

Title: *Endless Loop Book 1: Color of Life*

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Well, this certainly isn't what I had in mind. I mean, the job went off without a hitch, but the pick-up's leaving a lot to be desired. It just had to be that prick and his Mini-Me, didn't it? Some god out there is certainly having a good laugh at my expense.

Someone, remind me again why I didn't take the job at Kaiba Corp when it was offered to me. Oh yeah. I decided I couldn't work for someone with a stick the size of a *tree* up his ass, so I told him where he could stick it in no uncertain terms, as well as several choice terms that the brat might collapse upon hearing, not that that's ever stopped me from using them. Of course, Tree Up His Ass Seto laughed me out of his office for the advice, but we can't always have everything.

So I ended up in a nonexclusive contract with Kame Games. As long as I don't ever, *ever* steal from the Old Man, I'm free to contract out as much I like, which admittedly is a lot. Yeah, it sounded too good to be true to me too. I didn't find out the catch till much later: the goddamn Bossling and, worse still, his Mini-Me.

I wonder where the hell the Bossling found a middle schooler who looks so much like him to hang out with. I mean, they're not twins or anything, but the resemblance is uncanny. Then again, knowing the Bossling, he probably funded the kid getting plastic surgery to look like him. Yeah, the Bossling has a bit of an ego. I should know. Mine's nearly as big, but no one's going to top the Bossling, Mister "King of Games" himself.

I guess I should have knocked before I marched myself in the boss's office, but since when do I let a little thing like manners slow me down? I've never let them bother me before, and hell, my lack thereof is half of what got me the job to start with. The Bossman usually never lets a soul in his office for longer than ten minutes, myself included, so I guess I was used to it just being him in there and assumed the pattern would hold true. Stupid of me, I know. The thief who starts assuming stuff tends to end up a dead thief, and seeing as how I rather like being alive, I'd best start breaking that bad habit fast.

I have to stand there a second and stare. Thankfully, I caught the door before it could bang open, so they don't know I'm there yet. The Bossling and his Mini-Me are playing cards on the Old Man's desk, but I can't see from here what they're playing. Color me shocked - it looks to me like Mini-Me's winning. I'll be damned. I thought no one ever beat the King of Games. No wonder the Bossling snatched him up; either he's bucking for a prot? or, more likely, he grabbed the kid up before he got good enough to enter the tournament circuit. I mean, this is the guy who beat Tree Up His Ass Seto in a duel and took the gaming title away from him. What? It's a good practice to know everything you can about your enemies, and you aren't going to find anyone else who knows quite as much about the Bossling as I do, except maybe Tree Up His Ass Seto. I don't think either of us has quite figured out the secret of the Mini-Me though. If Treeboy has anything, he's sure as shit keeping it quiet from everyone, even his staff. And yes, I have my inside sources at Kaiba Corp, and no, I'm not saying who. Wouldn't want to compromise a perfectly good source.

That, and he said if I ever breathed his name as my accomplice, he'd put his favorite dagger through the brat's and my throats. Let it not be said that I don't respond to threats, especially when they're issued by a guy who has more than one certificate showing how crazy he and his other half are. How he fooled Treeboy's personnel manager, I'll never know.

Finally, I've looked my fill (It only takes a moment or two because who'd want to look at those two for long?) and clear my throat to get their attention; Mini-Me nearly jumps out of his skin, letting a very undignified yelp escape him and dropping his cards. The Bossling just looks at me like something he'd really rather squish than look at, rolls his eyes, and deadpans, "Oh, it's you." Meaning he thought it might have been someone important. God, I hate that guy. But I've got plans for him. Granted, most of them involve the eventual use of a shovel, a fire, or lots of acid, but they're still plans!

"Where's the Old Man?" I grit out through clenched teeth.

The Bossling shrugs, not even looking up at me, while Mini-Me puts on that stupid smile of his and replies while he gathers the cards he dropped at my entrance, "We're waiting on him to show up. Yami had something to ask him."

Yeah, the Bossling does have a real name. It's not Yami though. That's some kind of weird nickname his family gave him. His real name's Atemu. I'd probably go by Yami too, since it's better than admitting your parents were some kind of Egyptian fanatics. Mini-Me probably has a real name too, but I've yet to hear anyone say it. With the Bossling, he's always "Aibou". Can I begin to describe how much that annoys me?

