

Shukumei no Duelist

Von Yamato_

Inhaltsverzeichnis

Prolog: Shattered	2
Kapitel 1: Inochi wo Ataeta - Holy Elf no Shukufuku	9
Kapitel 2: Ka Yuugo no Chikara - Minotaurus, Kentaurus, Minokentaurus	20

Prolog: Shattered

There is so much darkness in this world. So much pain, grief, and suffering.

But still, the gods gave us one single light to overcome the darkness, that light which is called love. It shines in our hearts like a candle, like a blazing flame. It guides us and carries us, and gives us a reason to go on, regardless of the trials we must endure.

I can see this light in your heart right now as I look at you. It lies buried beneath your pride and your anger and the ashes of your broken dreams, but it still shines. You share a bond with someone. Your heart yearns for him, your soul calls out to him, and all your spirits stir in their weiju and find no rest.

Why do you try to shatter that bond instead of cherishing it? Why do you wish to deny yourself this divine gift? Do you not understand how precious it is?

Can you honestly say you prefer to stay in darkness? Alone?

Shukumei no Duelist

Duelists of Fate
(Schicksalsduellanten)

Disclaimer: YuGiOh belongs to Kazuki Takahashi. I'm only borrowing his characters.

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Author: Yamato (on Animexx: Julie)

Rating: R (FSK 16)

Ships: Prideshipping (Seto x Yami-Yuugi), Scandalshipping (Atem x Seth)

Summary: Seto Kaiba tries to put his heart back together after it was shattered at Death-T. On his journey he encounters strange visions of the past, guardians of the Egyptian underworld, Ka spirits fighting over his soul, and a promise made over 3000 years ago. It's a good thing, really, that he doesn't believe in any of this occult nonsense.

Author's Note: Borrowing some canon from the manga, some from the anime. (Japanese, not dub)

Prologue: Shattered

Everything was dark around him. In fact, it was so dark that in the very first moment he didn't know whether his eyes were closed or open.

Carefully, he touched his face, trying to ensure he was all right.

It did feel like a face. His nose, mouth, cheeks, hair, everything seemed to be in proper place. His eyes were open; yet he still couldn't see his hands. For a moment, he wondered whether he had gone blind.

His chest hurt. His chest hurt so badly as if he had taken a blow to his ribcage. Which he probably had, considering the circumstances. He lay flat on his back and tried to breathe evenly, but the pain didn't recede. Every breath felt as if he was taking in needles instead of air.

Where am I? What happened? How did I get here?

Why is it so dark?

"Every true beginning starts out in darkness," a soft voice answered him. "The darkness is older than the light."

Did I die?

This time the voice didn't answer, so he spoke his question out loud. "Did I die?"

"Anubis says, yes, you did."

Great. In all the things on his to-do list for today – not that he remembered any of them – dying sure wasn't included. In fact, he couldn't even remember if he'd kept any to-do lists, but if he did, they would probably read things like *Lunch at 11.00* and *Meeting at 16.00*. Instead, he was stuck in a strange dark place listening to some cryptic wish-wash from annoying floating voices, with a pain in his chest and no memory of himself. Well, almost no memory, for he was sure that he did not believe in either floating voices or cryptic wish-wash. Wait a moment – why would he still feel any pain if he was dead?

"But I beg to differ," said the voice. "And it seems that I have the better ...uhm... arguments. At least for now."

"Hmm. So, once you've all decided whether I'm dead or not," he gasped, pressing his hand to his aching chest, as he tried to sit up and failed miserably. If this was a nightmare, it was almost too ridiculous to be dreamed. He was going to stop dreaming this right now.

"I'm afraid that decision does not rest with me." She – it was undoubtedly a female voice – sounded sincerely disappointed about it.

"Well then, go get the person responsible and tell them that I wish to go back to my life." On the second attempt he managed to pull himself into a sitting position. "And hurry, if you please, I have a company to run."

Yes, there definitely was a company. If he only could remember what it was called...

"Oh, I would, but unfortunately it's not that easy." She gave a sigh. "This is partly my fault. I just wish I could have protected you better, then you wouldn't be in such trouble right now. But I was faced with a choice, and I chose your life over your soul and your soul over your heart."

"Get to the point, will you?" He really wasn't in any mood for this occult nonsense. He had far more pressing matters to deal with, and once he woke up from this pathetic excuse of a nightmare, he would surely remember what they were. All this talk about hearts and souls sounded utterly ridiculous and none of it made any sense to him. His soul was... well, wherever souls were if they actually existed, and his heart was right where it belonged, inside his chest.

Only it wasn't beating...

He pressed his forefinger to his wrist frantically searching for a pulse. This couldn't be possible; it had to be a bad joke. How could anyone live without a pulse? What was this supposed to mean? No, he couldn't be dead.

Yes, he could be. To lose means to die.

The last words rang so clearly in his mind that he wondered if someone else had spoken them. And it was definitely not the girl.

"So you've noticed." Her voice sounded much closer now. He reached out and felt around in the darkness; he didn't particularly like being sneaked up on, and annoying floating voices posed no exception. But all he could feel was a soft movement of the air as if someone had just walked past him. Yet, there was no sound of footsteps.

"Well, as I said, we both made our choices and now you're in a near-hopeless situation. But the good news is you're particularly skilled at getting yourself out of near-hopeless situations. It's probably what you're best at, apart from getting yourself into near-hopeless situations. And winning at *Duel Monsters*, but we'll get to that part later. For now, all you need to do is..."

"I decide for myself what I need to do, thank you very much," he interrupted her brusquely. "I don't follow anyone's orders."

"Yes, I know." He heard a soft chuckle; for some unknown reason his last remark seemed to have amused her. "But didn't you say you wanted to live? Living without a heart will prove considerably difficult to say the least. So what *will* you do? Sit around here and pout some more or try to get your life back?"

He considered his options. Since he still didn't know anything about this place (or about anything else for that matter) he wasn't left with many of them. "Fine. I'll play your little game for now. So how does it work?"

"I knew it! You would never give up!" she shouted in triumph, and added much softer:

"Still, there are no words to describe how happy this makes me feel. Please open your hand; there's something I have to give you."

He was still wondering how the hell she was even going to find his hand in this darkness as he already felt another hand touch his, and then an object was put into his palm. He had no idea what it was, only that it felt warm and smooth, and somehow – there was no other word for it – alive. The other hand tightly closed his fingers around the object before releasing him.

"What is this?" The warmth was quickly spreading through his body and the pain in his chest was finally receding somewhat.

"A broken piece," she answered with a tone of sadness in her voice. "I'm afraid it's the only thing that remains of your once so proud duelist's heart. I have kept it for you."

"And what am I supposed to do with it?"

"It will help you find the other pieces," she explained. "If you gather them all, you can put your heart back together and return to the world of the living."

"Hmm." This whole thing sounded too much like a cheap adventure game. "So where's the hitch?"

"Well, since this is a *yami no game*, you can imagine that there will be tests and trials and such..."

Of course there were. And most probably monsters and treasures and lots of pointless running around in pathetic dungeons. Not to mention some ridiculous final bosses with magical powers and a silly laugh. Haha. Me crush you now.

Another soft chuckle interrupted his train of thought. "Don't forget about the dragons."

Whatever. *Yami no game*, she had said. A shadow game. That name sounded vaguely familiar and it sent a chill down his spine. He was sure that it was connected to a memory of his, but he couldn't quite grasp it. Was this another riddle he had to solve?

