“Think what you want but- what is that?”

Malik had looked away for one second, but when he glanced back Bakura had completely vanished from his side.

“Uh, Bakura?” He scanned around, spotting a white mess of hair disappearing through a gate drenched in red light. He stood there dumbfounded for a moment, wondering just what had gotten into him. “What the hell…?”

Rushing after Bakura, he choked as he stepped through the gate to the next area. The air was hot and humid, musty and reeking like the jungle. He waved his hand before his face, coughing. Why had Bakura led them here?

He followed the path, which was lined with fake plants and more tanks displaying various reptiles and amphibians native to the climate the exhibit was trying to emulate. The lighting was much dimmer than the other exhibits, putting more of a strain on his eyes. Bakura was still nowhere to be found - until Malik rounded a corner and saw him nearly kissing the glass of a large tank. Bakura inclined his head when he heard him approach, and Malik could see the grin stretching his lips.

“Look at her, Malik. She's magnificent!”

Malik squinted, peering into the tank - it was actually more of a large room than a tank, so much bigger than any of the other enclosures in this area. He didn't see anything at first, but then he noticed the long, slender shape draped across some of the branches in one corner of the room and his eyes widened.
“Holy shit!” That was the biggest goddamn snake Malik had ever seen. It had to be at least the length of three people, its body like a tree trunk. He glanced at the information card displayed next to the glass window of the enclosure. Green anaconda, female.

Bakura chuckled at his reaction, but didn't take his eyes off of the snake. Malik had never seen him look so reverent - even peaceful. It was bizarre, but utterly fascinating knowing that something in this world could produce such a… human reaction from him.

“So much for nothing impressing you anymore…” Malik said, smiling knowingly.

“It's a snake,” Bakura argued back as if that explained everything.

Inside the enclosure, a door opened near the back and a man with a long tool of some kind walked inside. Something dangled off the end of the tongs, and Malik pulled a face when he realized it was a gigantic, dead, rat-looking creature. He turned away, understanding what was about to happen.

He focused on Bakura instead, the spirit's eyes lighting up in genuine excitement. He pressed closer to the glass, and if Malik didn't know what was going on behind him, it probably would have been more endearing seeing Bakura so… childishly enthralled.

Perhaps, it was then Malik understood why Bakura couldn't take his eyes off of him earlier.

Bakura gave a low whistle, prompting Malik to look again. The man was gone, but the anaconda had climbed down from its perch and lay in a pile of coils on the floor. It's jaw was unhinged, the feet and tail of the dead rat poking out of its mouth. Malik's lip curled in disgust and he took a step away from the glass.

“Are you afraid?” Bakura smirked at him.

“No, I just prefer to maintain a respectful distance.” Malik crossed his arms. “I was bitten by a cobra when I was younger.”

Bakura did a double take. “And you survived?”
“Rishid sucked the poison out.”

Bakura grinned widely. “That's pretty badass.”

Malik gave a wry smile, wishing he could believe Bakura.

“It wasn't, really.” His smile faded, eyes darkening as the memory seeped back into his mind. “The snake wasn't unprovoked. I kicked a ball into its nest like an idiot. The whole thing was my fault.” But the pain from the bite and the fact he had nearly died weren't the worst things from that whole ordeal. “… Rishid ended up suffering for my mistake.”

Bakura's lip curled, the mirth draining from his countenance. “Your bastard father again?”

Malik narrowed his eyes at him for that, biting back a comment. He decided it wasn't worth it and took another step away from the enclosure, pausing when he noticed Bakura wasn't moving to follow him.

“Think you can say goodbye to your long lost love?” He tossed back.

“Fuck off,” Bakura grumbled but took one last longing gaze at the enclosure before continuing along the path with Malik. He eyed the tanks lining the walls showcasing various other specimens of snakes, some poisonous, some not. “Seems criminal to imprison them all like this.”

Malik was about to make some teasing remark about Bakura being some vigilante of snake justice when something made him stop dead in his tracks. He saw Bakura stretch his arms above his head, which wouldn't have been so remarkable if it wasn't for what Malik saw on his arm.

“Bakura, what are those?”

He pointed to the patches stuck onto the spirit's bicep, just visible under his sleeve. Bakura lowered his arm again and pushed up the fabric so Malik could see them clearly.
“What, these?” He shrugged. “Well, making coffee all the time is inconvenient and my landlord's stomach doesn't always agree with it so I figure I can just cut out the middleman.”

Malik wanted to put his face in his hands. More so, he wanted to slap Bakura. He settled for pinching the bridge of his nose. Bakura had at least five caffeine patches on him, and a few that looked like nicotine. Really, he should have expected this from him.

“Okay, no. No. You're seriously going to kill yourself and Ryou.” Malik grabbed Bakura's arm so he couldn't squirm away and scraped at the patches until they peeled off. Bakura shot him an offended glare, but Malik fought with him until he could toss all of the patches into a nearby waste bin. “You wonder why you're exhausted all the time? Try some real food, Bakura. Here, I'll even buy it for you.”

He levelled Bakura with a sharp look, almost daring him to argue, before pulling him along down another hallway where the air was clearer. They could cut through here to get to the food court, according to the signs. The hallway itself was interesting, the ceiling arched and made of glass, a gigantic tank surrounding them on nearly every side. Malik could see fish and turtles swimming above them but he didn't stop to look at them this time.

“Gods, I thought we went over this already,” he growled back.

Bakura twisted out of his grip.

“What are you, my mother?”

Malik flinched. Silence cut through the air, broken only by the gentle bubbling of the water surrounding them. Bakura's words had an effect on them both - Malik could see it as he turned to face him. The spirit's brows were drawn together, looking almost lost as he tried to figure out why the mere mention of a mother figure bothered him.

It hit Malik right then, truly hit him, that he had been right about Bakura. He was staring at a person, not just a spirit birthed from the darkness, not a fable told to him as a child. Bakura was, or had been human at some point, and perhaps that part of him was closer than he thought.

Bakura's irrational, yet self-sufficient ways suddenly made a whole lot more sense. Malik felt like an idiot for not putting it together sooner. He had always attributed Bakura's destructive behaviour to his detachment as a spirit, and that still seemed true to some extent, but perhaps it went deeper than that.
Why then, would someone as aloof and unfeeling as Bakura look so troubled at the mention of his mother?

Malik frowned. “Right… You grew up without one.”

The three of them had, he realized. That was a pain they all shared, but Malik found it hard to imagine Bakura's side of it. He didn't just lose his mother, he lost everyone. It seemed almost unfathomable that a child could survive on his own like that. Malik knew he never would have survived without his own siblings.

Bakura's habits had been born from a lack of guidance.

Bakura's gaze hardened as if to cover his lapse, a defensive edge to his tone. “So did you.”

“I still had my father,” Malik muttered, still lost in his own thoughts, still trying to process it all. “He was… strict.”

That was putting it lightly. A brittle smile tugged at his lips. He supposed guidance hadn't done him wonders either.

“Your father was a miserable dog.”

Malik snapped back to the present, narrowing his eyes at Bakura. He didn't want this conversation to be flipped on him, but he had already let Bakura get away with insulting his father once today. “Don't you dare speak a word about him.”

Bakura shook his head in disbelief. “You can't be serious, Malik. He carved into your fucking back and you're defending him?”

“I don't want to hear it! Just drop it, okay?” Malik snapped, turning on his heel and continuing down the hall. An unpleasant pressure prickled at the back of his mind but he ignored it, burying it in the back of his subconscious like he had so many times before.

“And he beat baldy too? You're just going to let that go?” Bakura hurried to catch up. “Do you hate
“Shut up!” Malik rounded on him again. Why the hell couldn't Bakura just let it rest? He didn't want to talk about this. He didn't even want to think about it. It was a dark corner of his mind he never ventured. “You don't understand. The fate of the tombkeepers drove him out of his mind!”

So it wasn’t truly his fault, was it? It was only because of the curse laid upon the clan. Perhaps in another world where there was no curse, his father wouldn’t have-

That line of thought was more painful than Malik anticipated. He gripped at his hair, the drumbeat growing in his mind. His skin felt hot, blood racing.

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” Bakura spat. “Unless the Pharaoh's spirit literally possessed him and made him do those things to you, it sounds to me like you're making excuses.”

Bakura couldn’t understand it. He couldn’t. His father willingly acting that way wasn’t something Malik could accept. Malik’s chest ached, the hallway feeling too small, like the glass would collapse and they’d both drown.

“I never wanted to kill him!” He protested. “I skinned him alive!”

“Too good a fate for him.” Bakura’s voice was cold like the pale blue light that washed over them from all sides. “The bastard doesn't deserve your grief so save it.”

“Shut up!” Malik yelled again, pain stabbing at the back of his head, like something was trying to pry its way out. It was a wonder no one had come to check on them. The hallway remained empty.

“Perhaps that’s the one good thing your other personality did.”

The aquarium disappeared, light, noise and colour all vanishing. Malik only felt the impact of his fist as it collided with something hard. When the ringing in his ears cleared and the red seeped from his vision, Malik could see Bakura laying on the ground in front of him, one hand holding the side of his face. Malik’s fist was still extended, quivering.
But something felt wrong. His skin didn’t fit around him the same way, like something, someone else had slid inside it with him. His head felt like it had been cracked open, hot blood spilling out, frying his nerves. It was far too quiet now, the pounding in his head having ceased.

He heard it then, poison sliding into his ears. The voice was silky and familiar. Instead of burning heat, Malik felt ice crawl through his veins.

“I hate to say it, but I agree with the bastard…”

Deaf to the voice and heedless of the horror that had overtaken Malik’s features, Bakura pushed himself back to his feet, lips pulled taut in a grin. His tongue flicked over his teeth and he worked his jaw a few times.

“So you won’t raise a hand against the Pharaoh yourself, but you’ll hit me?”

Malik couldn’t respond, separated from the moment. He barely even heard what Bakura said because the voice was speaking again.

“Did you miss me, main personality?”

“He’s…!” Malik stammered, breathless. “I can hear him…!”

The grin fell off of Bakura’s face, replaced by confusion. “Malik, what-?”

“He’s in my mind again!”

Without thought, without any ounce of knowledge where he was going, Malik took off. His surroundings became a blur, everything else but the cackling in his mind falling away. All he could do was run, run and hope he ended up far enough away to never hurt anyone ever again.

“Again? Oh, dear main personality, I never left.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Strangely, this chapter doesn't have too much Bakura in it... well, I suppose that's only half true but anyways. This is supposed to be a thiefshipping fic wth

This chapter may as well be titled "Ryou and Malik go exploring in their own souls"

“You know it's pointless to hide.”

Malik knew but he didn't care. He threw open the door of his hotel room and slammed it shut behind him, hoping no one would be stupid enough to come and check on him.

“Go away!” He hissed, one hand clutching at his hair and the other fumbling for the bathroom door. He went for the bag he had left on the counter, searching for the painkillers he had brought with him. His head felt like it would split open. “I won't let you take me over again!”

“Not even for a little while? I do want to pay Rishid a visit…”

“No!” Malik choked. He didn't even want to think about his siblings being in danger again because of him. He kept his head ducked as he searched for the pills, afraid to raise it and see what lurked in the mirror’s reflection.

“Come on. I only need five minutes.”

A droplet of moisture splashed down on Malik's fist, and then another. He grit his teeth, sinking to the foot of the counter as another sob escaped him. He had forgotten about the painkillers, unable to muster up the willpower to take them. All he could seem to do was curl up in a ball and cry, swallowed by his own failures. His other self was back and there was nothing he could do about it.

All of that struggling in Battle City - what was it for if his other self could return so easily? His siblings efforts to save him had been for nothing. He had let them down again.

He heard the voice give a snort of disgust.
“Will you stop your sniveling already? Is this seriously what you’ve become in my absence, dominant half?”

The voice faded behind the fog of despair blanketing Malik’s mind. It was unclear how much time passed before it was broken by another noise, one that sent Malik’s pulse through the roof - a knock at the door.

“Malik?” The tone gave it away as Ryou's voice. Malik lifted his head, eyes wide with alarm. Had he locked the door? He didn't remember. The events following the aquarium were a blur.

“Is that the vessel?” The voice spoke up again, lower this time, calculating.

There was another knock, followed by silence as Malik held his breath, hoping Ryou would think he wasn't here and just leave. Of course, he wasn't quite so lucky - he heard the door handle twist.

“Ryou, don't-!” Malik cried out. “It's not safe…!”

There were footsteps as someone entered the hotel room. A moment later, Ryou's face appeared in the bathroom doorway, frown etched into it as he saw Malik cowering under the sink.

“The spirit told me you two got into a fight…” Ryou shook his head, stepping inside the bathroom. “I know he's an idiot most times, but this seems like a bit of an overreaction, don't you think?”

Malik's mind wasn't working properly. Why wasn't Ryou running away?

“It's not that, it's-!”

“Your other personality?” Ryou shrugged like Malik had made a comment about the weather. “He mentioned that too.”

Malik could only stare at him dumbly, unable to comprehend why Ryou wasn’t scrambling to get away from him. He saw for himself what had happened in Battle City, hadn’t he? “Then why the
“Calm down. I'm not worried,” Ryou said, lowering himself in front of Malik. “I've met your other personality before.”

Malik jerked back. “What…?”

“On the blimp after you and the spirit lost to him. He spared me when he had no reason to,” Ryou explained, gaze turning thoughtful. “It makes me think…” He chewed on the inside of his lip, a rueful smile tugging at his mouth as if he knew Malik wasn't going to like what he had to say. “Well, if banishing him to the shadows doesn't get rid of him… there has to be some way to deal with him, right?”

“Make him leave already…” the voice growled, tone sounding off in a way Malik couldn’t place.

Malik almost laughed. The very idea sounded so absurd. “What are you suggesting? You think he can be reasoned with? Have you completely _lost_ it?”

“Do you have a better idea?” Ryou huffed in exasperation, shaking his head. “I just don't see why you're cowering, Malik. I watched you overcome him in Battle City. You can do it again.”

Malik’s jaw slackened, shock creeping through his veins. He didn’t understand it. He truly didn’t. Bakura had said nearly the exact same thing to him, so much more confident in Malik’s ability to fit inside his own skin than Malik himself was. How could the both of them have been so sure? How did they have so much faith in him?

It was the same faith he’d seen from his siblings. They thought he was better, they trusted him more than Malik trusted himself, but why? This proved he wasn’t as in control as he thought... didn’t it?

Malik hadn’t realized how much his pulse had evened out, how much his hands had stopped trembling. He didn’t feel like he was being scorched, burned away from his own nerves. He curled and uncurled his fingers, dug his nails into his own palms. He was here. He was still himself.

Just himself.
“You didn't have to come here…” He said, voice low this time. Ryou had every reason to hate him, or at the very least want nothing to do with him. They weren’t even friends after all.

“I don't want any surprises. Were in this together and we can't be fighting another part of you every step of the way. There are bigger things to worry about.” Ryou placed his hands on Malik’s shoulders, giving them a slight squeeze. “You don't have the Rod anymore. What power does he have?”

The question stunned Malik almost as much as Ryou reaching out to him like this. He fell silent as his thoughts swelled, feeling more aware of himself and his surroundings than ever. He was still in his body, here, now. He hadn’t been shoved out or split away from the moment like so many times in the past.

He really did have more control than he gave himself credit for.

“Hmph. As if I couldn't get creative…” the voice grumbled, but it wasn’t an invasive cacophony pushing itself into the forefront of his mind. It was just… there, like any other thought.

“I could try speaking with him, if you'll let me,” Ryou went on, gentle, pragmatic, stabilizing. Malik didn’t trust his other personality at all, and he was never going to let him in control again, but Ryou sounded so sure of himself...

“I don't want to talk to him! He doesn't make sense!” The voice shouted, causing Malik to wince. “He won't be afraid again!”

Malik frowned, not having the slightest clue what he meant by that, but his other personality didn’t elaborate. His head felt blissfully empty the next moment, the tension in his limbs finally leaving.

“He’s… gone,” Malik breathed, unsure of what had just taken place. He knew it wasn’t the last he’d see of this matter, but for now he felt… safe.

Ryou looked relieved as well when he saw Malik relax. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah…” Malik nodded, hardly able to believe it. He stared up at Ryou in a sort of awe, amazed at how well that had been handled. He never expected Ryou of all people to be able to ward his other self off. “Thanks.”
“Anytime.” Ryou stood up and offered Malik a hand. “Are you gonna be okay by yourself?”

Malik’s brow creased as he took the hand and stood up. He really didn’t know. He was almost hesitant to let go of Ryou’s hand, like his control was some fluke that could be revoked at any moment.

“Could you just… hang around for a bit?” He felt stupid for asking, like a little kid afraid of the bogeyman, but Ryou merely smiled and nodded in return.

With the heat of the situation beginning to settle, Malik noticed some discolouration on Ryou’s cheek and frowned. He vaguely remembered punching Bakura earlier. Damn it. “I’m sorry about hitting you. I completely forgot you would feel it too.”

Ryou blinked, prodding his own cheek and working his jaw like he’d only just noticed it was sore. And then he smirked at Malik.

“Please. Hit him harder next time.”

…

Malik knew this wasn’t the end, His other personality wouldn’t just disappear forever, that much was clear by this point, and he couldn’t wait until he resurfaced again. There seemed to be only one thing left to do.

Malik had fallen asleep, but his mind was wide awake. Instead of running from the dark, he turned and faced it dead on, and when he next opened his eyes, it wasn’t the ceiling of the hotel room he was staring at anymore.

The corridor seemed to stretch endlessly, torches lining the walls, the smell of dust and death so familiar. He knew the tombs well, but this place didn’t seem quite the same as the grave he’d once called home. The halls twisted and warped as Malik travelled through them, making him feel like he was going in circles - that was, until a haunting laugh sounded from behind him.

He whirled around to see his double standing there, a distorted mirror image of how he had appeared
in Battle City. His double spread his arms wide, grinning like a fiend.

“What an honour! Mr. Main Personality has finally come to visit me!”

Malik narrowed his eyes. “Why are you back? I banished you!”

“Oh? Did you?” The double tilted his head, mock considering Malik's words. He patted himself down, glancing down at his body as if to make sure all the parts of him were still there. “Strange… I don't feel very banished.”

"I won't let you take over my body again!" Malik yelled, finding that he truly wasn't afraid at all now. His voice filled up the corridor, echoing around both of their minds. “Stay away from my family!”

“Ah, so we're jumping right to the accusations, are we?” The double sounded bored, idly digging a finger into his ear. “What makes you think I want to take control again? I have more power here than I do outside your mind.”

As if to demonstrate, he waved his hand. The Millennium Rod appeared in his grip and their surroundings began to shift, leaving them standing in a wider chamber instead of a narrow passage. The double smirked, crowning himself king by taking a seat on a throne made of shadows, leaning his cheek into his fist. “Come on, don't tell me you don't miss the Rod as well… Wouldn't it be fun to have it back?”

He snorted, disappointment blanketing his vacant gaze. “But you won't get it back. And even if you did, you already promised it to Bakura. You're kind of his bitch now, aren't you? How the tables have turned…”

Malik's eyes widened. He knew the Rod wasn't the real one, but the fact that his other personality could manipulate the properties of this subconscious realm so easily was unnerving. What was even more surprising was his double’s statement. He didn't even care about the ensuing insults.

“What?” Some of Malik's anger evaporated behind his shock. “You can't seriously expect me to believe that! You've always wanted to make my life a living hell!”

He saw no reason why that should have changed. In fact, his double should have been aching for
revenge by now.

“I've said it before, I have no wants or desires.” The double glared down at Malik from his perch, scorn leaking from every pore. “Besides, I couldn't take you over even if I could be assed.”

He... couldn't? Malik was only just beginning to realize he had more control than he thought, but his double saying it out loud was even more disorienting. He still didn't trust anything he said, however.

“What do you mean?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you?” Whatever humour the double's expression held drained right there, patience snapping like a twig. “As always, you're ignorant to what goes on inside your own head. You were infected by shadow magic, the same kind I fed off of for years. During our duel with that fuckhead Pharaoh, you banished that.” He bared his teeth in a snarl. “I'm powerless now. You shoved me inside this decrepit part of your psyche and I'm trapped. Are you happy?”

“But…” Malik stood his ground, fists clenching at his sides. “How can you be trapped if I keep hearing you?”

“Because you keep dragging me out!” A vein popped in the double’s forehead, the tremble of his rage shaking the confines of this realm. “I don't want to deal with your emotions again!”

Malik shook his head in disbelief. “Why would I-?”

“Because you're weak and you couldn't handle the initiation. You couldn't handle the lessons and the beatings when you couldn't pay attention. And now, you can't handle the guilt!”

Each word fell sharp and cutting right onto Malik's head. He opened his mouth to protest, but realized he couldn't. There were such large gaps in his memory, but that was where the problem lay, wasn’t it? He remembered wanting to run, wanting to get away from the reality of it all. For some reason, he hadn’t put together that he was thrusting another part of himself forward to bear it instead.

The double’s eyes smoldered, heat so intense Malik could almost feel it burning him. “And where do you think it goes? What do you think happens during those blackouts? I'm the one that has to carry it.” He leaned forward, muscles straining as though unable to contain his fury, spittle flying from his
lips as his voice rose to a scream once more. “The least you can do after everything I've done for you is leave me alone!”

Something in Malik’s mind shattered.

“Everything you've done for me?!” He repeated, hardly able to wrap his head around those words. “I never wanted to kill father…!”

“I was trying to protect us!” The double dragged his palm down his face, leering at Malik through his fingers. “If I hadn't stepped in, we wouldn't be here right now!”

“Wh-what…?” Malik felt more of his anger crumble behind disbelief. His other self had to be messing with him. He wasn’t going to fall for it.

The double stood up and leapt off of his throne, gravity not applying in this realm. He landed beside Malik as their surroundings shifted once more. “You know what? I'll prove it.”

An ice cold sensation slid down Malik’s spine as they were in a hallway once more, much too familiar - a place he’d seen in some of his worst nightmares.

“Rishid!”

His own voice cut through the air moments before he saw himself, five years in the past, run by, trailed closely by a younger version of Isis. Rishid’s cries of pain filtered down the passage, bouncing off the stone. Malik felt the world spin, the breath hollowly passing through his lungs. He didn’t want to see this.

The younger version of himself reached the doorway, horror freezing him in his tracks. Isis caught up a moment later, covering her mouth in shock. Malik recoiled, not wanting to see what was about to unfold inside that room, but then their view shifted and they were inside the chamber. Rishid lay on the floor, unconscious, his back destroyed with lacerations. Over him stood Malik’s father, who turned to face the two intruders, knife still burning red in his grip.

Malik and his other personality stood, invisible to the others. After all, it was only a memory, and one that couldn’t be changed.
“Don’t you dare look away.” The double growled. Malik couldn’t; he was as petrified as he had been years ago. “He was going to kill us all for breaking the laws of the clan. It was him or us.”

True to his word, Malik’s father walked over, reheating the knife over a torch, eyes wild with manic rage.

“Come here, Malik. Now it’s your turn…”

Malik shook his head as if to deny the reality of what he was seeing, but he knew it was the truth - truth buried beneath layers and layers of repression being dragged back to the surface. He fell to his knees, clutching his head. Before him, the carnage began to unfold, but he couldn’t look any longer, the screams becoming white noise in his ears.

When he finally found the will to raise his head again, his past self - now possessed by his other personality - advanced on the fallen Rishid, raising the concealed blade in the Rod.

“Why…?” Malik choked, tears streaking his cheeks. He hadn’t realized when he had begun to cry. “Why Rishid too…?”

The double had his arms crossed, watching the scene before them with an unreadable gaze. “He failed us.”

Another emotion he had repressed struck him right there, moments before the ritual had taken place. Malik saw Rishid leaned against the wall, eyes closed, a helpless grimace pulling at his mouth as he watched the men take Malik away. All Malik knew was betrayal, right up until the knife had first touched his back.

But despite Rishid’s inability to prevent what had happened, despite the animosity in his father’s eyes as he advanced on them, all that remained in Malik’s chest was grief.

“I didn't hate them…!” He fought through a sob to say.

The double’s jaw tightened, eyes hard like stone.
“No, you didn’t, so I had to hate them for you.”

Malik’s sobbing abruptly ceased. He turned to glance over his shoulder with wide eyes, but his double was already leaving. The memory crumbled around them, leaving them in the same dark chamber as before.

Malik found himself opening his mouth without thinking.

“Wait-”

“What is it now?” The double growled, whirling to face him again.

“You…” Malik was still trying to process everything, slowly working through what he had just witnessed. He got back to his feet and faced his other self. “Were you really trying to protect me…?”

The double snorted through his nose, sand-dry and bitter.

“Us. We’re the same person.”

Malik’s chest clenched, confusion and pain blending into one horrid ache in his chest. It would have been easier pretending there wasn’t another side to this. He could have gone on hating his double, but he was beginning to realize how pointless that was if they were the same person. How could he move on if he couldn’t even allow himself peace?

“I shouldn't have created you,” he blurted. “I… I'm sorry.” He didn’t know what else to say. “I didn’t realize there was more to this whole thing.”

The double shook his head.

“An apology? You must have really lost it…”
“I don't know what else to do at this point.” Malik ran his hand through his hair, wishing he was strong enough to bear the guilt. That’s how this all started, wasn’t it? Because he wasn’t strong enough, was he?

His fingers clenched in his hair, eyes squeezing shut. Ryou and Bakura thought he was strong enough. His siblings thought he was strong enough. He didn’t want to let them down again. He couldn’t.

What was it Ryou had said? That there had to be another way to deal with his other self? He didn’t think he could forgive his double as much as his double could forgive him, but he wasn’t getting anywhere as it was.

“I don't trust you, but… there has to be some way to make things right,” he said, opening his eyes again and dropping his hand from his hair.

“There isn't.” His other self’s lips stretched in a poisonous grin. “Maybe I’ll call it even if you let me out for five minutes so I can pay Bakura a little visit… Asshole is probably aching for a rematch.”

Malik glowered at him through his disheveled bangs. “Not funny.”

“Well, haven't you become a bore?” The double turned to leave again. “If we're done here…”

“Hang on!” Malik huffed. There was no way he could just let his other self walk off after what had just happened. This wasn’t going to be easy, was it?

He glanced around, eyeing the various doorways lining the walls. It seemed like there were endless passages, and he couldn’t imagine where all of them went. “What is this place?”

“Like I said, you're painfully ignorant as to what goes on in here. This is the place I've been dwelling for years. It’s a sort of… castle. Quite fitting for a king, heh. I built it while you continued to run from the darkness in your own mind.” He tilted his head at Malik, unimpressed. “And you're still running from it. How typical of you.”

“I'm not-” Malik bristled but his double held up his hand to cut him off.
“You ran away from Rishid and Isis because you're afraid of what they will think of you. You ran away from Bakura because you hated that he was right about father. You're running from your past because you don't want to confront the guilt of it all. I know you better than you think.” His voice dropped to a hiss, lip curling in disgust. “Denial is one of the worst emotions you feed me. It tastes horrible.”

Malik’s gaze averted, teeth clenching behind his lips. He didn’t expect to be cut down to size right there. Worse so - he couldn’t find fault with anything his double was saying.

“Why are you…?” Malik sighed, shrugging his shoulders in helpless exasperation. It just seemed weird that his double was bothering to tell him all of this. He was pretty sure this was the most words they had ever exchanged in one sitting. “I mean, you've never spoken to me like this before.”

“You had me suppressed for years by that bald idiot,” the double scoffed and crossed his arms, turning his shoulder to him. Perhaps that should have been obvious, in hindsight.

Malik’s brows creased, concern heavy in his gaze as it fell back on his other self. “If you do get out again… are you going to hurt him?”

He expected his double to laugh in his face because of course the answer should have been clear. However, a thoughtful aura seemed to cross the double’s features.

“I can exist regardless of if he's around or not now. His death is irrelevant. However…” He held the false Rod up, dull eyes fixed on it with a measured disdain. “I suppose some part of me still wants to.”

Malik expected as much, but he still tensed. His double continued, heedless of Malik’s discomfort.

“But this lack of darkness and power, the absence of the Rod…” The gold in his grip disintegrated into nothing, leaving behind his closed fist. His expression was impossible to read. Apathy? Uneasiness? It wasn’t crazed pleasure, or anything typical of his other half - that, Malik was certain of. “It leaves more room to think. I don’t think I like it.”

Malik blinked. He never expected an answer like that. He had to wonder just how far the darkness had invaded him before - infected as his other self had put it - and to what extent it had influenced his other personality. With it gone, what was left of his other half?
“You're different now.” How much different remained unknown. If he could take one thing from this conversation, however, it was that he had nothing to fear. At least, not for now.

His double inclined his head towards him, dark amusement flickering behind the pale lavender of his gaze.

“So are you.”

...Ryou appeared before the darkened pit on the cusp of his soul room. Bakura was already standing there, the spirit turning to him with a displeased narrow of his eyes.

“He almost caught you last time and you're going in again so soon?”

Ryou levelled him with a cold stare. If he didn’t know better he’d say Bakura seemed anxious. “Why are you so worried?”

“Why aren't you?” Bakura snapped back. “That's not just some fragment of the darkness, that's the real Zorc Necrophades.”

“He can't be that strong if he has to leech off of me to exist.” Ryou shoved past him before Bakura cold protest, allowing the darkness to pull him inside. The spirit’s snarl was lost in the rush of the shadows closing over him.

Once again, Ryou found himself dropped in the deserts of Egypt thousands of years into the past, but it was stone beneath his feet this time. Cliffs rose up on all sides, the path winding through them like a serpent. Ryou wondered where exactly he was.

The clop of hooves made him whirl around. Three men on horseback appeared as if from thin air, wearing smirks as they circled Ryou. Ryou tensed, having written enough random encounters to know where this was going.

“What's a delicate little thing like you doing all the way out here?” The first man said as one of his
lackeys went to block the other side of the path.

“‘Delicate’…?” Ryou muttered, frowning. This had to be some of the worst dialogue he had ever heard.

“We could show you the way to the nearest village of you're lost… for a price.”

Ryou took a step back, too unimpressed by these bandits to truly be frightened. Perhaps the danger of the situation hadn't quite sunk in yet.

“No, thank you,” he said, turning and running down the path, trying to slip by one of the other men.

“Where do you think you're going?”

A hand seized the back of his shirt and flung him to the ground at the center of the three of the men. Ryou grunted, turning to see one of them slide off of his horse and advance on him, knife drawn.

The man stopped. His eyes weren't on Ryou anymore, but looking at something above him. His expression was no longer smug, it was filled with horror.

There was a wet, gurgling cry from one of the bandits behind Ryou and he twisted his head to see the man fall off his horse with blood spraying from his neck. A small, blurred shape leapt from the horse's back to the one next to it, Ryou catching a flash of white mixed in with the chaos. The second bandit cried out, slashing with reckless abandon at his attacker, but a moment later he was on the ground as well, limp like the first bandit.

The horses, spooked by the struggle, screeched and took off, leaving the last bandit alone and without means to escape. Ryou had to roll to the side to avoid getting trampled, refocusing his attention just in time to see the attacker leap off of a fleeing horse and land directly in front of him.

Ryou got a clear look at the stranger for the first time, his eyes widening. Even with their back to him, Ryou already knew who it was. The white hair was a dead giveaway.

The Thief King stood, facing the bandit, and Ryou realized he had put himself between the two
parties with the intention to protect. It was uncanny, stirring up blurry memories of Battle City. Ryou didn't remember much from that time, but one thing that did recall was coming back to consciousness with the spirit standing before him, shielding him from the jaws of Osiris.

The bandit’s hands shook - with rage or with fear, Ryou couldn't tell - grip on the knife adjusting uncertainly. Ryou heard the Thief King scoff moments before he launched himself forward again.

The bandit yelped, backpedaling furiously, so focused on getting away from the Thief King he didn't notice the edge creeping up behind him. His heel met empty air, the rock crumbling beneath his weight, and then he disappeared. Moments later, Ryou heard a thud echo from far below, followed by nothing but silence.

The Thief King stepped up to the ledge and peered over, an eerily familiar, high pitched laugh bubbling up his lungs. Ryou shivered despite the heat. Hearing that laugh from a child made it sound no less haunting.

He watched in stunned silence as the Thief King paced around, pausing to crouch over the bodies. It was like Ryou wasn't even there.

“Don't even have much on them. Fucking dogs.” The Thief King kicked one of the bandits in disgust.

Ryou slowly pushed himself to his feet, the gears in his mind finally beginning to turn again. The crunch of the gravel beneath his feet caused the thief’s head to snap back over him.

“Hello, spirit,” the Thief King said, grinning at Ryou.

“Spirit…?” Ryou blinked, the irony not lost on him. “I'm not a spirit.”

“I've seen you appear before, right out of thin air. That seems like something a spirit would do.” He turned his nose up, a hint of childish petulance colouring his words. It was striking how young he looked - not as young as last time, but this version of the Thief King couldn't have been older than ten or eleven.

Ryou's expression became grim as his gaze swept over the carnage around them. There was nothing childish about the way the thief fought, and the lack of remorse he showed. He wore nothing aside
from the shendyt wrapped around his waist and the scars littering his body were plainly visible, the most notable one cutting down the side of his face. He looked closer to the man trapped in the darkness Ryou had seen than the boy from the last memory he had ventured into.

The worst part was the dulled look in his eye, more worn and ragged than the rocks surrounding them, like the sharp winds had shaped him too, made him into this… warrior. Just from appearance alone, he had been through more than a child ever should have, but someone softer wouldn't have survived in the brutal heat of the desert.

The thief drew closer, but only by a step, sights carefully trained on Ryou. “Do spirits carry gold on them? I don't work for free you know.”

“Gold?” The question took Ryou aback. “I don't have gold…”

The thief clicked his tongue, shoulders slumping.

“Not even some food?”

Ryou could see he was disappointed. The thief was thin - lithe, but still smaller than what someone his age should be - and it made Ryou's chest tighten. His gaze fell to a spot on the thief’s arm, where a bead of red was running down the skin. The fight had gone by so fast Ryou hadn't noticed the thief had been injured as well.

“Well, I don't have that either but… here, let me-” Ryou reached for the thief’s wrist but it was jerked back out of his reach before his fingers could even brush it. The thief glared at him, eyes wild and wary. Ryou sighed. He really didn't encounter many people, did he? When was the last time someone offered him help, if at all?

“It’s okay. I'm just going to wrap it.” Ryou reached down to the hem of his own shirt and tore at it until he had a sizeable strip. The thief’s hackles dropped when he saw what he was doing, but he was still eyeing Ryou like he expected to be stabbed in the back at any moment.

Ryou's eyes flicked to a nearby rock. “Um… this will be easier if you sit down.”

The thief said nothing, but after a beat he slowly stepped over to the rock and pulled himself up to sit on top of it, the knife he had used to kill the bandits still clenched tightly in his grip. Ryou moved
next to him, gently taking his wrist and holding it steady as he wrapped the makeshift bandage around the wound. He wished he had disinfectant or proper bandages but he imagined there weren’t any drug stores around here. This would have to do.

The whole time he tended to the cut, the thief didn't look away from him. Ryou wasn't even sure he saw him blink. His gaze was so intense, so distrustful, Ryou thought he might strike if he so much as moved his arm wrong. He only seemed to relax when the blood flow had finally stopped and his arm was fully wrapped. The thief's shoulders lowered a bit, but he didn't take his sights off of Ryou.

Ryou gave a nervous laugh, letting him have his arm back. The silence had grown painful and uncomfortable - and a little freakish if he was being completely honest.
“Is there a reason you keep staring at me…?”

The thief’s gaze shifted up to a spot just above Ryou's face. “You have the hair.”

Ryou must have looked really confused because the thief rolled his eyes as if what he was talking about was completely obvious.

“Those with white hair have souls as strong as the Gods, or so the legend goes. That's why we’re feared.” He leaned back on his arms, idly kicking his short legs, heels lightly slapping against the rock. “You're just as cursed as I am. Stay away from the towns, they won't trade with you. They might even stone you to drive you off.”

With that word of advice, he shoved himself off of his seat and began stalking off. Ryou stood up as well.

“Wait-”

“Don't follow me.” The thief turned to pin him with a sharp look.

“It’s dangerous to be out here by yourself.”

Not that the Thief King couldn't handle himself, but that didn't make it right.

“So?” The thief raised a brow, facing Ryou completely. He seemed skeptical, hardly able to process that someone might have had an inkling of concern for his wellbeing. After a moment, he rolled his eyes and started off again, huffing. “Fine. If you fall behind, I'm not going back for you.”

Despite the bratty arrogance, Ryou smiled and hurried to catch up. The child was stubborn, but not as stubborn as the spirit he had grown familiar with.

They began to make their way through the pass, the memory shifting and wavering around them. The thief didn't notice the odd way reality seemed to detach and glitch every so often, but Ryou did.
He saw the cliffs crumble and remake themselves, the sun travel through the sky faster than what should have been possible, the horizon blur and flicker. It felt like he was in a dream, one that was unstable enough to be shaken from at any second, but he had come this far already. He was determined to hold on until the end.

It could have been minutes or hours that had passed before Ryou broke the silence, a question he should have asked a long time ago on the tip of his tongue.

“Could you tell me your name?”

Again, that same hyena peel of laughter cut through the air, sending chills down Ryou's spine.

“Whatever you're planning to do with it won't work. I'm already damned,” the child declared as though proud of the fact.

“I'm not planning to do anything with it, I'm just curious…” Ryou said. It seemed horrible to him - growing so distrustful of people that one would assume the worst of them right off the bat. “Exchanging names is the polite thing to do when you meet someone.”

The child grunted and offered nothing more. Ryou waited, and waited, and finally came to the conclusion he wasn't going to get an answer. It wasn't like he expected this scrappy little thief to know anything of manners anyway.

The pause drew on for an absurdly long amount of time. Ryou forgot he had even asked a question to begin with, becoming swept up in other thoughts instead, such as how the thief had managed to survive, and if he truly was on his own out here.

“Bakura.”

Ryou blinked, thinking he had been addressed, but he remembered he had never told the thief his name to begin with.

“Huh?”
The thief stopped, narrowing his eyes at Ryou over his shoulder. “You asked for my name. Now you know it.”

Ryou drew to a halt as well, but he realized he really wasn’t all that surprised. So they shared a name, did they? Made sense, considering they already shared a body.

“My name is Ryou,” he said.

Bakura snorted, picking up the pace again. “You're a fool to give it away so easily.”

Ryou wondered what he meant by that, silently frowning.

And then the world shifted and they stood before ruins of some kind. A desolate, suffocating air swept over Ryou as he took in the charred structures, debris scattered everywhere. The place looked like a warzone - no, even worse than that. Something terrible had happened here, something that went beyond mere fighting. He recalled the smoke he had seen rising into the sky before, and realized he already knew exactly where they were.

Turning to Bakura, he saw the child standing in the midst of what used to be a house, a shadow having fell over his face. Ryou felt his heart twist in his chest as the pieces slid into place.

“This is…” he uttered, hushed like it would disturb the very air to speak too loud, like it would awaken some beast lurking in the ruins. “This is your home, isn't it?”

He took a hesitant step towards Bakura, his foot accidentally pressing down on a blackened piece of pottery. It snapped loudly, making him wince. He moved more carefully, stepping in front of Bakura so he could see his face.

Bakura’s mouth was screwed up like it was trying to hold something animal within. He glared through the moisture lining the bottom of his eyes, but he couldn’t quite contain the sob that wracked his body. His grief bled through, body too small for the weight of the destruction that had torn this place apart - that had torn him apart.

“It was,” he choked out, reaching up to furiously wipe at his face so the tears didn’t fall. He dropped to sit on the ground, making it easier for him to curl up and hide his face between his knees.
It was one thing being told about the massacre that had birthed the Items. It was another to see the aftermath for himself. Ryou could hardly imagine being in Bakura’s place. This was too much, and in the moment he forgot about the spirit because the only part of Bakura that seemed to exist - that seemed to matter - was this child.

And the royal family had ordered this to happen? Why? Ryou’s fists clenched at his sides. He didn’t want to think the Pharaoh was responsible for this, but if he was then he understood why Bakura was out for his blood.

He dropped to his knees beside Bakura, reaching out and placing his hands over the child’s. He pulled them away from Bakura’s face, and was met with a confused, cautious gaze. It was clear that he wasn’t used to being touched. He was truly alone out here. He’d lost everyone.

“I’m so sorry,” Ryou murmured. “You really didn’t deserve this.”

He wouldn’t wish this on his worst enemy. Not even the spirit.

Bakura jumped back to his feet, startling Ryou, eyes focused on something high above Ryou’s head. Ryou turned and glanced upwards, his mouth falling open in surprise.

He thought it was smoke swirling in the air, but upon closer inspection it didn't act like smoke. The trails of mist swirled in all directions, slowly crawling towards where the two of them stood.

And then Ryou heard it, a wailing permeating his ears - not one voice but many, all screaming wordless howls of despair and fury. He cupped his hands over his ears but it was already inside his mind, sending scratches of cold up his spine. He felt something brush his arm, gooseflesh breaking out along his skin as he turned his head to see a wispy tendril encircling his wrist.

It felt like the breath was being squeezed from him as more and more tendrils joined in, curious, searching. He couldn’t breathe properly, panic just beginning to set in when Bakura’s voice cut through the fog.

“There’s no need for that. He's not from the palace.”
All at once, the strange mist retracted, and Ryou sucked in a deep breath. He saw the trails retreat, still yowling with grief and pain as they dispersed among the ruins.