I opt to ignore them both and cross the room to the painting that conceals the Bossman's safe. I've lost count how many times I've told the old guy his hiding place is way too easy, but he always smiles, laughs, sometimes pats me on the head (which I hate!), and asks, "Who'd expect me to use an old trick like this?" He has a point; he was the King of Games for years before Tree Up His Ass Seto took the title, though he in turn didn't get to keep it long before the Bossling took it.

The safe's not as simple as it looks. In fact, the Old Man told me once he got security called on him when he didn't hit the tumblers in the lock at the right speed. I haven't made any mistakes like that yet, and I'm not about to fuck up now because a couple of freaks have nothing better to do than watch me. I'm not even going to give them the pleasure of seeing me twitch, even though it's making my skin crawl.

The last tumbler falls into place, and I turn the handle, opening the door. There's the envelope with my money sitting right there on top like always. I grab it and tuck it inside a pocket on the inner fold of my jacket before dropping the envelope with the plans for the newest upgrade to II's virtual system. Who'd have thought the gaming industry was so cut-throat? I'm not complaining because, hell, it's good for *my* business. Hell, I don't even play any of these games so what do I care? The brat likes some of them, though, and it pays the bills. Win-win situation, I think.

There are footsteps behind me. If I didn't always listen out for things like that, I probably wouldn't have heard one of the freaks trying to sneak up on me. Who do they think they're fooling? I ignore them for the moment to close and lock the Old Man's safe. Typically, I have a few weeks between Kame jobs, till I'm ready to either kill the brat or do something equally drastic, but usually the first week or so off is bliss. The brat'll let me sleep in, he goes to school, I get to watch the cable I'm scamming off the neighbors. It's great, the first week at least, till the brat starts whining.

Once the safe is closed up, which is thankfully a lot easier than getting it open, I climb to my feet and turn. Well, shit, they're both there. The hell? Do they time their footsteps or something? Freaks. Really, they're both freaks. Gah! How does the Old Man put up with them? Mustn't let them see how much they're getting to me!

I decide to take a page out of Tree Up His Ass Seto's book and roll my eyes exaggeratedly, trying to look bored enough to fall asleep on my feet. "Can I help you with something?"

"Kaiba Corp?" the Bossling inquires. God, I hate that. I don't think I've heard him say five words in a row to me. Not that I want him to say more than five words to me, but still!

"Did it have a Kaiba Corp label on it?" I shoot back.

Mini-Me's eyes go wide, and I could swear he's bouncing. "Is it Industrial Illusions?" I wonder if the Bossling gave him sugar or coffee or something. This kind of high *can't* be natural. I mean, the brat only got hyper like this once, and that was the time I put half a bottle of No-Doze in his cheeseburger. Of course, what happened later wasn't pleasant, but it was fun watching him bounce off stuff.

"Got it in one," I answer. "Too bad you can't share a brain with the Bossling here." Score one for me.

Mini-Me giggles like that's the funniest thing he's ever heard. Did he have laughing gas with his Cheerios or what? He's so damn happy it's scary. The Bossling just rolls his damn eyes. "Idiot."

It's so damn hard to keep my bristling purely mental. Outwardly, I smirk. "You shouldn't insult your Mini-Me like that. You might run him off."

I have the satisfaction of seeing the Bossling pale a few shades. Two points for me. Damn, I'm racking up today. I wonder if Mister King of Games is having an off day. Why am I wondering that?! I don't give a shit.

"Get out of here, thief." Well, well, I'm impressed. Five words in a row. It's a new record. And it didn't even break him to say them. "Leave before I break you." Another five. I might make a talker out of him yet. I can't hold back a snicker. Wow, was that a growl from the Bossling? Damn, I'm good.

"Yeah, yeah, Bossling, I'm gone. Later, Mini-Me." I step around them, giving them a wide berth and head for the door.

"Bye, Bakura-kun!" Mini-Me calls after me. I wave vaguely over my shoulder, still snickering to myself.

I pull the door closed behind me and finally let out the shudder I've been repressing. The Old Man's secretary sends me a sympathetic look. I smirk in return and mock shoot myself in the head, which makes her laugh. "Bossling's gonna be in a mood," I mention, leaning on her desk.

"Did you antagonize him again, Bakura-san?"

I let out a nasty little chuckle. "Just a bit." I glance at the door and stand. "I'm leaving now before he deigns to emerge. Later."