"You have a very long and difficult road ahead of you." Much to his surprise, her voice had lost all earlier playfulness, sounding dark and serious now. "I wish I could give you advice, but you never listen to what I say, so it looks like you'll have to do this on your own. However, I have great faith in your abilities. Believe me, even if you don't remember it now, you've mastered worse situations than this one. You'll manage. And I promise I'll be with you every step of the way."

"Hmm." He had absolutely no idea how to reply to this, so he resorted to his usual rudeness. "Are you quite finished with the pep talk? Then tell me something useful."

"You will know more once you open your hand. Wait – if you meet Anubis, tell him I'm sincerely sorry about our little disagreement. And his scales. And Ammit. And Maat's

feather... oh, on second thought, forget what I said and better stay out of his way. And when you play Ament-Urt at Senet, don't step on the House of Water. And watch out for..."

"I said, spare me the pep talk." And before she could say another word, he opened his fingers, and was blinded by a blazing white light emerging from his hand.

In the split second before he closed his eyes, he could see the silhouette of a girl sitting across him on the floor. A petite heart-shaped face framed by a mane of long hair falling down over her shoulders and chest. A small delicate body. And the most magnificent blue eyes.

Those eyes are exactly like mine...

He forced his eyes open again, but couldn't see much except for dancing spots in all colors. The blazing light was gone and so was the girl, but the pitch-black darkness hadn't returned either. Something glowed in front of him, something large and rectangular. He narrowed his eyes to get a better look at it.

It was a door.

It was a door in the middle of nowhere; there were no walls around it, and there weren't any buildings or courtyards where it would lead to. The stupid thing simply stood there with neither purpose nor reason.

Was this what the girl had meant by 'You will know more?' Well, just because the door was there didn't mean he was automatically going to walk through it, but it wouldn't hurt to examine it a bit before making a decision. He got to his feet and noticed with relief that the pain in his chest had reduced to a dull throb, nothing he couldn't handle. And that supposed piece of his heart was still...

...had changed into a small piece of cardboard. He was holding a card in his hand!

BLUE EYES WHITE DRAGON

Light (Hikari) * * * * *

[Dragon]

This legendary dragon is a powerful engine of destruction. Virtually invincible, very few have faced this awesome creature and lived to tell the tale.

[ATK/3000] [DEF/2500]

The card also included a drawing of a white dragon, but it was a very clumsy one. Its proportions were way off and all in all it looked more like an oversized chicken than a dragon. It was the kind of drawing a little kid would do.

Duel Monsters... this was a Duel Monsters card. That strange girl had spoken about it and she had said he was particularly good at this game. However, you couldn't play a game with just one card, so what was he supposed to do with it?

He checked the pockets of his school uniform (something he should have done ages ago), but they didn't reveal any more cards. Neither did they reveal anything else, no identification, no money, nothing that could give him at least a hint about who he was and where he came from. Why couldn't this stupid school uniform at least have a badge?

This whole thing was pointless, so he tucked the card safely into the pocket of his shirt and went back to his original plan to examine the door.

It was made of stone and covered in hieroglyphs and ancient Egyptian imagery. On the sides, two large figures were carved in it facing each other. They looked mostly human and were depicted in the typical Egyptian way with their heads sideways, but their bodies facing the front.

The figure on the left side wore a falcon's head upon a human body. The figure on the right side had an animal head as well, but this animal was hard to make out. With its long snout it looked like a mixture between jackal, pig, and donkey, but it also had rectangular ears, and there wasn't any known creature with ears like that.

Scattered between the two figures were seven different images. He could make out an eye, a scepter, a bark carrying a golden disc, a hippopotamus, two crossed swords, a sand dune, and an ear of wheat. In each of these symbols was a rectangular slot exactly the size of his Duel Monsters card.

Hmm. A one out of seven chance. Not too bad. Still, his instincts told him that putting the card in each picture in turn was not an option.

He took a closer look at the writing carved in the stone. At first there were only hieroglyphs, little animals and objects and such. But somehow they reshaped themselves, formed letters and finally words. Was this only his imagination? Or was he, for some unknown reason, able to decipher hieroglyphs?

WHEN THE TWO DUELISTS OF FATE ARE RECONCILED THE DOOR TO ETERNITY WILL OPEN

Tsuzuku (...to be continued)

Kapitel 1: Inochi wo Ataeta – Holy Elf no Shukufuku

I lost...

This can't be... this just can't be. He should never have been able to get past my dragons. They are the strongest, the most powerful monsters. My deck was perfect, my strategy flawless. I had everything planned out; I was prepared for every move he could possibly make.

Except for this one. Exodia...

This should have been my battle. My victory. My triumph over my enemy; the one who had dared to block my road to glory. The only duelist to ever have defeated me.

Twice now.

I knew the stakes, I knew what I was getting myself into. In a duel, you either win and live, or lose and die. It's as simple as that.

So, Yuugi...

Do you have the courage to take my life?

Or are you just a weak little coward who lets my duel box do the dirty work for him?

Shukumei no Duelist

Duelists of Fate
(Schicksalsduellanten)

Thanks: A big thanks to Lace Kyoko, Barrie18, Yuki-san, Selena12, and my dear Taichi Chisako for their reviews. And another thanks for my dad, who lent me some books from his study to help me research.

Author's Note: Researching ancient Egypt feels like diving into a bottomless pit with tons of gods, pharaohs, mystical places, and sacred objects. And all of these have tons of spellings because hieroglyphs are extremely vague on some letters, especially the vowels. Also, some names changed over time due to Greek and Latin influences. I try to stick with one spelling for each to avoid confusion, but there are many more. For example, Ra can also be transcribed as Re, Duat is sometimes written as Dwat or Tuat, and Atum can be spelled Atem (the Japanese transcription being Atemu). However, Atum, Atem, or Atemu are basically all the same name, just as Set, Seto, or Seth.

Something else, I'm not an Egyptologist, so I apologize for any mistakes I might make in the process of this story. Also, be warned that I have no qualms mixing elements from historical Egypt, mythical Egypt and Yu-Gi-Oh fantasy Egypt into a colorful potpourri. Last but not least, though gods roam this story, I don't wish to offend anyone's religious beliefs. This is fanfic and it's for fun, so enjoy.^^

Archive: So far, this story is posted to Animexx, Livejournal, Skyehawke and FFnet.

Arc I: Duat no Juuni no Tobira (The Twelve Gates of the Underworld)

Chapter 1: Inochi wo Ataeta – Holy Elf no Shukufuku (The One Who Gave Life – Holy Elf's Blessing)

WHEN THE TWO DUELISTS OF FATE ARE RECONCILED THE DOOR TO ETERNITY WILL OPEN

Doors in general did not open by simply staring at them.

This was clearly a riddle and it already made his mind race. Two duelists of fate; these duelists had to be the two animal-headed figures in the picture. And if these duelists were to be reconciled, one of the seven items was a symbol for their reconciliation.

That ruled out the crossed swords. Crossed swords were usually a sign of battle.

Who were these two anyways? A falcon, a head of a falcon... all of a sudden a thought shot through his mind, a word in a strange language, and yet a familiar one.

Heru. Falcon. Horus, the falcon god.