“They're ghosts…” Ryou murmured. Despite them leaving him alone, the fine hairs on his skin still stood straight up. It wasn’t hard to figure out what spirits haunted this place. Gods… was this all Bakura had left of his family?

Ryou watched as a few of the spirits disappeared down an opening in the ground. The darkness inside the stairwell seemed to swallow up everything, sending another wave of uneasiness through Ryou, and yet… there was something inviting about it.

Curious, Ryou took a step forward but a pair of tiny hands around his wrist stopped him. He turned to see Bakura peering up at him and shaking his head.
“Not down there. That’s where the voice sleeps.”

“What voice?” Ryou didn’t like this. He really didn’t.

“The darkness. I heard it when the Items were…” Bakura trailed off, a glazed, far away look in his eyes. Ryou frowned, gently patting his shoulder to bring him out of his daze.

“Is it… Zorc Necrophades?” If Zorc was the darkness in the Items, then Ryou could think of no other conclusion.
“Don't know its name,” Bakura muttered, pulling away from Ryou after a moment. “You can go
down there if you really want to, but I don't think you'll come out.”

“Where are you going?” Ryou hurried to follow him, not wanting to let the Thief King out of his
sight now that he’d found him again.

“I have to train. Don't get in my way,” Bakura tossed back over his shoulder.

Train? This Ryou had to see. He watched as Bakura stepped into a clearing, getting the impression
he should give him some space for whatever he was about to do. There was a strange, new energy
-crackling in the air, like a static charge moments before lightning touched the ground. Ryou stood,
watching silent and intently.

Bakura had his eyes closed, the wind picking up around him as the energy climbed. His brow
creased in concentration, fists clenched at his sides, straining with effort. Ryou squinted, thinking it
was a trick of the light, but was Bakura’s body… glowing?

There was a sharp crack as the tension broke, and Ryou was nearly thrust back when the wave of
energy expanded outwards. He cried out in shock, shielding his eyes with a hand as bright light
consumed the area. It didn’t seem to fade, but Ryou realized that was because something was there
with Bakura this time, burning bright like a tiny sun. He sucked in a gasp, knowing he'd seen this
monster before.

But ‘monster’ didn’t seem to be the right word to describe it.

He hadn’t been prepared for it to be so radiant, only having seen it dulled and consumed by shadows
before. It’s naga body coiled around Bakura, pearl white scales nearly blinding in the daylight. It’s
humanoid half hovered over the thief, who now seemed comically small in comparison, the beast’s
wingspan encircling them both like a protective halo.

“What is that?!” Ryou called out in awe.

Bakura opened his eyes, brighter now, burning with determination. Despite his small stature, Ryou
felt as though Bakura were looking down on him.
“This is my ka, Diabound, Sacred Beast of Kul Elna.” Bakura’s voice was strong, emboldened with promise. The way he held himself with the magnificent beast at his back, it even looked noble - Ryou never thought he’d view any incarnation of the spirit that way. “It'll be the last thing the Pharaoh ever sees.”

His last words sounded odd, dreamlike in Ryou’s ears. The ruins surrounding them had begun to feel less real. By the time Ryou realized the world was slipping away, it was too late.

…

Ryou jolted upright on the hotel couch, the blinding, radiant white of the creature’s scales having left an imprint behind his eyes. He could still see it when he blinked. He cursed himself for waking, wanting to see more of the past.

He could have laid down and forced himself back to sleep, but there was an even stronger urge coursing through his veins that couldn’t be ignored. He felt like he had stumbled across something tangible, so close he could reach out and touch it with his fingers.

He didn't know why but he twisted over and scrawled for his bag, practically tearing it open and digging for a certain box. He pulled it out and opened it, the cards from his deck nearly spilling all over the place before he caught them with his palm.

He hadn't touched his deck since Battle City. Duel Monsters had been the last thing on his mind as of late, but for some reason he knew he had to look through it now. He had heard Yugi and Jonouchi talk of souls hidden in the cards, but he never truly understood what they meant.

That was until his hand brushed a certain card. There was a pulse - dark skin, lavender eyes, and hair as white as the beast shining behind his eyes flashing in Ryou's mind. He withdrew the card from the deck, feeling the breath leave him.

Diabound Kernel.

The same beast he had just seen in the past… it was right here. But he had never had this card before, had he?

“I really didn't have to look far,” he murmured, and then he turned to the Ring lying on the arm of
the couch. “Bakura, where did you get this?”

Ryou didn't realize he had said something off until the spirit pulled himself from the gold and hovered beside him, brows creased in question.

“‘Bakura’...?”

Ryou's mouth fell open a little bit. The fact that they shared a name wasn't as odd as the fact that the spirit even had a name to begin with. He seemed... so far beyond such things, but he really wasn't, was he? Everyone had to have a name.

“I… We share the same name, don't we?” So shouldn't Ryou call him that?

Bakura pursed his lips, bothered for some reason, but not bothered enough to make a big deal of it. He rolled his shoulders in a shrug.

“I suppose we do.”

“Why didn't you ever tell me before?”

Bakura turned his head away with a puff of air through his nose, making it apparent Ryou wasn't going to clear answer on that one. Ryou assumed that Bakura didn't even know his own name until recently, like the rest of his memories. That seemed to make the most sense.

Bakura's sights settled back on Diabound.

“I won that card in Battle City. Some kid was flaunting it around.” He grinned when he saw the look on Ryou's face. “Don't worry. He's still alive.”

Ryou squinted at him for a few more untrustworthy moments before focusing his attention on the card again.

“This is... your ‘ka’?”
It still didn't seem right that the boy in the past and the spirit before him in the present were the same person. He couldn't quite wrap his head around it, but all of the evidence was before him, and with each piece he pried from Bakura's mysterious existence, the smaller the gap seemed.

Bakura hummed a vague confirmation, but he wasn't looking at Ryou anymore. His eyes were on the bed a short ways away - more specifically, on the person resting there.

Ryou pushed himself to his feet. It was late in the night and Malik was still fast asleep, lying tangled in the sheets on the bed. He didn't look overly distressed, but his features were pinched in discomfort.

Bakura drifted over to him, arms crossed as he floated nearly horizontal to get a good look at Malik's face. Ryou watched, unable to make out what he was thinking. He always knew Bakura had a strange fixation on Malik, but whether he thought of him as a true comrade or merely a plaything - that was still unclear.

The latter seemed more likely, but with the spirit's features looking so soft, Ryou had his doubts.

"Are you going to apologize to him?" He asked as he approached Malik's side as well, making a conscious effort to keep his voice down this time.

Bakura's expression hardened, nose wrinkling in distaste. Whatever humanity had appeared there evaporated as quickly as it came. "Why should I? His piss of a father deserved it and even he knows it."

Ryou sighed at the typical response. It seemed so needlessly defensive, there had to have been some denial there.

"Forget I asked. I just thought that…" His gaze slid between the spirit and Malik with uncertainty. "You're close to Malik, aren't you?"

Bakura drifted back, standing up straight again as he eyed the ceiling in thought.

"He's sensible - when it comes to the Pharaoh, that is."
“... That's the only reason?”

Bakura glanced at him, the look on his eyes cold. “What else do you want me to say?”

Ryou knew this would go nowhere. He wasn't going to get a confession out of Bakura if he tried.

But he was beginning to see why Bakura was so inclined to Malik, why he opened up to him so easily. They weren't so different, not in their motivations, or their pasts. Malik had been wronged by the royal family, had lost his parents just like the boy in the memory world.

It just seemed so… circumstantial.

“I do wonder about one thing…” Ryou found himself murmuring, raising the card up to peer down at it, attention drawn back to ‘Diabound’.

“Hm?” Bakura moved closer, brow raised in question as he nearly clipped Ryou’s shoulder.

“The Thief King said that those with white hair have souls as powerful as the Gods…” Ryou’s tone became flat, barren, and dry as the desert sands. “Why is your ka only a five star monster?”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I only cried 3 times while writing this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bakura’s hands gripped the edge of the diorama as he glared at the piles of sand Ryou had only recently begun laying down. Construction on the palace had already begun, the East wall half erected with blueprints strewn all around it. His host was making good progress. Everything should have felt like it was in order.

Except it wasn’t.

He dragged his fingers through the sand, gripping it in his fist. It spilled between his fingers like the thoughts so aimlessly running about his mind. He let it fall until there were just a few grains left sitting at the center of his palm.

His gaze drifted over the mountains, past the river where a certain spot lay. It would be populated with construction as well soon, a village of nothing but ash and ghosts.

He closed his eyes. If he thought back, digging through the darkness clouding his mind, he could see the village, the spirits swirling there, voices wailing for vengeance, for justice.

He could see Ryou too, felt his grip as he took his arm and wrapped that bandage around it, heard his reassurance… He had never seen his host’s eyes so gentle, not towards him anyway.

But that had never happened, had it? Those were false memories resulting from Ryou’s tampering. What kind of game was his host playing? He couldn’t truly change the past… could he?

Bakura’s lips peeled back, teeth grit. No, it was impossible. The only thing his host was going to succeed in doing was pissing Zorc off. He was gambling his luck, and luck always ran dry sooner or later.

Perhaps Bakura shouldn’t have concerned himself with his host’s little excursions. The only thing
stopping him was the unknown. What would Zorc do if he caught Ryou? Devour his spirit? If so, where did that leave Bakura?

Malik’s little stunt with the Rod already proved how unstable this body was without its rightful owner. Perhaps he would just fade along with his landlord if he couldn’t maintain control of the body. That couldn’t have been what Zorc wanted.

… Maybe a part of Bakura was just as curious as Ryou was, and that was why he didn’t stop him.

He tried to peer into the endless black expanse of the Ring. It was always so easy before, letting the darkness steep inside his soul. His thoughts had always seemed clearer, like his mind was on autopilot. It all made so much sense.

But the darkness wasn’t a pure, solid recluse anymore. It was dotted with shards of light, pieces of glass sticking out of a sea of sand. He could see bits of a life reflected back at him - his life.

*I’m not that thief anymore.*

He wasn’t weak.

He wasn’t even human at this point.

He wasn’t… anything.

“I’m not that thief,” he muttered aloud this time.

Why did his own words sound so uncertain in his ears?

Nothing seemed constant. He couldn’t turn to the dark because he didn’t know what to expect. The sand shifted beneath him, glass cutting into his flesh and reminding him what it was like to bleed.

He remembered. He remembered the sky. He remembered warmth - warmth of soft hands as they cupped his own. Had that been from the false memory Ryou had constructed by barging into his soul
- or was it something more?

He remembered a voice, sweet and soothing. Was it one voice, or many? He couldn’t tell. It was all lost in the noise.

But every time he heard it, it sounded closer, clearer.

Perhaps that frightened him more. Not the uncertainty. Not the shifting shadows. But what he’d see - who he’d see - staring back at him when the darkness lifted.

If it ever lifted.

A migraine-like pressure split apart the front of his skull, making him grimace and lose his grip on the edge of the table. He fell to the foot of it, jamming his palm against his forehead and trying to will away the spell.

What the hell was Ryou doing to him? It all seemed so simple before, his plan laid bare before him, but everything was tinged a murky shade of grey now. He couldn’t stop these thoughts dominating his mind. He couldn’t focus.

He knew Ryou wasn’t the only one at fault. Even when he wasn’t present, Malik somehow weaseled his way into his plans, into his thoughts, into his mind even without the Rod. Bakura saw him before the tank, cool blue light surrounding him as he pressed his hands up to the glass as though trying to reach for the whale swimming around within. He was grinning idiotically the whole time, like nothing could hold him down.

He couldn’t be free until the Pharaoh’s soul had left this world. That was what he’d said, hadn’t he?

Bakura didn’t think he believed him, not in that moment.

Things just had to go South from there. Bakura really didn’t think it was his fault. Malik’s issues regarding his own father weren’t his problem. If he refused to see the truth, that was all on him.

That was definitely all on him.
Bakura pulled himself back to his feet, the silence of the museum back room pressing in on his ears. It felt like it would crush all the thoughts and noise stirring inside his mind and his head would just explode right there. Bakura grimaced.

“Stupid Malik…” He growled, shoving himself away from the table edge. He flicked off the light before pulling the door shut behind him as he left, locking it with more force than necessary.

He wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he had to get rid of this wrongness plaguing his mind somehow.

“So stupid.”

...

It was well into the evening when he returned to the hotel. After three consecutive knocks, and then another three when Malik took too long to answer, the door to the room opened and a confused face greeted him.

“Bakura?” Malik frowned. “Ryou just disappeared this morning…”

Bakura snorted. That was it? He expected something more explosive - maybe even another punch.

“We were busy. Here.”

He invited himself inside, shoving a plastic bag into Malik’s arms. The contents clinked loudly, a glass bottle nearly spilling out before Malik got a proper grip on it. He peered inside, eyes widening.

“What's this?” He walked over and set the bag down on the coffee table, pulling out bottle after bottle and setting them out. There were a little less than a dozen, including a pack of six of what appeared to be cider. “Where did you get all this?”

“That's not important.”
Malik plopped down on the couch, running a hand through his hair as he leaned back as if trying to decide where to even begin. “Awfully generous of you… but, hell, I could use a drink.”

Bakra shoved his hands into his pockets, turning his back to Malik and heading for the open door. “I didn't know what you liked so don't complain if it's too strong for you.”

Malik jumped back to his feet, scowling in confusion. “Wait, you're just leaving?”

Bakra raised a brow at him, peering back over his shoulder. “Yes?”

“You really think I want to drink alone?” Malik shook his head in disbelief, waving him over. Bakura narrowed his eyes, intrigued, shutting the door and sauntering back over to the couch. He flung himself down onto it, bouncing once before he settled.

“Funny, I thought you wouldn't want me to wreck my landlord’s body anymore.”

Malik went to grab some glasses and filled them with ice before he took a seat again as well. He rolled his eyes as he set the glasses down and began sifting through the liquor.

“I'm not saying to drink a damn two six of vodka all to yourself. Show a little restraint.” He poured a glass of some scotch or whisky for himself - Bakura didn't know, he'd just swiped whatever looked fancy, pretentious, and expensive. Malik then plucked one of the ciders from the pack and set it on Bakura's end of the table. “Gods, it's like it's all or nothing with you. There can't be a middle ground?”

Bakra wrinkled his nose at the baby drink Malik had chosen for him to start with. Completely disregarding it, he lunged for a medium sized golden bottle, taking one glance at the plastic - something cinnamon flavoured? - before he uncapped it and brought it to his lips.

He managed to suck down two large gulps before the burn caught up with him and he had to pull the bottle away. He stifled a cough, flashing a proud grin at Malik even while his insides scorched.

“No.”
Malik gave an unimpressed sigh, like it couldn't be helped.

“Idiot.”

Bakura greatly underestimated the alcohol crashing into his system. A shudder ran up his spine, throat burning with every breath, the sweet cinnamon taste sharp on his tongue. He couldn't swallow his coughing fit this time, and he could hear Malik chuckling at his expense.

“I'm gonna enjoy watching you roll around on the floor in about ten minutes.” Malik took a sip of his own drink, smirking against the rim of the glass.

Bakura scoffed, shoving the cinnamon rum at him. “Why don't you take a shot then if you can handle your liquor so well?”

Malik wrinkled his nose. “It wouldn't do anything to me. My tolerance is way higher than yours.”

Bakura grinned, blood warming as the rush of the alcohol began to set in. “Is that cowardice I smell?”

Malik rolled his eyes and snatched the bottle, taking a generous drink straight from it - just as big as what Bakura had taken, if not bigger - and not even flinching at the taste. Bakura's brows shot up his forehead. He had seen Malik drinking wine in the past when he needed to relax, but rarely ever anything harder.

“You've had some practice.”

Malik snorted as he set the bottle aside, peering down into his own drink and prodding at the ice cubes. “Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Speaking of desperate measures… Bakura was reminded of the incident he had meant to ask about.

“What happened to... “ He fidgeted in his seat, unsure if approaching the topic would send Malik
“Honestly, I’m not sure.” Malik furrowed his brows. “Supposedly, he’s powerless now. Just another part of my mind. I don’t know if I believe that quite yet, but…” His rolled his shoulders in a helpless shrug, slumping back against the couch in exhaustion. “I don’t know. I don’t feel like I’m about to spin out of control any second, so that’s a good sign. I just don’t want to let my guard down.”

Bakura nodded slowly, the buzz of the alcohol making the words slide somewhat blurrier in his mind. It sounded to him like Malik had little to worry about and Bakura felt a flash of smugness - he knew Malik was just overreacting. A little confidence went a long way. “So what happened yesterday?”

“Ryou, he… he came to check on me. My darker half didn’t seem to like him very much…” Malik explained, scratching his forehead as though he wasn’t quite sure how to make sense of it. “Or it’s like he became nervous around him.”

Bakura’s lips curled up, grin crooked. He never expected an answer like that. “So my host scared him off?”

“Something like that.” Malik sighed, taking another drink.

“Interesting…”

A silence stretched between them, grating and uncomfortable despite the cloud-like haze filling Bakura’s mind. He rested back against the couch with his arms flung out on either side of him, head tilted towards the ceiling. His eyes were squinted in irritation, not aimed at anything in particular, a displeased scowl pulling at his mouth.

“Look,” he began, finding that the words slipped out of him far too easily, “it’s really not any of my business how you feel about your father. I’m dropping it if it prevents this shit from happening again.”

Malik glanced over at him, surprise flashing behind his gaze. He gave a wry smile, peering down at his drink as if he knew something Bakura didn’t.

“You have a roundabout way of apologizing, but thank you.”
Bakura crossed his arms, unsure of if the flush crawling across his face was the result of the liquor or not. He decided it definitely was the alcohol to blame.

“I’m not sorry for what I said. I just don’t want you becoming whiny.”

Malik only chuckled at him, and it made Bakura want to tear that smug look off his face. What the hell was so funny?

“... I’m actually glad you brought it up.” Malik said, and it was Bakura's turn to be shocked. Of all things to be grateful for, dragging out his other personality was at the top of the list for things Bakura never expected to hear.

Malik's swirled his glass thoughtfully, mind seemingly in other places when he spoke again. “It allowed me to... work some things out.”

Bakura turned his nose up. “Oh? In that case, you should be thanking me.”

“I just did, idiot.” Malik's eyes lidded, unimpressed. “Shit, Bakura, it's barely been ten minutes.”

Well, fuck, had he? Admittedly, Malik's words were blurring together a bit. Bakura shook his head to clear his mind, but it had the unfortunate effect of making him even dizzier.

“You know Ryou’s body is garbage!” He protested, dragging a hand down his forehead and pinching the bridge of his nose. He found himself chuckling for some reason - why was any of this funny?

“You just called your ‘landlord’ by his actual name. Now I know you’re smashed.” Malik's arrogance as he sipped his drink snapped Bakura out of his giggle fit.

“It’s your fault!” He tried to snarl, but the words slurred together and completely ruined the effect. Jerking back, he rolled around to the arm of the couch and leaned on it, shoving his chin in his palm stubbornly and pointedly not looking at Malik. Perhaps if he ignored it, the burn in his cheeks would go away.

“It’s my fault you went out and bought all this booze?”
Bakura could hear the amusement in his voice and he hated it. He ground his teeth together, glowering at the wall.

“Shut up.”

He felt Malik shift closer on the couch, the leather creaking.

“No, please elaborate, Bakura. What's my fault?”

If it were any other time, perhaps he would have remained silent, but his mind was slow and clouded, and he was reaching the end of his patience, and the words slid from him all too easily.

“That I feel like this.”

There was a long pause. Bakura half expected him to snort and demand what he was being so vague about but, much to Malik's credit, he was sharper than that.

“... Does this have anything to do with that time you told me you felt more… human around me?”

“Just forget I said anything,” Bakura grumbled, rubbing at his eyes as if that would get them to focus.

Malik started to laugh and Bakura jerked around to aim his glare in his direction again.

“What's so funny?”

“I'm just realizing now that if someone like you can still see that they're human, I never could have been a God,” Malik said, a soft, rueful smile on his face as he continued fussing with his drink. “I used to feel invincible, I commanded an army with the Millennium Rod in my grasp. I felt like nothing could stop me.” He sighed, gaze far away. “It feels like ages ago, but it's really only been a month, hasn't it?” He looked at Bakura again, and Bakura swore that shot he had taken earlier was finally starting to catch up with him. “And that's what you're feeling right now, like you're not so infallible anymore, am I right?”
Malik tipped his drink back and finished it, the smile falling off his face as something more thoughtful took over.

“Sooner or later, it all comes crashing down.”

Bakura scowled, uncomfortably shifting on the couch. As far as he was concerned, Malik was just spouting nonsense - troubling, drunken nonsense.

“Don't project on me. It's just…!” Bakura growled, hating the direction this conversation had turned, hating how unsteady he felt - and it wasn't just because of the alcohol. “I don't have time for this weakness.”

“You know what you do have time for?” Malik stood up and disappeared around the couch for a moment, returning with two water bottles in hand. He set one out for Bakura. “It'll take the edge off of that monster hangover you're gonna be sporting later. You should drink it.”

Bakura stubbornly turned his head the other way and Malik sighed.

“Or don't. I'm not going to force it down your throat.”

An immature noise caught between a snort and a muffled laugh burst from Bakura. He didn't even know why it was funny, playing it off as another coughing fit when he saw the weird look Malik was giving him.

Malik sat back down, cracking the seal on his own water bottle and taking a sip. Bakura noticed that he swayed as he plunked down, head nodding as though the movement made him drowsy. So the bastard was tipsy after all.

“Why did you help me out on the blimp?”

The question shattered the silence that was beginning to build up between them again, coming so out of nowhere Bakura nearly jolted.
“Huh?” He narrowed his eyes at Malik. What the hell was he playing at now? “Why do you think? I still wanted your end of the bargain.”

Malik shook his head, looking quite sober for a drunk man.

“But you had no reason to put your neck on the line for me and even I knew that. You could have gone straight for my other self, but you didn't. You didn't have to save my brother, but you did - and that was something that had literally nothing to do with our deal.”

Bakura grimaced, his head beginning to pound. Malik was making him think far too hard about these things at the worst time. In retrospect, that duel could only ever have ended in loss for him - even if he won, he would have destroyed the exact key he needed for his plans.

What had he been thinking?

The only clear thing he could remember from that night was Malik's desperation as he had come begging him for help - that panicked look in his eyes as he lay at the bottom of his clan’s twisted legacy. Why was that the only thing that stuck out?

“It just seemed… to make sense,” he muttered.

“Risking your opportunity for revenge just so you could help me made sense to you?” Malik smiled, soft around the edges.

For once, Bakura had nothing to say. His brain wouldn't seem to catch up with him and all he could do was scowl. He felt Malik shift closer, the cushion dipping under his weight.

“You might think it's weakness but… I really would have liked to meet the Thief King.” He snorted, bumping Bakura's arm. “At the very least, he seems fun to drink with.”

“Perhaps you have a very different version of the Thief King in your mind,” Bakura said, rubbing the spot where Malik had touched him. It felt like it was burning even above the liquor induced heat coursing through his system.
“I’d say the feral vigilante who made the royal family’s lives hell fits pretty well with what you’ve told me.”

“If wasn't just their lives I made hell. Anyone who crossed paths with me was fair game.” Bakura let his head fall back against the couch, inclining it towards Malik. “You would really admire a ruthless killer this much?”

“You say that as if I haven't done the same.” Malik shook his head. “People think that as soon as my other half was banished I was better, that Battle City was all him pulling the strings.”

Malik had turned to face him completely, chin propped against his fist. Interest flashed in Bakura's eyes as Malik went on.

“He didn't order the Ghouls to torment Yugi and his friends. He didn't force Jonouchi and the Pharaoh into a fight to the death. He didn't kill my underlings when they so much as displeased me in the slightest.” Malik gave a dry, humourless laugh. “All of that was me, and it's not like I haven't been…” His fists clenched, gaze averting from Bakura's for a moment. “… fighting to break my old habits, but how can people say they want me to heal when not acknowledging a part of me that exists whether they like it or not?”

Bakura hummed in acknowledgement. He remembered how the others had so easily accepted Malik after his other personality had been cut away from him, but the other personality hadn't even shown his face until midway through the tournament, and his tactics were the polar opposite of Malik's. Malik worked from the shadows and used the range of the Rod’s power to get what he wanted. The other personality came out in the open, unafraid to strike directly. They were two sides of the same coin - how could the other personality be to blame for everything when he had originated from Malik's heart in the first place?

Truthfully, however, Bakura was paying less attention to Malik's words and more attention to how he shaped them with his mouth, his concentration drifting.

“You're not the only one I've lost my temper on. My siblings keep calling my other self a monster as if he’s an entirely separate entity. It just doesn't sit right with me and they don't get it.”

Bakura's gaze flicked back up to his eyes, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Sometimes becoming a monster is necessary.”
Malik's eyes hardened, pale lavender darkening by a few shades.

“'I know,” he said, the certainty in his voice drawing a shiver up Bakura's spine. “That's why I want the Pharaoh gone. It takes a monster to kill a monster.”

Bakura all but purred, unconsciously leaning closer. Now that same ferocity that drew him into Malik's deal in the first place. It was good to know he really hadn't lost it, that he wasn't just some Pharaoh's dog waiting around for scraps.

“I'm so glad I was right about you,” the words slurred between his teeth but he didn't care this time, some unseen force pulling him into Malik's space. Gold flashed around Malik's wrists and neck again, making him look like the king he always aspired to be - it was so much more becoming of him than the pit of dullness and depression he had sunk into after Battle City had ended.

Bakura would have been lying if he said he didn't enjoy the sight, and take pleasure and pride in it.

“Malik.”

He breathed the name almost reverently, eyes lidding. Without thinking, he placed his palm on Malik's chest, feeling his pulse thud through the thin fabric of his shirt. It startled him out of his daze somewhat and he blinked up at Malik's face.

Malik seemed just as stunned as he was at their proximity, but he wasn't pulling away either. Bakura found that he couldn't move, his breathing coming faster and shallower - he could feel it mingling with Malik's, given how close they were.

Bakura was used to feeling cold - everything he felt, every sensation passing through Ryou’s nerves dulled on him because he didn’t belong here in this life, in this body.

But Malik was so warm - even the air surrounding him - hot like Bakura had the sun against his palm, the very fires of Ra eating through his detached, fragmented existence. Malik’s vengeance, like his own, scorched acid through his veins, but something even brighter burned through, so powerful it could drive away even the deepest, most festered of shadows.
Bakra could almost taste it - even covet it - with Malik looking at him like he was now.

Only when the silenced stretched on into something awkward did Bakura realize he had not only been looking at Malik, he had been *staring*, and reality slammed back into him like a freight train.

He jerked away, leaving no room to think as he lunged for a bottle on the coffee table - he didn’t care which one. The floor was rocking like a ship over waves, and none of the walls seemed level.

Malik caught him around the waist and clumsily flung him back to the couch, almost as disoriented as Bakura was, though he hid it better.

“Oh no, you're cut off.”

Bakura grunted as he rolled onto his back, head hitting the armrest, their foreheads nearly knocking together. White hair spilled everywhere, over the side of the couch, over his face, into his mouth. He pulled it away so he could see and speak again, but what burst from him instead was a breathless cackle.

“You're so fucked up right now,” Malik gave a laugh of his own, hair tickling at Bakura’s face, the force of the throw having left him hanging over him with his palms planted on either side of his head.

“Shut the hell up.” Bakura was gripping Malik’s shoulders, nails digging into skin like he couldn’t decide whether to shove him away or pull him closer. “You're really- pissing me off, you know that?”

It was hard to form words, the breath feeling like it was being squeezed from his lungs, and Bakura didn’t know how much of that could be attributed to their drinking. Malik was ablaze, a fire consuming all the oxygen in the room.

“You're looking a little warm around the edges…” Bakura grinned, lopsided and open mouthed, noting how the colour had risen in Malik’s already dark skin, his face getting the worst of it, “...and you say I can't handle my liquor?”
He didn’t even want to think about how his own face looked. He didn’t want to think about anything at all.

Nothing made sense. The world was spinning and he could barely keep his eyes open, but his fingers remained locked around Malik’s shoulders. It was the only thing resembling stability in the midst of the fog blanketing his mind.

“You wanna talk warm? You're burning up.”

A palm slid to his cheek and he sucked in a sharper breath, the contact sizzling across his nerves. He became acutely aware of Malik’s body pressing against his, their legs tangled together, the pressure against his groin. The gasp morphed into something else, a low, silky noise he couldn’t quite stifle, eyes nearly sliding all the way shut.

Touch was a foreign, abstract concept when he couldn’t even properly exist in the world around him, only existing in vague memories too far away to even make sense of - but he was sure he’d never experienced anything like this before.

“... Bakura…?”

He opened his eyes to see Malik peering down at him with concern, like he’d hurt him somehow. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Are you…?”

Gods, why was Malik still talking?

Their faces were so close it was easy to let instinct take over, Bakura’s palm slipping around to cup the back of Malik’s head and silence him the only way he knew how. Malik was all heat and fire and Bakura didn’t think he could have denied himself if he wanted to - not in that moment.

Their lips melded against each other and Bakura wondered if something in Malik broke too, if he was just as lost and looking for something to hold onto. Malik sank into the kiss, fingers threading in Bakura’s hair and tugging hard enough to make him moan. He tasted the liquor, sharp between them as Malik's tongue dipped past his lips and slid against his own. He pressed back, fingers searching for purchase against his chest, but unable to find it as Malik's hips shifted in just the perfect way.
He gasped into Malik's mouth, arching against his body as pure, white hot sensation shot through him. Unable to do much else, he let Malik have control, some dim part of him considering that this may have been what Malik wanted from the start - somehow. The kiss became one, two, and then Bakura lost count as it all blended together.

He threw his head back, cried out his pleasure as Malik rolled his hips down with more deliberation this time, and Bakura felt lips against his neck, panting hard when they sucked. There was more pain than pleasure when Malik bit down, but that only added to the fierce yearning within him, made it sweeter.

He was never one to deny himself of indulgence, not even in his first life - that, he was sure of.

But Bakura couldn't keep his eyes open anymore, a drunken, dizzying weight holding his limbs down. Malik must have felt it too because the lips along his neck and the pressure rutting against his hips slowed until Bakura could only feel him quietly panting against his skin, body slumping down.

Bakura had no idea which one of them passed out first.

…

**You deliberately disobeyed me.**

The voice cut through the darkness, scratching up Bakura's spine and snapping his attention upwards. He stood in the shadowy, desolate plain of the Ring, but the space around him was not empty.

None of the alcohol reached him here and he was decidedly sober, but he had bigger things to worry about than that right now.

Bakura narrowed his eyes up at the two red slits contemptuously leering down at him.

“I don't see how.”
I told you that tombkeeper wasn't to provide anymore distractions to you.

Bakura bared his teeth. Why was Zorc so hung up on this?

“But he's on our side again.”

You put too much faith in someone who can’t be trusted.

The shadows churned around him, thick black ink that swirled and crashed and looked like it could consume him at any moment. Bakura could feel flecks of it splash against his skin, Zorc's fury cutting into him like small razors.

You assured me you weren't weak, but every action you've taken suggests otherwise. Do you think I don't know the vessel is treading where he shouldn't?

Bakura's eyes widened. He didn't understand. He was sure Ryou had been passing through the memory world undetected, but Zorc knew.

Then again, what even was Zorc's problem with it to begin with? That was the real mystery here. Bakura stood his ground, letting the darkness lash against his skin.

“It's necessary for the final act of our plan!” His voice rose to a snarl.

A plan you're quickly losing control of. You're giving him too much power over the memory world.

Bakura's hands clenched into fists at his sides. How little faith did Zorc have in him?

“It won't matter in the end. I know what I'm doing!”

Those memories are not yours to give away.
Something shot out of the dark and Bakura felt claws encircle him. The grip wasn't suffocating, but it was tight enough to be a clear warning.

**You belong to me. Perhaps you've forgotten that if you so easily align yourself with the Pharaoh's servants, the same people who took so much from you.**

Bakura felt the sharp point of a claw push under his chin and dig against his neck.

**Shall I grant you a reminder of what led you to me?**

Bakura felt the darkness sink into him, piercing his chest, filling his mind, filling his mouth when he tried to open it and scream. Everything else fell away, even Zorc’s voice, as a new chaos took over.

He didn't realize he was staring up at the sky; it was too dark when it was clouded with smoke, the stars completely obscured as if the Gods had turned a blind eye to the destruction below. He was somewhere else, another time, another life, his memories rushing to catch up with him.

He felt weak… and small.

Something held his hand, pulling him along. Someone was breathing heavily, ash and smoke strangling the sound. Metal on metal clashed from far off, and then a shape fell in the haze, the body spilling blood from a spear to the chest.

He saw the bodies then, lining the streets. Some moved, but most were still, the dirt stained a rust colour beneath them and gleaming in the fire light.

A numbness had spread across his soul, mind not quite working to process the destruction, stuttering with every step he took. Someone continued to pull him along, their voice choking on a whimper.

It sounded like a woman.

His eyes fell on the shapes moving through the cover of smoke, advancing like shadows at the hour
of sundown. There were shouts, distant and near, coming from all sides.

Before he could see anymore, he was yanked through a threshold. The contrast between the bloodshed outside and the false sense of peace inside the hut was disorienting. He saw the woman throw herself against a crate, shoving it in front of the door. Moments later, she was back at his side, arms sweeping him up in a warm embrace, pale hair tickling his cheeks. He saw his hands - looking far too small in his eyes - clutch at the fabric of her robe. He searched for her face but no matter how high he looked, the only thing that met him was a blank darkness.

Bakura felt the corner wall press into his back as she huddled over him, like she were trying to block his view, but he could still see shadows pass by the windows.

“Not my son too…”

The whisper trickled to his ears, low and hushed and desperate. He felt the breath ghost the top of his hair, shaking fingers combing through the strands. Something splashed down just under his eye, warm and running down to his lips, followed by another. It tasted of salt.

“Ra, Horus, Thoth. Please, not my son…”

Bakura opened his mouth, but the only thing that escaped was a small, high pitched whine.

Something crashed against the door, the crate buckling under its force, but not giving way completely. Again, another crash, wood splintering. Bakura felt the impact shudder through his body.

The woman sucked in a gasp, but she kept her back to the door, fingers drawing faster, more unsteady patterns against his scalp. She shushed him, speaking lower now, frantic, hasty prayers he couldn't make out at all.

A dim light seemed to surround her, but it could have just as easily been the flames trying to eat inside the hut. Nonetheless, Bakura felt something pass through him, a soothing glow encircling his body, if only for a moment.

One last crash, and wood spilled over the floor as the room filled with men, but the woman kept her back to them, her body a shield. Bakura felt the gentle press of lips to his forehead, the moment
feeling detached and passing by unnaturally slow.

He managed to peer over her shoulder, and saw one of the men raise his spear high above her back. The chaos of the surroundings dimmed to a silence, as if to highlight the thuck of the blade piercing flesh and muscle.

The woman's face became visible for the first time as the light left her eyes, her body lurching forward. Pale grey-lavender was reflected back at him for a moment, clouding over like glass in a storm. Warm droplets splashed across his face, but it wasn't tears this time.

Her weight was pulled back slightly as the spear was wrenched out, and then it fell forward, body slumping against his own. A river of red poured from her lips, the metallic scent scouring Bakura's nostrils. Her eyes were dull, but he could see them search for his face one last time.

And then she was ripped away, grabbed by the ankle and unceremoniously dragged from the hut like she was little more than debris in the way. One of the men shouted something, the words completely lost on Bakura's ears, his eyes passing over the corner of the room.

Bakura waited for them to spot him and execute him too. And waited. The man's eyes fell on him, but they looked past him like he didn't even exist. After barking another order, they all retreated, just like that.

There was nothing left but silence, ruin, and a bloodstain. Bakura couldn't move. He couldn't even breathe. Instinct screamed to get up, to chase them all down and tear them apart, take all of the destruction and pain and deliver it back twice as hard onto their heads, but his body wouldn't respond. This was another time, another life, and he was another person - a weak, feeble, helpless child.

Everything was out of his control - his body, his voice, his will. He felt himself get to his feet, already knowing where he would go. Like a piece in a game, he had no choice but to play his role.

He ran, trailing the soldiers as they began to round everyone up. His lungs screamed from the ash polluting the air and his limbs seemed far too short to carry him fast enough. He passed, unseen by the men herding the villagers like cattle, already knowing what lay at the bottom of the shrine but unable to look away.

He watched them lead each villager - only the strongest men and women, and some children when it
became apparent they were running low on blood. He watched them fall, and with each body the
gold consumed, a piece of his mind unspooled.

It seemed like it would never end. The soldiers were fools. They couldn't see the darkness leaking
out of the tablet they were filling the gold with, and when the Millennium Items finally cooled in
their resting places, the black leaking out expanded, swallowing everything.

All at once, the noise dropped to silence, leaving him alone with nothing but his memories, nothing
but the screams echoing around his mind, nothing but the horrific act stuck dead center in the remains
of his shattered psyche. All he had was solitude, shock and pain nursed by the nothing into
something new, something poisonous.

He felt his lips stretch, baring teeth as something animal snapped within him, madness familiar and
oh so easy to slide into. He welcomed the darkness, the power that blanketed him all over again, took
his weakness and helplessness and shaped it into something new. He felt it all over again - the desire
to take, and take, until there was nothing left, just like they had done to him.

Claws encircled him once more, Zorc’s grin cutting against his own. Bakura's head fell back, the last
of his grief trickling out through the laughter that spilled from his lips.

He wasn't weak.

He wasn't human.

He wasn't...

…

“B... ra... ?”

“... aku…”

“... Bakura...?”
Light seeped into the edges of his vision, parting the darkness like the sun through clouds. The claws embedded in him retracted and he felt sensation bleed back into his numbed nerves. The pain returned, the grief even greater than before. He flinched away, thrashing, not wanting any of this back.

“Bakura?”

Bakura opened his eyes to see Malik’s face above him, concern heavy in his eyes. It was unbecoming to see him look almost afraid.

“Are you alright?” Malik placed a hand on his shoulder, the touch grounding him amidst the chaos in his mind. “You were whimpering in your sleep… That must have been one hell of a nightmare.”

Bakura opened his mouth to respond but the words wouldn't seem to come. His lungs wouldn't process air. He put a hand to his face - it came back warm and wet.

The woman. The spear in her back. The blood pouring from her mouth. He sucked in a sharp, panicked breath, jerking back and hitting the armrest of the couch. He scrubbed at his face desperately, expecting his hands to come back crimson.

“It's okay. You're fine. You're alright.” Malik took his wrists before he could scratch off his skin, his voice soothing like he were trying to coax a frightened animal out of hiding. “You're… crying.”

Bakura's breathing stilled. The wetness wasn't blood, it was tears. His head pounded, dehydration from the alcohol hitting him twice as hard.

What the hell was happening to him…?

An ugly, choked sob tore itself from his throat when he tried to speak again. It was useless, and humiliating, so he ducked his head and let his bangs hide his face. It felt like his insides were being crushed.
His wrists were released, only for a pair of arms to wrap around his shoulders instead. He sucked in a 
gasp, but Malik only tucked him against his body, cupping the back of his head. Stunned, Bakura 
couldn't move, couldn't do anything except cry his pain into Malik's shirt. He didn't even know he 
was capable of this - he shouldn't have been capable of this, but Ryou's body wasn't listening to him. 
A tremble ran through him as he sank into the warmth Malik offered, unable to resist it if he tried.

What have you done to me?

All of this was his, and that fact pierced right through him like that spear through the woman's heart. 
This turmoil, this grief, it wasn't leftovers from another life, it wasn't buried in the past; it was right 
here, dominating his soul like the very day the Millennium Items had been forged by fire. History 
was repeating, turning over and consuming itself like a serpent with its own tail.

But Bakura never remembered warmth like this comforting him when the ashes settled.

It felt like his chest had been cut open and he could do nothing but bleed out, wails swallowed by the 
fabric of Malik's shirt. Something had to have possessed him because it wouldn't stop, not until he 
was breathless and dizzy with a pounding headache, clinging to Malik like he expected him to 
crumble to sand at any moment.

But Malik never did.

“You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to but…” A murmur sounded in his ear, and 
Bakura wondered why Malik's voice seemed so fragile when he wasn't the one pathetically coming 
apart like this. “... it'll feel better if you do.”

It was a long time before Bakura found the will to speak again, the tears finally drying up and the 
sobs ebbing away, leaving a hollow space in his chest. He peeled himself from Malik's body, eyes 
blankly fixed on his hands resting in his lap.

“Kul Elna,” he said, voice as dry and dead as the ash he felt was still caked to the inside of his throat. 
“The place of truth. A truth those palace dogs could never handle.”

A fire reignited inside his chest and suddenly his words were as blazing hot as they had ever been.

“I saw it. I saw my-!”
He swayed as a wave of dizzying anger swept over him, but Malik steadied his shoulders.

“Take it easy…”

Bakura couldn't. His nails dug into his palms hard enough to draw blood.

“They killed them all!” He snarled. Malik's hands rubbed his arms but the sensation was distant. “They rounded them up like cattle and shoved them one by one into the cauldron. I shouldn't have watched-”

His voice wavered, caught on something lodged in his throat and almost turned into another sob.

“I shouldn't have let them- but I was too weak -” He squeezed his eyes shut, Ryou's jaw straining as he ground his teeth together. Aside from the mindless destruction, something else stuck out to him amidst the chaos.

“I saw… I saw a woman. I think she was my…”

He didn't want to acknowledge it. It didn't feel real - but then again, nothing felt real right now, with him spilling everything to Malik like this.