"Ah, Bakura-san? Is Ryou-kun going to be home tonight?"

I shrug. "He'd better be. I don't want to have to eat leftover Thai again." I raise an eyebrow in question. "Test coming up?"

She nods gravely. "I don't need to fail another one."

See, this is why I quit bothering to go to school. It takes up too much time, and then there's the whole studying crap. It's so stressful too. The brat goes to school every damn day it's in, though, and he's welcome to it. Even if I am the one paying for it. "I'll tell him you'll be by, Miho."

What? She's the brat's friend, so I need to be halfway nice to her. He gets pissy when I'm mean to his friends, and I don't fancy being locked out of my own apartment. "Bye, Bakura-san."

I make a beeline for the elevator. Really, I don't want to be there when the Bossling gets over himself enough to come out of the Old Man's office. I'm not running from him or anything, though! It's... a strategic retreat. Yeah. Plus I have to hurry or I'll miss the bus that runs by the apartment. So I'm not running away. Really.

The door's unlocked when I get home. How many times have I told him not to do that? How many more times do I have to tell him? And it's not that he forgets! I mean, we're in the habit of locking every door, even our bedroom doors or the bathroom door when it's just the two of us! No, the brat just unlocks it a few minutes before I get home, damn nearly every time. It's not as weird as it sounds. The brat almost always knows who's at the door or who's on the phone. It's just a shame we can't turn his little talent to more... practical uses, like helping me out on jobs. Not that I'm ever letting him go on a job with me, even if he asked, but it's still an entertaining thought. But, really, he needs to quit unlocking the door like this! There's no guarantee someone won't just waltz in, or the old bastard might not show up, or -

"Welcome home, niisan!" the brat chirps from the kitchen. At least we're going to having a real meal tonight, if what I'm smelling is any indication. "How did everything go today?"

I toe off my shoes at the door, making extra sure to lock it and put the chain on before heading to the kitchen. "How many times do I have to tell you not to unlock the door before I get here?"

"Hello, niisan." Do I detect a note of chiding in his voice? Is he my mom or my brother? Jeez.

"Fine, fine. Hello, brat. Now, the door?" I snap.

"No one was going to be coming by here before you so it was okay."

I glare at his back as he stands at the counter chopping vegetables and wander over to snatch a carrot and use it to point at him. "Look. You're not 100% correct all the time, brat. One of these times, you're going to be wrong, and who'll I get to take your place? Trained slave labor isn't cheap or easy to find, you know."

"I'll be more careful, niisan." He grabs the carrot back and starts chopping it up. "Go change and wash up. It'll be ready soon."

I hesitate a second and then pat him on the head. I swear he looks like Mini-Me, about to explode in happiness. Yeah, I'm an asshole most of the time, but this is my brother, after all. He's trying to train me to be nice. The lessons are slowly taking. It's hard to unlearn years of habits, and I learned to be a jerk from the best. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Take your time. The fries are still cooking."

Magic words. He knows my weaknesses too well. Not that I have too many, but fries are definitely on the list, right up there with rare meat.

I head back to my bedroom to start changing. Glancing around the room, I can tell Ryou's been in here cleaning. Hmm, he found my hamper again. I thought I buried that thing good last time. I toss my jacket down on the bed and get the money envelope out of the inner pocket. I retrieve the lockbox from behind the false bottom of my dresser, unlock it with the key I keep hidden on the top shelf of my closet, and tuck the money away, before hiding the box and its key again. Only then do I change into jeans and a striped t-shirt, tossing my "work" clothes on top of the hamper. Ryou buys both our clothes, and he just gets two of the same thing, like our mom's mother used to do. Of course, that was a long time ago, before we quit

looking quite so much alike and before the old lady kicked it and we ended up living with Oyaji. But there's no point thinking about that asshole and ruining what's left of my day.

Well, that should be enough time for the food to finish, so I wonder back to the kitchen. Ryou's setting out plates and the food and stuff, and I go wash my hands and help out. It makes the food be available faster, so I don't really mind.

Once we're sitting down and I've finished shoveling food in my mouth like Ryou would steal it from me, he inquires again, "How did work go today?"

I grab another fry or two to munch on as I answer. "Not too bad. The Bossling and his Mini-Me were there for the delivery instead of the Old Man."