The next instant, everything started to make sense, and images flashed through his mind like the whirling colors of a kaleidoscope. Horus was the god of light, the god of the rising sun. In his triune form Ra-Horakhty-Atum he guided the solar barque through the skies. He was Horus in the morning, Ra at midday, and Atum in the evening when the barque was swallowed by the great snake Apep, god of evil and destruction. The barque then passed into *Duat*, the underworld, only to be reborn in the morning when Horus defeated Apep in battle. A continuous cycle of life and death.

Apropos, the sun and the moon represented the two eyes of Horus. The moon was the weaker of the two because Horus had injured one of his eyes during a fierce battle with his mortal enemy, Set.

Yes, the pieces came together almost too smoothly. Horus and Set were the two fated enemies on that door, and all of the seven symbols were in one way or other connected to them. The eye and the solar barque were symbols of Horus. The scepter belonged with Set because Set's traditional weapon was the scepter of power, the so-called *Was*. He could wield great magic with it.

Hmm... the hippopotamus, that was more difficult. Hippos were usually associated with Taweret, the protectress of birth, and her demonic counterpart Ammut, the eater of hearts. But wait... wasn't there a story about Set and Horus turning into hippos? It was one of the many episodes of their ongoing battle. They transformed into these animals and stayed at the bottom of the Nile to see which one of them could hold his breath longer. Ergo, like the crossed swords, the hippopotamus was a symbol for battle, not reconciliation.

The sand dune and the ear of wheat were easily deciphered. Set was king over the desert regions of Upper Egypt, while Horus ruled the fruitful land of Lower Egypt. Regarding the battle of the gods in a political sense, it could have been a struggle between these two cultures, perhaps even a military conflict. When Egypt was united, each Pharaoh wore the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt, often depicted in coronation scenes with both gods, Horus and Set, placing the two crowns upon Pharaoh's head. A double crown would have been a proper symbol to place the card in, but obviously the solution couldn't be made that easy.

He was almost starting to wonder how he knew so much about these strange things, but since this knowledge had not yet revealed any solution to the riddle, he would only waste his precious time. Set and Horus were enemies, rivals struggling for kingship and maybe they just weren't meant to reconcile.

Where would that stupid door lead to anyways? Why was he supposed to go through it if he could simply walk around it? How was it supposed to lead to a different place once it had opened? Yet another thing in this unfamiliar place that made no sense whatsoever.

Well, it can't be helped, so let's mull this over from the beginning.

The eye, the barque, and the wheat were symbols for Horus, the scepter and the dune were associated with Set, and the swords and the hippopotamus referred to their ongoing battle.

Hmm... that was one symbol too many on Horus' side. Following things logically, one of those three images had to refer to both of the gods. Most likely, it wasn't the wheat because Set had the dune instead. They were a pair of opposites. The eye... was the eye opposite to the scepter? They both represented power. Or was it the barque?

When and how had Set and Horus reconciled anyway? They had shared the pillow once, but you couldn't count this as reconciliation because it had been a tactic of war. Set had seduced Horus in order to demonstrate his power over the other god. And Horus had given in, but in the end had managed to turn the tables with a little plot his

mother Isis had cooked up. In fact, if it hadn't been for Isis' constant interferences, Set would most likely have defeated Horus, but this wasn't the time to worry about ancient gods and their power struggles, and not that he cared anyway.

Scheming, treacherous, two-faced viper Isis.

And he still wasn't one single step closer to opening that door.

Rivals were rivals after all and duelists were duelists. They didn't simply forget all about their rivalry and became a team. Unless, for some reason, they had to fight a tag-team duel against other duelists. The best way to unite two warriors was a common enemy. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Hadn't Sun Tzu written that? No, but the fact that he knew about Sun Tzu and tag-team duels was a clear indication that his memory was starting to return. As was all this unexpected knowledge about Egypt.

And that pathetic riddle was child's play, unworthy of his attention. Without further ado, he removed the card from his breast pocket and placed it into the slot of the golden solar barque. *Here we go, Horus. So you want to be the ruler of all gods, but you cannot defeat Apep's darkness without Set fighting by your side. If it wasn't for Set's power, there would be no new morning. Not ever again.*

The shimmering glow emanating from the door increased in brightness and a thin line of light appeared, surrounding it like a golden frame. The line spread further through the middle of the door, parting it into two wings that slowly opened and gave way to an entrance.

Before he stepped through, he removed the Duel Monsters card from the slot of the door, slipping it back into his pocket.

* * *

The first impression to tingle his senses was not an image but a sound; a soft rustle that his mind immediately connected to water. A poem came to his mind, some insignificant words about frogs jumping into old ponds, and a woman's voice recited those words over and over like a charm while a second voice, a child's, tried to blabber them after her. He quickly discarded these thoughts since they appeared utterly meaningless to his current situation, but the warmth in the woman's voice seemed to linger on, long after he had forgotten the actual words.

Looking down, he saw that he was standing on a round flat stone in the middle of a giant river. At least, the constant flow of water suggested that this had to be a stream of some sort. Lakes and ponds were usually still. However, there were no other stones to step on, and there was no shore anywhere in sight, only a vast starless night sky spreading over the entire scenery and merging with the water on the horizon.

Behind him, the door had vanished into thin air, or had never been there in the first

place. He crouched down and gazed into the water trying to make out any moving shapes below the surface. There were none that he could see, but the river appeared to be quite deep. He removed his belt to use it as a sounding line, but the buckle didn't hit ground even after he disregarded his original intention to not touch the water, and plunged his arm into the cold liquid up to his shoulder. At least it didn't seem to be harmful, there was no burning or stinging, and his skin didn't redden or otherwise change color.

When he pulled his belt back up, there was a metallic object hooked into the buckle. A small golden amulet fell into his hand, an amulet which looked like a combination of a cross and a pointed ellipsis. He narrowed his eyes; where had he seen the likes of this before?

"*Ankh*," he said, frowning, looking at the amulet. "Life."

For a moment everything was silent, save for the soft rustle of the water. Then, all of sudden, a voice asked from the depth: "What gives life?"

Great. More riddles. Wasn't that exactly what he needed?

So, what gave life? The sun, nature, the earth, the river, a mother, Atum, the creator, or Khnum, who had formed humans out of clay. How were you supposed to answer a question like that?

"If you expect a well-defined answer, you should first narrow down the parameters of the question," he shouted angrily. This was undoubtedly not an answer that annoying voices floating in the dark longed to hear, but he was through with talking to annoying voices. Either these people were going to show themselves, or he would... ouch!

Something was hurled out of the water and smacked against the hand he had raised to protect his face. Before he could grasp the little object, it had slipped out of his fingers and tumbled down into his collar. Cursing, he reached for it and pulled it out again. It was a small green lapis lazuli crafted into the shape of a scarab beetle.

Scarabs were a symbol of life as well, but in a more literal sense the word meant *to emerge* or *to become*. As it seemed, he had stumbled right into another riddle, but before he could give it any further thought, there was a disturbance in the water and then something emerged from the waves and ripples. Suddenly he found himself eye to eye with a massive reddish-black head ending in a broad snout with bulky nostrils – the head of a hippopotamus.

His hands stopped in mid-movement; it would be best to not attract any unnecessary attention. Hippopotami could be counted among the most aggressive and dangerous animals of the world. If that creature chose to attack him, his chances would be slim indeed.

As the head emerged further, however, he was in for a true surprise. The body below was not the body of an animal at all, it was human.

"It's the Great River that gives life," said the hippopotamus woman. She had a deep, rich, gnarly voice. "Every year during the time of *akhet*, he breaks free from the confinements of his bed, flooding the lands with layers of black silt and rendering them fertile."