“My mother. They came in and killed her but she did something to me that made me invisible and-”

The tension drained from him, eyes widening and voice dimming as the revelation crawled over him, slow like poison.

“That's the only reason I survived.”

Malik squeezed his arms, and Bakura felt him shaking, glancing up to see his features twisted in shock and fury. He looked almost as distraught as Bakura had just minutes prior.
“Gods…!”

Bakura didn't know what to feel now, so he felt nothing, a dark, heavy pit carved into his chest in the wake of the storm.

“Malik,” he heard himself saying, taking Malik's hands and pulling them off of him so he could move. It was an automatic process more than anything else.

“There's something… I need to do.” Bakura's mind was disjointed, struggling to piece itself back together so he could get back on track. He managed to reach over the edge of the couch, finding Ryou's bag and reaching for the deck buried inside it. He withdrew a specific card, not even having to look to see what it was. “I want you to have this.”

Malik blinked at the seemingly random offer, taking the card from Bakura and squinting down at it in the darkness. The holographic foil glinted under the muted city lights streaming through the window.

“Diabound… Kernel?” Malik's eyes skimmed the card effect, widening slightly. “This is a really powerful card.”

“It'll be of more use in your hands.” Bakura's shoulders hitched in a shrug. “I know Yugi and the others are going to try and interfere. I want you to stop them.”

That wasn't the only reason for handing it over, but not even he could explain the sudden urge that consumed him. With his soul feeling like it had been broken apart and sloppily mended back together after what had just happened, he felt he should keep this part of him… somewhere else.

Somewhere safer.

Malik stared at him for a long time, but fortunately he didn't question it, merely tucking Diabound away in his pocket.

“Got it.”

With a sigh, he pushed himself to his feet and disappeared around the side of the couch. Bakura
didn't see where he went or what he was doing, his eyes blankly fixed on the spot in front of him for what could have been hours.

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention and he glanced up to see Malik standing there, wearing clothes more suited for sleeping this time.

Malik bent down and scooped him up into his arms with a surprising amount of ease. It took Bakura's mind a moment to catch up with him.

“What are you-!?” He jolted, glaring up at Malik. He probably would have struggled harder if he weren't so exhausted in every sense of the word.

“Bakura, just… be quiet for once.” Malik set him down on the bed and went off to grab something, returning with a bottle of water and some painkillers and setting them on the night stand. “Enough of the game for now. You're really not well. This will help the hangover.”

It was like the word 'hangover' triggered Bakura's body to remember how utterly wrecked it was. A twinge of pain shot through his forehead and he grimaced, reaching for the pills and swallowing two.

“I'm fine,” he said after sucking down half the bottle of water, setting it aside and wiping his mouth. “You're the one that isn't well, doting on me like this.”

“Would it kill you to just accept the help?” Malik climbed onto the bed beside him. “You've never had someone… help you like this, have you?”

Bakura stared down at his lap as he thought back to the false memory. They were both so insistent - Ryou and Malik - and he didn't understand it. He had survived just fine on his own, hadn't he?

“I never needed to.”

“I'm not trying to imply you're weak, it's just…” Malik sighed. “Gods, what you went through... it sounds awful.”

The corners of Bakura's lips twitched upwards. “So it's pity, is it?”
“I care about you, you damn idiot!”

Bakura's gaze was jerked over to Malik, eyes widening. Malik had his eyes narrowed, jaw tight in a grimace. He closed his eyes and exhaled deeply, turning so that his back faced Bakura as he reached for the hem of his shirt. Bakura's mouth went dry as he found the scars mapping out the Pharaoh's destiny right before his eyes, all of the tombkeepers bloody history condensed down to one person's flesh.

“You don't have to show me this,” he murmured. “I've seen it already - when you revealed it to the Pharaoh.”

“That's not why I'm showing you it,” Malik said, glaring back over his shoulder. “How can you look at what I've been through and think I don't know what this kind of pain feels like?”

He jerked his gaze away, the hieroglyphics wavering as his shoulders trembled.

“I hate it, okay? I hate what the Pharaoh has done to both of our families! All this time I thought I was alone, and then you…”

Bakura could see the muscles clench under his skin once more before they slumped, Malik's tone falling quieter.

“I don't know.”

Bakura was speechless - perhaps because Malik had put something into words that he had been aware of all this time but never went out of his way to acknowledge.

“Malik…” He breathed, reaching towards his back, drawn by some morbid urge to touch the cursed legacy that had been carved into Malik's back. His hand paused, hovering an inch above his spine, then it reached up to Malik's shoulder instead.

Prompted by the touch, Malik turned back around, his eyes softer than they had any right to be. Bakura's palm slid to his cheek instead, coaxing his face closer.
There weren't any excuses to hide behind; his mind wasn't clouded by the alcohol anymore and everything felt clear - almost painfully so - but it didn't stop him. He’d already bled before Malik, let him see him at his most vulnerable. As far as he was concerned, there wasn't much else to lose.

The kiss was slower this time, hardly more than a firm press of lips as Malik eased Bakura down until he was laying back on the bed, but it lasted a long time. Bakura could feel Malik's weight slip atop him as they parted, Malik's face burying in his shoulder instead.

“We drank too much…” Malik murmured, even though they had sobered up most of the way by now.

Bakura peered up at the ceiling through lidded eyes, hands resting on Malik's lower back, just beneath the scars. He let the silence sink over them, an unspoken understanding binding them both.

Chapter End Notes

Only 70k words in and Bakura has finally cracked.
Malik awoke in a haze of warmth and light, the sun streaming in through the window and his face buried in blizzard of hair. The gogginess from the alcohol still pursued him, but he’d slept off the worst of it. Still, he was more than content to tighten his arms around the body before him, a sigh escaping him as his eyes fluttered shut once more.

And then the person laying in bed with him shifted far too abruptly, voice cracking in a squeak that definitely didn’t belong to Bakura.

“Malik…?!”

The illusion of comfort shattered like glass as Malik’s eyes flew open once more, only to find a very flushed, very flustered Ryou gawking back at him.

“Oh, fuck.” Malik jerked away and sat up, mind struggling to catch up with him.

Malik felt heat crawl across his cheeks and he shook his head furiously.

Ryou glanced around, realizing they were in bed, and eyeing Malik’s lack of a shirt. “Don't tell me you both-!”

“Why were you in bed together?!” Ryou demanded, also scrambling off the bed. His eyes fell on the coffee table, where numerous bottles were still spread out. “And there's alcohol everywhere!”
He froze, eyes rounding as he caught sight of something in the hanging mirror. He stepped over to it and lifted his hair back over his shoulder, choking on a gasp.

“Why do I have hickies on my neck?!” He whipped around to pin a glare on Malik again, cheeks burning impossibly darker. “Just because you used my body before doesn't mean you're entitled to it now!”

Malik had to block a cushion as it was lobbed at his head. He tossed it back to the couch right as Ryou stomped off to the bathroom door.

“I'm using your shower,” Ryou grumbled, the slam of the door shutting punctuating the end of his sentence.

Malik stood there for a long time, dragging his hands down his face with a low groan. Bakura could have given him a little warning, at the very least, but that was probably expecting too much from him.

He sighed and went to pull on a shirt. May as well clean up the mess in the meantime.

It was nearly an hour later when the bathroom door clicked open and Ryou's face appeared again. Malik stood up from where he had been sitting on the couch and tentatively approached. Guilt tugged at his insides, but he was determined to shoulder it himself this time.

“Look… I'm really sorry.” He rubbed the back of his head, unable to meet Ryou's gaze.

“You've apologized to me before for this kind of thing, but now I'm wondering if you really meant it,” Ryou murmured, head half tucked against the door frame.

“I…” Really, it wasn't like Malik had intentionally ignored the fact Bakura shared a body, but it was hard to remember with so many other things running through his mind. Even so… “I don't have any excuse.”

This whole ‘being a better person’ thing was a work in progress after all.
His eyes narrowed in irritation - mostly aimed at himself. He wasn't a stranger to people trying to put their hands on him or taking advantage of his youth; he had run a crime ring and wasn't a stranger to the lowest depths of human scum after all. He really should have known better.

“I promise it wasn't out of any sleazy intention. In fact, it wasn't even planned and I never intended to go… that far.”

Ryou stared at him for an uncomfortably long period of time, and then his shoulders dropped.

“I guess it's not the worst thing you two have done to me.” He gave a bitter chuckle that made Malik cringe. “How far did it go?”

Malik thought for a moment. Last night's events had grown hazy, but he remembered them clear enough. Heat dusted his cheeks by the smallest amount, which he covered by scratching his nose. “... We kissed, not much more.”

“Just… don't do it again. It's… weird, you know?”

Malik understood. Ryou wasn't the only one here who’d had control of his body compromised to another entity, and all the strangeness that came with it. Ryou shifted his feet, glancing away.

“Though… I am kind of curious how you two even… I mean, imagining him-” It was Ryou's turn to look bashful, and the colour showed up more easily on his complexion. “But I can't really say I'm surprised either.”

“We were very drunk...” Malik supplied, but that didn't seem to be what Ryou had meant. Neither of them seemed willing to dwell on it now, however, the stench of awkwardness still hanging in the air.

“You can tell me the details at the museum later.” Ryou said, reaching for a towel and returning to drying his hair off. “I want to show you something.”

Malik stepped away from the door, the urge to bash his head against something still blindingly intense. He swore that, if he listened closely, he could hear laughter echoing from the deepest corners of his mind.
“Right...”

...

“He called it his ‘ka’?”

It was amazing what a couple rounds of lunch could do for Ryou's mood. He didn't seem inclined to bring up the disaster that was the morning up again, and Malik was alright with that. It was probably just as awkward for the both of them.

Ryou had taken them to the museum afterwards, bringing him into the back room and revealing his progress on the diorama. Malik had to admit, it was impressive, but it wasn't as interesting as the story Ryou told. First hand accounts of the Thief King were something he never thought he would hear. He found himself smiling without realizing it, trying to picture the Bakura he knew as a scrappy little rogue trying to survive in the desert. However, that smile didn't last long as Ryou recounted the conditions he lived in.

Still, it made him somewhat jealous that Ryou could see all of this for himself.

“Yeah! It was incredible!” Ryou jumped up from his seat and held his arms out as far as he physically could. “It was this great white beast with-” He paused, eyes brightening with possibility. “Actually, I can show you it.” He ducked down to search through his bag, pulling out his deck and sifting through the cards once, twice. By the third time, an intense frown was set into his features. “Oh no, where is it? Don't tell me I lost it…”

Malik stood up from his seat as well, pulling a certain card out of his pocket and leaning across the table to show it to Ryou.

“Are you talking about this?”

Ryou narrowed his eyes, using the table edge to pull himself back to his feet.

“Did you steal that from my bag?”
Malik shook his head. “No, Bakura gave it to me. He wanted me to have it. You can even ask him.”

He held the card before him, staring down at Diabound Kernel. Every time he laid eyes on it, it almost felt like it was staring back. “I think… it’s his way of showing me he trusts me with his soul.”

Malik placed the card back in his pocket and took a seat again, crossing one leg over the other. “You may or may not know this but thousands of years in the past, people would duel with their souls instead of cards. They would seal a person's ka inside a stone slab to be called upon in battle later.” He frowned, thinking back to the lessons that had been forced down his throat as a child. “In fact, my clan still has some of these slabs locked away underground.” He sighed, dashing Ryou's hopes before he got too excited. “Though they're quite useless now since the old way of summoning them has been lost to time…”

Ryou looked thoughtful, staring at the diorama as if he could actually see into the past. “Do you think Bakura's ka could be sealed away in there?” He deflated as he found the answer to his own question. “Though… I guess not since I saw the same beast trapped in the darkness of the Ring…”

“I doubt it would be in there anyway. They couldn't contain Bakura's ka; it was too powerful to be sealed,” Malik snorted. “Assuming he wasn't just saying that to inflate his own ego.”

“Even as a child, he was so fierce…” Ryou murmured. “It's so hard to comprehend someone living like that.”

Malik’s expression sobered, his mind brought back to last night. Bakura's face haunted him, more terrifying in his despair and sorrow than he ever could be angry or laughing out of his mind with power. It was like a mask had come off, layers of the wicked spirit peeled back and revealing the truth beneath.

“You know we can't just leave it like this, right?” He spoke lower now, fist clenching where it rested on the table, eyes fixed on something far away. “You didn't see him last night. He had some sort of nightmare, but it was… something else entirely. He… he was destroyed. It was like everything had been taken from him all over again.”

Malik could still feel Bakura’s tears burning against his shoulder, and those wails would never leave his mind.
“That was what led him into giving me his card. After seeing that… I have no doubt in my mind that he is more human than he thinks.” He raised his head and peered up at Ryou, gaze hardening. “I know he still wants to challenge the Pharaoh, but we can't just turn a blind eye to this.”

“I know, Malik, but do you really think he'll stop if we just ask him to? This is bigger than the Pharaoh, I can feel it.” Ryou sighed. “It's like I said, we have to play the game too.”

He walked around the table, stopping at a certain shelf and dropping to his knees. After rummaging around for a few moments, he pulled out a small, unsuspecting wooden chest. Carrying it back over, he placed it on the ledge beside Malik, who raised a brow at it, unsure of what he was supposed to be seeing here.

“This is what I wanted to show you.” Ryou said, unlocking the padlock that held the lid shut. “It's not the first time Bakura has set up a trap for the Pharaoh like this. He tricked Yugi and the others into playing Monster World with him and held their souls hostage inside the game.”

He reached inside the box and pulled out something small and white, placing it on the table edge next to the chest. Malik uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, squinting at it.

It was a… tiny Ryou dressed in white and holding a staff. It was cute but Malik didn't see how it was going to help them out here.

“I helped to stop him, but it nearly cost me my life… My character, White Mage Bakura, is the only reason I was able to return to my body,” Ryou explained. “It cost all thirteen of my White Mage’s levels to resurrect me, resetting him back to level zero…”

A secretive, determined fire lit up in Ryou's gaze, letting Malik know he was serious and not just spouting nonsense. “... But I've been level grinding again during my research in all of this, and when I enter the game again, I'll be much stronger than I was before.” Ryou narrowed his eyes. “Bakura doesn't know, and if you really want to help him, you'll keep this between us. Do you understand?”

Shock crept over Malik as he began to piece it all together - Bakura intended on replicating the circumstances of that first game and trapping the Pharaoh so he couldn't reach the Afterlife. This level of planning held a degree of finality that sent chills down Malik's spine. Even now, this very room held a charged, malevolent aura, as if anticipating the game to come. This was it - Bakura's last gambit.
If anyone tried to interfere, would they be trapped as well?

“I understand,” Malik answered. The last thing he wanted to do was sabotage what could be their one chance at getting through to Bakura. “But… saving him is easier said than done. Where do we even start?”

“The antagonist of our first RPG was none other than Zorc Necrophades.”

Ryou reached into the chest and pulled out another figure - or rather, a collection of what used to be a figure. It lay, shattered in pieces like it had been detonated from within its very core, and Ryou had to use both hands to keep broken limbs and other parts from spilling onto the floor. He dumped the pile onto the ledge before plucking up the hellish looking head of the monster and placing it beside White Mage Ryou.

“He's our real target here. He lives inside the Ring… inside that world of memories. When we enter the game, we better be prepared to fight him.”

Ryou pulled out a third item, clasping it in his first. He opened his palm to reveal a pair of ten sided dice.

Malik gave a wry smirk. “No offense, but if we're going up against a demon of shadows with dice, I think we've already lost.”

“These aren't just any dice… I sealed a part of myself inside them as a bit of insurance,” Ryou gave a huff, sounding borderline offended. “I've used this trick before - it was how I nearly died the first time - but I didn't use all my energy to do this time, just enough in case we need help in a crucial moment.”

Malik's eyes widened. All of this probably would have sounded insane to the average person, but Malik had witnessed Gods and Shadow Games first hand, so he merely nodded. Ryou's reasoning for providing so much backup seemed logical.

Ryou turned to the chest once again.

“And I have one more thing to show you…”
Malik blinked as another miniature clay figure was held out towards him, but this one was more than familiar. Malik took it, turning it over in his hands and admiring the detail. It was accurate right down to the designs on his jacket and the kohl lining his eyes.

Malik smiled. “I get a character too?”

“You don’t really have a role in the campaign, but there’s a reason for that. We need the element of surprise on our side and I have to get you in the game somehow.” Ryou's expression became grave again. “Bakura can’t know what we're doing, for his own good.”

“I understand,” Malik repeated, but his worries were no more sated than before. “This is going to be tricky…”

Even all this preparation didn’t account for the most prominent issue in his mind. “I'm worried that… if Bakura is merged with Zorc, then it's not so cut and dry. We can't just get rid of Zorc - what if Bakura is destroyed as well?”

Ryou grabbed his chair and pulled it around the table, setting it front of Malik's and plunking down. His expression seemed heavier now, as if considering a possibility he really didn't want to. “If it comes down to it… that may have to be how it ends.”

Malik bristled, his entire body going rigid with tension. “How can you say that?”

“I'm not saying I want that to happen,” Ryou shook his head. “But we can't let Zorc win, no matter what. That could cost all of us our lives.”

Malik’s gaze fell to the floor. He hated this. He hated how Ryou had a point. He remembered how he had thought he was too far gone, and all he wanted was for the Pharaoh to end it because that seemed like what was best for everyone.

But, even in the deepest reaches of darkness, light had managed to break through the clouds and reach him.

Perhaps they could be that light for Bakura.
“My siblings never gave up on me. I'm not giving up on him.” Malik raised his head again, glad to see his resolve reflected back at him in Ryou's eyes.

Ryou nodded.

“That will be the hardest part… finding a way to free him from Zorc. But that doesn't mean it's impossible.”

…

Ryou appeared before a familiar looking stairwell, one he had been cautioned to stay away from. That wasn't a warning Ryou would heed this time. Despite his best instinct telling him to turn and run, he took a first step down into the dark opening, and then another.

The village was still swirling with ghosts, tendrils of mist following Ryou as he descended. They coiled around his limbs and brushed against his face, but their touch was curious rather than obstructive and they would slide away moments later. Ryou still shuddered, an otherworldly cold remaining in his nerves long after they had left.

The stairs seemed to go on forever, and Ryou's lungs tightened with every step, gooseflesh prickling along his arms. Whatever lay down here clearly didn't want him intruding, but that only gave him the incentive to push forward.

A wide chamber opened up before him as he reached the bottom, a horrible uncanniness creeping over Ryou. This place stirred up something in his own memories, but he didn't have much time to think about it because he soon realized he wasn't alone.

A figure stood atop an altar raised in the center of the room, the edges of his crimson robe fluttering as he turned. Ryou knew who he was before he even saw his face, but the breath stilled in his lungs regardless.

The man appeared exactly the same as when Ryou had found him bound in the darkness, his eyes just as dull and devoid of life. On a physical level, a lot of the child from the desert was still there, but from his gaze alone, something had finally crumbled. His eyes were glazed with malice, empty like a void.
It was the exact same expression the Spirit of the Ring wore.

“So you've come to visit me again.” The Thief King’s voice rolled across the room easily, slick like honey. Ryou noticed he looked… off, like the edges of him were fuzzier. It was like peering through a fog, and Ryou soon realized why.

Bakura stood in front of a large, stone tablet with seven holes sunken into it. It was abundantly clear what was meant to rest inside them.

Shadow magic polluted the air, so thick Ryou nearly gagged on it. The disturbance was so heavy, he could almost see it pouring out the sides of the altar. He really wished Bakura would step away from there.

As Ryou hesitantly drew closer, his ears began to pick up something beneath the ever present wailing of the ghosts swirling through the air. A hum of some kind, or perhaps a whisper…

A voice, but it was unlike any voice Ryou had ever heard. If he listened closely, he could almost make out what sounded like words, but they weren't quite intelligible. The pit of dread that had begun gathering in his gut swelled tenfold.

Bakura tilted his head, that easy, unsettling grin still painted onto his face. “What was your name again, spirit?”

“Ryou, and I’m not a spirit. You’re actually the spirit here,” Ryou said, frowning heavily. “I’m from thousands of years in the future.”

The smile fell off of Bakura’s face, replaced by utter bemusement, and then he reacted about as well as Ryou expected him to. Throwing his head back, his booming cackle filled the chamber. The ghosts stirred faster, excited by the sound.

“Oh you are, are you?”

Ryou's hands balled into fists, impatience flooding through every vein in his body.
“You want to face the Pharaoh, don’t you? Make him pay for what he’s done to this place?”

*That* cut off the Thief King’s laughter pretty quickly. He looked at Ryou, no trace of humour in his eyes, but Ryou went on.

“Well your fight with him ends with the both of you being sealed inside the Millennium Items!”

Bakura glared at him, smirk having morphed into a snarl. His lips peeled back even further, exposing more teeth.

“What the hell are you-?”

“You’re going to die!” Ryou's voice rose to a shout. “Don’t you see that your plan is going to fail?”

The darkness surrounding Bakura seemed to pulse and thicken, but Ryou stood his ground, meeting the fierceness in Bakura's eyes with his own.

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you are-”

“You had a mother and a father, perhaps a sister, brother, cousins…” Ryou cut him off, a heavy empathy settling in his tone. “You must have loved them very much to want to avenge them, but would they want to see you destroy yourself like this?”

Something snapped inside Bakura's gaze. He leapt off of the altar and in two large bounds was standing in front of Ryou. His hands shot out, wrapping around Ryou's throat and jerking him close

“There’s nothing left!” He screamed, eyes alight with fire as he squeezed, digging nails into pale flesh hard enough to draw blood. “It doesn’t matter now! They’re all gone!” His voice caught, breaking almost imperceptibly. Ryou opened his mouth to protest, but all that came out was a choke, his eyes wide and pleading as he stared back at Bakura's face.

“All that remains of them is their disembodied spirits howling for justice! Can you not hear them?”
Bakura abruptly released him, shoving him back with a scoff of disgust. His voice dropped in volume as he turned away, stepping back over to the tablet. “I hear them every day, bound here and unable to leave…”

Ryou grunted as he landed on the floor, reaching up to rub at his throat and watching in dismay as Bakura climbed the steps again.

“And I’ll grant them their justice when I take back the Millennium Items and bring them to their rightful resting place,” Bakura spoke lowly, gaze fixed on the gaps in the stone.

“You need to get away from there! The shadow magic is destroying your mind!” Ryou cried, frustration burning at the back of his eyes. He was about to say something else when he heard it - that voice whispering words too quiet and too numerous to make out. “What is that voice…?”

Bakura must have heard it too because his head was cocked to one side, that haunting grin returning as if he had been told something Ryou hadn’t.

“I don’t know, but I can feel the power it promises me. It won’t be long now… all I have to do is free it…” His eyes lidded as though in a trance, voice low and hardly audible. He raised his head, the smirk fading as he peered up at the spirits floating and churning. “Free all of them…”

“You can’t be serious!” Ryou yelled, loud enough to hopefully shake the moron from his daze. “How can you trust anything it says?”

Bakura eyed him over his shoulder, gaze unreadable. “I have nothing to lose and everything to gain.”

“You’re wrong!” Ryou jumped back to his feet. “You have no idea what freeing that thing will do! It could destroy everything, including you!”

Bakura’s shoulders shook, merely chuckling like the prospect of death was some wild, desperate fantasy. Ryou changed angles.

“What about your family? What becomes of them?”
Bakura stilled.

“...You have no reason to believe it’ll deliver on whatever it’s promised you. It’ll cast you and your village aside as soon as it has what it wants.” Ryou narrowed his eyes. If some residual part of that child’s humanity still lingered, it better show itself now. “What then? Could you do it? Would their souls have been worth your revenge?”

Bakura was silent, and the expression on his face surprised Ryou. It was like some of the light had finally broke into the very shrine they both stood inside, the dark, bloodthirsty fog lifting from his eyes. For a fleeting moment he looked uncertain, like he was actually listening to Ryou's words, and considering them.

Ryou's shoulders relaxed, giving a sigh of tentative relief. Perhaps this wasn't a lost cause after all.

Bakura looked about ready to open his mouth to speak, and that was the moment the world came apart. It happened so fast, Ryou barely managed a cry of shock as his surroundings - the shrine, the tablet, the Thief King himself - burst into sand and the darkness took over.

He expected to awaken at any moment like he had so many times before, but the black expanse of this realm seemed infinite. He would close his eyes, only to reopen them and find himself hugged by ink on all sides, the darkness whipping past him as he fell endlessly. The ground rushed up to meet him - at least, he assumed it was the ground; he still couldn't see anything but it felt as solid as shadows could. There was no sound aside from his own breathing, the silence unnatural and oppressive.

Something shifted in the darkness. Ryou felt it rather than heard it, and his blood turned to ice. This wasn't any regular darkness; it was stronger - so much stronger - than the last time he had been face to face with it.

Ryou Bakura.

Ryou's eyes widened, his mouth dropping open in a silent scream. He fell to his knees, spine arched and head thrown back in a rush of agony before he slumped forward, curling in on himself. He clamped his hands over his ears, but it was too late. It was already inside his mind.

The voice was unlike anything he had ever heard. The whispers filtering through from just behind the Millennium Item’s tablet were nothing compared to this. It didn't come from the version of Zorc
Necrophades Bakura had brought to life in the first RPG they had played. It was the real, true voice of the Darkness. In fact, it hardly sounded like a voice at all, but rather a collective of every bit of pain, grief, and suffering that existed in the world, all condensed into one desolate, inhuman, horrifying sound. Everything about it was *wrong* - a beastly rumble that should have never been given the ability to form words.

Ryou felt as though he’d lose his mind just hearing it, like he had been dragged before a bottomless pit and thrown in, crumbling apart as he fell. Tears burned behind his eyes as he shoved his fingers deeper into his ears and tried to breathe again.

And this was the voice Bakura had listened to for thousands of years. How did he endure it?

Perhaps the realization was just as horrific. Bakura *hadn’t* endured it. He had let it in and twist him into something unrecognizable from that child in the desert, and he carried every ounce of poison currently being poured into Ryou's skull.

Ryou grit his teeth and forced himself up onto his arms, hanging onto every bit of light in his soul. He thought of his mother, he thought of Amane, he thought of his friends, keeping their warmth in a place not even the darkness could reach.

A sharp gasp left him as a gigantic grip encircled him, claws digging against his skin as he was lifted. He opened his eyes, glaring at the two red slits he found himself level with.

*I'm impressed you've made it this far, but this is where it ends for you.*

Ryou was prepared for it this time, but that didn’t make the voice any less unpleasant. Still, the light in his chest burned brighter. He held it close, kindled it within his soul until his ribs felt too small to contain it.

“So you're the real demon in the Ring,” Ryou said, furrowing his brows. “What does that make Bakura then?”

*A mere puppet of mine.*

Ryou felt the warmth spread from his chest, his anger igniting it like a match.
“A puppet, huh?” His voice was hoarse and quiet, yet unwavering and certain. “Then I’ll cut his strings.”

Zorc screamed and the grip abruptly released him as light seared through Ryou. He grunted as he landed on the ground, realizing he could see now; his body gave off a white glow, illuminating a small space around him. Ryou saw something slither along the edges of the light’s radius, the reptilian tail retracting into the darkness as Zorc hissed and spat. Ryou’s eyes widened as something whistled through the dead air a split second before the tail came back at a breakneck speed.

The impact shuddered through him, the ground disappearing as his body was sent sailing through the air, a single star in the endless black sky. Pain shot through him as his side slammed back into the shadowy floor, skidding to a stop what felt like miles and miles away. He coughed, unable to move, unable to breathe, utterly helpless as long, heavy footsteps shook the realm, Zorc approaching him once again.

A fruitless effort in the end. Bakura gave himself over to me entirely - long before you ever made contact with him. You’re chasing after phantoms from an era that’s long since crumbled to sand. The mortal you want so badly to exist simply doesn’t anymore.

Slowly pushing himself up, Ryou grit his teeth and glared up into the darkness again, despite some part of him faltering. Was there really nothing of the Thief King left aside from fleeting, disjointed memories? Was all of this really for nothing in the end?

However, given what Malik had told him...

“I don’t believe you!” Ryou got back to his feet, too furious to feel pain. There had to be some part of Bakura that could be saved. There had to be.

Zorc’s voice continued on, writhing deeper into his mind.

That’s all you’ve ever been doing, isn’t it? Engrossing yourself in the occult because that was the only way you could shoulder the grief. Perhaps you’ve convinced yourself there was some way to make contact with your-

“Go to hell!” Ryou screamed, his light burning so brightly it caused Zorc to rear and retreat back
You shouldn't concern yourself with searching for the dead anymore, Ryou Bakura, because you'll soon be joining them.

Ryou's eyes widened as he watched the demon turn, tail lifting high into the air above him. Even with the light protecting him, Zorc easily dwarfed him in size, and Ryou couldn't move as the tail came back down. He raised his arms and squeezed his eyes shut, awaiting the inevitable sensation of being crushed.

Something hooked around his heart and a moment later he was in the light of his soul room with his own frantic, maroon gaze peering back at him. Ryou sucked in a gasp, disoriented with the sudden shift in surroundings, and he tried to jerk back, but Bakura grasped his shoulders tightly.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?! Stop sneaking past me!” Bakura shook him, nails digging crescents in Ryou's skin.

Something in Ryou broke and he lurched toward his mirror image, pounding on his chest again and again.

“You're such an idiot!” He cried, each hit growing weaker. “He called you a puppet and you're siding with him!”

Bakura held him an arm's length away, scowling. “What the hell-?!”

“Zorc! I just fought him!”

“You did what?! ” Bakura screeched, abruptly shoving him back, posture rigid and tense.

Ryou staggered but managed to rebalance himself, holding his side where he had been struck by Zorc's tail. It was still throbbing with pain. “You're being used! Can't you see that?”

The incredulousness drained away from Bakura's expression, his posture slackening as a darkness fell over his face. The glare he met Ryou with was almost vacant, his voice falling to an unsettling,
quiet tone.

“Why do you care what I do? I already told you that you can’t change anything.” He shook his head, a humourless smirk twitching at the corners of his lips. “I don’t care if I’m being used, as long as I take the Pharaoh down with me.”

Ryou felt his chest seize, Zorc's words echoing in his mind. Was there really no convincing Bakura not to side with that demon?

“What about Malik?”

There was an almost imperceptible tremble in Bakura's countenance, a muscle briefly spasming under his eye. Other than that, his demeanor was as cold as his voice.

“What about him?”

“You're fine with hurting him as well?”

“He knows what he’s getting into. He wants the Pharaoh destroyed just as badly as I do.” Bakura chuckled, averting his gaze with a scoff. When his eyes fell on Ryou again, he grinned - an angry, poison-slick bare of teeth. “You always knew it was going to end like this. You’ve seen what sins the Pharaoh hides. Tell me, would you try to stop me? Wouldn’t that make you the monster here?”

“The real monster is Zorc. How can you trust him?” Ryou grimaced, hope a diminishing flame in his chest. “How do you know he had nothing to do with it - the massacre of Kul Elna?”

Ryou's eyes widened as he considered his own reasoning, mouth falling open in horror. “Do you even know what he’s capable of?”

Bakura took a step back, features falling open in what could have been clarity if it wasn't immediately taken over by blinding rage. Something snapped, faux composure shattering like glass in a storm, and then he was lunging for Ryou's throat. He seized it, squeezing hard, and Ryou almost wanted to laugh at the paradox of being choked twice in the same day, by the same person, thousands of years apart.
“I saw it with my own eyes! It was the royals! Those fuckers at the palace brought this on their own heads!” Bakura's scream was deafening, shaking the confines of their soul room. “And it’s too late for you to stop it!”

He flung Ryou away, and when Ryou looked up again, he was alone in the silence. He shook with a special brand of fury, uniquely aimed at the spirit and his whims, the tears of frustration that had been burning behind his eyes finally beginning to fall.

If there was one thing he was confident about, it was that Bakura wouldn't win. It seemed so easy then. All he had to do was sit back and wait for the Pharaoh to prevail. And Gods, right now that seemed more tempting than ever.

But that was probably exactly what Bakura wanted - for him to become a useless, passive piece in the game, just like he was before.

The only thing that burned brighter than his anger was his spite. He’d come this far, and he wasn’t going to step down and let Bakura do as he pleased now.

Because the one thing that mattered just as much as stopping him was proving him wrong.
Ah, finally. We are moving into the final arc of the plot

Spoiler alert: Everything gets fucked up

The weeks that followed were both the longest and the shortest in Bakura's existence.

Between that encounter with Ryou, and Malik running around his mind, he was left in an odd, liminal place. Ryou remained mostly silent, and Malik never brought up the incident that had occurred that night. The silence only worsened the tension, but Bakura preferred it that way, as confrontation would have been a waste of time and, ultimately, useless.

Though it wasn't like the time he spent with Malik was the most productive either.

It wasn't a fact Bakura wanted to acknowledge, and it felt out of his control as well. With the diorama finished and the trap all but set, there was nothing else but the wait to sit through.

And they filled the space however they could - Malik's whims usually. Bakura had few complaints as he had little idea of how ease the restless boredom either, so he let himself be dragged all over the city. It was almost nostalgic in a way - running through the streets of Egypt with a crime boss, running through the streets of Domino with a 'reformed' crime boss, what difference did it make?

And perhaps that was the strangest thing about their partnership. In comparison to his thousands of years as a spirit, his time with Malik was minimal - and yet, every moment felt drawn out to its fullest. Time seemed to slow, like it had when the light had fallen on Malik in the alley, like it had when he watched his partner paw at the glass in the aquarium. Even something as simple as watching Malik try a burger for the first time and wrinkle his nose at the taste had Bakura grinning ear to ear, the cackle he let out warmer than usual.

It all made him feel like he could exist, that this body was his own and he could forget the divide between his spirit and Ryou's flesh- that he was *more* somehow.

Perhaps that was what Malik wanted too - to feel *more* than his past. Bakura could see the appeal,
but he knew it wasn't possible on his own front. It was nothing more than a fantasy to be indulged in - a dream.

And that dream was about to end very soon.

Bakura growled as he shoved another 100 yen into the machine, causing the soft jets on the table to switch on again. “Two out of three!”

Malik shook his head, chuckling, the multicoloured lights of the arcade dyeing his pale hair neon green and electric blue. “You're such a sore loser. Are you actually going to try and protect your goal this time?”

“Let's see how long that smugness lasts…” Bakura bared his teeth, grabbing the thin puck the machine dispensed and tossing it to the middle of the table.

“To be fair, you are better at this than DDR…” Malik snorted.

“Rot and die.”

Malik ended up winning the second round of air hockey too, but Bakura just barely got even in Puyo Puyo Tetris. Their arguing over who should have won over all wouldn't cease until they went to leave the arcade, dissolving into them laughing and shoving at each other as they spilled onto the streets.

Malik grinned, holding out the soda he had bought, straw bobbing from the top. Bakura leaned over and took a sip without thinking much of it, bumping Malik's shoulder playfully as he pulled away.
As it approached the hour of dusk, their shadows grew long and deep and their idle chatter fell quiet. Given that it was a week night, the streets were mostly empty, people and cars few and far between. The streaks of pale yellow painting the horizon melted to a salmon pink, and then to a deeper blue, orange light bathing them as street lanterns flickered on. The dim silence brought a soberness along with it, reality dawning over them as the sun set.

Malik tossed the empty soda into a nearby bin, his voice lower when he spoke again. “Yugi and the rest of them have arrived back in Domino.”

Bakura's hands were shoved in the pockets of his dark coat, his left fidgeting with something as he had taken to doing these past few weeks. His thumb nail ran against the ridges of the ring as he slipped it on and off his fingers, idly twisting it. He wasn't sure when it had become a habit, but there was a strange sort of comfort in it.
It was the strangest thing. The gold felt like it burned his hands sometimes, like it fit too heavy in his palm, and yet he didn't want to let go of it.

Aside from that, it was simply a nice ring and what it represented still made Bakura grin wolfishly when he thought about it. The idea that he had stolen something - someone, rather - right from under the Pharaoh's rule was beyond a thrill.

He stole from tombs - he could steal from tombkeepers.

“Yes, it won't be long now. I can feel it,” he replied, a note of grim finality to his words. He couldn't quite identify the tightness in his chest, but he neglected to acknowledge it. Still, an off sort of feeling pursued him...

Malik must have picked up on his strange energy because he raised a brow at him.

“Nervous?”

“No, not nervous, per se. And not for the reason you think,” Bakura scoffed, brows furrowing as his attention was brought back to a matter he had only become aware of in the past few days. “Baffled is probably the better word for it…”

“Over what?”

Bakura released the wedding band, fingers opting to fidget with the Millennium Eye in his pocket instead. “Before we even met, I had sealed a piece of myself inside the Millennium Puzzle. It was sent as a spy, to have a set of eyes inside that maze buried in the Pharaoh's soul.”

“And…”

“And I can't feel it at all for some reason!” Bakura grit his teeth, hating to admit the fact at all. “It's like it's disappeared or… I lost control of it.” He huffed through his nose, glancing away. “I wanted some back up behind the enemy lines but it's not a devastating loss I suppose…”

Malik frowned. “Well, if it's gone, there's no point in stressing about it.” He drew to a halt, jabbing
his thumb in the adjacent direction. “Wanna head back to the hotel?”

Bakura rolled his shoulders in a shrug. “I guess. I can't stay late this time. My host has school tomorrow.”

Malik nearly sputtered a laugh. “Since when have you ever cared about Ryou's schedule?”

Bakura smirked back, a feral glimmer in his eye. “When it comes to tracking Yugi and the others, of course.”

…

The ride back to the hotel was quiet, Malik taking it slow as if avoiding the inevitable confrontation that lay at the end.

Perhaps he had grown too comfortable in this partnership. The past few weeks had been… some of the best in his life, if he was being completely honest. Bakura indulged him in whatever he wanted, even if he would act like every moment was an incomprehensible burden, and Malik could tell he was enjoying himself too. There was no need for explanations, no judgement between them - it was a freedom Malik had seldom experienced.

But Malik wouldn't kid himself. The burn of the Millennium Ring pressing into his back reminded him that these times were just that - ephemeral. His heart sat like lead in his chest, knowing the days were numbered now.

In fact, this could have been the last.

Ryou's words rang heavy in his ears - Bakura wasn't going to change his mind, too stubborn for rational conversation. Even so, Malik held things in his chest he might never get to say otherwise. That flicker of uncertainty in the Thief King's eyes that Ryou had told him he had witnessed gave him the tiniest spot of hope, a single glimmer of light in an otherwise pitch black sky.

They climbed off the bike and made their way up to the room, The thick, unspoken tension choking any conversation from the air. Bakura entered first, and Malik shut the door behind them, the soft click sounding far too loud in the silence.
"Bakura…” he began, his eyes falling anywhere but on the spirit. The couch where they had drank themselves unconscious. The bed where Malik had held Bakura until morning, his cries and whimpers still ringing in his mind. “... are we never going to talk about it?”

For the sake of Bakura's dignity, Malik didn't bring that incident up after that night, but he couldn't have cared less about dignity now, with his time so short.

Bakura didn't reply, and didn't turn to look at him, not for a long time, until the silence was almost too uncomfortable to break again. Malik opened his mouth to try again, but Bakura cut over him.

“What point is there?”

“I just thought…” Malik's fists clenched at his sides, as though envisioning squeezing his own lungs and forcing the words from where they were lodged in his throat. “You're really content with ending things like this?”

Bakura finally turned to face him, eyes narrowed in a puzzled squint.

“What else did you expect? It's me or the Pharaoh, Malik.” He scoffed, something careful and guarded in his voice. “Are you suggesting you don't think I'll win?”

Malik released a breath of frustration through his nose. That hadn't been what he was referring to - not entirely anyway. But it was so hard to think about, and even harder to put into words. Judging by the discomfort in Bakura's gaze, perhaps some part of him did recognize the other meaning in Malik’s words.

“What happens if you do win?” Malik said against his better judgement, firmly meeting Bakura's gaze. Instinct told him he should stop before he pressed too far, but some reckless part of him wanted to hear the truth from Bakura's lips.

“I gain the full power of the Millennium Items,” Bakura answered evenly, his jaw tightening. “But you knew that already.”

“And what will you do with all that power?” Malik grimaced, an even more reckless part of him
hoping Bakura could recognize the fault in his own plan if he spoke it out loud.

A chuckle fell from Bakura's lips, like ash settling on the carpet.

“You don't have to worry about that.”

Malik's heart sank deeper into his chest. Ryou had told him how badly Bakura had reacted to being challenged, but Malik wasn't one to back down from a challenge himself. There had to be a way to get him to understand; Malik knew there had to be.

“I'd say I do if it compromises the safety of oh, I don't know,” Malik threw his arms up, “the entire world.” He narrowed his eyes to a glare. “Do you think I don't know what monster you plan on unleashing?”

There was a shift in Bakura's countenance, ice breaking over a frozen lake and revealing the cold, churning depths beneath. Malik realized his mistake as the air in the room became choked with a dark, crackling energy.

“Do you want to know what I think?” Bakura's lips peeled back in a snarl. “I think you've been conspiring with my host behind my back.” The tines of the Millennium Ring began to clink together, feeding off of his boiling anger. Malik could almost see the gold beginning to glow as if heated in a kiln.

“I never should have trusted you. You're just as weak as I first thought, backing out this late in the plan.” Bakura's voice rose, disgusted, venomous - above all, angrily wounded. “You fucking coward!”

He spat the words, and Malik took a step back as if sprayed by acid, the Ring’s aura almost stinging to be near.