Ryou frowns at me, as much as he politely can around his mouthful of salad anyway. "You shouldn't pick on them."

"The Bossling's an asshole. Mini-Me's not too bad, for a midget on Prozac."

"Niisan!" He sounds scandalized. Another point for me. The thief's doing damn good today. "You shouldn't say stuff like that!"

I cock an eyebrow and smirk, feeling a bit smug. "Why not?"

He doesn't even miss a beat. "Because it's something Oyaji would say."

Damn. How long as the brat been saving that one up? Maybe I should be taking lessons from him. "Damn, that was cold, brat," I mutter under my breath.

"I'm sorry, niisan, but it's true." He starts gathering the plates, leaving the remainder of the fries in front of me. "Maybe if you're nicer to them, they'll be nicer to you."

I frown and stuff another fry in my mouth. "I don't want to be nice." I scowl in though. "And if Mini-Me's any sweeter," I nearly choke on the word, "we'd all die of diabetes."

"You really shouldn't call him that, though," the brat continues. "It's just mean, after all."

"He thinks it's funny though, and I don't know any other name to call him," I admit. "I'm not calling him 'Aibou' like the Bossling does."

The brat does this kind of half-freeze at the sink, glancing at me over his shoulder. "I'm sure he has a name, though, niisan."

"Yeah, sure. I'll try to find it out. Will that satisfy you?"

"Partially."

The look he gives me is loaded. Threats, bribery, pleas, cajoling, it's all there. "And I won't call him 'Bossling' as much anymore. Fine! Now are you happy?" I have to clench my fist under the table to keep my temper from really letting go. As it is, I can see a tiny bit of fear hidden well in the back of his eyes. I take a deep breath and do what I hate to do second most in this world. "Sorry, Ryou."

"I- It's okay." Damn, he's stuttering again. Now I'm starting to feel bad. I hate that.

With a sigh, I push myself to my feet and stalk over to join him at the sink. At least he's not crying or anything. Still, that was stupid of me to lose my temper on him like that. I'm still awkward at this hug thing, but I put my arms around him hesitantly and pull him a little closer. He snuffles, but that's as close to crying as he'll come. Guess we both ended a bit fucked up. "Sorry," I say again.

He nods. "It's okay, niisan." He scrubs an arm over dry eyes. "I'm all right."

I frown slightly and state, "You look like something I'd kick back on the scrap heap." I can feel the frown grow as I take in how red his face is. "You burned again."

He turns a little redder, thought this is a blush now. "I ran out of sun block."

I sigh again. "You're supposed to tell me when you're low."

"You've been working lately, and you were asleep when I got home yesterday." He stares at the dishes in the sink like they hold the answers to the mysteries of life. "I'll pick some up before school tomorrow."

"And you'll finish frying walking there," I predict direly. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you're part vampire."

"Better than getting fuzzy once a month."

It's a bit of an old joke between us. He's definitely not part vampire, and we only know one person who does the monthly fuzzy thing and that's our flatmate Jounouchi. We just figure maybe Mom did some of those funky drugs before we were born, so that's why he's so pale while I'm tan, and he know stuff before it happens, and we both have white hair, and the rest of the weird shit that is our lives.

I reach past him to retrieve the money stashed in the flour bin and start heading towards the door, snagging the last two fries as I go. "I'll be back in a bit. Stay inside, and keep the door locked this time. Miho'll be over to study with you sometime soon."

"You know, niisan, I'm not a kid anymore," he states, following me, hopefully to lock up after me. "You're welcome to stop treating me like one any day."

"I'll take that into consideration." Wow, that came out very Treeboy-ish.

He tosses one of his jackets at me. "The sun's going down. It's starting to get cold. My cell's in the right pocket. Call me if you need to. Be careful, and hurry home." He pushes me out the door and shuts it in my face. I have to laugh as I hear the lock slide home. I think I've just been evicted and I was being good for once. Irony's a sarcastic little bitch sometimes.

There's an all-night drug store a few blocks down from the apartment, and that's where I start heading. It's a fairly nice city we settled in, but it has its share of gangs, human and nonhuman, so it's never a wise idea to be too slow when walking at night, even if you're me. The brat would probably say here 'especially if you're you'. I'll admit I have a tendency to talk first and think second.

At least I make there without incident. I open the door, though, and have the distinct urge to wish for the ground to open me up and swallow me whole. Am I fucking cursed or something?