"Your point being?" His interest in agricultural lectures pretty much matched his interest in poems about frogs.

"How do you intend to cross the river if you do not understand his true nature?"

It seemed that this woman took great pleasure in answering questions with counter questions. Still, there was something vaguely familiar in the things she said. They evoked images of peasants standing amidst muddy fields digging canals to collect the water from the Great River. Others used buckets hanging down from long poles to distribute the water evenly over the black soil. Blurry at first, the images seemed to gain in strength until he could even see small details, such as the headdresses the peasants wore to protect themselves from the sun, or the clay stones they had bound to the other end of the poles to balance them out.

Akhet, the time of inundation was followed by *peret*, the time of emergence. As the water retreated back into the ground, the fields were tilled. Cows pulled light wooden ploughs over the earth and the peasants sowed wheat and barley. Soon, fresh green sprouts emerged, gradually growing into golden crops ready for harvest...

What was happening to him? Why could he see these images so vividly as if it had only been yesterday that he walked by those fields? Was this a part of his memory? And yet, somehow it didn't fit; something was wrong, although he couldn't say what it was. Did his mind play tricks on him?

Or was there someone else playing the tricks?

"Let me guess, it has something to do with these, hasn't it?" He held up the two objects, the *ankh*, and the scarab. "You're a kind of mystic guardian and you won't let me pass, until I solve some riddle or beat you at some silly game. Fine, put your cards on the table and bring it on! I've wasted enough of my precious time already."

"You speak boldly for one with a fragmented soul," she replied. He couldn't read her animal face too well, but it seemed that she was regarding him with a mixture of annoyance and curious interest. "But, as you so keenly perceive, I am a guardian indeed. I am Qat-A, handmaiden to the goddess Taweret and the keeper of the first gate of *Duat*."

"Whatever. So, why don't we cut this short and you just open your gate for me. Then I can return to my life, you can return to... whatever it is you're doing in this pathetic place, and we both get what we want." Of course, she wasn't likely to agree to this suggestion, but he had to try anyway.

"Before you ask yourself what you want, you should first ask yourself who you are,"

she chided him, raising a hand out of the river. It appeared to be empty at first, but what he had taken for glistening drops of water, was actually a small crystalline puzzle piece resting inside her palm.

"Hmm. Is this what I think it is?" So the blue-eyed girl had been right and the pieces of his heart were scattered all over the place. "In that case you should hand it over because it belongs to me."

He held out his hand, but she closed hers and pulled it back into the water. "When your *ib* was broken apart, a piece of it fell into my river. If you want to take back what the river has claimed, you first need to understand his true nature."

"We've been through this," he sighed, glaring at the two objects. "Let's cut it short, shall we? I suppose, the *ankh* stands for the season of inundation because it's shaped like the Nile river with its delta. The scarab stands for the season of emergence because that's one of its literal meanings as a hieroglyph. Are we finished yet, or do I need to tell you something about the third season as well?"

"*Shemu*, the time of harvest." She opened her hand again, but the piece of his heart was no longer in it. Instead, there was a little sickle about the size of the other two objects. "These three seasons pursue each other in a wheel without end. "*Akhet follows shemu, peret follows akhet, shemu follows peret. If this eternal cycle is broken, draught and famine will come over the Black Land and its people.*"

She held the sickle out to him and opened her other hand, which contained another one of each of the three objects.

He stared at them in disbelief; the woman couldn't be serious!

"Are you honestly trying to tell me," he could barely keep his temper, "that this entire Pandora's box of silly lectures and pointless visions boils down to an ancient Egyptian version of jan-ken-pon?"

Fuming, he snatched the sickle out of her hand. This really, really wasn't worth his time. He put both hands behind his back, secretly placing the ankh into the right one. To beat the ankh she would have to use the scarab, and experiments had proven that, for whatever reason, scissors was always the least likely choice in the game.

She opened her hand a split second before he did – it was the sickle.

"Akhet follows shemu," he said with a smirk as he briefly showed her the ankh and then rearranged the pieces again. "The goddess of victory smiles on me, keeper of the first gate."

Most people changed after the first round, so he guessed that she would actually use the scarab next turn. He felt the three symbols between his fingers and shoved the sickle into his right hand. This was going to be easy.

She opened her hand – it was the ankh.

He frowned; this turn hadn't gone as expected. He probably should have stuck with his original hypothesis that people didn't like to use scissors, but it was too late to worry about it now. He had one more round to go, and in order to get the piece of his heart, he would have to win.

Would she change her symbol or would she stick with the ankh? Most people did not change after the second round, so it was probably safer to switch to the scarab. On the other hand, what if she followed the natural cycle and used the scarab as well? It was the only piece that she hadn't used yet, and she had been so adamant about not breaking the natural cycle. What if this attitude was also visible in her strategy?

Hmm... would he plan his next move according to stochastic theories, or would he try to follow the twisted reason of an ancient divine being?

He would need to make a decision between the two. No, actually not. Both scenarios predicted that she would not use the sickle next turn. If he used the sickle, and one of his theories was correct, the game would end either in a win or a loss. If he used the scarab, however, the game would end either in a win or a draw. So it was obvious what to choose if he wanted to ensure his victory.

She opened her hand – the scarab.

"Since this game ended in a draw," she remarked calmly, "we will need to play another one."

"No, I don't think we will," he cut her off. "You'll use the sickle next turn, then the ankh, and then again the scarab. It is, like you said, a natural cycle that must not be broken."

"It appears that you finally understand the true nature of the Great River and his everlasting relationship with the Black Land and its people. Open your hand and receive the missing piece of your ib."

He dropped the three objects into her hands and reached for the small crystalline piece. This time, he half-closed his eyes to be prepared for another burst of bright light...

** * **

...which did not come. Instead, it was darkness that surrounded him, save for the soft shimmer from the puzzle piece which had turned into the warm glow of an oil-lamp standing on a small chest. A young woman sat on a straw mat next to it, one of her elbows resting on a cushion. She wore a dress of white linen tied over her left shoulder. Her head, framed by a mass of black curls was bent over a scroll while the writing reed in her hand moved continually over the papyrus, stopping only once in a while to be dipped into a jar of black ink on her other side.

Little animals, plants, human images, and objects of daily life formed under her writing

reed, arranging themselves into words, into sentences. As he tried to make out those sentences, he didn't know whether it was the writing itself that fascinated him, or the sheer fact that while time passed and thoughts vanished into nothingness, there was still a safe haven where they could be kept. Ideas that only existed inside your mind could be... ouch!

A sharp pain interrupted his train of thought and a wooden crocodile, still unfinished dropped to the floor. As the woman turned her head, he noticed the little boy sitting next to her and holding out his hand. On the child's forefinger, a small red cut was visible.

"Perhaps you should save your carving for the daytime when there's more light, Set." Tenderly, the woman took the boy's tiny hand into her own and examined the cut. "It's not deep; it'll be healed in a few days. Here, let me put some calendula balm on it."

"Mother, I'm fine." The little boy withdrew his hand and defiantly tossed back his youth lock over his otherwise clean-shaven head. "And you're working, too, although the light is bad."

"I promised Ib-En-Set I would finish the letter to his daughter until tomorrow, so the merchants can take it to the village where she lives with her husband. If I don't keep my promise, people will think that I am unreliable and they will turn to the scribes at the temple instead," the woman explained to her son. A frown crossed her face, as if she was worrying about something, but in the very next moment her expression brightened again. "Let me see you write your name," she demanded cheerfully, turning over a new sheet of papyrus.