“I was willing to help you! I still am!” Malik shot back, his own fury burning in his throat. “But not at the cost of this world. Do you forget how hard I worked just to start living here? You think I want that taken away?”

“This isn’t about you.” Bakura's voice dropped to a low, strained hiss, his body tense, coiled like a spring.
Malik shook his head, incredulous rage making him numb to the shadow magic polluting the air as he marched up to Bakura. His hands shot out, seizing the front of his coat and jerking him close.

“What about your village?” He shook him as if that could shake sense back into his skull. “You're destroying countless places like Kul Elna if you go through with this!”

Bakura's eyes were wide in stunned, vehement rage. He was still at first, and then it all rushed forward, shattering his composure. A noise that was more animal than human escaped him as he seized Malik by the throat, shoving him back against the wall with more strength than Ryou's body had on its own. Malik cried out, his scars bursting into fire as the impact reverberated up his spine.

“Don't you dare!” Bakura sunk his nails into his throat as he brought their faces close. “Was it not enough, Malik? Thousands of years of your people's pain falling literally on your back; the Pharaoh's memories carved into your flesh to hold; the abuse that broke your mind in half - was it not enough?”

Malik didn't have an answer for him - not one he thought Bakura would listen to anyway. He struggled for breath, keeping his blazing sights locked on Bakura.

With a harsh scoff, Bakura pivoted and three Malik's weight, sending him crashing to the floor. “You want to live kissing the Pharaoh's feet? Then you'll die the same way!”

Malik winced as his shoulder broke his fall, holding it as he pushed himself up to a crouch. The room swayed, shadow magic clouding his senses. Instinctively, he reached behind him, grabbing for the Rod that was no longer there - only to be reminded of how utterly defenseless he was.

Bakura took notice of his plight, a cruel grin splitting his face. “Bet you wish you hadn't handed over the Millennium Rod now, huh?”

Malik grimaced, forcing himself back to his feet despite how faint his limbs were feeling, his lungs still not quite working properly thanks to the hit to his back.

“It doesn't have to be like this, Bakura! I made the decision to walk in the light, and you can too! I don't kiss the Pharaoh's feet; I choose to live for myself!” Malik sucked in a breath, closing his eyes for a moment as the weight of the darkness bore down on him harder. He had to fight through it, like he had before. “You can't let this grudge control you forever! It isn't too late for you!”
Something snapped in the air and Malik dropped back to his knees a moment later, hands clutching at his chest as if they could claw out the pressure crushing his lungs. The world felt like it was closing in, as though nothing else existed but this small, isolated room.

“You don't get to make that decision for me! You know nothing about what I've been through!” Bakura's eyes were wild with fury, his voice just as frayed. “There is no living for me, Malik. I've been dead for thousands of years.”

Malik felt Bakura move in front of him and lower himself down to his level, balancing on the balls of his feet.

“You really thought you could change my mind, didn't you?” Bakura's words were deceptively soft, causing Malik to flinch harder than any blow thrown at him. “That I’d crumble into your arms again?”

That softness vanished as quickly as it came, leaving every bit of poison to drip back into his tone.

“No. Your father should have carved deeper. Maybe then you would understand.”

Malik didn't have words, remaining silent until Bakura stood up and moved away from him. And then a small, choked noise escaped him, and then another, and another, the chuckle breathless with disbelief.

“What was it you said to me? ‘You always have a choice’...?” Malik struggled to raise his head, a smirk of his own on his face, the words bitter between his teeth. “You want to call me a coward? Insist I'm the one giving myself up to a higher power?”

Bakura watched him carefully, no trace of humour or light in his eyes.

“Take a good fucking look at yourself. You're not in control; Zorc is letting you think that you are.” A tremble ran through Malik’s body, but his voice was steady, scalding with fire. “He's going to use you up, stringing you along on the empty promise of revenge and power until there's nothing left. You're so content being his bitch it sickens me!”
His voice had risen to a shout, hanging dead in the air as silence took over again. It wasn't empty silence; there was something dangerous stirring within it. Bakura's expression was unreadable, his bangs having fallen over his eyes.

Malik's heart pounded in his chest as he waited, and waited, wishing Bakura would say something - anything at this point. The dead air was almost worse than the argument.

And then Malik realized he couldn't move - couldn't even breathe for that matter. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out, hand uselessly reaching up for his chest. The ground rushed up to meet him, shadows clawing at the edges of his vision. Bakura stood at the center of the tunnel as the darkness closed in, swallowing up his face along with his dimming voice.

“I've made my choice. Stay out of this, Malik.”

... 

**Kill him.**

The voice started as a soft whisper, circling his mind, cradling his thoughts sweetly. Bakura heard it backdropping the heated words he exchanged with Malik, but it wasn't until the traitor collapsed that the voice grew louder, more insistent, speaking in phrases he could consciously process.

**Kill him.**

Nerves trembling with the argument still ringing inside his mind, Bakura couldn't take his eyes off of Malik's fallen form. His nails dug crescents into his palm, pulse thudding where the skin broke and blood pooled in his grip.

It would be so easy - stop his heart, crush his lungs, a slit to the throat if all else failed. Nothing more than a traitor like him deserved. Malik never truly planned on helping him; it was time to end this distraction, like he should have done from the beginning.

**Kill him.**
Zorc's voice became grating, claws impatiently pushing into Bakura's mind. The Millennium Ring hummed bright with power, so warm against his chest. He sunk into it readily, letting it wash over him and turn his thoughts easy and slow, a vicious grin spreading across his face.

Numb with intent, Bakura raised his arm and focused every ounce of shadow magic in the room on Malik as Zorc purred in the back of his thoughts.

Bakura exhaled hoarsely, fingers twitching once-

And stilling.

Starting from the third knuckle, a fierce burn set in his blood, travelling up his arm and causing the breath to seize in his chest. His eyes widened, not seeing the room anymore, not seeing anything except-

Blue.

Water sealed behind glass and hands pressing against it, lavender eyes bright with a fire so different from the one burning in his veins.

The image vanished from his mind, but the imprint remained. Bakura could see it as he tried to furiously blink it away, like Malik was still looking at him.

Zorc's purr had become a growl, claws scraping, grasping, *prying*, but his voice had dimmed, fading behind the noise.

Bakura *felt* it rather than saw it, his mind flooding against his will - his host and partner before a grave, the light in Malik's eyes as he discovered a new specimen at the aquarium, the press of warmth to his lips, the body cradling his own.

Hardly aware of his knees hitting the carpet, Bakura's hand flew to his chest instead. The shadow magic was still swelling around him, but it had no focus, as scattered as the memories pulling his mind in different directions. It shuddered and crashed, electric along his skin as the Millennium Ring clawed at the air wildly. Zorc screamed, wordless howls of indignation and fury.
It was all - just noise.

The window pane spider-webbed, bits of it hanging against the screen uselessly. The TV screen exploded outwards, shards cutting up the leather of the couch and leaving deep gashes in the coffee table. The wine glasses lined on the shelf splintered, sending glimmers of light scattering across the carpet. A table buckled, and everything that wasn't solidly planted on the ground was overturned and pushed away from where Bakura stood.

And Malik lay at the center of the destruction - unaware, yet unharmed.

The silence settled over them, the shadow magic insulating the room beginning to dissipate. It took Bakura's heated temper with it, leaving him with nothing but numb disbelief.

Why couldn't he…?

Bakura slowly worked to pull his mind back together, pushing himself back to his feet.

“There's… there's no point in killing him now.” He muttered, unsure of who he was trying to assure. If Zorc heard him, there was no indication of it. “He won't wake up for a long time anyway. He'll die along with the rest.”

Somehow, the lack of response felt heavier than any of Necrophade’s words pounding into his mind. He didn't have time to ponder it, however.

He waited a moment, swallowed, and then turned to leave. Hand falling on the door handle, he listened carefully for any signs of approach, if anyone had heard them, but there were none. The shadow magic had done its job then.

With one last spiteful look thrown over his shoulder, Bakura hung the ‘do not disturb’ sign on the handle and made his way down the hall and out the building - faster than any of his thoughts could catch up with him.

…
The door of the back room swung open and Bakura staggered inside, rain dripping off the tips of his hair and a breathless smirk fixed on his face. He felt it so vividly, his limbs trembling with energy, and he was sure the Pharaoh felt it too, given the look on this face. The time they had waited for for millennia was finally upon them.

One of them would be leaving this world soon - permanently.

“The Millennium Eye is in Yugi’s hands. Everything is in order…” He closed his eyes, relishing the words, savoring the moment. He reached the diorama, opening his eyes to sweep it over for imperfections, even though he was sure there were none.

Why did he ever think he needed Malik? Malik would have provided nothing he couldn't already do on his own. Bakura's grin widened, exposing a few more teeth.

“Everything is-”

His sights fell on a spot just beyond the river, the grin sliding off of his face. He stepped around the table, eyes narrowing at the village - and the small dot of red within it.

He reached forward, plucking the tiny figurine and bringing it up to his eye level, turning it around in his hand. He studied the small detail lining the Thief King's cloak, glaring down at the part of himself that had caused him so much trouble.

The Thief King merely stared back with vacant, painted eyes.

Bakura didn't realize there was something wrong until the hum of the Millennium Ring became audible. The figurine slipped from between his fingers and landed in the sand dunes as all the strength to hold onto Ryou's flesh and blood was ripped from him at once. He swayed, beginning to fall forward as spirit and body separated.

He never hit the table, fingers meeting it and then passing through as the darkness closed over him...
A pair of brown hands sunk into the sand before him, hit desert air whipping at his face. Bakura recoiled back as if desert was trying to suck him down, staggering and swaying into a crouch. He fought for breath, his lungs feeling decrepit and unused, yet familiar.

A spray of red fluttered around him, the cloak catching in the desert wind. Bakura pressed a hand to his chest - bare, firm, and much broader than the host body he had come to inhabit.

It wasn't possible…

Bakura turned and raised his hand to block out the harsh sunlight beating down on him - only, there was no sun. Instead, Ryou's cold gaze filled the sky, the upper half of his body visible over the edge of the diorama.

Bakura's eyes widened as he looked closer. It wasn't Ryou, it was-

“There's been a change in plans, my Bakura,” Zorc used Ryou's mouth to speak. “This shadow game will fall under my control.”

“How-?!” Bakura staggered back, his mind reeling. What did this mean for him? Why had Zorc shoved him out of control?

“I had a piece of myself lying in wait, biding its time until it was ready, should something like this happen.” Zorc sighed, displeasure heavy in his gaze as it fell right on Bakura's head. “There is still weakness in your heart, and you expect me to let you run this game by yourself?”

The betrayal formed a hollow pit between Bakura's ribs, his lips curling into a snarl.

“But-!”

“Don't worry; you still have a purpose.” Zorc waved him off with careless assurance. “You wanted a second chance to kill the Pharaoh, didn't you? Now you have it - personally.”

Bakura's shoulders dropped, hackles lowering slowly. He took a step back, pivoting and taking in the barren lands around him.
It was true, wasn't it…? This world of memories offered him a second chance. He had power here, the ability to alter events. Perhaps, like Ryou, he could change the course of fate.

And send the Pharaoh plunging into darkness for good this time.

Bakura turned to face Zorc again, opening his mouth to speak, but he was silenced yet again.

“Our deal is still in effect. All you have to do is play your role.”

Without giving him a chance to respond, or even a chance to think, Zorc turned and stepped away from the diorama, leaving Bakura alone with the shifting sands.

The pit in Bakura's chest hadn't left - in fact, it tore open wider, but what could he do about it? He was trapped here until Zorc decided to let him out.

Sighing, he kicked at the dirt as he paced along. Lifting his gaze, he noticed the golden walls of the palace standing in the distance, a shadow falling over his sights.

If he had no choice but to play his role, then he may as well get a head start.

…

Ryou woke up feeling like he had slept for less than a few hours, still dressed in the clothes he was wearing yesterday. Usually, the spirit would properly get him into bed at the very least - instead of leaving him half collapsed against the side of it.

Ryou pushed himself up, cringing at the stiffness in his neck. He sighed as he glanced at the clock - ten minutes before his alarm was meant to go off. He glared down at the Ring innocently dangling around his neck.

“You know I have school today,” he growled. “What was so important with Malik that you couldn't even get the body all the way into bed?”
No reply - typical. What wasn't so typical was the stark coldness as Ryou reached for the Ring to take it off. He blinked, lifting it up over his head. Usually the metal was warm to the touch, but something felt… off about it this time. Vacant and hollow.

“Guess it's too much to hope for that you just up and vanished, huh…?” Ryou murmured. Again, no response.

Ryou shook his head, dropping the Ring into his school bag before making his way to the bathroom. With any luck, he could make himself look somewhat presentable.

He arrived at school, a thin smile on his face as he greeted Yugi and the others outside. They were more than eager to spill about their trip in America, and all the wild events that had unfolded over there. It made his heart ache that he couldn't have been there to help them, but he masked it behind laughing along with them. He neglected to mention his own activities in Domino and Egypt.

Speaking of…

Class was slow, and Ryou found he could hardly pay attention anyway, struggling to stay awake. He sighed, pulling out his phone and punching in a text.

*If you're going to tire him out so badly, at least make sure he makes it to the bed…*

With a sour huff, Ryou shoved his cheek into his palm and stared out the window. The entire lesson passed without his phone buzzing back once.

After a bitter lunch period, Ryou headed to his afternoon classes, hardly having the energy to push away the girls attempting to cling to his arm. Perhaps he it was just the exhaustion, but the energy pouring off the Ring felt more terrible than usual… different, somehow. Ryou didn't like it one bit.

With little else to do, Ryou pulled out his phone again and checked his messaging for the umpteenth time. He sent another message directly after the first.

*Did you two have another fight? Is that why he's acting weird today?*
Ryou tapped his foot impatiently for fifteen minutes before breaking and risking another text.

*The Ring is behaving strangely too. I don't like the energy coming from it.*

He chewed his lip, an unpleasant feeling beginning to settle in his gut.

*Do you know anything about this?*

There was no way Malik wasn't awake by now. Was he ignoring him on purpose? Or had something happened?

*Malik…?*

A palm slammed down on his desk and Ryou winced, glancing up to see the teacher holding out his hand expectantly. Shoulders slumping in defeat, Ryou placed his phone in his palm.

“*You can have it back at the end of the day,*” the teacher said, accompanied by a round of giggles from the class.

The end of the day came far too slowly. Ryou went and retrieved his phone before moving back to where the others sat. Anzu gave him a knowing smile and a wink.

“It’s not like you to get in trouble like that. So, who were you texting that was so important?”

Ryou grimaced and glanced away. There was no way he could tell them he was trying to contact Malik. He wouldn't hear the end of that.

“It’s… no one really.”

“Well, do you want to come with us to the museum?”
Ryou's eyes widened, his attention brought back over to the group. Yugi sat at his desk with the others crowded around him, but Ryou looked closer and realized it wasn't Yugi at all. It was the Pharaoh.

“You're going after the Pharaoh's memories now?” Ryou said, a shiver moving through him. This was it. This was what they had been preparing for.

Why wasn't Bakura reacting at all? The Ring remained as cold as ever, but it didn't set Ryou at ease. If anything, the calm made him feel like there was something even more terrible in store.

Anzu nodded, a touch of heaviness in her eyes. “It’s time.”

Ryou frowned. He had been planning on going to check on Malik in person, but now he couldn't let his friends out of his sight. “I'll go with you.”

As they made their way to the museum, Ryou hung behind and tried to call Malik's phone. It rang four times and then went to voicemail.

“Seriously, who are you trying to get a hold of?” Anzu called back. “You've been glued to that thing all day.”

“My dad,” Ryou lied.

Anzu frowned. “He must be really busy not to answer for this long…”

Ryou forced a chuckle to mask the sickening dread forming in his stomach. “Yeah, you could say that…”

…

It all happened so fast. First, a strange man named Bobasa was there to greet them outside the museum, guiding them to their destination and brandishing the Millennium Scales and Key. Then,
the Pharaoh presented the three God cards before the stone slab, the energy in the room shifting as his spirit left Yugi's body.

Bobasa told them they had a chance to enter the memory world after the Pharaoh to help search for his name, and Ryou tensed. The opportunity couldn't have come at a better time. Perhaps he could change things from the inside, go right to the source. He hadn't told Yugi and the others about his venturing into the Ring, but if they saw it all for themselves then they would have to believe him - they had to help.

But Bobasa subjected all of them to the Scales power, judging their hearts before they could enter the maze within the Pharaoh's soul. Ryou already knew that the Scales would tip out of balance when it reached him. He grit his teeth together behind his lips, glaring down at his bag and picturing the Ring sitting inside - smugly.

You're just not going to make this easy, are you?

Ryou hid the ache in his chest behind a smile, taking a step away from the others. He met their gazes of empathy with assurance he was alright. Fate didn't want him accompanying them inside, but there were still other ways. He wasn't giving up that easily.

He stepped out of the wing before turning and running down the hall, sucking a sniffle back into his chest, frustrated tears burning behind his eyes. He flung the door of the back room open, tossing the strap of his bag off his shoulder and ripping the gold out.

He held the Millennium Ring before him, glaring down at it.

“Isn't this what you've been waiting for?” He hissed, giving it a shake. The tines clinked together - the only response he received. Their haunting melody echoes around the room.

“The Pharaoh is going to find his name and you're not gonna do anything about it?”

Ryou grit his teeth, the silence setting him more on edge than ever. He hated not knowing what the spirit was up to.

“If you don't start giving me answers, I'll…” he huffed, nevermind that he was yelling at a supposedly inanimate piece of jewelry, ”I'll break the diorama and throw you in a ditch!”
He didn't expect the threat to get him anywhere, seeking more of an outlet for his frustration at this point, but then he felt it. The gold began to hum, metal growing warm against his palms.

No, not just warm - blazing hot. Ryou wanted to drop it, but an electric current shot up his body, locking his grip around the Ring. His mouth dropped open in a panicked cry as he realized his mistake too late.

He wanted to drop to his knees, he wanted to fling the gold away from him - he wanted to do so many things but he couldn't because his body wasn't his own anymore. His limbs remained still, hands moving the Ring closer to his chest of their own accord. All attempts to claw back control sloughed off like mud on a rainy bank. It felt like the first time the spirit had shoved his soul in front of Ryou's, but this wasn't the spirit. It was-

**Arrogant mortal. Did you truly believe you could temper the power of the Millennium Ring?**

Ryou would have shouted if he were able to, but if Bakura had been the tides crashing against the shore, then Zorc was the entire storm, the weight of the sea washing over him and pulling him under. Ryou couldn't hold the darkness back as it stole everything away, leaving him to drown.

**The King of Thieves thought the same, and look at what became of him.**

Zorc had planned this, Ryou realized; he had been waiting to seize the opportunity for himself. But Ryou wasn't like Bakura. He couldn't let this stop him… he couldn't let Zorc…

Clawing for the light, Ryou saw the last slivers of it fading as he was pulled down even deeper.

He… couldn't...
Chapter Notes

Malik Ishtar deals with too much.

“Oi!”

“Unbelievable…”

“Wakey wakey!”

“Wake up, dominant half!”

Malik grimaced as something sharp prodded his side, mind slowly stirring back to consciousness. He opened his eyes to see his own face staring back at him, the tip of his other self’s shoe nudging his ribs incessantly.

“Wh-what…?” Groggy, Malik sat up and ran a hand through his hair, struggling to remember where he was or what had happened. A glance around told him he was in his soul room with his other self looming over him. “What are you…?”

“About time…” His other self snorted, crouching down to balance on the balls of his feet in front of Malik. “I can't believe you chose to sleep at the most crucial moment of your plan.”

Malik's brow wrinkled.

“I didn't-” It all came back, hitting him like a freight train. His eyes shot wide open, the grogginess chased away by panic. He shoved himself to his feet, trying to ignore the vertigo that persisted. “Shit! Bakura!”

The other personality got back to his feet as well, face splitting in a grin.
“You better hurry if you want to stop that dumbass…”

Malik turned to him, narrowing his eyes.

“... Why are you helping me?”

His other self crossed his arms, haughty like it should have been obvious.

“You think I want that bastard destroying us all? If you die, I die too. It's not a difficult equation, dear main personality.” He turned on his heel, cape fluttering in the dead air. “Now get out of here. I'm sick of looking at your face.”

Malik stared after him for a long time. If they were both the same person, perhaps it wasn't for such selfish reasons.

“... Thank you,” he said, unsure of if his other self had heard. There was no time to check - not with the current matter at hand.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them he was back in the hotel room. He groaned as he raised his head, the room in complete shambles around him, but he hadn't remembered his fight with Bakura being this violent...

Malik shoved himself to his feet, being mindful of the broken glass, and dashed out the door. As he ran for the parkade, he whipped out his phone and jabbed Ryou's name before pressing it to his ear. Given that the screen displayed eleven missed calls and several texts, he hoped he wasn't too late.

The call didn't even go through.

“Fuck!” He hissed, trying Yugi's number instead. He was thankful he hadn't deleted it after Yugi had offered it to him at the end of Battle City.

Though it didn't matter now - there was no answer from him either.
A pit of dread formed in Malik's stomach, his feet seeming to move far too slow, like he was in a nightmare. What if it was already too late when he finally got there? What if-

No. He couldn't afford to think that way. Not now.

Malik burst into the parkade, shoving through a group of people and ignoring their indignant cries as he sprinted for his bike.

He swung his leg over the seat, barely managing to put on his helmet before maneuvering out of the parkade as fast as he could.

Riding had always been a carefree, liberating experience for Malik, but the opposite couldn't have been more true now. He tore across Domino, heart pounding against the inside of his ribs so hard he felt it would burst. He broke the speed limit, pushing beyond what was sane where he could get away with it. He would have enjoyed the wind blasting through his hair and caressing his arms if he wasn't bound by his own desperation.

Miraculously, he managed to reach the museum in one piece, slamming down the kickstand and throwing his helmet carelessly onto the seat.

He pushed open the front doors, glad they were still unlocked as it appeared to be just after closing hours. Thankfully, there was barely anyone else around to question him. The hallways seeming to stretch endlessly as he made a beeline for that back room, his breathing harsh and ragged in his ears.

Even before he reached it, the dizzying aura of shadow magic filled the corridor, making his head spin.

He rounded the corner - and froze. This hall was so dark, and the air was so thick he thought he might choke. Could no one else see this? Could no one else feel it?

He started for the door marked ‘staff only’, a few steps away from it when it disappeared. Malik blinked as he found himself at the other end of the hall, an exhibit display in front of him and the door far behind him. He turned and started for the door again - only to end up where he began.
A shadow magic barrier, he realized. He couldn't even *reach* the door.

Gritting his teeth, he broke into a run, trying to beat the shadows before they turned him around again. It was the same result. Reality had warped, leaving him unable to pass through the threshold.

The hot burn of frustration crawled up his back, making his scars tingle and itch. He tried for the door again, and again, but never reached it each time.

Was that it then? Was he stuck out here until the game was over?

Was there truly nothing he could do? Would he have to wait and see what fate had decided to do with Bakura?

The museum began to sway as his anger climbed, beginning to feel far away, less real. He struggled for a hold, clawing at his hair. He couldn't dissociate here, he couldn't shove all of it on his other personality again. Ryou needed him. Bakura needed him.

So instead of crawling into that dark, safe corner of his mind to wait out the storm, Malik sucked in a deep breath, and then another, until the clouds in his mind parted. He closed his eyes and stepped forward, blind and searching with his heart instead of his sight.

He felt it then, a resonating light behind his eyelids. Pearl white scales and feathers guided him onwards, and he held the image of Diabound clear in his mind. If Bakura's soul was showing him the way, then it wasn't too late for him.

Malik's fingers brushed the door handle and he sucked in a gasp, eyes flying open. He grasped it and twisted.

It didn't budge. Locked, of course.

Malik drew back and slammed his foot just under the handle, delivering swift, heavy kicks until the lock snapped and the door swung open.

Malik shoved his way inside, and the darkness swallowed him completely.
This wasn't the same room Ryou had showed him. Malik paled as he took in the full extent of what the shadow magic had done to this place. The room didn't seem to have walls, darkness stretching in every direction. The Millennium Puzzle dangled over the diorama table, but its chain didn't appear to be connected to anything.

He glanced over, spotting Yugi's friends unconscious in a set of coffins at the foot of the diorama. The display itself was warped beyond its natural proportions, the table raised higher and the playing field much wider. Yugi's body was collapsed in the chair at one end of it, but Malik knew it was the Pharaoh who was really playing. On the other end sat...

“Bakura!” Malik shouted up at him.

Bakura's head snapped over to leer down at him, the gesture not quite fitting naturally into his flesh, even for the spirit. His eyes were two black pits, and Malik felt like he was peering directly into the void just staring into them.

“You're not him,” Malik realized, his voice falling hushed with shock. Zorc Necrophades had finally revealed himself - at least partially. Malik had known it would only be a matter of time.

“Don’t you know when it’s time to give up, tombkeeper?” Zorc sighed, turning his attention back towards the diorama as if Malik was a mere fly to be swatted away.

“Let them go.” Malik glared up at him, hands balling into fists.

Zorc waved his hand and Malik grit his teeth as his body seized up of its own accord, arms pinning themselves to his side's.

“You're in no position to be making demands. If my thief was smart he would have rid the world of you already. He’s proven himself too weak to run this final game.”

Despite himself, Malik outright laughed, the sound slightly choked by the shadow magic permeating the air.

“Is that what you’re upset about? That I got through to him after all the walls you put up?”
Zorc shot him a hateful look, fury stirring in that ink black gaze.

“You think he is your piece now? Even as we speak, he is fighting for me.”

Malik's nails dug into his palms and he gave a hard jerk against his bindings. Bakura shouldn't have been anyone's piece.

Zorc took notice of his struggle and smiled unnaturally wide, eyes lighting up with a terrible excitement.

“I have ruined him in ways you could hardly imagine. His soul has been mine for millennia now, and it will continue to be mine until he has served his purpose.”

“If you’re so sure then why did you snatch control of Ryou’s body?”

The smile fell off Zorc's face and Malik smirked instead.

“Because it sounds to me like you’re scared. How pathetic is that? A dark god scared of the person he leeches off of feeling something other than hatred for once in his life?”

Zorc’s eyes burned with malice, his hatred almost a tangible miasma in the air, but Malik only laughed. He never would have expected a demon’s mind to be easier to take apart than a human’s.

“His soul is mine and I’ll prove it,” Malik challenged, gaze hardening. “I’ll play you for him.”

“Do you think I’m a fool?” Zorc’s lip curled in disgust. “No, tombkeeper, I’ve wanted to get rid of you for a while. You can perish. Your use ran out long ago, and his is well on its way.”

Malik would have said something but his throat closed up, his chest feeling like it was being crushed. His jaw fell open, a choked cry escaping him. Zorc grinned cruelly.

“You don’t even have the Millennium Rod to defend yourself with anymore. It’s time for you to die. Perhaps you all can reunite in the depths of the shadows.”
Malik couldn't breathe but he glared at Zorc, watching as his stolen face shifted from malevolence to confusion - and then to shock. The shadow magic squeezing the life from Malik suddenly dispelled, letting him drop to his knees and struggle for air. He managed to lift his head up to see Zorc clutching at his own hair and snarling.

“Damn you…” His voice was strained and furious, pained like a wounded beast. He pressed his eyes shut, only for them to fly open again, wide and shining with light this time.

“Malik!” Ryou's voice - his real voice - filled the air, just as strained as Zorc's had been. By the looks of it, he didn't have much time. He raised a shaking arm and pointed it at Malik. “Find him and stop him...!”

Reality shifted around Malik again, and when he blinked, he wasn't in the museum's back room anymore.

Chaos erupted around him, screams piercing the smoke filled air. The sky was black above, but flames bathed everything in a sinister glow. A light burned before his eyes, growing brighter and expanding like a dying star. It was only when he felt its crackling heat that he react, not thinking, just throwing himself out of the way as the blast sizzled the air to his right. Behind him, a hut exploded into charred debris.

Malik threw himself to the ground as a piece of roof sailed over his head, eyes wide as he looked up, brain struggling to process what he was seeing.

The city was in shambles, people running in every direction to escape the destruction. Malik shoved himself to his feet, eyes falling on two shapes in the sky. One of them was dark and all too familiar but… wrong somehow. Its silhouette was all off, scales blackened where they had once been a pure white. Something in Malik's chest seized when he realized it was Diabound, the creature coiling and twisting in the air as it avoided another streak of thunder.

The telltale red blur of Osiris raced after the other ka. Malik broke into a run, tearing up a hill to get to higher ground so he could get a better view.

A sharp peel of laughter cut through the air, a chill running down Malik's spine. He knew that voice anywhere.
Squinting, he could make out two forms on horseback dashing down the main road. One of them was unmistakably the Pharaoh, his arm extended to the side as he commanded the God above.

The other’s cloak billowed out behind him like a spray of blood, head thrown back with a wild, malicious grin on his face. Bakura turned to glance back over his shoulder, Diabound flipping so it was flying backwards, energy building between its claws. But the ka didn’t aim for the Pharaoh, instead turning and unleashing its blast on a gaggle of bystanders.

“Let’s see how many lives you can save, Pharaoh!”

Osiris threw itself between the blast and the people as they scurried to get out of the way, the impact reverberating through the air. The Pharaoh cringed, clutching his chest with one hand and struggling to grip the reins with the other. Bakura laughed and laughed as he targeted another group of innocents.

Malik watched, a cold numbness crawling over him as the moment slowed to a crawl. This was the Thief King, the man he had looked up to since he was a child, but it couldn’t have been.

Something at the Thief King’s chest glinted in the fire light - gold, the vague shape of something circular. Malik’s eyes narrowed as the world came back into focus and he found the strength to move his limbs again. Bakura and the Pharaoh had disappeared behind a few buildings, but he could see Osiris and Diabound heading for the edge of the city.

“Bakura!” Malik screamed, running as fast as his legs could carry him. “Pharaoh!”

The roar of the battle and shrieks of the crowd drowned his voice out, and they were too far away to hear him. He didn’t stop, leaving the houses behind as he ran out of the city after them. He had lost sight of their horses, but he could still see their battle raging high above, leading them up a peak.

It seemed to take forever to reach the top, Malik’s lungs burning a hole in his chest as he climbed after them. He dropped to his knees to catch his breath, but he could hear the two of them clashing from just up ahead.

Raising his sights, he saw their ka poised to lung again. Grimacing, he shoved himself into a run. He had to put an end to this.
"Bakura!" Malik screamed, tossing himself between the two men and spreading his arms wide. "Stop!"

He expected to be torn apart at any moment, either by claws or by another blast, but there was nothing but the rush of wind against his face as the two ka ground to a violent, jittering stop.

Malik opened his eyes, not knowing when he had closed them, to see the two coils twisting restlessly in the air as if impatient for the pause to end.

Bakura's face had fallen open, shock overtaking his blinding, manic rage, if only temporarily. Malik exhaled a small sigh of relief and began to approach him.

“Malik!” The Pharaoh's voice came from behind him, ripe with alarm. “Don't get close! Step away from him!”

Malik ignored him, didn't even spare his majesty a glance, his attention only on Bakura. "You need to stop this! This isn't the only way out!"

Bakura looked at him like he'd grown another head, and then his shock collapsed back into fury. The Millennium Ring sitting against his chest gave a violent thrum.

"Stay out of this!" He snarled. "You know nothing!"

His horse reared and Malik was forced to back up, grimacing. The aura surrounding the man was downright rank - there was no way Bakura was in his right mind. Malik turned to the Pharaoh.

"Bakura is not your enemy!" He shouted.

The Pharaoh was looking at him like he'd lost his mind, but Malik had no patience for providing the full context. There was no time.

"He's being influenced by the dark power behind all the Millennium Items - Zorc Necrophades!"
A shriek of laughter cut through the air. Malik whipped his head back around to shoot a withering glare at the cackling Thief King.

*I'm trying to help you, you dick.*

"So what if I am?" Bakura released the reins to spread his arms wide, gesturing to the devastation in the valley below. "All of this stems from my will! My desires! I'll tear this land apart until there's nothing left, then you'll feel but a fraction of what I feel!"

Bakura's eyes burned with hatred, crazed and glassy with mania, like there was nothing but an empty shell of a man left behind - a vessel for the will of the Items.

Malik had seen enough.

While Bakura was holding onto nothing, Malik pivoted and reached up, yanking him by the robes so he toppled off of the horse. Malik just barely managed to throw his weight, spinning them both out of the path of the horses hooves as the frightened animal took off. Bakura shrieked in rage, spewing profanities.

"Get off of me!"

Malik reached for the Ring as Bakura shoved at him, grasping it in his hands and refusing to let go. The gold heated up, first warm, then hot, then blazing, like he was holding a tiny sun in his hand. It seemed to be magnetized to Bakura's body, clinging to him like a leech.

Malik didn't relent, pulling it away inch by inch even as the smell of burning flesh filled the air. The tines flailed wildly, scrabbling for purchase as they dug into Bakura's skin, the gold trying to escape inside him.

*Oh no you fucking don't.*

Malik yelled with the effort of tearing it away from Bakura's body. Bakura had stopped struggling, his eyes wide and fixed on nothing as the cord snapped from around his neck.

As soon as Malik held the Ring in his hand, he pulled his arm back and let the wretched piece of
jewelry sail far away from them. He didn't see where it landed.

Diabound's form melted into the night as Bakura slumped against him like a puppet with its strings cut. Malik caught him instinctively, wincing at the pressure against his burn. He shifted Bakura to his other arm, raising his blackened palm up to inspect the damage.

Malik heaved a sigh, staring down at Bakura's face, the man semi-conscious and struggling to open his eyes again.

“The shit I do for you…”

…

Bakura struggled to remember where he was. Like waking up from a dream, it had all seemed so clear before - raiding the Pharaoh's palace and challenging the entire court, fleeing when that plan had failed and striking back at a more strategic time, turning Mahaad’s own trap against him.

It had all begun to blur together after he had taken the Millennium Ring from the fallen priest. The pieces were all there but they didn't quite fit together properly. The chase through the burning city, the two warring ka, and Malik as he flung himself between them...

Acrid smoke stung his lungs - that was clear. A warm grip around him, bracing his weight - that was clear as well. Bakura's eyelids fluttered open to bright lavender fixed on him intently.

When had Malik…?

“What…”? Bakura's voice was low and uncertain between his lips. He turned his head, taking in the ruin in the valley below, vibrant shades of yellow and orange dancing before his eyes.

He had… done that.

There was the soft trodding of hooves against the ground, bringing his attention over to the man he had been fighting with everything he had mere moments ago. The Pharaoh slid off of his horse, swaying on his feet as he landed, just as worn by the battle as Bakura. With the Ring gone, the fog
over his mind had lifted and exhaustion became increasingly apparent.

But not even exhaustion could dull his hatred. When the Pharaoh approached, taking a cautious step towards the two, Bakura's eyes narrowed, his focus tunneling to a single point once again - the Pharaoh's throat.

But then there was a firm grip on his chin and Bakura found himself looking into Malik's eyes once more.

“No,” Malik growled, “don't look at him. Look at me.”

A bitter swell of resentment clawed up Bakura's throat, but he had nothing to say. The words wouldn't form in his scattered mind. He tried to jerk his head away but Malik held tight.

“He shoved you out of control, didn't he? He doesn't just think you're weak; he wants to keep an eye on you. You've been a piece this whole time.” Malik's voice was grave as he spoke, taking no satisfaction in the words, in knowing he was right. “He told me himself how much he has ruined you, and how soon your use will run out. Whatever deal he has made with you, he never intends to follow through.”

Bakura trembled, something more powerful than fury burning through his veins. It was indescribable, and he couldn't speak, could barely even breathe. He squeezed his eyes shut, but Malik grabbed him by the collar and gave him a shake.

“Do you understand? You'll gain nothing from this. Your people won't be freed. You won't gain power. Nothing.”

Bakura opened his mouth, sheer obstinance alone wanting him to bite back, say something - but only silence would come forth. Perhaps some part of him had known all along that Malik was speaking the truth.

His strength was fading, a bitter edge of defeat and betrayal settling in his blood. Zorc casting him aside didn't scare him, but his ebbing temper - that made him seize with panic. Without that fire in his soul, he could feel himself slipping away.

What was he without hatred? What was he without anger?
Malik's features softened, and Bakura never thought he was see such a proud face look so pleading.

“It's not too late, Bakura.”

Bakura choked on something in his throat, mind not quite working to process the situation. What was Malik suggesting? Was he supposed to just forgive and align himself with-?

He couldn't. He couldn't, but every other path was so unclear. Everything led back to that nothing.

“Zorc Necrophades…?”

Bakura heard the Pharaoh stagger closer and he bristled, but his limbs wouldn't move despite every instinct screaming to get back to his feet and finish their fight.

Malik turned his head to address him instead, mouth pressed into a thin line. “Yes, he's the one that orchestrated all of this. He's pitted you two against each other, probably in the hopes that you will both destroy the other for him.”

There was a pause, and then Malik released a breath, the disdain audible in his voice. Perhaps that made Bakura feel better - somewhat.

“Pharaoh, I know we have had our differences, but this enemy is greater than all of us. Before you fought my darker half, my sister asked for you to do whatever it took to save me… now I'm going to ask of you the same thing, for Bakura.”

Bakura's nails dug into his palm, his teeth ground tight behind his lips. “As if I want his pity...”

Malik turned his stern gaze on him again, opening his mouth to say something when a new voice rang out, one that sent a hot shiver of fury down his spine.
It was his own voice, but off.

Malik helped him back to his feet and they turned to look up, spotting a twisted image of Ryou Bakura perched up on the rocks, but they knew it wasn’t really him. He held the discarded Millennium Ring in his hands, the two broken ends of its cord fluttering in the breeze.

“Here are you are again, getting in my way, tombkeeper,” Zorc eyed Malik with heavy disdain. “But it’s convenient you showed up here… So many players in one place, all of which I need to rid the board of.” He turned his sights on Bakura. “You’ve served your purpose, Bakura, now the priest can take over.”

Emotions weren’t quite tangible for Bakura in that moment, too many rushing through his mind and muddling together into a solitary grey.

None of it, not even his plot to infiltrate the Millennium Puzzle, had been under his control.

He had never been in control.

“Zorc…!” Malik growled, eyes flitting back to Bakura for a moment and drawing the same conclusion. “I think I found out where that piece you sealed inside the Puzzle went…”

Zorc glanced at the Pharaoh, reaching up to fasten the Millennium Ring around his neck as he spoke, tying the loose ends together behind his head.

“I’m glad you two tired yourselves out with that display. It was certainly something to watch. Now…”

Bakura felt the energy shift in the air before the Ring began to glow. He couldn’t find the will to move, not even when the dark current slammed into both him and Malik, the world losing its colour as the ground disappeared beneath his feet.

He tumbled into darkness, and he didn’t even try to resist as the last reaches of light slipped away. …
Malik cried out as the shadow magic sent them both flying backwards, his eyes widening as there was suddenly nothing but a sheer drop into a chasm beneath them. One of his hands reached up blindly, seizing for rock and gripping with everything he had. The other had clawed for Bakura, managing to seize his wrist before the man could drop.

The hand Malik was gripping the rock with also happened to be the hand badly burned. He cringed as intense pain shot down his arm, forced to focus on not releasing the ledge. Bakura was utter dead weight, head hanging limp and fingers unresponsive as Malik's grip slipped from his wrist to his palm, and then to his fingers.

“Bakura!” Malik cried as he lost his hold. There was a flash of red as Bakura's cloak caught the wind before disappearing into the chasm completely. Malik could hear rushing water below and he grit his teeth.

_You better not die yet, you damn cockroach…!_

He gripped the rock with both hands and pulled himself up onto a small outcropping just below the top of the cliff. He couldn't see what was going on up there, but he could hear Zorc's voice.

“Thank you for holding onto this, Pharaoh.”

There was another surge of energy, and then the Pharaoh was sent into the empty darkness below the same way as Bakura had been, the glint of the Millennium Pendant absent from around his neck. Malik grimaced as he pulled himself back up the ledge and got to his feet. Zorc turned to face him, features neutral with displeasure.

“You’re still here, are you?” He tucked the Pendant away, the Ring beginning to hum with power again.

“I told you I’d play you for him!” Malik spat. He didn't care who Zorc was or what power he had. “You fed my darker half through the Rod, didn't you? Surely I'm not as worthless as you say I am.” He grit his teeth. “What's one bet then? Are you scared you'll lose to a human?”

A beat, and then Zorc's stolen face split apart, the snarl of teeth barely constituting a grin. “Very well. If you're so eager to die,”

The sound of multiple footfalls sounded from nearby, drawing their attention over to the path. Yugi and his friend's skidded to a stop, gawking almost comically as they took in the scene before them.
Malik couldn’t say he was unhappy to see them, but they sure as hell had to take their time.

“Malik?” Anzu blinked. “What are you doing here?”

“Where is the Pharaoh?” Yugi stepped forward, eyes shining with concern.

Jonouchi bristled when his eyes fell on the Millennium Ring sitting against Zorc’s chest.

“The other Bakura! But… where’d the guy in red go?” Jonouchi rubbed his head. “… There’s too many Bakuras…”

The most Zorc spared them was a disdainful leer before he turned to Malik again.

“We do things the modern way. In this duel, your soul is your ante.”

“I don’t have a duel disk,” Malik pointed out. Zorc threw his head back and laughed like he had said something naive.

“This is a world of thought. Anything you imagine becomes reality.”