"You," the Bossling growls at me. I feel my eyes narrow. A distinctly long stream of curse words build in my mind. They're immediately followed by an image of the brat scolding me for all eternity, and I bite them back. "What're you doing here?"

Okay, screw being nice. He's being an asshole. "Stalking you obviously."

"What?" He actually looks completely baffled. So, I guess I'm up three points to the Bossling, and the night's still young.

"Don't flatter yourself. I live around the corner." I step the rest of the way in the door, letting it close behind me. The brat was right; the minute the sun went down, it got cold. "So what're you doing slumming with us commoners?"

"On my way to class."

An actual answer. Color me shocked. "Impressive. Almost a full sentence. Excuse me." I start to step past him, but he stays right behind me. What is he, my Velcro buddy now? "Help you with something?"

"Impressive. Almost a full sentence," he returns.

"Where's your better half?"

"At home where he belongs." He's still trailing me, so obviously he's not taking the hint, so I just opt to ignore him and go on with my shopping. The look on his face is great as we get to the sun block and pick out the highest strength. "What's that for?"

Years of habit makes me lie automatically to that one. "Friend of mine burns easy." I'm not about to tell the Bossling about the brat. It's not like it's any of his damn business.

It's also out of habit that I go over to the candy aisle and grab two bags: chocolate mints for the brat and dark chocolate for me. I haven't managed to shake my new shadow yet, but I guess he's not satisfied I do stuff like normal people yet. "Sweet tooth?"

"A bit." The is getting really annoying. It's like Twenty Questions or something. Of all the rotten spots of time, I had to come in when he was here. Hell, maybe I should go flip through some of the magazines till he leaves me alone. No, I should get back before the brat gets worried.

I march myself and my items to the counter. Makiko's working tonight, and she smiles at me before shooting a questioning look at the Bossling. She's used to me coming in here alone or with Ryou, and I think my new escort has thrown her for a bit of a loop, not that it hasn't done the same for me as well. She sends the Bossling a quick smile and starts ringing me up, and I toss a booster pack of Duel Monsters in for the brat. Now that gets a raised eyebrow. "I thought you didn't play."

"I don't. It's for a friend," I toss back, handing Makiko the money. Damn, did I shoot down some big hopes for the Bossling or something? For a second there, he looked like I kicked his puppy - or his Mini-Me as the case would be - then he's back to his usual bland expression. Not much gets a rise out of the Bossling. I take my change back from Makiko, grab my stuff, and turn, only to find myself pretty much nose-to-nose with the Bossling as he steps forward to drop a notebook and a pack of pens on the counter. "Excuse me, Your Highness," I growl. Hey, that's a pretty good nickname for him. It certainly suits him and his better than everyone else demeanor.

"Your friend can wait," he replies confidently, handing Makiko the exact change. And where the hell is he hiding change in leather pants? Gah, why the hell am I looking at his pants?! I have my eyes firmly fixed on my goal, the door, by the time he's got his stuff.

"Can I go now?" Patience is not a virtue I keep in good supply when he's around. I have plenty of it on jobs, but the Bossling, something about him makes me very impatient to be elsewhere, before I do something really stupid.

"Want a ride?"

I'm pretty sure my eyes are about to pop out of my head. What is this: the freaking Twilight Zone? I'm waiting for Rod Sterling to make a voiceover, and His Highness starts to smirk. Damn, I think he just gained back some of those points he lost to me. It's not often I'm flabbergasted. "I'll pass," I finally manage to get out. "It's only a couple of blocks."

Behind us, Makiko clears her throat and, once we're both looking at her, speaks. "They were saying something on the radio earlier about there being a lot of gang activity going on tonight."

The Bossling glances back at me, an eyebrow sardonically raised. "Sure about that ride?"

I flip him off. "Don't push your luck, asshole." He's so annoying. Damn. "I should have taken that job at Kaiba Corp," I mutter to myself, only half aware I'm thinking aloud now as I walk to the door, my new shadow trailing me like... well, like a shadow.

"You'd hate it. Kaiba's a complete asshole."

Holy shit. That's more than I've ever heard from him at once. And how does he know so much about Tree Up His Ass Seto?

I whirl to stare at him in shock, and that's probably what saves my life.