"Yes, mother." Eager to demonstrate his skills, the boy dipped the writing reed into the ink. He didn't content himself with the small hieroglyphs his mother had used, but covered the entire sheet in writing, which he held up proudly. "My full name spells Meri-Set, which means 'Beloved of Set'. And if I add this," – with a few more strokes he changed the name to Merit-Set – "my name becomes yours!"

"Very good," she praised him. "I always knew you to be a fast learner."

"I can do more if you want to!" Set dropped the writing reed, eagerly reaching for the next sheet. "I can also write Master Ib-En-Set's name. It means 'heart of Set'. And his daughter, who married the man from another village, is Nefer-Selket, 'Selket is gracious' because she got bit by a scorpion when she was little, but Selket spared her life."

He took up the writing reed again, but his mother shook her head. "It's enough for now, Set, I know you can write all these names, but I need the papyrus for my work. Don't worry, once you go to the temple school you'll have enough writing to do. And if you keep up like this, you are certain to become one of the best students."

"I'm going to become the best," he corrected her, in a calm, matter-of-fact voice. "I won't be second to anyone."

"It seems you've inherited not only your father's quick mind, but also his ambition." Merit-Set gazed at her son, apparently lost in thought. "And sometimes I wonder whether this

is a good or a bad thing."

"How can it not be a good thing?" Set shouted, looking utterly bewildered. "My father was a brave man. He gave his life to protect our country. You said so yourself!"

"Yes, he was, and yes, he did." She said these words in a very firm voice as if she wanted to convince herself as well as her son. "I simply wish sometimes that things were different and that he could still be with us."

Set nodded. "I wish so, too, but I have no memory of things being different. For me it was always like this."

No memory of things being different...

No memory of a father...

* * *

There were images of his father fighting bravely in the midst of battle, but he knew them to be fantasy rather than memory. And yet, they felt as real as all his true memories. Memories of his mother teaching him how to write. Memories of the children in the village he had played with. Memories of...

..fire. A blazing fire that burned down all the houses of his village. People screaming and running from the destruction. Bandits who chased them and struck them down with their swords. And then...

Then, the white dragon appeared in the skies.

No, none of this could be true. Someone was trying to play a trick with his mind; he was sure of it. This wasn't his life. Those were not his memories. His memories were gone. What was happening to him?

One last time the image of his mother appeared before his mind's eye; then the vision was gone and her shimmering black curls changed back into the ever-flowing water surrounding him. The hippopotamus woman was gone as well, but in the spot where she had been, another door emerged from the waters, a door that seemed to be made of blue ice. Hieroglyphs were carved into it.

And instead of the piece of his heart, he held another card in his hand.

*HOLY ELF NO SHUKUFUKU
(Holy Elf's Blessing)
Gift of the Mystical Elf*

[Trap Card]

*Increase your Life Points by
300 points for each monster on
the field, regardless of position.*

A card which gave life-points to a player and prolonged the game? Somehow it didn't seem like a card he would put into his deck. He preferred an offensive beat-down strategy that finished the opponent quickly, so there really was no need to buy time. It was just unnecessary ballast that took away space for good cards...

This was real. This was part of his life; he could feel it. So, there was another thing the blue-eyed girl had been right about: he was good at this game. And with each card, some of his strength would return.

He put the card into his breast pocket to the Blue-Eyes White Dragon and turned to the writing on the door.

*A mouth I have, but never speak
My arms stretch far and wide
A bed I own, yet never sleep,
I travel day and night.
Without legs to carry me,
So, answer now, who may I be?*

Tsuzuku (...to be continued)

Kapitel 2: Ka Yuugo no Chikara – Minotaurus, Kentaurus, Minokentaurus

...but mathematics was real boring today because I know all this stuff already, and in literature we had to memorize some writers of the Meiji era, but I can only remember Natsume Soseki who went to England to study English.

When I want to study English I'll go to America. They've got hamburgers and great music, and you're allowed to drive cars, even though you're just a kid.

You promised me, we would go to America, didn't you, Nii-sama? We would go to America and build another Kaibaland. A real big one with games and rollercoasters and a Haunted House, and all the children who don't have parents to buy them a ticket are allowed to go in for free. You promised! Have you forgotten your promise?

Have you forgotten our big dream?

Please, please come back to me, Nii-sama. I miss you so much.

Don't leave me.

Please don't leave me.

Shukumei no Duelist

Duelists of Fate
(Schicksalsduellanten)

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Arc I: Duat no Juuni no Tobira (The Twelve Gates of the Underworld)

Chapter 2: Ka Yuugo no Chikara – Minotaurus, Kentaurus, Minokentaurus (Strength of the Ka Fusion – Minotaurus, Kentaurus, Minokentaurus) -----

*A mouth I have, but never speak
My arms stretch far and wide
A bed I own, yet never sleep,
I travel day and night.
Without legs to carry me,
So, answer now, who may I be?*

A mouth, arms, and a bed. These hints clearly referred to a river.

Many riddles employed the use of ambiguous words to spread confusion. Besides, this solution would match perfectly with all that river talk that first guardian had bored him with. The only thing bothering him about this answer was the fact that this riddle had been so much simpler than the last. It had trap written all over it in friendly yellow letters.

Yet, on the other hand, wasn't Taweret a much simpler goddess than Horus, let alone Set?

'A river,' he repeated aloud, and soft ripples broke through the crystal clear surface of the door. From its center, the tiny waves traveled in all directions, finally spreading over the entire exterior. Only in the place they had emerged from, they left a small slot untouched.

He wasn't surprised to see that said slot had the shape of a Duel Monsters card. There was no doubt what he had to do to get this damn thing open and finally move on.

* * *

Before he could see anything in the darkness, he had to suppress an urge to sneeze. Dust tickled his nose and the smell of old parchment was so overwhelming that his mind's eye pictured a library even before the darkness dissolved and revealed to him that this was exactly where he was.

The library in his mind had a carpet in the color of fresh blood and bookshelves so high that they seemed to reach the very sky above him. The library around him didn't hold any books at all; books were probably not even invented yet. Instead, the room was filled with stone tablets and baskets of papyrus rolls.

Even the walls themselves were covered in hieroglyphic writing. Strangely enough, he could read most of it; there were many different tales about Thoth, the ibis-headed patron of knowledge, wisdom, and the sciences: Thoth's birth from the seed of Horus and the head of Set, Thoth inventing the hieroglyphic alphabet, and finally Thoth acting as the scribe of Osiris during the judgment of a dead pharaoh. None of these

stories seemed particularly new to him, he had known them since he was little.

Or had he? Were the memories of that young boy Set truly his own? They surely felt real to him, but if they were, what about those other fragments in his mind? The books, for example? Set couldn't know about books. Or that poem about the frog and the pond? None of this made any sense.

And the company. There definitely was a company, he was sure of it. If he only could remember what it was called.

"None of this makes any sense."

It was him, all right. It was the same young boy sitting cross-legged on a carpet, his head bent over a scroll. He looked a little older now; this was probably due to the fact that he had cut off his youth-lock and grown his hair.