He raised his arm and there was a sickening crack. It sounded like the bone had fractured, a mass swelling up at the wrist. It contorted into a familiar crescent shape, a screen for life points and slots for cards appearing. There were cries of disgust from Yugi and the others as Zorc held up his makeshift duel disk of flesh and bone, but Malik’s gaze was flat and unperturbed.

“Is that little parlor trick supposed to impress me?” He snorted, raising up his arm and concentrating for a moment. True to Zorc’s word, a duel disk - a normal one - appeared on his arm. Malik pulled his deck from his pocket and slammed it in the slot. “If I win, you’ll release Bakura - permanently.”

“But you won’t win.” Zorc’s grin was unwavering.

Having recovered from the gruesome display, Jonouchi rushed forward, skidding to a stop beside Malik and glaring at Zorc.

“Hey! I wanna take down this jerk too!”
“You can wait your turn to die.” Zorc scoffed, reaching up to draw his cards.

Malik went to do the same - only for his hand to still over his deck. Had things grown… darker?

He glanced up to the sky, dread and unease welling up in his chest. The stars were still shining bright as ever but it seemed like the air itself was weighed down by a shade of black. With each passing second it grew heavier until Malik could barely see what lay just in front of him.

“What the...?”

“Ah, there it is,” came Zorc’s voice, his smile able to be heard.

“What’s happening?” Panicked stirring sounded from Yugi and his friends, but Malik ignored them for now, gritting his teeth when he felt Zorc's presence move away from them.

“Until next time then.”

Malik started forward, but only met empty air. No - this wasn't over yet! Zorc couldn't just run away now!

But everything dimmed to a solid black and Malik had to wonder - if this was a world of memories and they were reliving the Pharaoh's past, then could it sustain itself after that fall the Pharaoh took…?

The stars blinked out completely, and the world went dark.
Consciousness trickled back slowly, sliding into his senses one by one. The grit of copper mixed with sand against his tongue, the constant yet gentle tug of something wet around his legs, the soft whisper of running water. As awareness came back, so did a prominent, resonating ache blanketing his entire being.

Bakura's pale lashes fluttered as a groan seeped from his mouth, the lower half of his body cold despite the burning sun pressing against his lids. He cracked open his eyes, hands shaking as he pulled them across the sand. Once he had them under him, he pressed his upper half off the ground, his limbs barely supporting his weight.

Turning his head, he found his lower half still submerged in the river, his crimson robes being tugged by the current, like someone had sliced the Nile open and let it bleed out. The water sucked at the fabric as he pulled himself up the bank, the sopping cloth clinging to his calves.

Bakura huffed out metal tasting sand, lacking the strength to even spit, eyes a muddied grey as they drifted over the river. He reached up on instinct rather than conscious drive, but the Millennium Ring did not sit against his sternum. His chest was empty - hollow, caved in, and he could almost feel the wind whistling through his ribs.

That was right - Malik had ripped away the Ring, and then Zorc had reclaimed it. Bakura didn't know what he was supposed to feel, so he felt nothing. Nothing except the breath he shouldn't have been able to pull into his lungs after being so utterly *scoured* from the inside out.

Bakura climbed to his feet, swaying and staggering with each moment - again, not out of conscious thought, but an instinct to move. Move and get somewhere else before the *nothing* caught up with him.

Movement in the sky drew his dulled gaze upwards, spotting something gold gliding away. He squinted, but he couldn't make it out, especially not against the glare of the sun. Following its trajectory, Bakura could see that it had come from a cave just up ahead. Something drew him in that direction, like a magnet's pull, and he dragged himself along until he was nearly at the mouth of the cave.
A head of hair peeked out, crowned in familiar gold. The Pharaoh's cape hung limp around his shoulders, his body hunched and his arm clasped around his waist as he stepped out into the sun. He fared no better than Bakura after that fall, blood caked along his skin and bruises covering his body.

Bakura began to sway as pure resentment welled up, eating away at what little energy he had left. He was going to burn up, like fire eating away at the last of dry brush, but it didn't matter as long as he could take the Pharaoh with him.

“Bakura…” The Pharaoh spoke, low and hoarse as his gaze fell on him. He looked at him with something closer to exhaustion than hatred or anger. “Enough.”

Bakura would have laughed, but all that came out was a scratchy huff. Did the Pharaoh honestly think he could command anything of him?

Taking a step closer, Bakura had to draw to a halt, steadying himself as the ground threatened to become parallel with his body.

The Pharaoh sucked in a breath as if waiting to see if Bakura would make any sudden moves. When he didn't, the tension in his body slackened by the tiniest of margins.

“We're both weakened and without our Items… There's no point in fighting now.”

That look in his eyes, it could have been pity, or something close to it. Whatever it was, it only made Bakura hiss and lurch closer.

“You don’t… get to decide that…”

The Pharaoh dropped his hand from his side and straightened his spine as though trying to regain his regal air.

“If Malik is telling the truth, then… I'm not your enemy, and you're not my enemy…”
Bakura grinned. He grinned so hard it felt like hooks were digging into his cheeks as his breathing stuttered in a chuckle.

“You don't believe that,” he said in a rusted voice, wishing there was something to hold onto because he could barely stand. “You'll kill me and pretend you're in the right, and you'll wear my blood around your neck… like you have before…”

The Pharaoh squinted, ever the affronted victim. “What are you-?”

Something in Bakura broke right there and he lurched forward, grasping for the Pharaoh’s neck so he could wring it like cloth. His fist met nothing, and he wrung the empty air instead, knuckles blanching and fresh blood welling up under his nails.

“Show you- I tried to show you what it was like…!” He spoke, not like a man, but like a growling beast, embers burning behind his eyes, burning everything up until there was nothing but ash. But his temper wouldn’t sustain him, just fire without air to feed it. “To have your dead dragged before you and defiled…!”

The Pharaoh had moved back out of reach, but he reversed in his tracks, eyes narrowing dangerously - even helplessly.

“You… you disrespected my father and desecrated his tomb! What makes you think I would be so ready to listen to you after that?”

Bakura clutched at his own chest, feeling just about burned up on the inside. He gritted his teeth in a grin of pain. There was always pain, but not like this. There was no numb darkness of the Ring to cradle it, to turn it into poison. It bled out of him instead, draining everything away as it went.

“A father… a mother… a sister… uncles… brothers…” He hissed, swallowing as something foreign lodged in his throat and made his voice hitch. “Did you watch them all burn? They were still alive, you know… for the most part. They boiled and screamed and prayed to the Gods for mercy… but what's a village to the blood of the Pharaoh…?”

Even the Pharaoh could detect a shift, or perhaps he saw that Bakura’s legs were half buckled and he was dying where he stood. His eyes softened in thought.
“My father… ordered the creation of the Millennium Items…” The Pharaoh said slowly, as if hardly wanting to believe his own words. “You told me they were birthed from a dark past. This is the dark past you spoke of? They were… sacrificed…?”

Bakura watched him like a cornered animal watches anyone or anything approach it, not trusting his eyes for a moment. There was no way the Pharaoh was having a sudden epiphany now.

“Why would my father have wanted such a thing…?” The Pharaoh grimaced, something close to sorrow in his gaze. For the first time, he took his sights off of Bakura, squeezing his eyes shut, guard dropped, if only for the moment. But it was a trick. It had to be a trick. “Bakura, I want to understand…”

“You want to understand?” Bakura choked on a laugh. “What does it matter if you do?”

The Pharaoh pursed his lips, seemingly lost in his own thoughts. Bakura could strike before he opened his eyes again, wring the life from him and seen how much his petty understanding would have made a difference then, but he didn’t. He remained where he was, and he waited, some unexplainable curiosity weighing him down just as much as the exhaustion.

The Pharaoh opened his eyes, and they were filled with something that made Bakura’s blood boil all over again.

“I would have been hesitant to believe Malik's words if I hadn't just watched Zorc throw you away. What do you gain by fighting me now?”

“Nothing!” Bakura shot back. He had no delusions about the situation - they were alone, out of ba, and without help from anyone. Killing the Pharaoh wouldn’t grant him anything aside from an echo of silence - assuming he could even manage it.

Still, the Pharaoh didn’t get to look at him like that, with such pity.

“But I have to! I promised th-!”

Bakura’s legs gave out, knees scraping against the dirt. He didn’t want to bow, but this thing in his chest was too big to hold. It was like when Malik had stripped him bare and left nothing for him to hide behind. His vision blurred and he squeezed his eyes shut, but he could still feel the tears sliding
down his cheeks.

He couldn't - he couldn't allow the Pharaoh to see him this way.

“You can't bring them back…” His voice was a low wail, and he wasn't so much speaking to the Pharaoh as he was trying to convince himself. “You can't make things right…!”

There was a long pause, and Bakura didn't dare look up. His fingers dug into where his tears had stained the sand, like he were trying to reclaim some piece of his dignity. He had nothing left - not power, not the Ring, not pride, just weakness.

He had always been weak.

“Maybe I can't, but I can try. All of this pain… I don’t believe there wasn’t some sort of reason behind it,” the Pharaoh said. “Something had to have made Malik see anything salvageable in you.”

Bakura finally glanced back up at him, but not before scrubbing his face off on his sleeve.

“You stole his life like you stole mine. He understands,” Bakura spat out with a grimace, knowing it was a gross oversimplification of his and Malik's alliance.

“You're so convinced I've done everything in my power to wrong you…”

For all his talk of trying to understand, the Pharaoh still didn't get it.

“No, you’ve done everything in your power to remain ignorant.”

“Am I trying to be ignorant now?” The Pharaoh's voice rose, perhaps the first real display of anger from him since they'd both washed up here. “Take me to your village. I want… I need to see this for myself.” He closed his eyes, sighing deeply. “I don't want to fight you anymore.”

It wasn't a request, it was a demand. Bakura regarded him with nothing but contempt, but he was finding it harder to refuse. Perhaps he would take him there, just to show him it wouldn't change
“Why?” Bakura’s skin prickled uncomfortably. “You can’t tell me you would forgive me, not after dragging your father’s corpse, not after killing your priest.”

He prepared to get to his feet again, bringing his left knee up and bracing a hand on it - a mockery of pledging to the Pharaoh.

“But you’re content being a pawn for Zorc?”

Bakura didn’t mean to flinch, but that was more of a sore spot than he thought it would be. He was still processing that particular betrayal, so he found he had nothing to say to that.

The Pharaoh nodded in thought, as if Bakura’s lack of response had told him everything.

“I’m beginning to see his game now… as long as we fight each other, we’re doing exactly what he wants. He’s turned your grudge into a weapon against me.”

There was something about the way the Pharaoh had worded that that made Bakura go still.

A weapon.

The pause crept through his veins, turning them to ice. The sole survivor. The one to lead the spirits of Kul Elna against the royal family and to freedom. The one who would inherit the powers of darkness and sink this world into a new era.

Zorc had built him up through whispers of power and promises that could never be fulfilled, but Bakura had been cast away like any other broken tool, cast away to wash up here.

Just a tool to throw away when it had grown dull and rusted.
He may as well have been another Millennium Item forged by fire and gold, flesh and blood.

*A weapon.*

He clutched his chest for stability, unable to breathe.

Malik had been *right*. Ryou had been *right*.

He wanted to shut his eyes and cover his ears and shake his head, but the realization seared into his mind before he could stop it, burning brightly behind his eyes.

The Pharaoh was right. *The Pharaoh was right.*

“Maybe we can't forgive each other…”

An outstretched hand entered his vision point blank and Bakura glanced back up. The Pharaoh’s gaze was careful, even expectant, like holding one's palm over an open flame and anticipating the burn.

“... but we don't have to play into Zorc’s hands either.”

Why the Pharaoh was offering this, Bakura didn't know. Why Bakura found himself *contemplating* what this deal entailed, that was anyone's guess either. Perhaps it was so unthinkable it circled back around to… sensible.

What other option was there?

The silence stretched, Bakura's face like stone as he leered at the hand like the mere gesture was the most offensive thing his existence had suffered. The Pharaoh didn't falter, didn't lower his arm for a moment.
He was serious.

Bakura's fingers twitched, and his arm began to stretch forward, paused, and then began to move again. His expression shifted - deliberation, skepticism, disdain, desperation.

And then his eyes narrowed, nails catching the Pharaoh's palm as he slapped the hand away.

“I will never forgive the royal family,” his voice was guttural, hands locking into fists once more. He held his resentment as long as he could, gripping it like the vice of death - and then the tension finally gave.

His shoulders slumped, palms slapping against his knees as he shoved himself back to his feet.

“... but I'm sick of being a piece on this game board.”

…

When the lights came back on, they stood in the exact same spot, except night had become day and the sun was blistering in the afternoon sky. There were cries and gasps of shock from Yugi and his friends as they turned this way and that, searching for the answer to what had just happened, but Malik remained where he was because he had a feeling he already knew.

“What happened? We were just about to duel Bakura and then-”

“That wasn’t Bakura,” Malik swiftly cut Jonouchi off, prompting a quizzical scowl that went ignored.

Anzu stepped forward. “We know. It was the Spirit of the Millennium-”

“No, you don’t know anything.” Malik ground his teeth together. He truly didn't want to waste time explaining the whole thing to them, but it looked like he had very little choice. “It’s too much to explain right now but… there’s a lot more to the Spirit of the Millennium Ring than you think. That man in red you saw, that was his true form, but he’s being influenced by another entity entirely.”
Malik heaved a sigh, wondering why he was even bothering with this. It wasn't like this would automatically turn their opinions of Bakura around. “The Ring holds a darkness I’m sure you’re familiar with - Zorc Necrophades. That is who we were faced with before the world went dark.”

Frowns were etched into their faces, wariness and even suspicion more than apparent - not that Malik could blame them.

“I don’t… understand,” Yugi said.

“Like the Pharaoh, a human’s soul has slept inside the Millennium Ring for thousands of years, but he has been twisted and corrupted by Zorc.” Malik went on, gaze hardening as his nails dug against his palm. He looked Yugi directly in the eye - if any of them would understand, it would be him. “I’m not asking you to forgive what he’s done, but… I know him, and I know there’s something worth saving in there.”

The tension drained from his body, his shoulders slumping as his gaze fell. Sometimes it surprised him - the heavy ache that still clawed inside his ribs.

“Just like what happened with me in Battle City.”

Silence wore on for a long time. Malik was about to turn away, seeing that this was a lost cause, but then Yugi spoke up and drew his attention back to him.

“I trust you, Malik, just like me and Other Me trusted you to overcome your own darkness. We’ll help you.” Yugi smiled in that way only he could pull off, and any other time Malik would have smirked at his naivety. He didn’t know how it was possible - to always see the good in people. In a way, he envied Yugi for it.

“That means a lot to me, Yugi,” Malik nodded, cracking a wry smile of his own.

“So, wait a minute-” Jonouchi held his hands up and marched between them, rounding on Malik. “You’re expecting us to believe you just became friends with that lunatic overnight?” His fists settling on his hips as he leaned in close to Malik's face, scrutinizing glare locked on his face. “Influenced or not, he’s still done horrible things - and I remember the two of you had some strange deal going on in Battle City!”
Malik's features fell into a mask of cold neutrality. “You don't have to trust me. Just don't get in my way when I take down Zorc.”

Anzu pursed her lips, eyeing between Malik and Yugi like she wasn't sure who to side with. “What about Bakura - er, our Bakura I mean? Does he know about this?”

“Ryou and I staged this rescue mission together in the time that you were absent for America. He is perfectly aware of the spirit’s true identity.”

“What?” Honda bristled. “He knows messing with the Ring is dangerous. Why would he…?”

Malik gave a snort. “There’s a lot about him you don’t know.”

“Then why isn’t he here as well? How do we know this isn’t some trap?” Jonouchi took a heated step closer.

Impatience began to scratch up Malik's spine. The longer they stayed here talking, the more precious time they wasted. “Currently, he is fighting Zorc Necrophades for control of his body - and control of the RPG we’re stuck in.”

Malik did find himself growing worried over that fact. He would have thought he’d see Ryou's White Mage by now, but perhaps Ryou couldn't use him yet. Or he was waiting to strike at a better time.

“RPG? What-!?“Jonouchi blurted.

“It’s just like before, when we fought the Spirit of the Ring for the first time,” Anzu said, though she didn't sound as shocked as Jonouchi.

“... Like I said, it’s a lot to explain.” Malik gave them all a glance over, brow furrowing. “How did you guys even get into this world anyway?”
“A man named Bobasa helped us find a way in through the Puzzle after the Pharaoh disappeared so that we could help search for the Pharaoh’s name!” Yugi explained.

That made Malik pause, blinking slowly. He had been so focused on Bakura, he had almost forgotten the real reason for this game.

“I’m going with you,” he said. “If you’re looking for the Pharaoh’s name, then Zorc is going to try and stop you, and that bastard still owes me a match.”

As much as the ache in his chest tugged him in the other direction, he knew he couldn't immediately go after Bakura. Finding Zorc and completely severing Bakura's ties with him held priority, as much as he wanted to make sure Bakura himself was alright. But that fall hadn't killed the Pharaoh - it couldn't have since light had returned to the memory world - so he had faith that Bakura had survived as well.

He would just have to hold on a while longer.

“But where would the Pharaoh’s name be?” Anzu tapped her chin as she paced.

“His tomb, in the Valley of the Kings. I know exactly where it is.” Malik flashed them a dry smirk. “Tombkeeper, remember?”

He took a moment to glance around, determining which direction they needed to take. He felt eyes on him and turned, glancing down to see Yugi peering up at him.

“So we’re really trapped in another RPG?”

Malik nodded, motioning for them to follow him as he started down the path.

“I can explain on the way, but we need to move. Let’s go!”
They walked at pace with each other, albeit several meters apart, neither of them trusting the other to walk behind them. Bakura would cast wary, contemptuous side glances at the Pharaoh every so often, unsure of what to expect. He refused to call this a truce - it wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't.

The village wasn't far. A strange energy sunk into Bakura's skin as they approached the entrance. Perhaps the Pharaoh felt it too, but perhaps not.

As they made their way into the village, ruined structures began to appear, houses nearly levelled with the ground, charred roofs and walls caved in. Debris littered the path, and Bakura watched as the Pharaoh moved ahead, picking his way over it as he went. Bakura had stopped walking, so there was nothing but the crunch of his majesty’s footsteps in the silence.

"Welcome to Kul Elna." Bakura smirked despite the suffocating tightness in his chest. "I'd offer his majesty the grand tour but, as you can see, it's a real ghost town."

He laughed once, the sound hanging in the dead air before joining the rest of the caked ash on the ground.

The Pharaoh didn't answer, barely giving an indication he had heard him. He bent down - Mr. King, sullyng his hands in commoner’s soil, Bakura thought with grim amusement - and picked up something made of cloth and strung together with linen. The toy was singed around the edges, but the Pharaoh gazed down at it like it would reveal some lost secret to him.

"Gods…” the Pharaoh murmured, setting the toy back down a moment later.

"No,” Bakura shook his head. “The Gods abandoned this place. There's no point praying for them here.”

The Pharaoh cast his gaze in Bakura's direction again, somber and heavy. The weight of It hit Bakura, nearly causing him to step back. It wasn't pity - pity he could have shrugged off, or screamed at again - it was… something more.

Something Bakura wasn't sure he could comprehend right now.

“You were right,” the Pharaoh said. He sounded dazed, far away from himself.
Maybe, at any other time, Bakura could have taken satisfaction in hearing those words from the Pharaoh's mouth, but he hardly reacted to them now. He merely closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Tell me, between the dragging of your father's corpse, to the extremes I went to flip your kingdom upside down… at what point did you think I was lying?” He opened his eyes only to narrow them again. “Did you think I was challenging the entire royal court for fun?”

“I never doubted there was some sort of reason, but…”

“But it's a little different seeing what you bastards did to me up close,” Bakura finished, listening to the gentle howl of the wind drifting by them.

The Pharaoh wasn't looking at him anymore, and before Bakura could process what he was doing, he had taken two steps forward and threw his fist against the other's face.

“Fuck you.”

He spat out his anger - a cold, dead thing by now. It didn't feel good. Watching the Pharaoh sway from the punch and recover - it hadn't been very strong - writhed under his skin in the worst of ways. He thought seeing the Pharaoh's naivety come crashing down around him would be glorious, but it just hurt. It only served to highlight how weak they both were, how helpless this entire situation was.

“I don't want your guilt! I don't want-!”

Bakura bit his lip, clipped voice hanging in the air. Something had to fill this hole in his chest, this uncertainty. He almost wished the Pharaoh would retaliate, and they could pick up where they left off, but he didn't. He merely stood there and rubbed his jaw.

“I have… I have to show them this.” The Pharaoh said after a while, fevered with the revelation as he took a step in the direction of the palace. “They have… to know…”

Bakura watched him try and leave, bemused.
“Don’t bother,” he muttered, tilting his head back. “They’re probably already searching for you. They’ll come to us. Besides…”

Bakura could already see them, the tendrils of wisps in the air, drifting closer as if drawn by the signs of life. A low wail drifted over the rubble, and then another, and another, until the air was filled with a haunting cacophony.

“… you haven’t truly seen anything yet.”

The Pharaoh’s eyes widened when he finally caught sight of the spirits. “Those are…!”

Ignoring him for now, Bakura stepped forward and turned his attention on the ruins of his village, actually taking them in for himself.

He hadn’t revisited these memories in thousands of years, he realized. They had always lay in the deepest parts of the Ring, gated off by darkness. Zorc hadn’t wanted him to find this part of the past, and Bakura hadn’t wanted to either, but now that it was before him, it all unwound like thread before his eyes.

“We weren’t always thieves.” He barely heard himself speak, gaze lost in the distance as if he were peering beyond the destruction and seeing the village as it truly was - or had been.

“We served and revered our Pharaoh’s like anyone else. We built and decorated the tombs that would see our Pharaoh’s over to the afterlife.”

Bakura was speaking to himself more than anyone, numb with the memories that poured back into his mind. A few of the spirits circled down from above to trail him curiously, and Bakura felt their chill despite the heat.

“My mother would tell me stories of the Gods, and how they would protect us if we were faithful, and I believed them back then.” The corners of his lips curved up, but it was only a shadow of a smile. “I was a child, playing in the mud with the other youth and laughing when our parents scolded us and pretending nothing could touch us - because the Gods would always protect us.”

The smile slipped off his face.
“But… when war fell over the land and our rations were cut off… we used our knowledge of the tombs we built to rob them, because we had to eat, we had to survive…” He hadn't realized how quiet it had grown, not even the wailing of the ghosts interrupting his words. “No one helped us then, not the Gods, not the Pharaohs…”

It took him a moment to remember where he was, his eyes narrowing as he turned to face the Pharaoh once more.

“So, tell me... does that make us evil? Does that make us less than cattle for slaughter?”

“Bakura…” The Pharaoh said, barely above a whisper.

It took Bakura a moment to notice that he was surrounded. Every spirit in the village had moved to circle him, hanging in the air like a dim cloud. He pivoted, gaze sweeping over every one of them.

They had lost their bodies, their hearts, their minds, and their very individuality so long ago that they hardly resembled humans, but he could see beyond them. There were no shadows covering their faces anymore, and the memory of their warmth only made the ache of loss worse.

“I failed them,” he uttered, a tremble beginning low in his chest. “I couldn't give them justice… I couldn't give them revenge… I couldn't bring them the Items…” His knees hit the dirt, hands soon following. “They're trapped here… they can't move on.”

The nothing never felt more pronounced than now. There was only an empty space in his body, a hollow shell left behind. The lightest touch would crumble him to sand.

“It's not too late.”

Bakura was surprised to hear the Pharaoh's voice, but he didn't lift his head. His will was as dried up as his strength.

“You haven't failed anyone yet, Bakura.” The gravel crunched as footsteps drew closer. “A great injustice was done unto this place. I… I don't believe for a second that this is what my father had envisioned when he ordered the creation of the Millennium Items.”
The mere mention of the previous Pharaoh seemed to excite the spirits. They shifted and writhed in
the air, their cries beginning to bleed out again, but the Pharaoh continued on, his voice noble even in
his anguish.

“They were supposed to bring peace but all they've caused is pain.”

Bakura's dead gaze drifted up to find the Pharaoh's face. Where was he going with this? Did it even
matter?

“But more darkness and turmoil cannot right this. This is your world as much as it is mine, and Zorc
intends on taking it from the both of us.” The Pharaoh lifted his chin, his voice raising as he
addressed all of them. “I know you've gained nothing but suffering in exchange for all your loyalty
to the Gods, but I'm asking you to trust me one more time. Put your faith in the light. Put your faith…
in me.”

He spread his arms wide in an inviting gesture, determination written across his face.

“Spirits of Kul Elna, judge me if you must! I swear, I will bear all of your pain on my back!”

Bakura watched with a detached sort of fascination. The ghosts around him churned faster, and
faster, and faster - and then there was a pause.

They all lunged at the Pharaoh, crashing down over him like a wave. They swallowed him
completely, his form obscured by the current of howling spirits.

He was a fool. He was a fool and they were all going to devour him, Bakura thought.

It seemed like hours had passed - perhaps a Pharaoh's soul was so great it took longer to consume,
but some part of him knew that wasn't quite right. Something was off.

And then, one by one, each spirit began to slide away. Bakura shook his head slowly as the shape of
the Pharaoh was gradually revealed to be standing there, whole and untouched.
It wasn't possible.

Bakura realized that one spirit was still at his side. He turned his head, the breath stilling in his lungs.

Even with her form melted into a vague, humanoid shape along with the others, Bakura recognized her. He recognized her touch as wispy fingers tried to card through his hair the same way they had when she had touched him for the last time. He recognized her voice, even though it didn't sound like her voice anymore; it sounded like the collective of many that had been melted into gold.

*Justice lies with the Gods.*

She drifted away, and Bakura finally managed to breathe again, the sound hitching into a sob as silent tears ran down his face.

The Pharaoh blinked and glanced around, as if he too had heard the voice. His gaze then settled on Bakura again, but he didn't have to say anything.

Bakura braced his hands on his knees and pushed himself to stand, resolve setting into his blood.

“I remember now… how this battle is supposed to go.” He turned and looked in the direction of the underground shrine, where he knew the tablet rested. His voice had dropped to a growl, a new fury coursing through him. “I fall, and that shitty priest takes my place as Zorc’s second in command. He leads my village amongst his army of darkness.”

He saw now that true weakness wasn't a lack of strength - it was letting his people fall right into the hands of the man and the beast that slaughtered them, intended to use them.

“Well, I've decided he can't have them. Not anymore.”

It almost frightened him how clear it all seemed, how powerful his voice came out. He straightened his spine, feeling the wind move through him and his village as if they were one, the conviction of ninety-nine voices singing in his veins.

Had he ever felt this kind of energy when he wore the Ring? Had the gold truly stolen this much from him?
“Pharaoh, I know we're not friends. We’re hardly allies,” Bakura said, looking at the Pharaoh. It wasn’t quite trust in his eyes - but they didn’t need to trust each other to take down a common enemy.

“But I want your word that they'll be set free… that they'll finally see justice.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

In which Malik Ishtar is grade A Ridiculous (TM)

The chamber was suffocating as they descended, the howls of the ghosts rebounding off the walls and making their song more forlorn than usual. The Pharaoh gripped his head, but Bakura couldn't tell if it was because of the noise, or the tangible darkness pouring off of the tablet that rested in the center.

“This place… it's painful being here,” the Pharaoh grit out. Bakura gave an absentminded nod, perhaps dazed by the fact they were having something close to civil conversation.

“It's raw shadow magic.” He stopped a ways away from the stone. “This is what was brought into the world when the Millennium Items were created.”

The dark energy beckoned him closer, and he was almost tempted to comply, craving that familiar power, but his fury at Zorc kept him grounded. It was jarring how easy it was to process everything when the Ring wasn't sitting against his chest - and there was so much to process.

The Pharaoh looked at him. “Bakura, when you mentioned a priest, did you mean…?”

“Akhenaden.” Bakura pressed a hand to his forehead, narrowing his eyes. Searching through his own mind was like wading through a sea of black tar. “He's working with Zorc. My memory is… fuzzy, but when I had the Millennium Ring, I went and implanted a piece of Zorc into the Millennium Eye. That's why I said we shouldn't move. That bastard will come to us, and your court shouldn't be far behind.”

“Perhaps there is some way to free him from Zorc's control as well…” The Pharaoh mused, staring at the ground in thought.

Bakura's mouth set in a thin line, eyes burning in a leer.

“He decided to drench his hands with the blood of Kul Elna, and that was before the Items had been
Though it did beg the question of how much Zorc had influenced that decision. The darkness had existed long before the Items. Perhaps it had already begun seeping into this reality long before the first body had even fallen into the gold…

Bakura's stomach churned with nausea. He couldn't think about any of this right now. Judging by the Pharaoh's reaction, they were on the same wavelength.

“Damn it…” The Pharaoh grimaced. “Has your ba regenerated? We're not going to be much good in a battle if we're running on empty.”

“I'll manage,” Bakura grunted.

There was a shift in the air, one that Bakura picked up on immediately. The ghosts seemed to stir with the disturbance, wails pitching in excitement. If Bakura listened closely, he could hear the trod of hooves from above.

“Someone's here."

The Pharaoh tensed up - until he heard the familiar voices of his court drifting down to him. It wasn't long before footsteps echoed down the stairs. Seto and Isis appeared first, followed by the others.

“My Pharaoh!” Priestess Isis gasped, hand thrown over the Tauk sitting around her neck. “I had a vision of you with the—"

A ripple of hostility ran through the group when they realized their Pharaoh wasn't alone.

“That thief…!”

Priest Seto stepped forward, gripping the Millennium Rod tightly, a smirk on his face. “Worry not. He won't take long to finish off.”
Bakura shot an irritated glare at the Pharaoh, a pointed reminder he had his end of the truce to hold up.

“Wait!” The Pharaoh put himself between Bakura and the others. “There's been a misunderstanding! Zorc is our true enemy, not Bakura!”

Bakura snorted to himself, the scene feeling like it was something straight out of a fever dream. “Never thought I'd see something like this…”

The rest of them recoiled in shock, but Seto recovered just as quickly.

“How do you know he isn't feeding you lies? How can you trust anything a thief says?”

“Because he has shown me proof!” The Pharaoh flung out his arm, gesturing to the shrine. “Look around you! This village lies in ruins, and it's because of my father's decision. The Millennium Items were brought into this world along with a dark power none of us could ever hope to control.” He turned to cast Bakura a glance, sighing. “Bakura isn't fighting against us anymore. This dark power was playing him as much as it played the rest of us.”

The priests weren't convinced - why would they be? - but they didn't advance either. They merely scrutinized their Pharaoh, and glared at Bakura, as if trying to work out if their leader had gone insane or if he had been brainwashed somehow.

“Look,” Bakura said, voice dripping with impatience, “I don't give a shit what any of you royal bastards think of me. But, answer me this… the last time you saw us, we had the Ring and the Pendant, didn't we?”

He held out his arms, showing there was nothing concealed on his person. Then he glanced over to the empty stone tablet, bringing their attention to it.

“We don't have them now, as you can plainly see, so… where have they gone?” Bakura's eyes drifted over all of their heads, doing a mental count. One of them was missing, but Bakura could hear footsteps in the stairway and his features twisted up in anger. “I'll give you a hint.”

He jabbed his finger at the man that brought up the rear of the group. Everyone turned their heads to look, tensing as if unsure what to believe.
“Akhenaden, surrender the Items,” the Pharaoh called out, his voice carrying strong and commanding across the chamber. Isis whirled to face him again, eyes wide.

“Have you gone mad, Pharaoh?! Akhenaden had been with us the entire t-”

A distinct clink rang out, and every pair of eyes in the room fell down to Akhenaden’s hand. The cords of both the Pendant and the Ring were clasped in his fist, the gold knocking together as he walked. He didn't respond to any of them. In fact, there wasn't any indication he had even heard them. His gaze was empty, fixed far beyond any of them as he strode towards the stone tablet.

The Pharaoh bristled. “Stop him!”

Bakura didn't need to be told. His strength surged back through his veins, the sheer force of his rage propelling him forward. He couldn't summon his ka, but he didn't need to to rip this man apart. The Kul Elna spirits rallied around him, whirling and screaming towards their target.

A snarl tore from Bakura, arm outstretched, fingers clawing for the gold buried in the man’s skull. He was going to rip the Millennium Eye out just as he had done to Pegasus. Ten feet, five feet, he was going to-

Freeze.

Bakura came to a halt mid-dash, unnaturally suspended in the air a mere few breaths away. It was as if he had turned to stone - even his robes and hair stopped moving.

Akhenaden continued walking forward like he didn't even exist, and Bakura could do nothing but follow him with his eyes.

No!

He grit his teeth, becoming acutely aware of the silence that had overtaken the chamber. The other priests may as well have been statues, permanent expressions of shock fixed into their faces. The Pharaoh stood rigid, having about the same luck moving as Bakura did.
Bakura knew what spell this was, and he cursed himself for practically handing it to Zorc on a silver platter. Time had been brought to a complete stop, but Akhenaden could still move. Bakura suspected he and the Pharaoh were left aware of what was happening so Zorc could taunt them.

“So very close, but you still couldn't see the mole in your own kingdom until it was too late, could you, Yugi?”

Their attention was drawn upwards. The false image of Ryou Bakura hovered there with his arms crossed, eyes lit up with vicious excitement. He tapped his chin, pretending to look contemplative.

“No… that's not your name, is it?”

Zorc turned his sights on Bakura, cold disgust curling his lip.

“It’s unfortunate you survived that fall, but I imagine it couldn't have hurt anymore than willfully aligning yourself with the people who destroyed your home.” He scoffed. “A traitor’s end is more than you deserve.”

As he spoke, Akhenaden had been moving to each priest and taking their Millennium Items one by one. After he had collected six, he reached up to his own face and gripped the edges of the Millennium Eye. With a scream, he pulled it from his own head, blood spilling down from the empty socket. He paid it no mind - in fact, he was grinning as he stepped up to the stone.

“Good, Akhenaden, now place the Items in the tablet…” Zorc purred, watching with pleasure as Akhenaden pressed the gold into each appropriate slot. “This game has only just begun…”

A tremor ran through the air, the darkness around the stone thickening as if it couldn't wait for the final Item to be placed into the tablet. Bakura attempted to fight free, but his body still wouldn't move. He couldn't even open his mouth to yell. The same panic and frustration was reflected in the Pharaoh’s eyes. Zorc laughed as he watched them struggle.

“Ah, that's right, our Pharaoh is the only one out of the loop.”

He spread his arms wide as the darkness swelled, waves and waves of it seeping out and flooding the
chamber. Having finished his task, Akhenaden stood before the tablet, bowing before the shadows as they rose up and began to solidify.

“This world of memories is nothing more than a playing field, and you two are the pieces…”

…

“You should let me make a roll. My throws are better than yours.”

If Zorc was determined to make him a prisoner in his own body, then Ryou was determined to make the experience the most irritating as possible. It took all of his strength to cling to consciousness, his soul gripping at the edges of his body.

You are nothing more than a pest. Sit quiet until your end comes. I have no more use for you.

Ryou could see through Zorc's eyes - his own eyes, Zorc had just stolen them for now - and he could just barely feel the vaguest impression of his limbs. It made him want to scream, reminding him so much of how the Ring could control him before, but that would waste energy. He had a plan, and he had purpose. He would have to be smart about this. All he needed was time…

Ryou idly clawed at his left arm. He found he had more luck there, like Zorc's control had been weakened on that side, perhaps because that arm had suffered so much abuse. He couldn't help but let the smirk creep into his voice.

“Oh, does your arm still hurt from last time? I remember how your hand got cut off and we blasted you apart. Still licking your wounds?”

Be silent.

Zorc's anger lashed out, making Ryou hiss and recoil.

“So touchy…”
Ryou refocused on the game before him. The other Yugi had awoken some time ago, now fighting at full power. With the addition of Malik and the others, as well as Bakura’s turn of allegiance, Ryou could see the campaign had begun to diverge from history’s original path.

Good, everything was on track then.

What worried Ryou was that Zorc didn't look concerned. He seemed confident that he could alter events to suit his needs just as easily. Ryou prayed it was just arrogance.

And then Zorc produced three hourglass tokens and used one of them to freeze time so Akhenaden could claim all the Items. Zorc claimed they were a special ability, but Ryou definitely hadn't put those in the game.

_Dammit, Bakura._

He shouldn't have expected Zorc to play fair in the first place.

Still… if Zorc had special abilities, perhaps the Pharaoh did as well. Ryou gazed across the table, wishing there was some way to communicate with him.

_Come on, Pharaoh… use your head…_

Ryou watched as Zorc was resurrected in the game, grimacing. It had to happen for them to progress, but that didn't make the situation any less dangerous.

_Just hold on a little longer…_

…

“What happened?”

Jonouchi jumped in front of a man running a stall at the edge of town, leaning in close and squinting. The man, along with everything and everyone as far as they could see, was completely still.
even a hair moved. Dust hung in the air, a flap of cloth was stuck in a wind blown shape, and a pitcher of water being poured may as well have instantly turned to ice.

“Everything's stopped moving!”

“It's like someone pressed pause...” Honda noted, waving a hand before a woman’s face. It wasn't like she could see him anyway - none of them were visible to the people of this world - but it was still unsettling.

“No, it's more than that. Look.”

Not everything had frozen. Malik raised his hand to point at a darkening spot in the distance. The clouds churned, flashes of lightning illuminating a hulking silhouette. It wasn't any regular storm.

Judging by the distance, it looked to be right over where Kul Elna rested.

“That's not good…” Anzu murmured in dismay.

Malik’s nails dug into his palms, his jaw setting tightly. What if it was already too late? What if something had happened to Bakura? Worse - what if Bakura had done something stupid?

No, he couldn't afford to think that way. Not now.

“We’re too slow on foot…” He growled, glancing around at the market they were crossing through.

Yugi glanced up at him, meeting his gaze with thought.

“You know, I've been thinking about something ever since Zorc said this was a world of memory and you conjured up that duel disk…”

Malik paused as Yugi's words sunk in.
“He did say something like that, didn't he?” He raised a brow at him. “You think that could mean…?”

“One way to find out.”

Before anyone had the chance to question things, Yugi took off running. One stride after the other, he picked up speed until he pushed off of the ground and leapt high into the air - only, he never came back down.

“Whoa!”

His friend's jaws dropped as they watched him soar up high and higher. Anzu was the first one to recover from the shock, grinning as she followed Yugi's lead and pushed off of the ground. Jonouchi and Honda followed soon after, albeit with rougher starts.

“We can fly!” Anzu cheered as the market grew further and further away.

“This is amazing!”

Yugi suddenly slammed on the breaks, throwing his arms out. “Wait, where's Malik?”

A noise like thunder tore through the air moments before silver and red tore through the center of their group. Jonouchi yelped as he was sent tumbling through the air, managing to right himself before he fell out of the sky.

“Holy shit!” He yelled, glaring after Malik. “Watch where you're going! Why did you even-?!”

Malik popped a wheelie as he pulled the motorbike to a stop, sticking his foot to balance it as if there was still ground beneath him. He grinned like Ra had personally granted him the blessing of his life.

“It’s called ‘dreaming bigger’. Not that I expect a mind like yours to have room for the concept.” Malik scoffed. “Believe me, I remember being in there…”
Jonouchi bristled, waving a middle finger at him. “Bullshit, I'm pretty sure I saw that in a movie once!”

Malik threw his head back with a laugh before revving the engine again.

“What, just make sure you keep up!”

He took off, hardly looking back to check if the others were following him. The sun beat down, turning his motorbike to a glimmering red streak in the sky. The wind whipped by his face and through his hair. Any other time, this would have been a perfect ride - beyond perfect. He was flying, the ground so far beneath him it seemed like the earth could never claim him again. This was straight out of his wildest dreams.

But they had a mission. His eyes were set in a determined frown on a spot in the distance. He didn't laugh or shout, or have the chance to indulge in a fantasy coming true.

Because despite the fact that everything had come to a pause around them, they didn't have any time.

…

The shadows grew into something that didn't seem like it could possibly fit inside the chamber, yet somehow did. Akhenaden's screams filled the chamber as the darkness transformed him into a high priest for Zorc instead of a high priest of the Pharaoh's. It was more difficult to watch than Bakura expected, seeing what he was supposed to be apart of.

No, not be apart of - Zorc had lied about that. He was intended to be just a stepping stone to this point. He was supposed to die before he got this far.

Bakura and the Pharaoh could do nothing but watch, their bodies still frozen in time. The darkness had stopped flowing into Akhenaden and he rose to his feet, no part of him recognizable. He reached down and plucked the Millennium Eye from the tablet, returning it to his empty eye socket, now surrounded by a mask.

The dark form filling the room pulled itself away from the tablet, towering high over the two of them. Clawed feet stomped craters into the stone as Zorc advanced, a long tail swiping a column to dust. At this rate, Zorc wouldn't even have to attack them - he could merely bring the shrine down on them.
Enjoy your last moments alive, Pharaoh, Bakura.

As Zorc spoke, energy collected around his body, swelling to an intense pressure. The air felt like it would combust at any moment.

Now die!

Bakura would have closed his eyes if he were able to, the red light searing into his vision as Zorc's inferno surged towards them. He expected to feel it tear through them both any moment.

But it never reached them. Gold blasted apart the red surge, and then a shape landed before them on his knees. It was a man Bakura didn't recognize, yet felt somehow familiar. He was robed, wearing a golden mask that heavily resembled the sarcophagus cut into the tablet that held the Millennium Items.

“Great Pharaoh…” The man rose to his feet, his very presence cutting through the time magic holding them prisoner. It created a barrier around them, allowing Bakura to finish his leap and the Pharaoh to stand up straight. “My name is Hasan, Spirit of the Stone Tablet.”

“That gold I saw in the sky…” Bakura muttered once he had grounded himself again, remembering what he’d seen after waking up near the Nile. He thought he had just been hallucinating then but, judging by the Pharaoh's expression, he had seen him too.

“Zorc and I are two sides of the same coin, light and darkness. When he awakens so will I,” Hasan explained, sinking to his knees. “At the will of the former king, I will protect you, my Pharaoh.”

The Pharaoh's eyes widened before softening in realization. “My father… he sealed you in the tablet.”

Bakura growled. If the previous Pharaoh had thought to help his son, the least he could have done was leave him something useful. Already, Zorc's heka was overpowering Hasan’s, pushing into the barrier the spirit had created. The spirit shone bright like the sun, but it wasn't enough to light up the sea of darkness surrounding them.
“How’s a leftover spirit supposed to stand up to that?” He snapped, gesturing before them.

“At least one of you knows you're outmatched…” Akhenaden laughed, holding his arms out as more energy began to gather around him.

The Pharaoh stepped forward, raising his voice so he could speak over the suffocating wall of black. “Akhenaden! Why did you turn to Zorc?”

Akhenaden paused, but only for a moment.

“The people saw you as a god, Pharaoh… and yet you couldn't see into the darkness, where true power lies.” He flung his arms forward as lightning crashed around him, surging towards them like a wave. “Power not even the three Egyptian Gods can match up to!”

The second wave hit them harder than the first. Bakura could feel it, gritting his teeth as his body seized up involuntarily. Glancing over, he saw that the Pharaoh had nearly been brought to his knees.

They weren't going to last long like this.

“Time will resume any moment now!” Hasan called, his arms spread wide as he fought against Zorc's magic. “Just… hold… on…”

Between the forces of light and dark pushing against each other, something had to give. Just when Bakura's vision began to darken around the edges and the black lightning broke into the barrier, something rushed between them.

The Pharaoh whirled around to see the rest of his priests had begun to move again, their eyes wide as they took in the demon before them. They had all summoned their ka, using them as a wall against Zorc's attack.

“This is…!” Priest Seto uttered in horrified awe, his eyes falling on Zorc, and then Akhenaden.

“Pharaoh, retreat for now!” Hasan said. “Have faith in your friends! I led them into this world!”
They're searching for your name!"

Both the Pharaoh and Bakura's eyes widened. So it wasn't just Malik that had found his way into this world.

The Pharaoh nodded, turning on his heel and waving his priests towards the stairs.

“Fall back!” He shouted, his voice nearly drowned out by the falling rubble as the chamber finally began to crumble around them.

Bakura jumped as a piece of debris the size of a car landed mere feet from him, startled out of his daze. The events unfolding around him were almost too much to keep up with. There was a howl from above him, jerking his attention up to where the spirits had begun to swirl again.

The ink black darkness bled into their forms, their cries reaching a fever pitch as they dissolved into the mass of calamity and chaos that was Zorc. Bakura felt like time had stopped again as he watched, helpless - so helpless like the first time as they disappeared into shadows instead of gold.

A wordless cry broke out of his lungs, his hand uselessly outstretched. His knees hit the floor, nothing but a ringing, rushing noise filling his ears. His mind had gone blank.

They were gone.

“Bakura, we have to go!”

The voice shattered the silence, a hand coming out of nowhere and seizing the front of his robes. The Pharaoh was jerking him to his feet and dragging him towards the stairs, but Bakura barely found the strength to react.

“Get up! This isn't the end!”

Bakura wanted to shove him away, but his body was on autopilot. He allowed the Pharaoh to herd him out, but not before casting one last look over his shoulder. He glared hatred up at Zorc - ice cold instead of burning this time, and clear instead of clouded.
"You've taken everything."

... 

After touching down just outside the tomb, they headed inside, moving quick enough to not waste time, but slow enough as to not trigger any traps. There were a lot of traps and, unlike the people in the city, they could actually touch them. Jonouchi found that out the hard way when a falling blade took off a lock of hair. The tomb was designed to keep out all intruders, regardless of if they were from this world or not. They couldn't fly in here either.

Malik did his best to recall the layout of the tomb - his Ghouls had once looted it before - but his memory wasn't perfect. The room ahead, however, he remembered quite well.

"Walk with your right foot forward at all times," he said as he stepped out onto the dangerously narrow walkway. "Unless you're looking for a new haircut."

The others didn't question him. The maze of pathways hung suspended over a drop to nothing. Scattered all over the paths were statues with blades raised high over their heads. Malik could see the tension in their arms, like nothing but the thinnest of threads was holding up their swords. Any moment now, it could snap. The statues were watching them, waiting for the slightest error.

That was the wrath they would bring down on them if they put the wrong foot forward.

Something caught Malik's attention and he glanced downwards, spotting a small rectangle lying near his foot. A Duel Monsters card. Carefully, he bent to pick it up.

"What is it?" Jonouchi hissed, the rest of them stopping behind Malik and eyeing the statues warily. "And can it hurry up? This place is creepy!"

Malik stared down at the card - Ouija Board. Up ahead, he could see various Spirit Messages littering the walkway. His jaw set.

"Someone's here." And it wasn't any secret who. Malik tossed the card into the black abyss to his right as he began to walk again.
They made it to the other side in one piece, proceeding into the chamber beyond. The room consisted of a single narrow walkway with a sheer drop on either side of it. The other side lay bathed in shadow, but there was movement over there and a moment later, a familiar face stepped into the light.

“IT’s time to play…” Zorc spoke, low and ominous.

“Not running away with your tail between your legs this time?” Malik sneered, raising his arm as his duel disk materialized, deck already fitted into the slot.

“If you were smart, you would have taken the chances I offered you to turn back and enjoy what little time your world has left.”

“Is that what you call it?”

Yugi stepped up beside Malik, looking more fierce than Malik had ever seen him before.

“Move aside!”

Zorc merely chuckled, crossing his arms and shaking his head.

“You won't get past me. I know you want the Pharaoh's name back there, but it would mean big trouble for me if you reached it.” He raised a hand, wrist contorting with an unnatural crunch as his duel disk made of flesh and bone reappeared. “Now, who wants to die first?”

Yugi now had his own duel disk at the ready, nodding at Malik.

“We'll face you - together!”

Zorc grinned with a mouth that wasn't his, and Malik knew he was going to make him sorry he ever thought about wearing Bakura's face.
“Taking out two worthless vessels at once… how efficient.”
Zorc loomed over them all, a gigantic black mass that blotted out the horizon. He watched them all retreat like they were nothing more than ants under his foot. The remains of Kul Elna were crushed under his weight, leaving nothing behind.

Even though Zorc was glaring down at them all, Bakura felt his gaze zeroing in on him in particular. Something grabbed his arm, and Bakura turned his head to see the Pharaoh dragging him over to a horse. The Pharaoh climbed on first and Bakura jumped up behind him, no time for thinking, only acting. He seized the Pharaoh's belt just as they took off.

Zorc turned and swiped his tail, sending boulder sized chunks of debris into the sky. They crashed into the cliffside a ways above where the Pharaoh and Bakura were riding, the rock crumbling down on top of them.

“Mahaad!” The Pharaoh yelled.

Bakura's eyes widened, daring to turn his head upwards to see a purple blur above them. The mage had become a ka for the Pharaoh; even in death he would always serve him.

From the corner of his eye, Mahaad shot Bakura a cold, hateful look but raised his staff, forming a shield that protected them all from the falling rock.

Bakura grimaced. Well, shit, no hard feelings then.

The Pharaoh and his court didn't stop until a considerable distance was put between them and Zorc. Soldiers had rushed to meet them all, appalled by the Thief King riding on the back of the Pharaoh's horse. The Pharaoh had to give them all the same spiel he had given his court, but Bakura wasn't listening this time. He was focusing on the gargantuan demon in the distance steadily getting closer. Each of Zorc's steps shook the land, frightening the horses and causing them to trod anxiously in place. Dark clouds bled across the sky, turning the afternoon into a murky twilight.

In the valley below, a shape had appeared in front of Zorc. Shadow Priest Akhenaden raised his arms and the ground began to quake. A hand burst up from the earth, rotted and skeletal, followed by another, and another, until the field was filled with bodies dragging themselves forward with their
weapons raised. Their numbers matched the Pharaoh's - possibly even doubled them.

“He’s raising an army of the undead,” Seto growled as he watched. “Pharaoh, what do we do?”

The rest of them looked on in horror, and then to their leader for guidance. The Pharaoh gripped the horse's reins, his jaw tightening. He raised his fist, looking out over his men.

“We fight!” He declared, his voice carrying strong over his men. “Zorc won't have Egypt! He won't have this world!”

A roar answered him, every soldier raising their spear as they gathered their ranks. A wall of them formed before they charged into the valley, meeting the undead as they closed in. Bakura sat, stunned as he watched the two forces clash, the land turned into a battlefield. For all his talk of raising hell in the Pharaoh's land, he had never seen this part of the war.

There was cries from the priests as they all called forth their ka, their sights trained on Zorc. Mahaad reappeared at the Pharaoh's side, and close to him was his apprentice - that young mage that commanded Dark Magician Girl.

Bakura realized he couldn't just stay here. As his sights fell on Zorc and Akhenaden, his eyes darkened, energy welling up within him. He raised a hand, fingers splayed as he called forth his ka.

“Diabou-!”

The agony seized him so abruptly he cut himself off with a choke, clutching his chest. His limbs locked up, and he could no longer maintain his balance on the horse, sliding off and falling to the ground with a grunt.

“Bakura!” The Pharaoh dismounted as well, dropping to his knees beside him. “What is it?”

Bakura shoved him back with a hiss. “Nothing! Why do you give a shit?”

“If you can't fight, you're only going to be in the way.” The look in the Pharaoh's eyes dangerously resembled concern and Bakura scoffed.
“I can fight.”

Diabound had appeared, but something was wrong. His form was still tainted and black, warped and monstrous like it had been when Bakura wore the Millennium Ring. Every moment he was out was a moment it felt like Bakura's insides were being crushed.

He grimaced, holding his heart. Why was this happening? It didn't make any sense.

Did you really think it would be that easy? That I'd let you go with no repercussions?

Bakura cringed as the voice spoke directly into his mind, baring his teeth in a snarl.

You gave me your soul. Do you remember that? You don't get to have it back just because you betrayed me.

“Go to hell,” Bakura uttered under his breath.

You may have outlived your usefulness, but you will always belong to me. I gave you power, so take it. Take all of it.

Bakura curled in on himself, leaning his weight on his forearms. Diabound coiled and convulsed in the air, the shadows eating away at him. It was too much, and Bakura tasted blood between his teeth. With a cry, he called Diabound back into himself, huffing as the pain subsided.

“Dammit!” He punched the ground, not caring about the sting in his knuckles.

“Bakura... Pharaoh...”

Bakura's head jerked up as a new, softer voice permeated his ears. The Pharaoh heard it too, raising his head as well.
“Zorc’s left arm.”

“That’s…” The Pharaoh’s eyes widened.

“Ryou…” Bakura finished. “What’s he up to?”

“Only one way to find out,” the Pharaoh said, moving to hoist himself back up on his horse.

Bakura shoved himself to his feet and swiped the reins of some horse he saw standing near Seto. “Mind if I borrow this?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, jumping up and squeezing the horse’s sides with his legs. He took off, headed straight for Zorc.

“Bakura, you can’t!” The Pharaoh called after him, galloping behind him.

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Bakura snarled back.

With little other choice, the Pharaoh pulled ahead, flinging his arm out in another command. “Mahaad, go!”

Mahaad swung his staff, his dark burning magic scorching a path through the undead. They closed in on Zorc, horses splitting apart as a dark beam of energy cut between them. The mage flew up towards Zorc, and he was accompanied by another - that young apprentice of his had joined him.

Dark Magician and Dark Magician Girl joined their power and unleashed their attack on the left side of Zorc’s body. At the same time, Bakura called forth Diabound again, bracing for the pain.

With a scream of exertion, he had Diabound add his power to the blast. There was a roar from Zorc as he staggered back, kicking up dust and debris.

Bakura half collapsed over the back of his horse as Diabound faded, breathing hard and watching the dust clear around Zorc. When the demon was revealed again, nothing about him seemed to have
changed - at least, not at first.

Light bled out of a crack in Zorc's bicep, taking him by surprise as it spread around his arm. A scream shook the air as his arm shattered and a small, glowing shape pulled itself out of the stump left behind. Bakura didn't see where the shape flew off to, his vision wavering in and out of darkness.

A soothing green light washed over him, relieving some of the weight of his injuries. Bakura opened his eyes again, finding it easier to push himself back up. He realized he wasn't alone, glancing over to see a familiar face hovering close to him. Ryou was dressed in white robes, carrying a staff of his own. He smiled sweetly.

“You hid yourself inside of Zorc?!”

“Right under his nose!” Ryou chirped, reaching up to adjust his cap. “I figured he would be so focused on the pawns in his precious game, he wouldn’t even think about his own piece.”

“Unbelievable…” Bakura had to laugh, shaking his head, the sound breaking off into a cough.

The Pharaoh went to regroup with them, grinning at Ryou as he approached. “Good to see you again, White Mage.”

Ryou opened his mouth to say something, but the ground began to shake again. Zorc was recovering, his glowing red sights trained on them. They turned and rode back the way they came with Ryou flying along beside them, because a one armed Zorc was still fully capable of crushing them with his bare might.

Bakura grit his teeth. Ryou better have brought a plan with him. He turned his head to glance back over his shoulder, his mistake made before he could even process it.

Akhenaden stood there, arms raised to the sky again. He called forth a second wave of the dead, not from the earth this time, but from the air. Spirits, numerous, so many that didn't even look to be anything that had lived in this realm before.

Bakura's horse whined as he pulled it to an abrupt stop. He couldn't speak. He could barely breathe.
“Bakura, no!” Ryou shouted from far off. Bakura ignored him and tried to steer his horse towards Akhenaden, but the animal refused, too frightened by the spirits. Bakura jumped off and charged on foot, skidding down a slope and staggering when he reached the bottom.

The mirth in Akhenaden's voice was audible as the spirits of Kul Elna swirled above him, soaked in Zorc's darkness. “That's right, Bakura. Your village fights for me now. I’ve transformed them into something greater than they could ever hope to be…”

Bakura's arms fell limp to his sides as the mass of raging souls churned above him. Could they see him? Could they hear him? He couldn't tell.

“Spirits…” he uttered, but it was hardly audible to his own ears.

“They've grown sick of your weakness. For too long you've kept them starved of revenge… while I bring it to them on a silver platter.” Akhenaden turned his chin up, surveying the chaos before him. “You have no worth to them anymore. They have become apart of my greatness - our greatness.”

He gestured up to Zorc reverently before his cold gaze settled back on Bakura.

“And you… you will die alone, in vain, like you were always meant to.”

Akhenaden brought his arm down and the spirits were released, screaming and twisting through the air, but Bakura couldn't hear any of it. His knees hit the dirt, everything else fading behind a ringing silence.

Nothing else mattered, nothing but each soul that descended upon him, each person he couldn't save. He felt them encircle him, close in. There was no room to breathe amidst their grief and his own.

He closed his eyes, awaiting their judgement with open arms.

…
The duel was a shadow game. Malik knew from the moment he drew his first card that something was wrong. His chest felt like it was being compressed with every breath he took, like the shadows were just waiting to close in and steal the last of his life.

He and Yugi each began with 4000 lifepoints, while Zorc had their combined total of 8000. Malik supposed it was fair given it was two on one, but he didn't expect Zorc to play fair to begin with. There was no telling what he had in store for them.

Nonetheless, Malik was confident they could destroy him. Zorc fell for Yugi’s Marshmallon trick right off the bat, knocking 1000 lifepoints off of that 8000.

After that, Zorc didn't seem very interested in attacking, which irritated Malik because his own deck consisted of many flip effect monsters. They weren't much use right now if Zorc only seemed concerned with building up his defense. Malik ended his turn.

Zorc went next, choosing to focus on trying to get rid of Yugi’s Silent Swordsman. With Yugi’s quick thinking, it resulted in Zorc’s monster being destroyed instead. However, Zorc used the effect of Zoma the Spirit, doubling the damage that would have been dealt to him and forcing it on Yugi instead.

“Yugi, are you okay?” Malik asked as he watched Yugi cringe and hold his chest.

“Yeah…” Yugi said through gritted teeth, straightening up with a huff and taking his turn. He drew, but didn’t attack, eyeing Zorc’s three face down cards warily. He couldn’t afford losing anymore lifepoints after that last turn. He opted to pass.

“Afraid of my set cards, are we?” Zorc sneered.

Malik leered at him, placing two fingers on his deck as he prepared to take his turn next. “I'm not!”

A sharp current spread through his body, tasting of wind and light, prompting a gasp as his eyes widened. He knew exactly what card he was about to pull from his deck. Malik’s set monster vanished as he tributed it for a great, pearl white creature with a human half and a naga half.

“I summon Diabound Kernel!”
For the first time, Zorc’s features had fallen open in utter shock, the bright light reflected in his dark eyes.

“How did you get that card!?”

“Bakura gave it to me because he trusts me with his soul.” Malik smirked. “Really goes to show how far 3000 years of your bullshit went, hm?”

“Well, no matter. I activate Hidden Soldiers.” Zorc recomposed himself, revealing one of his trap cards and using it to summon a monster from his hand - Disgraced Mage. “The real remains of his soul are probably dried up right now. Even if you defeat me, there might not be anything left of Bakura to save...”

“Guess I better hurry up and wipe the floor with you.” Malik glowered at him. “Diabound, destroy Disgraced Mage!”

Diabound gained 600 attack points when it attacked, rising to 2400. With its opponent only having 1700 attack points, Diabound easily obliterated Zorc’s mage.

“I activate Disgraced Mage’s effect. By shuffling my hand back into my deck, I negate the battle damage.” Zorc did so, causing Malik to scowl impatiently.

“I end my turn then. Go.”

Zorc drew, a low chuckle building in his throat. “Well, it’s been fun toying with you both, however…”

He revealed another face down card. “I activate Cursed Necro Twins.”

Two dolls appeared on his side of the field, one holding a red velvet box, the other holding a black. Malik had seen just about every card there was, but he had never seen anything like this.
“Consider this a gift... You may choose one of the boxes, and the other will go to me.”

Malik and Yugi exchanged a glance. If they knew Zorc, this was going to be anything but a ‘gift’.

“The red box,” Yugi called out. Malik nodded in agreement.

Zorc chuckled. “Lucky you. This means you will gain 200 lifepoints each turn.”

Malik narrowed his eyes. That couldn't be the end of it. There was no way Zorc would just give them a blessing like that. “What does the black box do?”

He was almost afraid to ask, and the way Zorc’s grin stretched like he was trying to hold onto a secret didn't set his mind at ease at all.

“My graveyard... disappears!”

Misty forms began to appear above and around Zorc, scattering over his side of the field. Malik jerked back in surprise, realizing they were the monsters he and Yugi had already destroyed.

“Since I don't have a graveyard, every one of my fallen monsters will return to the field,” Zorc explained. “Don't look so frightened. They can't attack or be attacked, and they don't count towards my monster card zone. They're mere phantoms of their former selves.”

Zorc had to have something bigger in store for them, Malik could sense it. The peanut gallery behind him, murmuring about the duel uneasily, could probably sense it too.

Zorc used Pot of Greed to draw two more cards, setting one of them and summoning the other. “Necro Soldier, defense position!”

Zorc grinned, revealing his one other face down and causing Malik to pale. “I activate Counterbalance!”

He ended his turn after that and Counterbalance’s effect activated. Counting every monster card on
the field, including Zorc’s phantoms, it totalled out at about ten.

That was how many cards he would have had to discard to the graveyard - except he had no graveyard.

Malik grit his teeth, knowing what this meant for both him and Yugi. Now Zorc’s strategy was becoming clear.

“Draw!”

Yugi took his turn, but the one Necro Soldier on the field called forth another one on his standby phase. Yugi was unable to strike at Zorc’s lifepoints with just Silent Swordsman. When his turn came to a close, he grimaced as Counterbalance activated for him, forcing him to discard about a quarter of his deck.

Malik knew he would have to do the same for his own turn. On his standby phase, Zorc’s Necro Soldier automatically called another one from his deck. Even with Diabound’s power, he couldn’t get through both of them.

Zorc didn’t need to destroy their monsters. He didn’t need to overpower them. All he had to do was stall them out until nothing remained of their decks.

…

Bakura expected to be torn limb from limb any moment, for his soul to be ripped out and fed upon. If he couldn’t be of any use to his village otherwise, perhaps he could provide them one last meal.

It was nothing short of what he deserved.

There were voices yelling from far away - Ryou and, surprisingly, the Pharaoh. Bakura could barely hear them over the rush of the spirits as he was encircled.

His eyes snapped open as an unseen force jerked him back up to his feet, nearly lifting him off the ground entirely. Wide eyed with shock, he watched the storm of ghosts whirl around him. None of
them moved in. They weren't devouring him, they were-

“Why…?!” Akhenaden's voice wavered, the smugness wiped out of his demeanor completely. With a snarl, he flung his arms out and sent a wave of shadow magic straight at Bakura's heart.

The spirits swarmed in front of Bakura, a wall of them blocking the strike. Akhenaden screamed, trying again and again, but without success.

By the time the third wave of dark magic hit, Bakura broke from his daze. His people… they stood with him, not against him.

And Akhenaden… Akhenaden was nothing more than a sniveling coward.

The dark priest seemed to realize his mistake as the full weight of Bakura's venomous gaze settled on him.
“I…” Bakura's voice hung, uncertain and nearly drowned out in the air. His robes whipped around him as he swayed, dozens of ghostly hands resting on his shoulders, making sure he didn't fall.

He felt the strength of his village enter him, each spirit fueling the fire in his chest. It was so much
stronger than the darkness - he was stronger than the darkness.

“I put my faith in the light!”

Akhenaden was cast backwards as all of the ninety nine souls he had taken so many years ago rushed at him. They glowed brightly, their light singing away the shadows that had blanketed his form. As they dragged him to the nearby cliffside, the High Priest of Darkness was peeled away, revealing the trembling, sad man beneath.

“No!” Akhenaden clawed at the edge of the cliff, desperately scrabbling for purchase, but the pull of the spirits was stronger.

“Nononoooo-!”

His yowls faded into silence as he fell, but there was nothing left of him to hit the bottom. Bakura stepped up to the edge and peered over, watching the ghosts disappear as they carried the remains of Akhenaden's soul to the Gods only knew where.

As each spirit left him, so did Bakura's energy. He didn't even know he was falling until his back hit the dirt, his eyes blankly fixed on the clouds above. A thin trail of blood ran from his lips down his chin.

There were footsteps before Ryou's face appeared above him

“Bakura!” Ryou worked an arm underneath his shoulders, forcing him to sit up slightly. “Don't run off like that!”

Bakura's eyes narrowed up at him. What did it matter? Ryou should have been the last person to care about him.

He merely managed a grunt, frowning as another wave of green magic surrounded him.

“Malik will be here soon, just…” Ryou sighed, “just hang on until then.”
A wheezing chuckle lodged in Bakura's throat, his features softening.

“Malik…” He murmured the name without any real meaning. Perhaps he just enjoyed the sweetness of it between the bitter, copper tang on his tongue.

What was Malik going to do about this? He was irreparably damaged, he could feel it. Ryou could mend his body all he wanted, but his soul was too eroded by the darkness - strange how he hadn't noticed it being eaten away when he had the Ring. This was a waste of Ryou's energy.

All Bakura could hope for was to take Zorc down with him when his ka finally burned up.

Chapter End Notes

Akhenaden isn't completely dead, the Kul Elna spirits merely destroyed the human half of him. The thing that confronts Seto and Kisara later is merely a shell. Obviously this won't be shown from Bakura's POV so I figure I'd make a note of it here.
Malik grit his teeth as he reluctantly placed another dangerously large chunk of his deck in the graveyard. He and Yugi were cutting it down to the wire, only a few cards remaining in their decks. Within another turn or so, they would have nothing left to draw and they would automatically lose the duel.

Zorc’s Necro monsters were relentless, able to summon more with their effects to clog his field. He activated Necro Cycle, allowing him to special summon one each turn. With cards like Multiply and Narrow Corridor, he successfully blocked each of their attempts to strike at his life points. It didn't matter how many monsters Yugi and Malik summoned, they couldn't get through.

And the more monsters on the field, the more cards they had to throw away each turn.

“How are they going to win this?” Anzu uttered in horror as she watched.

“I… I don't know,” Jonouchi said. Malik snorted. To hear someone so brazen sound so defeated definitely wasn't a good sign. Weren't Yugi's friends known for not giving up until the very end?

Malik turned his attention to Yugi, the grim reality of this duel dawning over both of them. If they lost this, they not only lost their lives, but Bakura and the Pharaoh were both doomed as well. Everyone was as good as dead.

“Yugi, if you have anything - anything at this point, use it now. Don't worry about me,” Malik said, his eyes set in determination. He had a plan of his own.

Yugi looked uncertain at first, but he gave a nod. When it hit his turn, he went to draw the last card in his deck as Zorc watched in amusement.

“Looks like this is the end of the line for you. All I have to do is pass my next turn, and then you perish on the spot.”

“Who said you're even getting a next turn?” Yugi shot back, raising the card he’d drawn high as the
monsters on his field disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“I summon Gandora, the Dragon of Destruction!”

Zorc’s smug expression was wiped off of his face completely as a great, black mass filled the chamber. The red gemstones lining the dragon’s body lit up all at once, the blinding light blasting apart everything on the field. Malik had to grin as he watched, Zorc’s screams nearly drowned out by the sound of his monsters exploding into dust.

The cards Gandora banished were added to its attack power and, with nothing to stand in the way now, Yugi struck Zorc directly.

Zorc staggered, a river of blood falling from his mouth as he was brought down to his last few life points. He glared hatred at both of them, struggling to regain himself. Gandora hadn’t been strong enough to take him out completely, but it had done more than enough.

“Gandora goes to the graveyard now!” Yugi declared. “I end my turn.” He nodded to his dueling partner. “Malik, would you take it from here?”

Malik shot Yugi a knowing glance as he drew his last card. “With pleasure.”

“I'll admit, that was a pretty good effort…” Zorc wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his fist. “But both of your fields are empty and the majority of your decks are already in the graveyard.” He grinned, but it was more of an angry grimace than anything. “This turn will do you no favours, tombkeeper. Gandora destroyed all the cards on your side of the field as well. You don't even have a monster to play, do you?”

“Are you sure about that?” Malik smirked. It was true, he had nothing to attack Zorc with and he hadn't drawn a monster, but he didn't need anything in his hand either. “You were so focused on Gandora you didn't pay any attention to what was happening to your own monsters, did you?”

There was a twitch of uncertainty in Zorc’s countenance. “They were being destroyed. What difference does it make?”

“Diabound has a special ability. I can select any of your monsters and have their attack points decreased by whatever Diabound’s current attack points are.” Malik chuckled. Oh, he was going to enjoy this. “Truthfully, that's not the most important part of this effect. You see, immediately after doing this, Diabound is then banished from the field, thus avoiding Gandora’s onslaught.”
Zorc growled, clearly wanting Malik to just end his turn so he could win. “What does it matter if it banishes itself or is removed from play by another card’s effect?”

“Shut up and watch.”

Above the field, there was a shimmer of light as a form pulled itself back into existence. Diabound shone brightly, tail coiling and twisting in anticipation as it awaited its orders, its cold stare trained directly on Zorc.

“How-!?" Zorc’s features twisted in shock and fury, realizing he was done for.

“Diabound returns to the field on the next standby phase. I shouldn't have to explain what this means for you, do I?”

Malik swore he could see the faint imprint of someone standing before him, an outline of red and white. When he gave the ka his command, he felt as if his words were shadowed by another voice - the voice of Diabound’s true owner.

“Diabound, Spiral Wave!”

The blast tore through Zorc, obliterating the last of his life points. He fell to his knees, the edges of his body beginning to smoke as the shadows claimed him. Parts of him vanished, but the last thing to go was the vehement glare he had fixed them all with.

“I’ll bury you all here....” His growl faded into silence, the smoke beginning to dissipate. Diabound and the duel disks went with it.

Alarm shot through Malik and he dashed forward. The duel may have been over, but Zorc couldn’t leave yet. He had promised him he’d hand over Bakura’s soul! Malik grabbed for Zorc’s throat, but his fingers met nothing but air.

He was seething with fury until he glanced down at his feet. Something small and glimmering rested on the walkway where Zorc had stood. Malik bent to pick it up, his eyes widening.
“What is this doing here…?” He murmured to himself while the others celebrated their victory. He examined the ring - it was the wedding band he had given Bakura. Did this mean… Bakura had actually kept it?

He hadn’t thought much of the ring before, letting Bakura have it out of some petty spite for his upbringing, but perhaps it represented more than that. He closed his fist around it, feeling how warm the gold was. The same warmth he’d felt when Bakura had bared his soul to him, where the similarities in their pasts created something so tangible and unyielding, not even Zorc’s darkness could corrupt it.

This was where the key to saving Bakura’s soul lay.

Slipping the ring onto his finger so he didn’t drop it, Malik turned to Yugi.

“Go on ahead. There's something I have to do.”

Hardly waiting for an answer, he spun on his heel and turned back for the door they’d come through.

“Be careful, Malik!” Yugi called after him.

_You be careful, you damn idiots._ Malik couldn’t help but flash a brief smile before wholly dedicating his attention to getting out of this hellhole of a tomb. Every moment being in here was more torturous than before with the knowledge he now had Bakura’s salvation literally in his hands, he just had to reach him before it was too late.

The air seemed so much more suffocating and dry as though trying to make sure he could never leave, but he’d already made a promise not to let the earth claim him again. He ran, breezing past every trap and puzzle they’d already solved, but it still felt like years had passed before the entrance was in sight. The blinding light at the end of the tunnel nearly made him yell with relief.

And then the shockwave hit. He stumbled and nearly fell as the ground gave a violent shudder. A sharp chunk of rock fell from the ceiling and raked a large gash into his arm. The quake was followed by another, even more powerful. What the hell was happening? Why now?

Gritting his teeth, he pushed on, dodging falling debris left and right. He couldn’t die here. He _wouldn’t_ be buried again.
He burst out of the entrance just as it collapsed in on itself. As soon as he was in the light, he kicked off of the shifting earth and flew into the air, turning and glancing back down at the tomb. His eyes widened when he saw how far the devastation reached. It appeared like the entire tomb had sunk into the earth.

He could only hope Yugi and his friends had made it out alright. Knowing their dumb luck, there was hardly a reason to worry.

Steeling himself and taking off for the dark spot in the distance, Malik didn’t look back.

…

The Pharaoh’s priests were falling one by one. Siamun’s Exodia was useless against Zorc. Isis, Karim, and Shada were all wiped out by Zorc’s continuous stream of attacks, their bodies crumbling into sand. Seto had vanished and none of them had seen where he’d gone. The soldiers were dwindling, their numbers unable to match up to even a fraction of Zorc’s power.

The Pharaoh was throwing everything he had at Zorc, trying to keep him away from the city and the innocents inside. Hasan accompanied him, blocking and striking back wherever he could, but the only thing they seemed to be accomplishing was irritating the demon.

Bakura could hardly think about trying to attack Zorc. He could barely manage fending off the leftovers from Akhenaden’s undead army. Every time he summoned Diabound, the world slipped further away. He was convinced more of his blood was outside of him than inside of him, given how much he was coughing up.

This fight seemed like it had gone on for millennia - which he supposed it technically had.

He growled when he felt another wave of soothing magic wash over him, weakly shoving Ryou away.

“Save it!” He gave a wet snarl, wiping his lips. He hated how insistent Ryou was on helping him. The White Mage was having trouble dividing up his healing spells between the people that remained, and Bakura didn’t want it wasted on him.
“Just a little longer… hang in there.” Ryou frowned. Bakura laughed.

“You keep saying that, but we both know how this ends.”

“How you think it ends.” Ryou heaved a sigh, shooting Bakura a withering look, but then his eyes brightened as he spotted something high over Bakura’s head.

“Malik’s here!”

Bakura nearly broke his neck twisting around so fast. “What?!”

Sure enough, there was a small dot in the sky steadily coming closer. Bakura could just barely make out the unmistakable head of golden hair. Malik was… flying?

There was a shout of warning from the Pharaoh, telling his soldiers to retreat back even further while Mahaad rushed to block one of Zorc’s attacks. The Pharaoh choked as his ka’s magic shield shattered, blood spilling down his lips.

Zorc reared back, his dragon head gathering a deadly red energy between its jaws, his sights trained on all of them. With the Pharaoh stunned, there was nothing standing in his way.

Ryou cried out, throwing up a haphazard shield around them all. It barely held for a second, shattering under the blast.

The world disappeared behind an explosion of red light and agony, like they had been caught in the epicenter of a bomb. Bakura smashed against a rock, his temple split open as a trail of red ran down his cheek. For what felt like ages, all he could do was lay there, his ears ringing and his body refusing to move.

As the dust settled, his eyes cracked open so see dozens and dozens of bodies strewn around them. The last of the Pharaoh’s army lay in twisted heaps, some of them in pieces. None of them moved.

The Pharaoh himself was on his hands and knees, gritting his teeth as he tried to find the strength to push himself back up. Mahaad flickered in and out of existence, the ka struggling to stand over his
Ryou lay nearby, his staff stuck in the ground several meters away. He panted heavily, quivering with the effort of staying conscious. By this point in the battle, his white robes were soiled with blood and dirt.

Finally, Bakura's eyes fell on Malik. His mouth was open in a soundless howl of pain at the sky, writhing on the ground. He must have been thrown directly on his back.

**Stop resisting.**

Bakura's attention was drawn upwards, watching blankly as Zorc advanced with each ground-shaking, rhythmic step. There was a flicker as another round of crimson energy gathered between the dragon's jaws again.

**This is the end.**

They had no defense this time. They couldn't handle another direct attack.

**Now die!**

Bakura glanced to the others still fighting to recover. His hand found his way to the rock behind him, using it as a brace as he pushed himself to his feet. His teeth gleamed red with blood as he bared them.

Zorc was right, this was the end, but not for them.

Zorc’s power grew, the red light swelling to envelope them all in the glow of death. Bakura raised his arm, a blackened form appearing high above him.

Diabound rocketed towards Zorc’s second mouth at breakneck speeds. His body began to glow like a supernova, brighter than Zorc’s smouldering red energy. Parts of Diabound begun to break off - first the scales, then the feathers from the ka’s wings, glimmering like stardust as they fell- but Bakura didn't care. He didn't stop, and with one final scream of defiance, Diabound collided with
Zorc’s attack right before it left the dragon’s jaws.

Caught between the blast and the dragon’s teeth, Diabound was torn apart. Zorc roared and staggered back, not seriously wounded, but stunned by the counter attack. Hopefully, it would be enough.

It *had* to be enough.

Bakura watched the shredded remains of his ka dissolve into the air like burnt paper. Strangely, he felt no pain, just a dull numbness blanketing his limbs. His arm fell back to his side, but not before Bakura noticed the cracks crawling over his fingers, grains of sand flying off of them. The edges of his body became out of focus, dissolving into the air.

His vision dimmed, no sound reaching his ears. It was like he was sinking under the ocean.

“Bakura!”

One voice broke the silence. He turned his head to see a blur moving towards him as if in slow motion. All he could do was curve his lips upward, flashing Malik a parting smile before his body began to tip backwards.
There was little left of him by the time he hit the ground. His body crumbled on impact, wisps of sand scattering to the sky.

Death was more peaceful the second time.

…

Malik dropped to his knees just before the spot where Bakura had stood, a crushing weight sitting in his heart. His mind didn't seem to want to accept what he had just witnessed, and he felt himself separating from the moment. He had to fight to stay grounded, a slow horror creeping over him.

He didn't make it in time.

Bakura had sacrificed the last of his ka to save them from what would have been a killing blow.

Bakura was gone.

Malik's hands clenched into fists, the ring digging against his skin. It was cold, like how he felt.

_I couldn't save him._

All of this - it had been for _nothing_. Bakura had been lost anyway.

Only Malik, Ryou, the Pharaoh and a few of his servants remained. Who knew if Yugi and his friends had made it out of the collapsed tomb? Zorc had been paralysed by Bakura blocking his attack, but he wouldn't remain that way forever. As it appeared now, all that stood between Zorc and the world were a few survivors on their last legs.

Had it truly been a losing battle right from the start?

Malik squeezed his eyes shut, curling in on himself, his hair tickling the ground below. His head
jerked back up when he heard rapid footsteps approaching him.

“Malik!” Ryou skidded to a stop, leaning on his knees and panting. “Do you have it?”

Malik must have given him a look of utter defeat because Ryou's shoulders slumped. “Please tell me you have it…”

Malik glanced down to his hands, pulling the ring off of his finger and letting it sit in his palm. “This is what Zorc's shadow dropped when we defeated him…” His eyes fell on the empty space where Bakura should have stood. “But Bakura is…”

“He's not dead yet.” Ryou's sights brightened when he saw the ring. He dropped his staff and lowered to his knees in front of Malik, reaching out to curl Malik's fingers over the jewelry to keep it safe. “He's still here. We just have to bring him out.”

Malik glanced back up in surprise. How were they supposed to do that?

Ryou smiled, reaching for his staff and using it to push himself up again. He offered Malik his hand. “My White Mage is level 15. This spell is going to cost all but one of my levels.”

“Spell?” Malik took the hand and stood up again.

“I need your help,” Ryou said. He took a step away from Malik and raised his staff to the sky. A circle of light drew itself on the ground surrounding them, lined with runes and symbols Malik didn't recognize.

A rumble shook the air, drawing their attention over to see that Zorc was recovering. Ryou clicked his tongue, focusing on Malik again. “We have to hurry. The Pharaoh will die if he tries to fight off Zorc on his own.”

“What do I have to do?” Malik held the ring tightly, as if it could protect them from the raging beast outside.

“You're the closest to him, Malik. You can find his soul in the darkness.” Ryou closed his eyes, and
Malik got the impression he should do the same.

Malik still wasn't quite sure what that meant, so he let instinct take over, squeezing the ring close to his chest.

“What do I do once I find him?”

They were both painfully aware of Zorc’s voice growing in volume, coming closer.

“Pray for a miracle.”

…

Zorc tried not to let it show how much losing his shadow strained him, grimacing and holding his chest. That tombkeeper and the other vessel… they becoming more than mere pests. The closer they got to the Pharaoh's name, the more of a threat they posed.

So Zorc activated his second hourglass token and sunk the tomb with all of them still inside, much to the Pharaoh's horror. However, Zorc’s sadistic glee fell back into shock when the tombkeeper was able to find his way to the battlefield.

It appeared that he hadn't seen the Pharaoh's name, so Zorc merely gave a scoff. It was pathetic really, watching him scramble after the Thief King as if it wasn't a wasted effort. As he suspected, Bakura succumbed to his injuries before Malik could reach him.

It was about time. Bakura's stubbornness had been wearing on his patience.

And then Zorc noticed the White Mage begin a ritual of his own, narrowing his eyes down at the piece.

The vessel had stopped fighting for control of his own body a while ago, instead transferring his spirit into his White Mage to take an active part of the game. Zorc hadn't cared what he did - the pieces were easier to manage when they were all in one place - but this new development was giving him second thoughts.
“It's your turn, and since Ryou isn't here, you'll have to roll for him,” the Pharaoh said from across the table, catching Zorc’s eye. “Bakura is still technically your piece. This will decide if he returns or not.”

“Why do you appear so smug, Nameless Pharaoh?” Zorc’s lips peeled back in a sneer as he reached for the dice. “Your army is ruins. Your friends are dead. The fate of the game is in my hands.”

“No, it isn't. It's in ours.” The Pharaoh raised his chin, not faltering for a moment. “You've learned nothing from the last time, and that's why you'll lose. Make your roll, and don't bother trying to cheat.”

Zorc’s features were hardened in a glare, an ugly twitch of nerves spasming at the corner of the vessel's jaw. As if he needed to cheat. He would admit that the vessel’s incantation was clever, but it required nothing short of the highest roll possible to use. It had less than a one percent success rate. They were trying to revive the dead after all.

Even if they succeeded, they would merely be delaying the inevitable. He didn't know why they were so dead set on bringing back Bakura, but he would destroy the traitorous thief as many times as he had to.

Still… why did his hand hesitate to let the dice fall?

After a moment longer, he let them slide off of his palm. They bounced once, twice, then spun, slowing until the numbers became visible.

Zorc began to lean back, satisfied. A fumble. The vessel's spell had failed. He only wished the boy's conscious was still here to see it personally.

And then the dice shifted ever so slightly, knocking them off their course right as they were about to seal Bakura's fate for good. For perhaps the first time, Zorc actually felt the blood drain away from Ryou's face as the new roll was revealed.

00
Malik kept his eyes squeezed shut. He didn't want to see what would happen if they failed. He searched with everything he had, darkness pressing in from all directions, weighing him down at
every turn. It crushed his chest, making his breath come faster with panic and frustration. If they lost here, they would be going to a place far deeper than the tombs.

Was that where Bakura was now? How was he supposed to reach him?

Malik felt himself slipping away from the moment again, but he couldn't. Not now.