A soft giggle made Set raise his head. He truly was a few years older than during the last – only a fool would call it vision – and a frown crossed his face as he searched for the cause of his disturbance. Two little girls were hiding behind one of the stone tablets, watching him curiously. While both of them were clothed in simple linen dresses, the exquisite jewelry the older one wore, marked her clearly as a person of high rank.

Although her presence obviously annoyed him, he couldn't simply tell her to go away. Instead, he must have remembered the polite way to get rid of her. He sank into a low bow onto the floor: "Are you lost, Royal Highness? Shall I help you find your escort?"

"No, you shall not," the girl ordered in a commanding voice. "We're glad that we finally managed to get away from those boring people, aren't we, Mana?" She nudged her friend, who burst into another giggle: "Oh, I know him. He's the student who always makes such a serious face. All the other boys smile sometimes, but he doesn't. Not ever."

"Not ever?" the older girl repeated incredulously. "Fine, then." She turned to Set: "Smile. By order of the princess."

Set didn't reply, but didn't look impressed either. He lifted his chin and gazed at her sternly, and for the moment he didn't seem to care that he was being impolite. For a few seconds everything was quiet, except for the rustle of parchment and the soft tingling sound of the bracelets the girls wore.

Suddenly a pout appeared on the well-painted lips of the princess, disfiguring her otherwise pretty face. She scowled and beckoned to her friend. "He's boring. Come on, Mana, let's go play somewhere else." Both girls turned to leave.

"My sister and future queen gave you an order, temple boy!"

It was a voice used to issuing commands and being obeyed, although it belonged to a boy even younger than Set. As Set got to his feet to face him, the other boy stood

motionless, locking gazes with Set in an unfathomable battle of wills. Dark eyes seemed to bore into him, like predators lying in wait for the slightest sign of weakness.

Set didn't avert his gaze, feeling his temper rise with every passing moment. White hot anger blazed through his body. He certainly wasn't going to follow such a ridiculous order and he wasn't going to be a plaything for a spoilt little brat.

Even if that brat was – and there could be no doubt about that fact – the crown prince of Egypt.

"I will smile if you give me a reason for it, Horus in the Nest." His voice was still soft, but his tone hard and clear.

"I'll have my servant punish you for your insolence," the prince replied with cold fury. He spun on his heels, marching away without a single glance backwards. As Set watched him leave, tiny fires of triumph were sparkling in his eyes, for his opponent had been the first to turn away. It wasn't important what would happen now; the only thing that mattered was that he had once again been victorious.

Yes, he did have me punished...

And afterwards he must have regretted it because he sent me calendula balm for my back.

But I was too proud to use it.

He blinked, trying to banish these strange images and emotions from his mind, but they didn't disappear, although the figures of the children did. He was once again alone in this strange place, surrounded by the remains of a past he couldn't claim to be his own.

Everything was quiet again, save for the rustle of parchment.

It was then he realized that the rustle didn't come from any parchment at all. The sound was simply too symmetric, too harmonious, like the soft beat of a musical instrument. It was not the rhythm that changed, only the intensity. And this was because the rustle didn't remain in one place, but moved around the room.

When the noise seemed to be straight above his head, he looked up to see a strange creature hovering above him. A miniature being that looked like a cross-breed between a bird and a girl flapped her tiny wings, watching him with bright beady eyes. Her head was tilted slightly to one side as birds have a habit of doing when they want to examine something very closely.

"A fair welcome to the humble seeker entering these sacred halls of knowledge," she greeted him in a high chirping voice. "I am Nebt-Meket, handmaiden to His Majesty Thoth, and the keeper of the second gate of *Duat*. How may I be of service to you?"

"How about a fly swatter," he snapped back.

* * *

Some silly voice in the back of his mind had warned him about being so disrespectful, but he dismissed it without a second thought. No, all these self-proclaimed gods and goddesses wouldn't get any respect from him. Respect was something that had to be earned. You didn't get it for wearing a hippo's head upon your neck and you certainly didn't get it for fluttering around a library.

He had to fight for it as well. The other boys at the temple school all came from noble families. He on the other hand, had no family at all. He had only his quick mind and his burning ambition to rely on and he used them to their full extent. Used them to best the others over and over again...

No, for the last time, those were not his memories. Still, they were the only clues he could work with, at least for now.

"It certainly isn't knowledge your soul lacks," The tiny creature buzzed around his head, finally landing on one of the stone tablets. "It is wisdom. You are stubborn, arrogant, impatient, and quick to anger; those are well-known properties of people who lack wisdom."

"Wrong," he interrupted her. "What I lack is knowledge, the knowledge about who I am and how I ended up here, but I don't suppose your oh-so-sacred halls of knowledge can provide me with that information, can they? Therefore, if you own a piece of my heart and if you have a test to throw at me, let's just get it over with."

"Yes, that's true." She took off as quickly as a flash of light, hovering in front of his face again. "Your soul also lacks a heart."

"Think about it," she suddenly chirped into his left ear, "what good is a heart without wisdom? I know you will have to rebuild it eventually, but if I were you, I would take this excellent opportunity to halt in my journey and obtain..."

"But since I'm not an annoying little buzz ball, I'll do nothing of the sort," he interrupted her again. "Now, do you have a piece of my heart, or don't you?"

"Actually, I don't have one..."

"Then stop bothering me."

"I have two." Circling a basket, she opened one of her claws to allow him a glimpse of a crystalline object she was carrying. "One test will not be enough to teach you all the qualities you still lack, but I, too, have to keep to the words that Master Thoth wrote down so long ago. Therefore, if you do not fail, I shall give you the pieces and lead you

to the next gate. If you do fail, however, you must agree to remain here and continue your studies. That's my only condition."

"Agreed." For a moment, he wondered what the hippopotamus woman would have done to him if he had failed her task. Probably something even less pleasant than boring lectures about wisdom. But he hadn't failed her task, and he had no intention of failing this one either.

"Follow me," the bird girl said and she fluttered over to the carpet little Set had sat upon while studying his scroll. The scroll still lay there, spread-out on the dark fabric, so the girl tried to lift it up to make some space. Slightly amused, he watched her tiny claws struggle with the heavy papyrus. She answered with an angry glance in his direction as she seemed to realize that he had no intention whatsoever to help her.

Finally she gave up her futile attempts to pull or drag the scroll and rolled it from the carpet instead. This method performed the job, but it was still a lot of work. He could see tiny droplets of sweat on her forehead as she settled down on the rug again.

He couldn't suppress a smirk. For the next couple of minutes she would be in no condition to annoy him with her pointless fluttering around.

The gatekeeper raised her wings, letting out a shrill chirp and suddenly, a bundle of wooden sticks appeared between her claws. If that was supposed to be some sort of spell, why hadn't she used one to move the scroll away in the first place? But there was no point in wondering why anybody in this strange place did any of the things they did, so he just waited for her to continue.

"You know that you are here because a part of your soul was destroyed, don't you?" she asked him. "I am now going to use these sticks to create a diagram of your soul. My master Thoth adores diagrams; you should see the one he created for the Tabula Smaragdina... absolutely magnificent! Well, maybe some other time."

She put down four sticks and arranged them into a square. "The first square represents your *ba*.

For a split second that word sounded completely unfamiliar, but then he suddenly remembered what it stood for. A *ba* was the part of the soul that made a person unique. It contained your thoughts and ideas, most of your personality. The *ba* was usually depicted as a person's head upon a bird's body, in fact, the tiny gatekeeper looked like she might well be someone's *ba* herself. As she put down the forth stick, they all glowed for a moment and the faint image of an eagle appeared in the square. The human head upon its shoulders was his own, and he was glad as it vanished and he didn't have to look into his own eyes anymore.