He stopped searching in a place he could never hope to reach. Instead, searched through his memories. Bakura was easy to find there, walking with him, arguing with him, challenging him, knowing him, making him feel like it was easy to simply… be. He didn't see the spirit, or the Thief King - he saw his partner, someone a wholly unique experience of his own.

The light started as a soft glow behind his eyelids, but steadily grew harsher. It was then that Malik realized the light wasn't coming from within - it was pushing in on his sights from outside.

His eyes flew open to see both he and Ryou were engulfed in the pale green of the magician’s circle surrounding them. He felt the ring in his palm crumble to nothing, drifting away in the wind, but he had little time to question it as the circle abruptly faded.

Ryou slumped forward and Malik rushed to catch him, hearing him murmur something incoherent.

“Ryou!” Malik gave his shoulders a small shake, but the White Mage seemed to have worn himself unconscious.

Malik’s heart sank as a torturous few moments of silence wrung the last of the hope from him. It hadn't worked. *It hadn't worked.*

Zorc’s earth-shattering roar split the air. It wasn’t a sound of anger this time - it was one of agony. His body contorted in an arch as light poured through the slices that had appeared all over his chest.

Malik watched with wide eyed shock and awe, but he had to turn away again as it grew too blinding to look at.

The explosion was more deafening than Zorc’s roar, holding an almost fleshy quality to it. Malik
looked back just in time to see a bright silhouette pull itself from the ruins of Zorc’s chest cavity.

Diabound's form was more pearl white and pure than Malik had ever seen it, its original glory restored. The ka spread its wings and soared across the battlefield, tail bunched up tightly around something. When it landed not far off, the coils of its tail fell slack, revealing a figure kneeling at the center and swathed in red.

Malik’s heart stuttered in his chest as he watched Bakura turn and rise to his feet.

Like Diabound, an ethereal light surrounded his body. When he caught Malik's eye, a grin split his face - one that was entirely him - and it only seemed to make him glow brighter.

“Did you miss me?”
tfw you get fooled into using a pair of jinxed dice
Chapter Notes

Two more chapters after this guys~

If you want something to listen to while Zorc is being thrashed:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bio99hoZVYI

Zorc’s scream pierced the air as his red slits trained on Bakura. Even with only one arm remaining and his chest blown open and hanging in tatters, he still cut an imposing shadow. His dragon head reared as energy built between its jaws once more.

At the last moment, he turned and aimed it at the Pharaoh instead.

With a snarl, Bakura took off running, leaping into the air and landing at the Pharaoh's side. Diabound swooped to block the attack, catching it in his hands. With a sweep of his arm, Bakura sent the red surge right back at Zorc.

“Get up!” Bakura shouted at the kneeling Pharaoh. “You're still a prick, but you're the prick that has to end this!”

The Pharaoh snapped out of his stunned daze and shakily pushed himself up, palm pressed against his side. It was clear any more use of his ba would prove to be fatal.

“Can you really… hold him back on your own…?”

“Someone has to do it!” Bakura sent Diabound out, the ka shooting a Spiral Wave at Zorc and forcing him to block it with his arms. Bakura dashed towards him, releasing attack after attack, each punctuated with a cry of everything he had endured at the hands of the demon. Zorc would retaliate, slashing with his claws and trying to bring his tail down on him, but Bakura was too fast and too small, using Diabound to carry him to safety every time it looked like he would be hit.

Malik felt Ryou shift in his arms and glanced down to see he had regained conscious - and he was watching Bakura dodge and weave around Zorc with a soft smile.
“He's winning,” Ryou whispered.

Bakura had scaled up Zorc’s back with the trained nimbleness of a thief, producing a sword he taken off of one of the dead soldiers. He drove it into Zorc’s right eye, leaping off his head when it began to thrash from side to side. Bakura caught Diabound's tail as he fell, using it to slow to a stop before he could splatter on the ground. Clenching his fists, he turned and faced Zorc again.

“You had me believe I was weak!” Bakura shouted up at him. “Who's the weak one now?”

He held up his arm and Diabound glowed with power, preparing to unleash another wave.

**Bakura.**

Bakura didn't know why he stopped - perhaps out of habit, a learned response from hearing that voice reverberate through his very soul for thousands of years.

**You side with the mortals who destroyed your world. They’ve given you power. It's not too late for vengeance.**

Bakura could feel the voice trying to worm into his mind, and his lips peeled back in a snarl. “No.”

**The Pharaoh is weakened. You want to spill his blood for the blood he took from you.**

Bakura didn't bother glancing in the Pharaoh's direction. He knew what Zorc was trying to do, and it wasn't going to blind him to the true enemy. “You can’t trick me again!”

**They did this to you.**

“*No!*”

Diabound flared with light, another shockwave unbalancing Zorc. Bakura rushed forwards, determined not to let Zorc have another inch.
“It was you!”

The Pharaoh, his father, the royal family - all pawns in Zorc’s game. Even Akhenaden, whom he despised more than anything, was nothing more than a vessel for Zorc’s will. The truth wouldn’t be hidden from him any longer.

“You took my eyes!”

Bakura’s voice filled the air like thunder as Diabound lunged for another strike.

“You took my mind!”

Diabound’s Spiral Wave hit Zorc right in the chest, making the demon stagger.

“You took my people!”

Twice. Three times. Five times. Bakura lost count of how many strikes he sent Zorc’s way.

“And you gave nothing back!”

Bakura’s body sung with power, each of his words backed by surging, unrelenting heka.

“It—”

“-was”

“-ALWAYS”

“-YOU!”
Zorc glared at him with his good eye, a pained note entering his voice as he growled. Smoke was rising from his flesh from all of the damage Diabound had done.

He abruptly turned and swiped a chunk of rock the size of a small house with his tail. It fell right on Bakura's head, Malik and Ryou sucking in horrified gasps as the Thief King disappeared under the stone.

A moment later, Diabound phased out of the side of the rock like it were nothing, Bakura kept safe in its coiled tail.

But Zorc wasn't attacking anymore. He was… retreating. It was odd behaviour for one so desperate to destroy them before they had a chance to recover.

Ryou seized up with a frantic realization, and Bakura did the same, their eyes wide with horror.

“No,” Ryou said, squirming a bit in Malik's arms. “He's-!”

Malik watched as the energy around Zorc’s body shifted, the clouds moving faster above. On the horizon, where a glimpse of the sun was visible, the light began to roll in reverse. Malik's shock turned to horror when he saw Zorc’s ruined chest cavity beginning to rebuild itself, the stump of his arm elongating, and his destroyed eye pulling itself back together.

“He's regenerating!” Bakura rushed at him, Diabound unleashing blast after blast, but none of them were able to pierce the barrier surrounding Zorc. “It's his fucking time magic again!”

Malik knew this seemed familiar. It was the same energy he had felt when the Pharaoh's tomb nearly came down on top of his head.

“He has three hourglass tokens,” Ryou explained, gritting his teeth. “He's trying to restore himself back to full power.”

Malik swallowed. If that happened, they were as good as done.
“Hasan!” The Pharaoh shouted to the spirit. “Stop him!”

“As you wish, my Pharaoh.”

The golden shape rocketed towards Zorc, flying past Diabound and striking right at the center of the barrier. It shattered, time winding back down to its normal speed.

Hasan burned up along with the last of Zorc’s hourglass magic, and the Pharaoh dropped to his knees again, bowing his head. It was another loss, but a necessary one.

However, the damage had already been done. Zorc hadn't recovered completely, but he had restored a good amount of his strength. Bakura screamed as he threw himself headlong into battle again, fighting twice as hard. While Bakura was still successfully preventing Zorc from advancing, his attacks weren't doing any real damage either, and judging by the way he was gradually slowing, he was going to tire himself out before Zorc fell.

A great ball of fire lit up the sky and slammed into the side of Zorc’s head, a shriek piercing the air moments before a great, black shape entered the fray.

“Red-Eyes, go!”

Malik turned his head to see that Yugi and his friends had finally caught up, all of them wearing duel disks as they descended from the sky. They each summoned their monsters, Yugi's Silent Swordsman, Anzu’s Petit Angel and Honda's Cyber Commander all rushing to join Red-Eyes Black Dragon in an assault against Zorc.

Malik realized he couldn't just stand here and watch. After making sure Ryou could stand on his own, Malik's duel disk appeared on his arm.

A second Diabound flew up to join the real one, Bakura tossing Malik a look of wide eyed awe over his shoulder. Malik merely gave him a smirk before unleashing a Spiral Wave of his own on Zorc.

Ryou, not wanting to be left out, raised his staff and sent his magic Zorc’s way. Even though he was hitting for the lowest damage possible, all of their strength combined wasn't just enough to keep Zorc at bay - they were pushing him back.
“The name!” Malik yelled to Yugi as the four of them landed near the Pharaoh.

“It was written in hieroglyphs! We couldn’t read it!” Yugi called back.

“Are you kidding me?!” Bakura shrieked as he narrowly avoided another slam of Zorc’s tail.

Malik grimaced, cursing himself for not seeing this coming. He had to do something, and fast. “What did they look like? I can translate it!”

“Wait!” Anzu cut above them all, pointing at the Pharaoh’s chest where a small chain was dangling out from under his robe. The chain had something small and golden fastened to it.

“I got this cartouche so the Pharaoh could put his real name on it when he learned it! Maybe we can make his name appear right now!”

Her friends had to pull away from the battle to direct their attention on the cartouche, the four of them arranged to form a circle.

“Everyone, focus. Picture the symbols we saw in your minds…”

Bakura’s strength was waning as he threw everything he had at Zorc. He had to start pulling back, leaving room for Zorc to advance again. Ryou stopped attacking and poured his energy into fortifying a shield to protect them all.

A soft glow emitted from the cartouche, the gold burning the fated name into it painfully slow.

“My name…” The Pharaoh uttered, holding up the small tag as it was gradually revealed before his eyes.

Desperate, Zorc’s roar shook the air as he charged right for the Pharaoh, his one remaining arm outstretched to grab them all and crush them to dust.
“My name is…”

The gold disappeared into the Pharaoh’s fist as he shoved himself back to his feet, raising his voice so the Gods high above could hear him loud and clear.

“Atem!”

...

A thunder crash of energy swept through the air, all the way to the edges of the game’s world. The clouds split apart, letting the sunlight shine down from above.

Bakura’s head snapped up as he watched three shapes shoot through the sky like comets of gold, crimson and navy.

“Osiris the Heaven Dragon! Obelisk the War God! The Sun Dragon, Ra!” Atem shouted. “I call upon you!”

The three Gods burned high above, their forms circling together into one.

“Zorc Necrophades, begone from this world!”

Bakura had to cover his eyes as it grew too blinding to behold. When he uncovered them, he swore he had never seen Zorc look so frightened.

No… It can’t be…!

Standing above all of them was a Goddess robed in white and gold. Her sights fell on Zorc, betraying neither scorn or sadness, merely gazing upon him with calm, silent judgement.

The Creator of Light, Horakhty!
Horakhty raised her arms and once again, Zorc’s body was aglow with light too great for him to contain. It poured from every crease, swelling until his roars cut off, his form coming apart in an explosion that shook the heavens.

... 

Bakura pressed a hand to his chest and braced for it, the sensation of every tendril of darkness that had wormed into his soul to drag him down with Zorc, but it never came. He breathed out, nothing but empty space surrounding his heart and his mind. The silence, the lack of pain he felt… it was staggering.

The clouds had disappeared completely, light bathing all of them as the last remnants of Zorc fell around them like melting snow. Atem stood before Horakhty, exchanging words without sound, and then the Goddess too vanished.

The exhaustion caught up with Bakura quickly and he swayed on his feet, fighting to steady himself. Had he just done that? Had he just fought off Zorc - and won?

The disbelief left something foreign and unidentifiable in his chest. His lungs only seemed able to process it as a hoarse, breathless laugh.

“It’s over!”

“Zorc’s dead!”

Bakura's head turned towards the cheering, Yugi's group all laughing and smiling and celebrating their victory - except the Pharaoh.

Atem's triumph was weighed down by the immense sorrow in his eyes as he gazed over the ruins of the battlefield. They had defeated Zorc, but so many lives had been lost in the process.

Bakura knew it well - the emptiness that followed the chaos, the silence in the wake of the storm. Wasn't this what he wanted? To see Atem understand the weight of his loss?
Satisfaction was probably the last thing he felt. Their eyes met for a moment, and then they glanced away.

Bakura gave a bitter snort. Of course there was nothing to be said.

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention and he turned to see a familiar mage standing there.

Ryou was quiet, and it was more crushing than any words he could have given. Now that the heat of battle had worn off, a tight mess was fast gathering in Bakura's chest.

But before it could consume him, someone else passed Ryou.

“Hey, dickhead!”

Bakura froze.

Malik was chucking the duel disk off of his arm and sprinting towards him, the expression on his face unreadable. Elation? Anger? Bakura couldn't tell, but he did know what to expect in the near future.

He closed his eyes, anticipating the punch coming his way - only for all of Malik's weight to slam into him instead. He yelped, eyes flying wide open as they both toppled down a slope and out of sight.

Bakura grunted as they rolled to a stop, Malik's weight settling atop him. He opened his mouth to say something, but a pair of lips covered his own and completely knocked the words out of his head.

…

“You bastard,” Malik breathed between the volley of kisses he was attacking Bakura's mouth with. “You beautiful bastard…!”
Malik didn't care that the kisses were a mess of clipping teeth and tongue. He didn't care that his scars ached and dirt had gotten between their mouths from the tumble down the slope. He didn't care. He didn't care. Bakura was here, solid under him, and he was alive.

Malik kissed him until they both couldn't breathe, eyes closed as he rested his forehead against Bakura's. When he opened his eyes again, he finally took notice of the way Bakura's sights were glossed over and how his chest heaved for air. He looked like he might pass out.

“Heh… whoops. Got a little excited there…” Malik sheepishly brushed a strand of hair back over his ear.

Bakura blinked up at him, dazed with bewilderment.

“I…”

“Don't.” Malik already knew what he was going to bring up, and he didn't wanna hear it right now. The mess could be sorted out later. “I want to enjoy this.”

He cupped Bakura's cheek, fingers caressing down to his lips. So strange how it was like Ryou's face, only broader, rougher. His thumb traced along a small scar cutting across the corner of Bakura's mouth.

Bakura's gaze had softened, for once unwilling to argue - or perhaps he just didn't have the strength. His unruly hair was fanned out around his head, and Malik couldn't resist running his fingers through the bone white strands.

This was… the Thief King. Malik had been so caught up in everything earlier he hadn't taken the time to process that this was really him, in the flesh. This may have been a world of memory, but he was looking at the real Thief King with his own eyes. And, hell, he had just watched him essentially give the finger to an elder god of darkness.

Malik didn't care that he was grinning like an idiot.

“Thought you’d be angrier…” Bakura breathed, sounding far away from himself.
“Oh, I am angry, but right now I just…” A scowl crossed Malik's face, made of frustration that he couldn't put what he was feeling into words. “I already told you to shut up.”

He lowered down to seal their lips together again, slower this time so Bakura could actually respond. He cupped Bakura's head, fingers threading tightly in his hair when he felt the man's lips finally move back against his own. He sighed through his nose, the victory of both defeating Zorc and saving Bakura trembling through his body, but the victory alone wasn't the only thing making his nerves sizzle with energy.

“Hey! Lovebirds!”

Malik abruptly pulled away, cheeks flaring with heat - Bakura may have had the same issue, but it was hard to tell under the flush of battle.

Ryou drifted along high above their heads, a knowing glint in his eye. A moment later, he turned and flew up into the sky, quickly becoming a small white dot in the distance. Malik realized that Yugi and his friends had already left, becoming specks against the clouds.

Malik exchanged another glance with Bakura before reluctantly climbing off of him and offering his hand. The world was already beginning to feel further and further away, like a dream it was finally time to wake up from.

“I guess we should go too.”

…

A prominent ache shot up Malik's back as he returned to consciousness. He pushed himself off the museum back room floor with a groan, sitting up and rubbing at his shoulder blades.

The shadow magic had completely dispelled. Now it was just a regular room with a table sitting in the middle and two bodies slumped over it. Malik shoved himself to his feet and dashed over to the unconscious Ryou.

“Ryou!” Malik gave his shoulders a shake. “Hey, are you alright?”
Ryou stirred, a low mumble sounding in his throat as he lifted his head. Blood ran down his upper lip from his nose, but Malik couldn't tell if it was because he had smacked his face against the table or some side effect of Zorc’s possession.

“Feel better than I usually do after waking up from these things…”

Ryou placed his palms on the edge of the table and pushed himself to sit upright. As he did so, something fell out of the folds of his shirt.

Malik's eyes widened as he watched the Millennium Ring, which had been sandwiched between Ryou’s body and the table, fall apart. The gold had been completely severed diagonally, the bottom half of it falling to the floor. Each one of its five tines had snapped off, bits scattering underneath the table.

“Ryou… the Ring…!” Malik's voice was hushed, contrasting how horrified he was. What did this mean for the Millennium Items? What did this mean for Bakura?

Ryou glanced down, his brows furrowing as he reached up to hold the half of the Ring still attached to its cord. He dropped it a moment later, head falling back as a distressed whine left him.

“My dad's gonna kill me…!”

Malik nearly sputtered. Was that a joke? There were bigger things to worry about.

“But Bakura-”

Ryou waved him off. “Don't worry, he's fine. He's not in there anymore.”

Malik blinked. Bakura wasn't in the Ring?

Ryou's eyes were bright with reassurance and Malik got the sense he should put his faith in him. A series of groans and grumbles interrupted his thoughts and he looked over to see the rest of the group stirring back to life.
Dazed, Yugi sat up while his friends pushed themselves out of the coffins they’d been lying in. They blinked as though surprised to see Malik there with the rest of them. Ryou chuckled and met Malik’s gaze, a soft smile appearing on his face.

“We did it.”
Ryou trailed along the edges of his soul room, humming softly to himself as he searched for a familiar spot of red. Around here, his mind tapered off into abstract thought and his surroundings grew to reflect that, making it more difficult to sort through.

Still, it had been days. Bakura had been given enough time to collect himself. He couldn't keep hiding like this.

Ryou passed one lone tree growing on a patch of grass disconnected from everything else. He paused when he saw the corner of a crimson robe sticking out from behind it, and then backpedaled. Stepping around the tree, Ryou found a form tucked into the shadows of its trunk.

Bakura didn't wear Ryou's face anymore. His brown legs were drawn against his chest and his face was buried in the red sleeves of his cloak. There wasn't any indication he had heard Ryou approach.

Ryou sighed. Even without the Ring, Bakura still found the darkest corners of his mind to occupy.

“Guess this is the first time we both get to speak without that stupid Ring getting in the way, huh?” Ryou said, moving to sit down beside him.

Bakura finally stirred, lifting his head, though he couldn't quite meet Ryou's eye.

“I don’t get it,” he murmured. “Why you tried so hard. I was… unreachable.” His fists clenched as he hugged his legs tighter to himself. “I thought I was.”

Ryou frowned. “I saw everything you went through to get to this point. I heard Zorc’s voice for myself. That’s not something anyone should have to go through.”

“It wasn’t your burden to carry.”

“It wasn’t yours either,” Ryou pointed out. He knew Bakura felt guilty, but this was a whole other level of self loathing. It wasn't good for anyone. “Do you have to be so difficult about everything?”
Bakura's eyes darted to over to meet his. “You can’t tell me you honestly forgive me.” Both his gaze and his hands fell to the floor, fingers digging trenches into the dirt. “Everything would be better if I just… didn’t come back.”

Ryou felt something sink in his chest. He moved onto his knees in front of him, narrowing his eyes as he leaned in.

“What would it solve if you died? You really don’t understand, Bakura, if you think that’s what I wanted.” He shook his head, a grimace curling his lip as his eyes began to sting. “I don’t need any more death and loss in my life. I thought you, of all people, could see that.”

He didn't want to cry but tears gathered around the edges of his eyes. He hurriedly wiped them away when they spilled down his cheeks. Bakura paled at the sight and buried his face again, this time in his hands.

“I don’t want an apology from you… not in words anyway,” Ryou went on, swallowing a sniffle. He hadn't come here to make Bakura feel worse - he didn't even need to try for that. “I know your words aren’t worth much to begin with.”

Bakura didn't answer, but there was so much tension in his body. Ryou reached up, and Bakura flinched as his hands were gently pried away from his face.

“It’s over.”

“It doesn’t feel over.” Bakura tried to pull his hands away, but Ryou's grip tightened. He eventually gave up, legs falling to the side so his and Ryou's hands could rest in his lap. “Nothing makes sense anymore. I don’t know what to feel, just that whatever this is isn’t right.” He grit his teeth, tears of his own gathering at the corners of his eyes and spilling over. “I still see them, I still hear them howling for justice, but I don’t know what justice I’m supposed to seek now.”

He let a laugh escape him, the sound lacking any humour, even any characteristic sardonic ring to it. It was just empty and lost.

Ryou moved forward and wrapped his arms around Bakura's shoulders, drawing him close and feeling the man’s trembling shake through his own body.
“You have to let them go,” Ryou murmured. “Your family will be fine. We’re going to lay the Millennium Items in their proper resting place.”

Truthfully, this was a source of anxiety for him as well. He wasn't sure if his tampering had done anything irreversible to the Millennium Ring. Ryou didn't think he could live with himself if he had interfered with setting the Pharaoh and the souls of Kul Elna free.

But the Puzzle had been in pieces, and Yugi still found a way to put it back together.

Bakura clutched the front of his shirt, curling away from him as if trying to put distance between them. Ryou wouldn't let him, not after everything.

“You shouldn’t be… coddling me like this,” Bakura protested through his teeth, voice choked around the edges.
“Stop telling me what to do. I’m a White Mage; I heal.” Ryou shifted so they could both sit against the base of the trunk again, his arms still tightly wrapped around Bakura. “I know you feel like you don’t deserve it, but you need it.”

He combed his fingers through Bakura's hair, idly twisting a strand behind his ear around his finger. “Malik saw something worth saving in you. That was why he couldn’t give up. And I…” His voice became a near whisper. Perhaps he was speaking to himself more than anything at this point. “I guess I saw myself, or what I could have become…”

His fingers found Bakura's cheek, tracing the scar that cut down the side of his face. He absentmindedly compared it to the knot of scar tissue on the back of his own palm. “Maybe a demon could have twisted my pain and anger into a weapon if the circumstances were a little more severe than a car accident.”

Ryou gave a wry smile.

“Or maybe I’m just petty and I wanted to prove you wrong.”

Bakura raised his head, a sort of stunned awe filling his eyes. His breathing had slowed and the sobbing had subsided.

“Zorc never could have manipulated you. You’re strong,” he uttered, a far away quality to his words. “So much stronger than I am.”

The silence bled between them. Bakura looked like he wanted to say something else, but frustration had left his mouth dry. He glanced away, baring his teeth.

“You’re right, an apology would be worth nothing from me.”

Ryou's hands slid to his shoulders. Forgiveness was a complex thing. He didn't know how long it would take for it to sit right in his chest, if it ever would, but it meant a lot to him that Bakura was sorry - even if he didn’t quite know how to express it. “I don’t want you to tell me you’re sorry. I want you to show me.”
Bakura peered up at him with wide eyes.

“How?”

“You really haven’t figured it out yet?”

“What?” Bakura's nose wrinkled in confusion.

“Your soul isn’t in the Ring anymore. I had to take it out so it wouldn’t be destroyed.”

Bakura's body seized up, his spine abruptly straightening. “That’s not possible… How did…?”

“It is. Zorc actually helped me.” Ryou gave a sheepish laugh, releasing Bakura's shoulders to fuss with his own hands, wringing them together. “During the game, I kind of… rigged a roll and caused Zorc to unknowingly transfer his ba into my spell since I was running out by that point... I used that to revive you outside the Ring so he couldn’t get his filthy claws in you again.”

Perhaps it wasn't the most honest play, but Zorc had never been honest either, and if everyone was cheating then no one truly was. And Ryou found there was a beautiful irony in Zorc helping revive the very soul he had driven to darkness in the first place.

Bakura's disbelief got the better of him for a moment, and then he gave a laugh of his own, unable to stop the corners of his mouth from turning upwards.

“Tampering with a roll? Looks like I have been a terrible influence on you…” he said, impressed. “Then where am I sealed now?”

Ryou huffed. The point was still flying miles above Bakura's head.

“You’re not sealed in anything. You’re just here, with me. I didn’t want to cage you in gold again.”

All of the mirth dropped off of Bakura's face, his expression swallowed by abject horror.
“Ryou, why…?”

Ryou's features remained soft, yet steadfast. “I want you… to show me what you can do with a second chance.”

“No, no, no, I… I can’t share your life. Why would you do this to yourself!?” Bakura shook his head, panic strangling his voice. His face twisted in grief and he weakly beat his fist on Ryou's chest. “You should have just left me in the Ring and thrown the damn thing off a cliff…!”

“It's so easy to be cruel, isn't it?” Ryou spoke, the calmness of his voice contrasting with Bakura's frantic whimpering. “I've always found it strange that Yugi got to know the Pharaoh so well while I've… barely gotten to know you. The real you.”

Ryou really wished Bakura would have a little more faith in him - and himself. He knew what he was doing, and he wasn't the kind of person to hold onto a grudge until it destroyed him.

Bakura glanced back up at his face, eyes shining with skepticism, even fear - but there was a trace of something brighter, something closer to hope. If not hope, then the smallest sign that he was at least trying to understand Ryou's optimism.

Perhaps that would be enough.

Ryou smiled.

“I’m willing to start over. How about you?”

…

Bakura glowered at a spot of orange rusted to the ceramic. No matter how much he scrubbed at it, it wouldn't come off. It seemed a better use of his time to just throw the plate away rather than bother with it.
With a huff, he tossed it into the garbage bag sitting on the floor and already filled to the brim. How was it possible one apartment could have this much junk in it?

Though Bakura knew a lot of it was his fault. An exhausted Ryou could hardly find the time to clean up, after all.

He dove into the stack of dishes once more. While he was busy gritting his frustration between his teeth as he worked, he nearly missed the sound of the front door opening and shutting. A presence moved behind him, but he didn't need to turn to see who it was.

He must have forgotten to lock the door when he had returned from a few errands. Damn.

“Never thought I'd see this…”

Bakura shoved his hands under the dishwater, trying not to think about the blood rushing to his face. Stupid Malik and that smug tone of his.

“You're the housekeeping now?”

“Paying rent,” Bakura grunted without looking at him, opting to go back to scrubbing filth from a bowl. Ignoring Malik wasn't going to work, but that wouldn't stop him from trying.

Footsteps moved up beside him. “Want some help?”

“No.”

He tried lose himself in what he was doing, but his mind kept drifting back to Malik until he was all he could think about. His hands slowed until he was doing nothing but staring blankly at the faucet.

“You don't have to do this alone,” Malik said, bumping his arm and startling him from his daze.

Bakura rolled his eyes. “They're dishes, Malik.”
“I’m not talking about the dishes,” Malik snorted. There was something heavy in his tone that finally drew Bakura’s gaze over to him. “I felt it too, after Battle City ended. Hell, I still feel it. I have to carry that guilt with me every day.”

“Who says I feel guilty?”

Bakura’s eyes fell on the garbage bag and he kicked it under the table and out of sight. He didn’t go back to washing dishes. In fact, all he could do was stare down at his hands.

“It’s a lot to process, I know. I can’t… fathom how long you’ve existed sometimes, but I still feel like I’ve known you forever,” Malik said. “Pain and hate… it’s been all of my life too, up until recently. I held onto my grudge so hard it was my only purpose, and without it, I felt lost.” He narrowed his eyes, taking a step closer. “So don’t avoid me, Bakura. I can see right through you.”

Bakura’s jaw was locked tight, the pit sitting between his ribs expanding. There was nothing he could hide from Malik, and that was the most terrifying thing.

“I’m…” Bakura pulled off his dish gloves and set them aside before turning to lean back against the counter. “… trying to see a reason for this.”

“A reason for what?”

“I’m sure Ryou already told you about my… situation.”

Malik reached up and poked the center of Bakura’s chest, right where the Millennium Ring used to rest. “Yeah, as far as I know, this isn’t a rental anymore.”

Bakura brushed his hand away, trying to ignore the warmth that spread through him without fail every time Malik touched him. With his soul properly sitting under Ryou’s flesh, the sensation was even more vivid.

“He’s a fool. You’re both fools for interfering,” he grumbled, wishing he had somewhere to retreat to. He had never realized how heavy the Ring had sat around his neck - he felt so light without it - yet he craved its darkness again. If he could bury himself inside the gold, then no one would have to
bother with him.

His lips peeled back in an angry grimace. He could hardly look at Malik, because all he saw was his own mistakes. His fingernails dug into his palms.

“I mean, I was so horrible to you, to both of you, and- fuck, at least yell at me or something! Tell me I'm a goddamn idiot!”

“Okay, you're a goddamn idiot. Happy?” Malik shrugged, nonplussed. “I don't know what sort of punishment you want from me, Bakura. You seem to be doing enough of it to yourself.”

“Nothing will be enough.” The tension drained from Bakura's body, his gaze falling to the kitchen tile. “He shouldn't have done this to himself. I can't… I can't exist like this. I've spent enough time dragging him down by the neck.” He chewed his lip, an almost imperceptible waver in his voice. He hated the way his throat tightened and his eyes stung. “He calls it a second chance but… there's nothing here for me.”

Malik had an oddly serene look on his face. “Are you sure about that?”

Bakura choked down the lump in his throat, covering it up with a scoff.

“I might not even be staying anyway. I know Yugi and the others are going to lay the Millennium Items and the Pharaoh to rest soon. When that time comes… who even knows what'll happen to me…?”

A sadness sat heavy in Malik's eyes, even as he tried to smile reassuringly. “Your village will finally be freed… Maybe you will go with them.”

“If I don't go straight into the jaws of Ammit first.” Bakura snorted, not missing the slight flinch from Malik. “… Besides, it's not where I belong.”

Malik's brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Like Ryou, they’d all be better off without me. I left their fate in the hands of a demon. I forgot their
names, their faces…I forgot my own name and my own face as well.” Bakura gave a ragged sigh. He had caused enough damage. If he could just take his village to their final resting place…that in itself would be a miracle. “I'm not the Thief King. I'm not the boy from Kul Elna. I can't even call myself the vessel Zorc thrust his will into anymore.”

His fingers dug uselessly against the front of his chest, curling into his shirt, searching for something he would never find. The Ring was in pieces, and that was how he felt - shattered.

“There isn't even any mention of my name in the records, is there…?” He stared down at the floor, gaze as blank as the tile. That was all he was now - just a pile of dust, crushed under history. “I'm…nothing.”

He closed his eyes, the silence that hung after his words only confirming it. Not even Malik had anything to say to that, it seemed.

A pair of hands seized his shoulders, forcing his eyes open again.

“It's true, the scriptures only detail the Pharaoh's passing. A ceremonial battle must take place in order for his spirit to find rest,” Malik said, directly meeting Bakura's gaze. “There's no such ritual in place for you, but…that doesn't mean you're nothing.”

He squeezed Bakura's shoulders a little tighter before he continued.

“I thought my life had ended in Battle City, but I was wrong. My brother told me there is only light in life…and I made it my new mission to chase that light. Your past coming crashing down around you isn't the end… it's a new beginning.”

Bakura's breathing hitched. A new beginning…?

“Maybe the Gods don't have a plan for you, but what if there doesn't have to be a plan, Bakura?” Malik gave his shoulders a small shake. “You always have a choice, don't you?”

Bakura swallowed when his own words were thrown back at him. It should have been hideously offensive - Malik's insistence that it was all so easy. He should have told him he was just being idealistic and childish, but his throat remained tight. He just stared at Malik's shirt as if the answer to everything would reveal itself there.
Malik’s hands slid from his shoulders as Bakura plopped down on the floor a moment later. He leaned back against the lower cupboards, shoving his face into his hands with a groan. This was all too much to think about.

“Gods, I just wanted to wash some damn dishes today…”

Malik gave a sheepish laugh, moving to take a seat beside Bakura.

“Like I said, you don’t have to do this alone, and you sure as hell don’t have to figure all this shit out today. I know I haven’t…”

....

“Shit!” Malik growled as his kart was blasted off of the side of the road by a green koopa shell. By the time he had been placed back on the stage, Ryou had already overlapped him and crossed the finish line. He slammed down the controller on the couch. “You're too good at this.”

Ryou flashed him one of his sugar sweet grins, unable to help but giggle. “You just started playing, to be fair.”

“I wish this game had motorcycles… then it would be a different story.” Malik was not pouting. He was absolutely not.

“I'm just glad I have someone to play with - well, you know, someone who doesn't share a body with me. It gets kind of boring always trying to beat the records…” Ryou sighed as the Double Dash menu came up on the screen after the results had finished.

“I think you just enjoy someone to wail on,” Malik snorted.

“I should teach you how to play Monster World sometime…” Ryou mused, and then rolled his eyes. “Actual Monster World, not that butchered thing Zorc made us play.”
“Is it all that different?”

“Well, you probably won't die if you play it.”

“'Probably'...?” Malik shook his head with a smirk.

Ryou went to set up another round. “So, you've really never played video games before?”

“Never had time to when I ran the Ghouls… the only game I devoted myself to was duel monsters.” Malik leaned back, letting his head rest against the couch cushion. “And I've had enough of that to last me a lifetime.”

“I haven't. Though that might be because I never got a chance to participate in any of the duels.” A sly note crept into Ryou's voice.

He didn't miss the way Malik shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Ryou frowned.

“... You know I'm just giving you a hard time. I really enjoy your company.”

He had only really known Malik as the leader of the Ghouls, or his unlikely partner in discovering the secrets of the Millennium Ring. Now he was getting to know Malik, the person who had been through just as much - if not more - than him. Who was just as lonely in the same ways, and could understand him in many others.

Ryou leaned forward, reaching for a box sitting on the coffee table. He plucked up a creampuff and popped it into his mouth.

“All the gifts might help a bit though~” He sang when he was done with it, licking a drop of cream from his fingertip. Malik managed to crack a smile.

“I enjoy your company too,” he admitted, but his smile didn't last for long. “Although I know anything I say will sound… dishonest.”
Ryou couldn’t fault him for thinking that way. It was an odd situation they had all been placed in after all. But he already knew how Malik felt about Bakura, and the two of them were definitely more bearable when they were open with each other.

“If you wanna talk to him, you only need to ask.”

For the past few hours Ryou had been distinctly aware of Bakura watching them both, but never pressing for control. It was almost aggravating - now that Ryou was more than willing to let him front, he stubbornly refused to take the opportunity?

You can't hide in there forever.

It was all too easy to shove Bakura to the forefront of their mind. There was barely even time for a struggle, Ryou filling their subconscious and leaving nowhere to run.

Bakura bristled, gripping the controller that he suddenly found in his hands, eyes bright with panic for a moment. He arranged himself into a casual position a second later, pointedly glancing away from Malik and muttering some choice words in Ryou’s direction.

Malik seemed just as shocked as Bakura had, and then he laughed. “Welcome back.”

Bakura snorted and directed his attention at the game in front of them.

“You can break the sound barrier driving a real motorcycle, but you're slower than a snail with a virtual go kart?”

Malik's eyes lidded in challenge. “Could still wipe the floor with you any day.”

Despite himself, Bakura grinned. “Wanna bet on that?”

They fell into silence broken only by cursing at each other as they let themselves get lost in the game - or tried to. Bakura was sure he wasn't the only one clenching the controller tighter than necessary, but he kept his eyes locked on the screen because it was easier than confronting the heaviness in the air. Soon he was barely thinking about the race, fingers mindlessly pressing buttons. He barely
noticed his kart fly off the track and grant Malik another win, his mind swallowed up in other matters entirely.

“You're both hopeless…” A voice groaned after a while. “I really thought he’d make a move.”

Bakura tensed. Ryou was still here? Why was he watching this?

What the hell are you going on about?

“I told both of you it was okay.”

Bakura's chest clenched, and it was suddenly harder to find a comfortable spot in his seat.

Ryou quickly went on, “I mean… everyone's anxious about what's going to happen next so I thought you would have jumped each other by now…”

“Wait, you told-!?” Bakura spoke out loud before he even realized it, heatedly rounding on Malik. “You knew about this?”

“What?” Malik squinted at his outburst, and it occurred to Bakura that he probably looked insane right now with half of the conversation being audible only to him.

“Nothing,” Bakura snapped, ducking his head to hide that he was burning cheek to ear. “Forget I said anything.”

Malik’s confused scowl deepened. “What are you two talking about? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong!” Bakura grit his teeth. Why did his host keep insisting on compromising his own self for him? “Why would you tell him that, Ryou?”

“Because I just…” Ryou deflated. “You don’t know how much time you have left and I wanted to…” He gave a sigh. “I thought it would make you both happy.”

Bakura's eyes widened, lifting his head as Ryou unwittingly dragged the storm raging inside his mind out into the open. He forced a swallow, setting the controller down and not touching it again.
It frustrated him to no end that Ryou always tried so hard for him, or that Malik made it sound so easy to just... pick himself up and carry on. It had been a week since they had defeated Zorc, and Bakura *was* trying - he had to try because there was nothing else, because he didn't want to see either of them suffer for him again.

But another voice spoke that it would all be ripped away any day now, so it didn't matter in the end.

And that, for some inexplicable reason, left a gaping hole in his chest.

“Bakura?”

Malik sounded genuinely concerned now. Bakura turned his gaze on him, but it was like he was looking through him instead of at him. Like he was as intangible as Bakura felt.

Ryou's flesh housed him better now without the Ring forcing him to act as a medium. There was *life* racing through his blood, his senses sharper than ever, but each breath he pulled into his lungs still felt foreign. Existing, but not belonging.

It wasn't fair to any of them.

Was this how the Pharaoh felt?

“Seriously, you're freaking me out right now.”

Bakura blinked out of his daze when fingers brushed his cheek. He shivered despite the warmth of Malik's palm, leaning into it without thinking but not bothering to pull away when he realized what he was doing. Malik silently watched him, his fingers twitching as if he wanted to reach further forward, but he let his hand remain where it was.

Bakura's blood raced even faster when he met Malik's gaze, something desperate snapping within him.
“He told you it was okay,” Bakura heard himself murmur. “Why are you hesitating?”

Understanding seemed to slide into place behind Malik's eyes. The game completely forgotten, his weight shifted forwards as his hand slid to the back of Bakura's head, cradling it as he pressed him down against the couch.

Bakura wholly anticipated the kiss this time, but there was something very different about it. It wasn't one of triumph or victory; there was a frantic quality to the way their mouths slid together, and each pull of their lips had the pressure around Bakura's heart tightening.

Why is this so painful?

He clutched at Malik's shoulders, heat sparking through him. He wanted to get lost in it, but all of Malik's warmth and light only seemed to highlight what he couldn't have.

Why does this feel like goodbye?

Malik's fingers threaded in Bakura's hair, tugging his head back as his lips met his throat instead. He didn't leave marks this time, but it was good all the same. Bakura's voice was ragged as he sighed, his hands finding their way under the collar of Malik's shirt, fingers splaying against his burning skin. He felt along his scars, palms smoothing across the wings, and Malik answered him with a hazy groan.

It was less arousal motivating them and more the desire to make this something… more, even though it never could be. Malik briefly pulled back to peel off his shirt, and Bakura did the same, their arms wrapping around each other and pressing their bodies close. It was clumsy, and there was probably some carnal urge they wanted to scratch out of their systems, but Bakura found he could do nothing but breathe when their chests were flush against other, each heartbeat pronounced against their ribs. Soon Bakura was baring his teeth in frustration, a thinly disguised hitch of air catching in his throat.

Do I want this to be goodbye?

Judging by the way Malik buried his face against Bakura's shoulder in return, he didn't have an answer for him either.

“I'm selfish,” Bakura heard himself say. He didn't want to torture Malik like this, or make it harder on
both of them, but he couldn't bring himself to pull away either.

“No,” Malik squeezed him tighter, the rueful smile audible in his voice. “I'm selfish too.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Aaaand this is the end. Thank you to everyone for all the support. It has been a Ride writing this and I'm so glad to see everyone loves these shitheads as much as I do!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Time always seemed to fly when he was around Bakura.

Nothing truly changed, aside from the fact that they weren't plotting to destroy the Pharaoh anymore. They still occupied themselves with frivolous things - videogames, arcades, new food - and Malik even managed to drag Bakura to the aquarium one more time, without it ending in disaster.

In retrospect, he supposed neither of them wanted it to be different. If they acknowledged that time was running out, that made the air seem heavier, so they didn't.

Malik let the dream play out, let a distance remain between their hearts. It was the same spot they had started in, ending where it began. There couldn't be finality if they only moved in a circle.

But any dream would be awoken from. It felt like days, but it was weeks later that they were headed back to Egypt, Yugi's group and all. It was bittersweet stepping into the Cairo airport, Malik glancing around until he spotted his two siblings waiting for him.

“Isis! Rishid!” His eyes lit up as he ran towards the two, breaking away from the group.

Isis saw him first, and then Rishid, and the way they looked at him made Malik's heart twist in his chest.

“Malik…!” Isis wrapped her arms around him and Malik clung to her so tightly he didn't want to let go.

Even though it was a self imposed exile that had driven him away from Egypt, Malik never realized how much he missed them both until he was faced with them again.
“I have so much to tell you,” he said as he reluctantly pulled back.