She put down another four sticks. "The second square represents your *ka*.

The image of a white dragon appeared on the square and he stared at it, mesmerized by its beauty. The *ka* was the divine life force inside the human soul, a sort of guardian spirit that protected and guided you. But different *ka* could also live in trees, rivers or

mountains and an angry *ka* could lead the soul to... no, wait, that couldn't be right! His own *ka* was Duos. The white dragon had been the *ka* that had appeared on the day the slavers had destroyed his village. What was going on here?

She put down another four sticks. "The third square represents your *ren*."

The *ren* was a person's true name. As long as your name wasn't forgotten, you continued to exist, so it was important to carve your name in stone or have it written on a *shenu*, a cartouche that you could wear around your neck.. As the four sticks glowed, he could see the hieroglyphs that spelled his name, but then they changed from hieroglyphs to a different writing... those were kanji. In kanji, it was spelled a little different, *Seto*, instead of *Set*, but it still remained the same name and suddenly he remembered that he ought to have a last name as well, but it couldn't a part of his soul anymore because he deliberately chose to forget it and cross it out of his life.

She put down another four sticks. "The fourth square represents your *sheut*."

He could see it manifest on the square for a few seconds, a shadowy silhouette of himself. The *sheut* was the shadow, it always followed you wherever you went, stuck to you like the ghost version of a living person. You couldn't exist without it, but it could exist without you...

"I don't have any sticks left," she said, "but your soul is still incomplete."

"Well, we already figured out that I don't have a heart," he said, suddenly feeling incredibly tired. "Or *ib* if you prefer that expression. Without it, I shouldn't be able to tell good from evil, so that gives me a real good excuse to simply grab you and squash you in my fist. However, without it, I shouldn't be able to feel any emotions, so I shouldn't even feel the need to grab you and squash you in my fist, which I do feel, and this proves that this entire thing is utterly pointless."

"Your task is to repair your soul," she explained, completely unmoved by his outburst, "but for now, you will simply repair the diagram of it. Add a fifth square to represent your *ib*. I have only two pieces of it, so you are only allowed to move two of the sticks."

"Hmm." He bent over the diagram. There were four squares, the first and third in the upper row, and the second and fourth in the lower row. All four were forming a kind of zigzag pattern, only touching at the corners.

Two sticks, she had said. But if he only moved one stick, he would destroy one of the squares. So he actually had to create not one, but two new squares to receive five of them in the end.

However, while you needed four sticks for one square, you didn't need an entire eight for two. Seven would do just fine, if they were next to each other and shared a wall. The space between the first and the third square was already surrounded by three sticks and so was the space between the second and fourth square. He only needed two sticks to turn them into two full squares.

"Heureka." He took the top stick from the third square to close the gap between the first and third and then the right stick of the third square to close the gap between the second and the fourth, thus eliminating the third square, but creating two new ones. "There are two solutions to be exact. I also could have taken the bottom stick and the left stick from the second square to receive the same result."

"Brilliant!" The gatekeeper gave a little skip, fluffing up her feathers. "Are you sure I can't convince you to stay?" she asked with big shiny eyes.

"Positively sure," he snapped back at her. "Now hand me the pieces."

"This door," she buzzed along the wall, forming the shape of a door in front of him, "leads out from the library into the courtyard of the temple. You'll find everything you need there. One hint for the road, though: Only one of the three statements is true. The other two are false."

* * *

Voices sounded from the outside, as he stepped through the door that had suddenly appeared in the wall as if it had always been there. He even remembered it, having walked through it many times. No, not exactly, but little Set had walked through it, while he had been a student at this temple. They often had lessons out in the courtyard, especially fighting lessons. There was one boy, Ramesse, who had even managed to beat him a few times in combat. He was quick and strong, wielding his khopesh like a deadly lightning bolt.

The only other student he considered a rival, was Mahaad. Being a personal friend of the prince, Mahaad studied at the palace most of the time, but returned to the temple once in a while to use the library or to do certain assignments for the priests. He was quite skilled in the arts of magic and had an immensely powerful *ka*, the Magician of Illusions.

After taking another step, he could see them, all three of them. Ramesse had already drawn his khopesh and assumed a fighting stance. Mahaad was talking in low soothing tones to someone or something hidden from his sight. Set stood a little to one side; he obviously hadn't decided yet what the best course of action would be.

On a balcony overhanging the courtyard a small group of priests was observing the entire scene. They were talking in low voices, watching the three students intensely.

The three of them were facing a horse.

The animal paced back and forth, nervously pawing the ground with its hooves. Its eyes bulged out in fright, its ears were drawn backwards, and layers of white foam covered its open mouth, as a whimpering sound escaped from trembling lips. "Put away your sword, Ramesse," Mahaad commanded. "There's no need to harm the poor creature."

"You have no right to order...", Ramesse began, but another sound interrupted the beginning conflict. The golden Dia-Diankh on Set's arm had suddenly snapped into action. "Diaha! Come forth, Duos!"

"Set is right, it must be an evil *ka*! That's what is paining this mare." The golden plates of Mahaad's Dia-Diankh fanned out as well. "Diaha! I summon you, my Magician of Illusions!"

"Diaha! I call upon you, Angel Knight Perseus!" Hastily, Ramesse stored his khopesh away and changed his own Dia-Diankh into fighting position.

A blue flame burst from Set's chest, almost throwing him backwards with its force. Duos was a mighty warrior, his shining wings reflecting the sunlight, the armor covering his body sparkling like blue crystal. The magician made a less spectacular entrance, simply stepping out from behind Mahaad, shadowy purple robes billowing around him. The very next moment, however, they were all bathed in feathers, as Perseus emerged from the bright white light surrounding Ramesse.

The horse took one last step and then sank to the ground unconscious, surrounded by a strange aura of red and green mist.

"Here it comes," shouted Ramesse.

A creature galloped towards the three boys. Its lower body looked exactly like the horse it had inhabited only moments before, four hooves stamping the ground and a long tail swishing through the air. But the *ka*'s upper body was that of a human man with wild fiery eyes. He was swinging a scythe at Set, who stood closest to him, but Set dodged the blow and Duos jumped in to interfere, blocking the next attack with his sword.

"Aura Sword!" Set ordered. The centaur jumped aside as the attack came and ran at the magician who had started mumbling a spell.

"Protect me!" Mahaad called to the others. "I need only a few minutes!"

"No!" Ramesse protested and Set added: "Everybody fights on his own. Winner takes it all."

"You are fools, both of you." Mahaad could only shake his head in silence as the centaur tried to grab the magician. The magician disappeared, only to reappear a few seconds later, but his spell had certainly been interrupted.

Angel Knight Perseus stepped forward to engage the centaur in combat. As they were trading blows, Ramesse, caught in the fever of battle, imitated his *ka*'s movements. "Get him, Perseus. I know you can do it!"

"No, he can't." Set sneered. "His arms are growing tired already."

"Yes, he can." Ramesse pressed his hands to his chest. "I will support him with energy from my *ba*."

"Don't use too much. It's dangerous," Mahaad warned him, but Ramesse seemed not to have heard him. Golden light flowed from his chest, was channeled through the plates of his Dia-Diankh and engulfed Perseus in power. For a few moments it seemed to work, Perseus gained in strength and drove the centaur backwards, but then after a particularly vicious blow from the scythe, Perseus dropped to his knees and so did Ramesse.