“Don't do that again, brother,” Isis chided with worry weighing down her expression, her hands squeezing his shoulders. “You just ran off with no warning… you hardly kept in contact with us…”

“That was beyond reckless, Malik.” Rishid added on, and Malik felt his heart plunge deeper into his chest. His brother held himself at a distance, not rushing forward to meet him like Isis had, either out of respect or the fear of breaking from his role that their father had drilled into his head. Malik had no patience for it right now and threw his arms around Rishid’s waist. After a tense of muscles, Rishid let his arms fall around Malik in return.

“I told you to trust me, didn't I?” Malik offered a tentative smile, stepping back as he heard the others catching up to him. “I helped the Pharaoh recover his name.”

He conveniently left out the part where he had agreed to help Bakura with his plans first.

“And… there's something else too.”

Yugi and the rest of them smiled and laughed as they greeted Isis and Rishid, but there was one straggler at the edge of the group. Ryou had been active on the plane, chatting with his friends and napping for most of the journey, but the look in his eyes now told Malik he wasn't the one present anymore.

Judging by the way Bakura scowled and squinted up at the bright fluorescent lighting, he had been unceremoniously thrust into control.

Isis seemed to notice something amiss when her sights fell on him. Her pleasant demeanor evaporated immediately, eyes becoming cold as she narrowed them.

“You.”

“He's fine.” Malik stepped in when he saw Rishid's expression darken as well. “Trust me.”
His siblings looked at him with immense skepticism, and he couldn’t exactly blame them for it either. Then Yugi, of all people, spoke up.

“When it came down to it, he helped us!”

Bakura bristled, lip curling in Yugi’s direction. He gave a disgusted huff when Yugi beamed at him in return.

“This is just slander…”

Isis frowned, but both her and Rishid’s hackles lowered - albeit slowly.

“How is this possible?” She said, scrutinizing him closely. Perhaps she noticed that the Millennium Ring was nowhere to be found. “What became of the original Bakura?”

Bakura crossed his arms, glancing away with a snort. Malik wasn’t fooled, well aware of how sensitive a subject it was for him. “We share this body now.”

Isis’ gaze remained cold, yet thoughtful as she studied the former spirit. She looked as if she wanted to argue, but with everyone else clearly unalarmed by Bakura’s presence, there seemed to be little reason to.

“I suppose we shall see who you really are very soon.”

Bakura narrowed his eyes.

“What do you mean by that?”

She turned away from him to address the rest of the group.

“We’re leaving for the Shrine of the Underworld today. We’ll be taking a boat through the Nile to reach Deir el-Medina.”
Bakura's jaw tightened and he glanced away.

Malik frowned. This whole process was going to be a torturous slog. He wasn't even sure what he was feeling right now - if anything at all - but he didn't like it. They still had to explain the ceremonial battle and all it would entail to the Pharaoh and his friends.

“It was once known as Set Ma’at, the Place of Truth,” Isis noted before her sights fell on Yugi in particular. “The Pharaoh's fate will be revealed there as well.”

…

“I mean, I think you owe them that much after everything.”

Bakura gripped the railing as he stared into the churning waters of the Nile below. Everyone seemed to be coping with what was to come tomorrow in their own way. Yugi and the Pharaoh were privately assembling their decks for what could be their final duel. Malik was probably off indulging in some fine wine. And Bakura was contemplating flinging himself overboard - the only thing stopping him was the fact this body wasn’t just his own.

Not knowing was the worst part. Would he be struck down before the gate? Would his soul be judged and cast into oblivion? Would he never see his family again?

Or would he be given the chance to go with them and be laid to rest? Somehow, that was even more unthinkable, and the dark pit in his chest swelled. The thought of rest should have brought him relief, but it only made him grow heavier.

On top of it all, Ryou wouldn't stop bothering him about a certain matter. Everything made nausea rise up in Bakura's throat, and he struggled not to empty the contents of Ryou's stomach over the railing.

“I don't want to be interrogated,” he ground out.

“They just want to talk to you - you, not the Spirit of the Ring always terrorizing them. Malik will be there too.” Ryou's voice was so soft, yet it was like a sledgehammer against his patience. “Pretty
Bakura snarled and shoved himself away from the railing. “If it'll get you to stop pestering me.”

He heard the smile in Ryou’s voice as he chirped his approval, but chose to ignore it for now. Bakura didn't even give himself the chance to think about what he was doing as he headed inside. He soon found himself face to face with the door of the lounging area and pulled it open with more force than necessary.

Half a dozen pairs of eyes turned in his direction and Bakura froze. Whatever chatter had been going on abruptly ceased, leaving the air so quiet and still, a pin could have been heard dropping.

Bakura's eyes fell on the faces of each of Yugi's friends, their expressions ranging from neutral to vague concern. Malik was there too, like Ryou had promised, and he was the only one who didn't look perturbed. In fact, his posture was casual and reclined like he owned the place - a king in his natural habitat. He smirked against the rim of his wine glass when Bakura entered.

Bakura had the mind to turn around and walk right back out. Their stares got under his skin in a way they never had before. It had been so easy to impersonate Ryou in the past, but he wasn't impersonating anyone right now. He was just… transparent for them all to see. There was no where he could hide anymore.

But he wasn't a coward either.

If no one was going to speak, he supposed he had the first word. He raised his hand and shot them all with his finger gun.

“Yo.”

The silence answered him. There were a few blinks, and a raised brow from Malik. Bakura dropped his hand.

“So, let's just get the awkwardness out of the way. Yes, I was a jackass. Yes, I shouldn't have let Zorc nearly sink the world into oblivion. No, I do not want to be friends with any of you and no, I don't want to be in this room any longer.”
With that, he spun on his heel and reached for the door again.

“Oh, Bakura~” Malik's sing-song voice drifted through the air. Bakura came to a grating halt in his tracks.

“I despise you, Ishtar.” He grit his teeth as he turned back around to face them.

“Are you really the spirit from the Millennium Ring?” Anzu was the first one to break the tension, stepping forward with a cautious, yet curious air.

“And here I was thinking all your tongues had been stolen…” Bakura muttered before answering seriously. “As much as the Pharaoh is the spirit from the Millennium Puzzle.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and glanced out the nearby window. What was the point of this? To see who could make the other more uncomfortable? Ryou was probably getting a huge kick out of this.

“I know none of you would believe my change of heart or whatever you want to call it, but-”

“I believe you.”

Everyone’s attention snapped over to Yugi, but it wasn’t Yugi that had spoken.

Bakura’s hands slipped back out of his pockets, clenching out of habit. He had to make a conscious effort to let the tension ebb away. They weren’t fighting. The war had ended long before most of the people in this room had been born.

“Pharaoh.” He tilted his head in consideration. “No, your name is Atem, isn't it?”

“And you’re that same thief from thousands of years ago, Bakura.” Atem stepped forward so he stood merely a few feet across from him.
It still surprised Bakura how wrong it felt - to be here without fighting, to speak as if a trail of blood didn’t bind them both at the necks. Could such an existence even be a reality?

Bakura shrugged.

“Relatively.”

Atem raised a brow. “You don't think so?”

“I'm as much the Thief King as you are a Pharaoh. They're meaningless titles now.”

Bakura didn’t think much of the way his own voice had slipped into an older tongue, one he and the Pharaoh had spoken thousands of years ago.

“They're not meaningless.” Atem shook his head, mirroring his switch in language. Even though the people surrounding them couldn’t understand, save for Malik, they all watched intently. “They’re pieces of the past. If we had nothing from our history to cling to, we never would have found ourselves again.”

“There was never much to find.” Bakura's voice rang hollow. “Just ashes.”

“You found them.” Atem pointed out, the corner of his lips twitching up. “You saved us. If you hadn't held off Zorc, we would have all been done for.”

Bakura let out a snort, ignoring the odd feeling in his chest. Gods, he hated that Atem had put it like that. “I wasn't doing it for you.”

Perhaps there were people in this room he had been thinking of when he flung himself headlong into battle, however.

“But you were doing it for someone.” Atem's smile was fleeting, soon disappearing under the weight of the sorrow in his eyes. He appeared deep in thought for several long moments, like he was truly considering the perspective outside of his palace. It was the same look Bakura had seen when they had picked over the ruins of his village. “Perhaps my sense of justice was… narrow. I can't help but
think if I had been a better king, I could have prevented…”

Bakura's throat tightened, his teeth ground tight behind his lips.

Maybe if Atem hadn't been raised on ignorance and crushing responsibility since birth. Maybe if there was any feasible way a child could have stopped a raid by hundreds of trained soldiers and magicians. Maybe if the darkness hadn't claimed Bakura's soul long before Atem had known he even existed.

Then they could have pretended that this situation was anything other than unwinnable for both of them.

“You couldn't have.” Bakura knew that now. Perhaps he had always known.

“That's just it, isn't it? The past can't truly be changed.” Atem sounded distant as he spoke. “But I can make sure you and your village finds the peace my uncle deprived Kul Elna of.”

Bakura squinted at Atem addressing him specifically in that promise. The kingdom may have taken Bakura's village, but Bakura had taken Atem's home away in return.

“You don't owe me anything.”

Atem shook his head. Nearly everyone in the room tensed as he stepped forward, reaching out and resting a palm on Bakura's shoulder. “I'm a king to my people - that means all of my people.”

Bakura's gaze fell to the floor. He didn't have the energy to push Atem's hand away - he didn't even think he wanted to.

“Perhaps things could have been… different between us,” he said before he could stop himself, unsure of why he wanted to voice such a painful train of thought. Maybe it was just the closest he could get to an apology - not that an apology would have been worth anything by now.

In another reality, there wouldn't have been a massacre, there wouldn't have been a war, and his soul wouldn't have fallen to darkness. In another reality, maybe even despite the social and political
barriers dividing them both… Bakura could have been the one standing amidst his friends.

But that wasn't the reality they lived in.

Judging by the expression on Atem's face, he knew that as well as Bakura did. His hand gradually slid from Bakura's shoulder and fell back to his side.

“Perhaps.”

…

Bakura must have stood for a solid ten minutes outside Malik's door. He was glad no one came by, but he was even more glad Ryou's mind was asleep right now. He wouldn't be hearing the end of it otherwise.

He turned to step away from the door, rolled his eyes at himself for being fucking ridiculous, and then finally turned back to grab the handle. He didn't bother knocking.

Malik was laying in bed with a bright square of moonlight falling over his body. He had his arms folded behind his head, eyes open as he gazed up at the ceiling in apparent thought. When the door opened, his eyes darted over to Bakura.

“Hope I'm not interrupting something…” Bakura snorted.

Malik's brows shot up his forehead. “You’d know if you were.”

“Can't sleep?” Bakura shut the door behind him and slunk closer to the bed.

“No, just betting on how long it would take you to open the door.”

Bakura froze, and Malik laughed at the look on his face.
“There's no way you heard-!”

“I didn't.” Malik winked. “Don't worry, you're not getting sloppy, Thief King, just a little predictable.”

Bakura's face burned, caught between being angry and being flustered.

“Asshole,” he hissed, swirling around and reaching for the door again. There was a shuffle as Malik pushed himself out of bed and crossed the room, a pair of arms encircling his shoulders from behind.

“Hey, you can't go anywhere yet,” Malik murmured into his ear. Bakura felt the words hum in Malik's chest, which was pressed flush against his back. He was sure Malik could feel the pounding of his heart against the back of his ribcage in return.

Bakura's arms fell limp at his sides, neither reaching up to hold Malik's or pushing him away. His blank gaze was trained on the floor.

He thought coming here would make it easier somehow. He knew he couldn't just… leave things the way they were, but now that he was here, he found he had nothing to say.

He heard Malik swallow like he was getting ready to fill the silence for them.

“Bakura,” there was something about the way Malik said that that had panic shooting through Bakura. “I…”

“Don't.”

Bakura squeezed his eyes shut. Why did Malik always have to make things so difficult?

Malik's arms slackened, hands moving to either shoulder as Bakura turned to face him. “You don't know what I'm going to say.”

“Yes I do.” Bakura peered up his face with a thin smile. “Say something that isn't cliche.”
“That's not fair and you know it.” Malik frowned, fingers digging against Bakura's shoulders. He bit his lip as if contemplating playing by Bakura's rules, a heavy sigh falling from him. “I just want you to know that whatever happens...”

Bakura held his breath as Malik's hand travelled upwards to cup his cheek, and his eyes seemed to fall shut of their own accord.

“You'll always have a place with me. I know I can't replace what you lost but…” Malik leaned forward until his forehead was pressed against Bakura's, his voice little more than a whisper, like he was afraid to speak the words and all the vulnerability they encompassed into existence. “You're more than a friend to me and, if you'll let me… I'll consider you a part of my family.”

A slight tremble ran through Bakura, his voice wavering. How could Malik still offer this to him? How could Malik still want him?

“I don't deserve-”

Malik tilted his head, cutting off Bakura's words with a press of his lips, his mouth finding the shape of Bakura's. He held the kiss until Bakura couldn't find it in him to fuss anymore.

“Shut up.” Malik breathed raggedly as he pulled back. “I know what happened and I forgive you. We don't know how much time we have left so why can't you just let me-!”

He grit his teeth, wrapping his arms around Bakura so he could hug him properly this time, burying his face against his shoulder.

“I don't want to live in the dark of the past anymore. I want to step into the light of the future.” He murmured against his ear, a desperate and pleading note entering his voice. “Come with me, Bakura.”

In his numb state of shock, Bakura's arms automatically moved up to return the embrace, feeling the indentations of the scars through the thin fabric of Malik's shirt. Answering him verbally seemed so far away, and it was much easier to lose himself in how warm Malik felt.
The hug could have gone on forever, but it ended far too soon. Malik stepped away, eyes widening as he remembered something.

“Oh, there's something I've been meaning to show you.”

Bakura blinked, disappointed that Malik moved away from him, but grateful for the shift in topic. He didn't know how much longer he could have lingered on the subject before cracking.

Malik pulled an object off of the nearby desk - a black portfolio bound by string. He brought it over to his bed, climbing on and setting it down. Taking the hint, Bakura moved to sit next to him, a foot of space between their bodies, but Malik didn't appear to have that much patience tonight and jerked him closer by the waist.

Bakura nearly spilled onto Malik's lap, adjusting so he could lean against his shoulder and shooting him an irritated glance - or as close as irritated as he could get right now. Malik just smiled and reached down to unwind the string.

He pulled open the binder and a bunch of papers nearly spilled out. It was script, pages and pages of it. Most of it looked like it had been written recently, but there were some scraps clearly worn by time. Bakura's brows furrowed as his eyes fell on a familiar drawing and he reached down to pick it up.

It was Ryou's doodle, the one he had sketched for Malik down in the tombs. It was one of the only visual depictions of the Thief King that existed.

“What is all this…?”

“It's… you,” Malik said, his hand giving Bakura's hip a squeeze where it still rested on his waist. “Well, it's your history. Your true history. The story of Kul Elna and the Thief King. I wanted to have it recorded - properly. It deserves to be in the light, not buried.”

Bakura's gaze found his face again, softening as his limbs felt weak. How many times was Malik going to do this to him tonight?

“Malik…” He breathed, collapsing into Malik's chest because he didn't know what else to say or do. He felt Malik's smile against the top of his head.
“I wrote what I could about the creation of the Millennium Items and revised the initial attack on the Pharaoh's court.” He spared an arm to close the portfolio again and place it on the desk so they had room to lay down. It took a bit of shifting for them to find a comfortable position, Bakura laying on his side and tucked under Malik's chin. “Obviously it's still incomplete because it's not my story to tell. It's yours.”

Bakura drew back slightly. With the moon at Malik's back, he couldn't help but admire the way the pale light outlined his shape.

“But... not even I remember everything,” his voice was a quiet mumble. It was the finer details that escaped him - the feel of wind through his hair and sun on his skin, the names of his friends and family, the sound of his mother's voice - those were always the hardest to hold onto.

“But you've recovered so much.” There was that same flicker of childlike optimism in Malik's eyes. How could he always make it sound so simple? “Who's to say you won't eventually remember it all?”

…

Malik awoke to sunlight pressing in on his eyelids. He gave a sleepy mumble as he nestled closer to the source of warmth at his side, lying there for a few more minutes as sense slowly begun to creep back into his mind.

He opened his eyes, blinking when he discovered it wasn't Bakura he was laying beside; his features were too soft for it to be.

Ryou peered up at him as he stirred to wakefulness as well - and then he yawned and rolled over, pulling the covers up higher on his body. He paid Malik as much attention as he would the blankets, or the walls, or the very air itself. Malik felt a twitch of a smirk at the corner of his lips.

“We have to get up.”

Ryou groaned.
Malik sighed. He couldn’t say he didn’t share the same sentiments. “Not excited for the big day?”

There was a pause, and then Ryou tilted his head back towards him.

“Are you?”

A deep frown set into Malik’s features. This was the day everything could be changed forever - not just when it came to Bakura, but also with the matter of Yugi and the Pharaoh. He never thought he’d be torn like this.

And even if the Pharaoh’s soul was allowed to pass on, did that really guarantee Malik his freedom? He still carried these scars no matter the outcome, after all.

He swallowed hard, trying not to think about it. His guts were in enough of a twist as it was.

“I thought I would be for the Pharaoh's departure, but…”

Ryou pushed himself into a sitting position, his eyes meeting Malik’s. “We can't keep him if he really wants to go.”

They weren’t talking about the Pharaoh anymore.

“I know that.” Malik glanced away, a bittersweet smile crossing his face. “I'll be thrilled for him if he can be with his village again.”

*It’s where he belongs.*

Malik couldn’t be selfish - he knew he couldn’t - but it still felt like their time was too short. The past few weeks had brought him a sense of peace he had never known before, and he thought that maybe Bakura was starting to feel the same. Even Ryou didn’t seem to mind getting to know the former spirit for who he truly was, and they had been gradually working out a pattern that made occupying their body almost seamless.
Ryou give a ragged sigh, bringing Malik’s attention back over to him.

“At the same time… I hope he realizes what he has here.” Ryou was frowning down at his hands, troubled on a level Malik could understand. Sadness gave his eyes a softer quality as he continued, but his words were touched with bitterness. “Not everyone gets a second chance like this. I just hope he doesn’t…” Ryou bit his lip. “Well, I know how the weighing of the heart works.”

Malik gave a solemn nod. It wasn’t just a rite the Pharaoh had to go through; every soul had to have their heart weighed before they could pass into the afterlife. Even if Yugi succeeded in laying Atem’s soul to rest, this fate would await the Pharaoh - and Bakura as well.

If Bakura’s heart couldn’t balance against Ma’at’s feather, if it was still weighed down by darkness, then all he would see beyond the gate were the jaws of Ammit. The second death.

And there really would be no saving him again.

…

The morning wore into the afternoon as everyone got ready, Atem and Yugi making the final tweaks to their decks. It was only after they made the walk to Deir el-Medina that Ryou allowed Bakura to slip back under his skin.

“This is your village. You should be present for this.”

Bakura felt the dirt crunch under his feet as he drew to a stop. This place was filled with people he didn't recognize, new housing had been built, and children played along the roads. Despite how lively the air was, it couldn't have rang more empty.

“It's not my village anymore. There's nothing that even remotely resembles Kul Elna here,” he thought back, surveying his surroundings in silence. He could see past it all to the pile of sand and ash this place truly was.

He began to walk again, catching up with Malik who had paused to wait for him. As the group rounded a corner, his eyes fell on the only thing that had endured over thousands of years.
“... Except *that* of course.”

The stairwell was open and waiting for them, like the earth wanted to swallow them up. Bakura and Malik lagged behind the group as they all made the descent, torches lighting their path. Isis’ voice sounded from up ahead as she explained the whole ceremonial process, but it was all just words to Bakura. Judging by Malik's expression, he wasn't really listening either.

There were a gaggle of tombkeepers waiting at the bottom, all bowed as they addressed the Pharaoh. They led him over to the altar, and Bakura tensed as his eyes fell on the stone tablet again.

Over a decade of close proximity to that thing, listening to *that voice* poison his mind. There was no voice now, but the energy that radiated off of it was still so intense. He wondered if anyone else here could feel it like he could.

“My Pharaoh, place the Millennium Items inside the tablet,” Isis instructed.

Atem nodded, unzipping the duffel bag he had brought with him. He made his way up the steps and began to place each Item into its appropriate slot - Ankh, Scales, Tauk, Eye, Rod. When there were only two empty spaces remaining, he turned to Bakura.

Bakura heaved a sigh and stepped forward, opening his own bag as he went. He withdrew the sack that Ryou had placed the Millennium Ring inside after he was done repairing it, but Bakura hadn't actually seen the repair job until now.

He gingerly withdrew the gold and held it up in his hands.

“That's just unsightly…”

It was in one piece again… relatively. The split across the middle was held together with some sort of adhesive and the tines were tied together, but it looked like it could fall apart again at any moment.

“*Hey, I did the best I could…*”

“It'll have to do.” Bakura held it by its loop towards the Pharaoh. He knew Ryou had collected every
bit of the gold, leaving no piece behind, so the Ring should still work for the ceremony. It had to.

After exchanging a wary glance with him, Atem took the Ring and laid it down into its proper spot. Rather miraculously, it fit without issue.

Bakura huffed a snort. He supposed his job was done, but it was still surreal to him that he was working with the Pharaoh to open the gate. He made his way back down the steps, but a jolt shot through his body by the time he reached the bottom.

His eyes widened as the strange, static-like current spread through him and he whirled back around. Atem had froze mid way through removing the Puzzle from around his neck, sensing the apparent disturbance as well. He lowered his arms and met Bakura's gaze with equal bewilderment.

Something glinted ahead, catching Bakura's attention. The eye engraved over the wall ahead of both of them was glowing, but that shouldn't have been possible. Atem hadn't finished placing the Millennium Items yet.

“What is this…?” Bakura uttered, his hands shaking. It was growing harder to breathe, harder to feel the air passing through his lungs or the shock trembling through his nerves. That eye was looking through him, turning him transparent.

“What the hell is this…?”

There were rapid footfalls from behind before Malik appeared at his side.

“What Bakura, what's wrong?”

Could Malik not see or feel it? The energy in the room felt like it was pressing on him from all sides. Bakura struggled to hold himself up. He could feel the stares of everyone else at his back and it made him grit his teeth.

“I don't know.”

Malik raised a brow.
“You didn't forget to eat again, did you?”

“No!” Bakura snapped, able to momentarily ignore his own dizzy spell to be infuriated at the suggestion. “I… I just…”

All at once, his strength left him, sights dimming as he toppled over, but the darkness consumed him before he hit the ground.

…

“What just happened?!”

“What's going on?”

“Are they okay?”

Voices slowly filtered back into his mind. Bakura groaned low in his throat, the cold stone floor pressing into his cheek. A pair of hands were at his shoulders, giving them a slight shake.

“Bakura…?”

That could only be Malik. Bakura's eyes began to flutter open, catching something red through the crack in his vision. He felt… off, not in the disoriented way he had before, but in a more foreign way. His body… there was something wrong with it.

And he didn't figure out what until he saw Ryou's face across from him.

Bakura's eyes shot all the way open, gaze falling on his hands as he pushed himself up. They were dark, almost obscured by the red cloak falling down his arms.

“What…?” He felt dizzy all over again. “Why am I…?”
Was this real? He could feel Malik's touch. He was solid. He reached up to map his own face with his fingertips, feeling the indents of the scar cutting down his right eye. The room was dead silent, but he couldn't even think about anyone else's reactions right now, not even Malik's.

Jonouchi and Honda were helping Ryou sit up as he rubbed his head. Ryou was looking at him with just as much surprise.

“I… I didn’t think this would happen.”

Bakura struggled to push himself back to his feet. “Ryou, what the hell?”

Ryou got up as well, surveying Bakura up and down. He brought a finger to his chin contemplatively, perhaps not as taken aback as the others by having the actual King of Thieves standing in front of him so suddenly. “I guess this is what happens when you revive a spirit…”

“Revived-?” Bakura wasn't sure what to say. “That isn't possible…!”

“Wait…” Ryou squinted. “You thought that all this time you were still dead? I told you I would share my life with you, didn't I?” His voice softened. “I brought you back the same way I did myself after that first game of Monster World.”

Perhaps Bakura had known the whole time, but his but he didn't want to believe it. A part of him still consciously wanted to deny it, and it must have shown all over his face because Ryou gave a sigh.

“There's something I want to check…” Ryou stepped forward, and Bakura was drawn towards him for some reason he couldn't explain. Ryou reached out with one arm, and Bakura mirrored him, clasping each others wrists with their hands. “You can feel that, can't you?”

Bakura could sense the connection even before he felt their pulses thudding in tandem. He understood then - they hadn't been truly divided, and he was still a part of Ryou. It must have been some trick of the shadow magic still heavy in the chamber.

Malik moved between them, pressing his fingers to the pulse points on both of their wrists so he could see it for himself. His brows shot up his forehead.
“Well, would you look at that. They're beating at the same time…”

Ryou nodded, a touch of excitement lighting up his eyes. “It’s kind of cool.”

Jonouchi scowled as it was made clear to the rest of the group what was going on. “Only you would find that cool…”

“The Eye of Wdjat revealed the truth: a body with two souls. One person, but two shadows.” Isis recovered much more quickly than the rest of them, though her guarded, yet thoughtful gaze remained on Bakura for a moment longer. She soon directed her attention back to Atem. “The Pharaoh and Yugi must face each other now.”

“Er… right.” Ryou gave a nervous laugh as he released Bakura's arm, stepping aside with a small bow. “Sorry for interrupting!”

With the spotlight shifted off of the anomaly, Atem stepped up to the tablet after placing the Puzzle inside. Bakura’s eyes widened as one body became two before the Eye of Wdjat. Yugi and the Pharaoh exchanged no words, moving up the altar to face their final trial together.

“Oh, so he doesn't take an embarrassing tumble when his soul gets split apart…” Bakura sourly noted under his breath. Did that have something to do with Atem’s soul still being tied to the Millennium Puzzle?

A heavy air settled over the room as the ceremonial duel went underway, but Bakura and Malik were detached from it all. A numbness settled over Bakura as he slunk to the back of the group with Malik, the silence between them thicker than anything else. Bakura could feel Malik's gaze on him as they stepped behind a pillar. It wasn't like they were missing any of the duel - the play by play was still very audible to them, thanks to Yugi's friends, but it all became white noise.

“I'm a… shadow?” Bakura said, voice blank as he stared down at his hands. “What is this? Some sort of half existence…?”

Was it even permanent? Yugi and the Pharaoh had been split apart in a similar fashion, but only one of them would be walking away from that altar.
Malik’s hands entered his vision, clasping both of his hands tightly and startling Bakura out of the dark haze that had begun to close over his mind.

“I don’t care what you are. You breathe and you have a heartbeat and I can actually touch you—” Malik cut himself off with a breathless laugh.

Bakura was forced to look up as one of Malik’s hands cupped his cheek, feeling his breathing still when he saw the intensity in Malik’s eyes.

“You’re still that same asshole who waltzed into my life and made me forget what it was like to be a prisoner,” Malik said as he wrapped both arms around him, Bakura’s back bumping against the pillar. They held each other until some development in the duel going on ahead of them got everyone excited.

Malik slid away, but his hand still held Bakura’s as he stepped out from behind the pillar. Everyone was making a fuss over Atem nearly taking out Yugi in one of his plays, but it was a false alarm. They were neck and neck.

Bakura felt his hand squeezed and glanced over at Malik, who wore such a tense expression.

“Now we have to wait and see if Yugi will defeat the Pharaoh and open the door…” Malik spoke in a low voice, and Bakura grimaced.

This was going to be a long duel.

…

Yugi ended up delivering the final blow, sealing away Atem's Osiris and leaving him defenseless. Whether conscious of it or not, everyone knew this was how it had to be if both Yugi and Atem wanted to move forward.

Malik wasn't all that surprised. He had seen Yugi's potential in their tag duel against Zorc, and knew he shouldn't be underestimated as a mere ‘vessel' of the Pharaoh's. He grimaced as he watched Atem step over to Yugi, who had collapsed in tears at the thought of losing someone so dear to him.
Malik unconsciously squeezed Bakura’s hand tighter.

Bakura automatically squeezed back, his gaze trained on Atem as the Pharaoh had to pull away and step up to the gate. With Isis’ instruction, he spoke his name and the shrine gave a near violent shudder.

The wall split down the middle, light seeping through the crack and filling the chamber with an otherworldly glow. It soon became so blinding it was difficult to look at.

Before Atem could do anything, another disturbance trembled through the air. Everyone's attention was drawn over to where the Millennium Items rested, the stone beginning to splinter and break apart as mist began to rise into the air.

And then the wailing began - the haunting sound that had solidified this place as home to Bakura for years, the screams that motivated him to find justice for his people. It sent chills up his spine, and made nearly everyone else in the room reel back in shock and horror.

Like a dam breaking, shape after melted shape pulled itself from the stone, every imprisoned soul pouring into the light. Atem watched in stunned awe as they flew over and around him, each of them quieting as they passed into the afterlife. The moment they crossed the veil, their vaguely humanoid, ghostly forms transformed into the silhouettes of villagers, young and old, men and women and children, walking into the endless realm.

It fell all too quiet as the ninety ninth soul passed on. Something broke in Bakura's chest as he stared at their backs disappearing into the light, and he lurched forward. He planted his foot on the first step that led up to the gate, but his weight caught and dragged back a little - his and Malik's hands were still clasped tightly.

Bakura turned to face him, hardly able to breathe let alone speak. Malik's eyes were wide, and then his composure gave and his features softened out with a resigned smile. His hand squeezed tighter for a moment, and then his grip slackened bit by bit, until only their fingers were touching.

“I love you, Bakura.” He gave a small, sweet sounding chuckle. “Had to say it at least once.”

Bakura bit his lip so hard it nearly drew blood, Malik's image growing blurry as his hand trembled. He wanted to curse and yell at him for making this so much harder than it had to be, but he couldn't find it in him to use his voice. If he let the words escape, he would be torn even harder between two
Their fingers slid away, and Bakura squeezed his eyes shut as he turned, swallowing the sob in his chest. He dashed up the few steps, opening his eyes to the endless light before him.

He couldn't look back, not even for a moment. He couldn't look back, but each step forward felt wrong. He couldn't look back, but there was so much to weigh his heart down, turning his body to lead.

He peered into the endless space again. All of his people had disappeared by now and it was just an endless sea of white. The more he looked at it, the more it seemed like it was waiting to swallow him up.

He stopped.

There was a spot of grey ahead of him, a shape moving back through the haze of light. As it drew closer, the silhouette of a woman gradually became visible. She stepped out of the gate, winking at the Pharaoh as she passed him. The smirk that spread across her face was more familiar than it had any right to be.

Bakura's heart rioted in his chest as she turned her pale eyes on him. All of her was washed out as she stepped up to him, her form shimmering and translucent. Her smirk evened out into a gentle smile, framed by her ghostly white hair.

Bakura trembled, and it all seemed to come crashing down right there. It didn't matter that everyone was watching - as far as he was concerned, no one else existed - he couldn't have pretended to be strong, not in that moment.

His knees hit the stone and his hands soon followed, his head hanging as the tears finally spilled over and splashed to the floor beneath him. He was pulled open, nothing left to hide behind.

“Mother…!”

“Stand up, my Bakura.” The woman's voice was calm, her eyes heavy but her smile unwavering.
“I don’t deserve your forgiveness…!” He protested, scrubbing his face with his sleeve before slowly pressing back to his feet. “I… I don’t even remember your name!”

“Sati.” She offered with a small chuckle, but her face soon grew somber again. She reached forward to rest her palm on his shoulder, but she couldn't truly touch him. All he felt was a brush of cold air. “Bakura… you’ve carried our village on your shoulders through life and through death. It’s not a burden I want to see you take into the fields.”

Bakura sucked in a sharp hitch of air. He had never heard it put like that before. No matter how much time had passed, no matter how much of his mind he had lost, no matter how much Zorc twisted his motives, his village had always been under it all. They had never left him, occupying a space in his heart so dense Zorc hadn't been able to touch it.

And that was why it all abruptly seemed so clear.

You have to let them go.

Sati’s gaze averted to the floor. “It was… partially my fault. I wasn't thinking when I used the last of my heka to hide you. I wasn't thinking of the world you would have to live in on your own, and the weight you would have to bear. All I wanted to believe was that you would survive and find a place to live where Ra would smile down upon you.” She sighed. “It was naive and desperate of me and... I'm sorry.”

Her gaze lifted as she looked past Bakura, a flicker of hope there.

“Perhaps it’s not too late.”

Bakura swallowed hard, finally allowing himself to turn and look back. Malik was still there, watching with awe and wonder, but another face had joined him.

Ryou's eyes were glassy with moisture, his expression fallen open as he gazed at Sati. His composure tightened a bit as he locked sights with Bakura, guarded like he was waiting to see what he would do before reacting.

Bakura saw it then, that this wasn’t some divine punishment meant to rend his soul. Plain and simple, it was a choice.
There is only light in life.

By the time Bakura faced Sati again, her form had begun to flicker.

“You don’t have to worry about us anymore.” She reached up, her hand brushing his cheek, her eyes crinkling at the edges. “Whenever you’re ready… we’ll be waiting for you.”

She faded away, leaving Bakura and Atem standing before the gate. Atem’s expression was unreadable, but he didn’t have to say anything. Their paths were different, and Bakura had a trial of his own to face before the gate would open for him.

Sorry, Pharaoh, but I won’t be leaving this world on your coattails.

With more strength than he thought was possible, Bakura turned his back to the gate and began to walk. It was painful but he didn’t falter, his pace picking up until he dashed off the top step.

Malik barely managed to overcome his shock in time to brace Bakura’s weight and stop them both from crashing to the floor. He staggered back, his arms automatically wrapping around Bakura’s middle while Bakura’s were slung around his shoulders.

“Bakura…” Malik’s voice was strained, choked. “Don’t stay because of me. You don’t have to…”

A haphazard, broken laugh tumbled out of Bakura and he shook his head.

“I have to.” He grinned, wondering why it had all seemed so uncertain before. “I choose the light.”

Malik’s response was to hold him tighter, unable to find a reason to argue. After a moment, he drew back and led them both away from the gate.

Bakura suspected their partnership may have provoked more attention if Atem wasn’t still leaving. He could hear Yugi’s friends calling out to the Pharaoh, asking him why he had to depart so soon, but Bakura was more concerned with other matters.
The shrine gave another shudder and the light began to dim, narrowing to a thin rectangle cast on the floor. The stone that held the Millennium Items shattered, sending both it and the gold into the dark chasm that waited below, burying them for good.

It was tempting to look back, and maybe he should have, but he didn't. He knew where he belonged, and he had a future in this world - he had time in this world.

His fingers curled in the fabric of Malik's shirt as he braced for that dizzying sensation to wash over him again, or for something to that effect to happen, but it never did. Whether by fluke or divine error, his and Ryou's separation appeared to be permanent.

Silence and dimness flooded the chamber, and Bakura still stood there, pressed to Malik with his heart thudding so loud he was sure it was audible.

It was over. It was over. And Bakura didn't think that fact would truly sink in for a long time.

“That woman…” Ryou's soft voice made Bakura finally dare to turn his head. His former host was staring at the spot where Sati had been standing. “She was really your mother, wasn't she…?”

Ryou shuffled nervously, like he was embarrassed he was the first one to break the silence by speaking his thoughts out loud.

“She just looked like…” He rubbed the back of his head, unsure of what he was trying to get across. But he was smiling with a sense of peace Bakura understood.

“Well… she reminded me a lot of my own.”

…

It took stepping out of the shrine and feeling the sun on his skin for what seemed like the first time to realize it was his. This body, this life, this existence - even if it was still tied to Ryou in some way - it was his.

With each step he took away from the place he had once called his home, it became more and more
apparent that the weight in his chest had lifted. As bittersweet as it was, Kul Elna was gone - they had been gone for quite some time. He could be - no, he was more than a child of the desert, more than his revenge.

His home lay far beyond this village, and he didn't have to find it alone.

It was as Malik said. This wasn't the end; it was a new beginning.

Even so, he didn't think his mind caught up with him until after they had crossed the Nile again. He had practically collapsed as soon as they had boarded - his new body didn't seem adjusted to existing yet. He woke up to a quiet ship and light pouring into the window. He must have slept for nearly a day.

There was a bottle of water and a few nutrition bars of some sort left out for him on the table. He sucked down the water like a sink and wolfed down one of the bars, barely tasting it.

With some of his strength restored, he pushed himself out of bed and found his way to the front of the boat. They were still travelling along the river, but Bakura didn't know where they were now or where they were headed.

The wind caressed his face and carded through his hair, lifting the crimson robe away from his legs. The sun had begun it's journey through the sky, its warmth sinking into his skin. The river sprawled endlessly into the distance, wildlife and growth hugging it on both sides.

He could have been standing in the same place thousands of years ago if not for the signs modern civilization springing up in the distance, and he realized then how easily he could have been swallowed by time. The past met the future, but nothing had truly changed, had it?

City and desert, sand and marsh, rising waters. It didn't matter, time always churned, turning over and over again with or without him. Civilizations would build and would crumble, land would overtake sea and sea would overtake land, but it all just kept moving forward, never stopping.

He understood then, why Malik clawed so hard to dig himself from the grave he was born in, why he would give everything just to see where the river ended.

Bakura had hardly seen where the river began.
The world had always seemed smaller, something to hold and crush in his hands, something that began and ended with the Pharaoh's blood. He had been wrong. It expanded infinitely, pressing in on him from all sides, holding him and filling his lungs with air he was never meant to breathe.

“You're awake.”

Bakura jolted from his thoughts, cursing himself for letting Malik sneak up on him.

He turned to see Malik standing there with a warm, almost hesitant smile on his face that had Bakura's stomach feeling odd. The gentle murmur of sloshing water stretched between them both and filling the space where they couldn't with their words. It was peaceful, almost suspiciously so.

Bakura reached up and scratched the side of his jaw. The moment was so quaint he almost didn't know what to say.

“Not that I care where the friendship cult takes their weird fetishes, but where’d everyone else go?”

“They're going back to Cairo.”

A dry smirk crossed Bakura's face. Perhaps it was unjustified, but his chest felt tight. “You went with them, huh?”

“He told me to say goodbye on his behalf. He didn't want to wake you,” Malik reassured, sensing his dip in mood.

That came as somewhat of a relief. Perhaps things were better with space between them - at least, until Bakura could figure out a way to approach the situation.

Malik then flashed him a smirk. “You looked like you needed your beauty sleep so I figured we'd go for a little scenery before we head back to Luxor.”

Bakura rolled his eyes, leaning on the rail and turning his attention to the river stretching before him.
They were headed to Luxor, where Malik lived, but where would they go after that? He knew neither of them would want to stay in the land they had been tied down to for so long.

Bakura watched the currents drag the river along, weaving it like a tapestry.

“There really is a lot of water,” he mused.

He heard Malik step up to the railing beside him, and felt his arm brush his own as Malik leaned his weight forward.

“The world really seems different when you stop and look at it, eh?”

Bakura gazed at Malik instead, fascinated with the way the sun highlighted his complexion and turned his hair to gold.

A laugh bubbled up his throat before he could stop it, and he gave a slight shake of the head.

“I'd ask you what the fuck we're going to do now but, knowing your plans…”

Though Bakura was beginning to realize he didn't care where they went, as long as Malik was by his side.

“Like yours are any better.” Malik levelled him with a lidded, unimpressed stare. “I have a few ideas but before we get into that…” Malik reached into his pocket and withdrew something in his fist. He stepped back, prompting Bakura to move away from the edge as well, curious. “I think you dropped this.”

He opened his palm to reveal a familiar looking ring. Bakura's eyes widened.

“Where did…?”
“Ryou gave it back to me.” Malik said, taking something else out and holding it up. It was a small golden chain, glinting in the mid morning light. “Here, I have this as well...”

He threaded one end of it through the ring and reached up to clasp it together around Bakura’s neck, brushing stray hairs aside and adjusting it accordingly.

Bakura’s fingertips touched the gold hanging against his sternum, a gentle - more gentle than he would ever let anyone see - smile ghosting over his features.

“Definitely a lot lighter.”

“It better be.” Malik held his shoulders, smirking. “It doesn't have a dark god sealed inside it.”

Bakura fiddled with the ring, turning it over and over, hooking his fingers inside it. His gaze had fallen from Malik's face, his breath seizing up in his lungs.

“Malik?” He spoke low, as if fearful his voice would carry over the water. The words felt too big for his throat, but he couldn’t leave them to rot in his chest any longer.

“I love you too.”
Malik abruptly released his shoulders. It was a rare moment when he seemed entirely overtaken by shock. Bakura shifted restlessly, nerves grating with each moment that passed between them. Was it really all that unthinkable to hear from him?

And then Malik's posture relaxed, his features settling into that controlled, infuriating smugness Bakura knew him for.

“And you say I'm the one being cliche?”

Bakura's face burned, and it wasn't because of the sun rising higher in the sky. He covered it with a derisive scoff.

“Like I didn't have to witness your tear filled goodbye?”

Malik raised a brow. “I seem to recall I wasn't the only one crying.”

“I should throw you overboard.”

“This is my boat, asshole.”

They shoved at each other, trading insults until their scowls broke apart with laughter and not even the sun was as bright as their grins.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again everyone! I just wanted to say I actually have plans for continuing this story through a smaller sequel (likely based on Dark Side of Dimensions events) since there are several things I feel I didn't get much of a chance to explore. Malik's other personality for example, their lives after this, and certain ramifications for Ryou and Bakura's... situation. This won't be for a long while however because I need a break after writing this monster, so for now this fanfic is complete.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!