"Stop! Ramesse, your *ba* will be torn out!" Mahaad ran over to the other boy, steadying him, while his magician created a shield to protect them both. "Breathe. Just breathe. Try to withdraw your power. It helps when you think of water seeping into the ground. Withdraw it drop by drop. Yes, just like that. Everything will be all right."

"It's time that I end this!" Set raised his Dia-Diankh. "I summon Minotaurus from the temple of *weiju*."

"Two *ka* at the same time, I hope that guy knows what he's doing," Ramesse mumbled as a bright beam of light crossed the sky. Minotaurus manifested next to Duos and now both of them started attacking the centaur together.

"I know your name." Set's eyes never left the battle. "You are Kentaurus."

The centaur's weapon dropped to the ground. He turned away from Duos and Minotaurus, facing Set instead.

"That's right, I call you by your name," Set shouted. "Obey me, Kentaurus! Come to your master!"

Kentaurus struggled. He took one step into Set's direction, then suddenly reared on his hind legs, whinnying loudly. Minotaurus raised his battle axe again, but Set commanded him to hold the attack, while Kentaurus pranced around. Duos stood to the other side, watching, but not interfering.

Suddenly Kentaurus let out a high-pitched battle cry and swung his scythe at Minotaurus, who blocked the blow with his axe. But then something strange happened. Instead of continuing the fight, both *ka* stood motionless, as if they weren't able to break free from each other. A shimmering aura of light engulfed them both, so bright that everybody had to close their eyes.

As the light dissolved, both *ka* were gone. In their place stood a third *ka* with the lower body of a horse and the upper body of a minotaur. Standing taller than the other two had been, the creature was covered in mighty red and blue armor, while black smoke emerged from its bull's nostrils. Even the weapons had merged; what the new *ka* was carrying seemed to be a mixture of axe and scythe.

"Minokentaurus." Set spoke the name as coldly as if it didn't refer to a huge monster

stomping into his direction. "Get down, Minokentaurus! Obey my command!"

The monster stood right in front of him now, towering over him. Puffs of smoke protruded from his nostrils...

And then it dropped to ground at his feet. One of the priests on the balcony used a beam of power from his own Dia-Diankh to separate the creatures again and banish them back into stone tablets.

Set gave a huge sigh of relief and felt a surge of triumph fill his heart. Once again, he had won his battle. It had been him who had defeated that new *ka*. Kentaurus' stone tablet would be set up next to Minotaurus' tablet in the temple of *weiju* – his own temple of *weiju*. He now had two powerful *ka* besides his own, and they could even fuse. It was amazing. He had kept his word, he had truly become the best student at the temple.

"Wow, that was some fight." Ramesse struggled back on his feet, helped by Mahaad. "Listen, I owe you, man..."

"Think nothing of it." Mahaad smiled. "I'm going to bring the horse back to the stables now. She'll need rest after the fright that *ka* gave her."

"She probably could use some food and water, too. And she's all sweaty. We should rub her fur with straw, so she doesn't catch a cold."

"You're good with horses?"

"I learned to ride before I could walk, man. We really should go riding sometimes, how about tomorrow after lessons?"

"Yes, that's a great idea, Ramesse. Not trying to brag, but I'm not too bad a rider myself."

"Let's see how good you are when I race you around the palace..."

Set watched them leave and couldn't understand why his victory suddenly didn't feel like a victory anymore. It was as if Mahaad and Ramesse had gained something else today, something that was worth more than all the victories in the world.

Nonsense. He brushed away these strange thoughts. Those two were only looking for something to do so they didn't have to think about their defeat all the time. They were losers, both of them. Not worthy of his attention.

I'm doing it again. I'm getting all caught up in these visions.

One of the priests on the balcony was looking directly at him. Not at little Set – at him. It was ridiculous, really, the people in the visions couldn't see him. They just acted the way they had acted back then. They couldn't know about his existence, but...

The priest was still looking at him.

But the very next moment he was sure that he had imagined it because all the priests turned their attention to Set, congratulating him on his victory. He couldn't hear what they were speaking, but he didn't feel any particularly strong desire to come any closer. A few minutes later, the vision faded away entirely and he was left standing alone in an empty courtyard.

Everything was the same except for two cards lying side by side in the dust. He picked up the first one and read it:

MINOTAURUS
(Minotaur)
Battle Ox

* * * * Earth (Chi)

[Beast-Warrior]

*A monster with tremendous
power, it destroys enemies with
a swing of its axe..*

[ATK/1700] [DEF/1000]

Then he turned around, picking up the second card as well. He wasn't particularly surprised to read:

KENTAURUS
(Centaur)
Mystic Horseman

* * * * Earth (Chi)

[Beast]

*Half man and half horse,
this monster is known for its
extreme speed..*

[ATK/1300] [DEF/1550]

Two more pieces of his heart meant two new cards for his deck. It was starting to get pretty crowded in his shirt pocket, so he would have to find a new mode of transportation soon if he didn't want to get any frayed edges. Why couldn't this world have protective card sleeves as well? It would save loads of trouble.

Back in the ancient times, the door at the end of the courtyard had only lead into the large room where the priests, novices and students ate their meals together. But for some reason he was sure that this door and none other was the exit he needed. It looked like a simple wooden door, save for two crude carvings showing a centaur and a minotaur. Below each carving there was a small slot to place the card in.

No riddle this time? It seemed almost too easy. There had to be a catch.

And there was one. As soon as he had placed the cards in their respective slots, a third picture appeared on the door. It was the Minokentaurus, the fusion monster of the two. He had to be placed in the door, too. But, as of now, there was no card.

He looked around. Maybe the third card lay somewhere on the ground as well, perhaps covered by sand.

That was when he saw the three boxes. They were all different colors, and each of them had a statement written on top.

Orange Box

Minokentaurus is in this box.

Purple Box

Minokentaurus is not in this box.

Yellow Box

Minokentaurus is not in the orange box

Tsuzuku (...to be continued)

* * *

Author's note: I'm real excited if someone finds out in which box Minokentaurus is

hidden. Anyone as smart as Seto? *g*

Review Answers:

@Lace Kyoko (ffnet): Your answer is the right one *cheers*

@Barrie 18 (ffnet): Your answer is correct as well. As for Set & Atum, or Seto & Yami, I can't give you much of an answer yet. But we'll see how much of the story takes place in Ancient Egypt and how much of it in modern times.

@Selena (ffnet): Sagen wir mal so, in gewisser Weise hatten Kaiba und Yami ihre erste Begegnung schon in diesem Kapitel. Falls du aber eine Begegnung in moderner Zeit meinst, da wird es wirklich noch etwas dauern. Was nun die ägyptischen Erinnerungen angeht, so hat Kaiba sie ja in der Serie nicht, auch dafür wird es einen Grund geben. Auch die modernen Erinnerungen werden natürlich noch eine Rolle spielen.

@Tawariell: (ffnet) Yep, that answer is correct.

@FrankDark: (eTCG): Das Problem mit der Spannung ist, dass jeder, der die Serie kennt, auch irgendwo weiß wie die Geschichte endet. Ich hoffe aber trotzdem, dass es in den nächsten Folgen spannender wird, da ich einige Plots habe, die so in der Serie nicht vorgekommen sind. Wichtig ist ja nur, dass es alles am Ende wieder zusammenpasst. :-)