I hear the glass exploding before I actually see it. The first piece hits me, though, and I hit the floor, grabbing the Bossling's wrist and pulling him with me as I go. His Highness looks like he's never seen anything like this before in his life. Hell, I don't think I've ever seen anything like this in *my* life, and I've seen some pretty weird shit over my short lifespan thus far. Glass is still flying, and there's some weird electricity stuff jumping through the air as well, making the lights flicker dangerous then go out, plunging us into darkness, except for what's coming from the... lightning? Electricity? Not the time to wonder about it. Previous experience, however limited, says to get a solid object between myself and the danger. I tug the Bossling's wrist and drag him with me behind an aisle. Well, toss him down an aisle and follow quickly, accidentally slamming my back up against one of the shelves in the process. "Shit..."

"What the hell is that?" he finally explodes. I think the brat would call that a stage whisper; it's soft, but I can hear him over the crackle of electricity and things exploding in the store. Sounds like he's recovered nicely - and he's picked up some of my more interesting speech patterns as well.

"Off-hand, I'd say either we're having some damn freaky weather tonight or there's a witch having a spastic fit nearby." Even - no, *especially* in stressful situations, sarcasm is our friend.

"Oh, it's definitely the latter." I nearly jump out of my skin at the sound of Makiko's voice. I look up, and she's standing just past the Bossling. Damn, I didn't even realize I tossed him further down the hall, and thereby further from danger, than I positioned myself. The hell? I guess my body thought he was the brat and needed protecting and - And why is Makiko staring at me like I've grown a second head or something? "You're bleeding," she quietly states. Hmm, she must be better at this stage whisper thing than Yami - I mean, the Bossling; it's almost like I can hear her in my head.

I look down, and my left hand is cut to hell and back. I must be running on adrenaline because - Well, *now* I'm feeling it, of course. "Oww, fuck." It's not too hard to restrain myself to that because, you guessed it, it's habit.

The Bossling follows my gaze, and he goes pale. Great, I'm the one that's bleeding, and he's the one that's going to pass out. Maybe my body knew what it was doing, assuming he was like the brat. Or then again, maybe not. He looks... less sickened and more pissed off. Interesting. I've heard of going white with anger, but I don't think I've ever seen it before. "What happened to you?"

And he's being an asshole again. And he claims Treeboy's bad? I wonder if he's looked in the mirror lately. "I cut myself shaving. What the hell do you think happened? In case you haven't noticed, there's glass and shit everywhere!" Sometimes, I think the brat may be right and I'm a testy little bastard when I'm in pain, but just sometimes. After all, I'm a testy bastard most of the time anyway, I'm proud to admit.

Something clatters to the floor next to the Bossling, and this time we both nearly jump out of our skins. I almost have to laugh at the expression on his face; I would, except that I'm sure it's probably on mine as well. If I wasn't in pain, I'd be in stitches. Stitches... Oww, I hope I don't have to have those. I hate stitches. "It's raining first-aid kits," His Highness comments dryly.

I'm already reaching over him to seize it. "Don't knock it. I can live with medical boxes from heaven." It's kind of... interesting trying to do this one-handed, but it wouldn't be the first time. It probably won't be the last. And Makiko needs to stay still and out of the way before she gets hurt. I mean, I don't believe in medical boxes from heaven, so she's the most likely source. And there she is, at the far end of the aisle. I nod my thanks to her and go back to bandaging up my hand, with the Bossling's help, surprisingly enough. I guess this isn't going to be a good thing job-wise. At least it should be a little while before I have another scheduled Kame job come up, but these hands are my money-makers. The brat and I can't long afford for them to be stiff. I can hope it won't wind up being too bad anyway.

As suddenly as the lightning started, it stops again, leaving us in darkness. The air smells like ozone. The Bossling wrinkles his nose; I guess the smell doesn't agree with him either. Cautiously, I push myself to my feet, ignoring the critical way I'm being stared at. It's not like I'm going to fall over the minute I stand up. Then again, I might if I let go of this shelf any time soon. A hand grabs my elbow, to steady me I guess, and I follow it up to see, yep, it is attached to the Bossling. Well, what do you know? Maybe he's not *too* much of an ass.

"I'm taking you to the hospital." I thought too soon, I guess. He finally starts talking, and it's to order me around, like he is some sort of princeling, like I'm his damn Mini-Me. "You need that hand looked at."

"I've got someone at home who can handle it." Now that's the truth. The brat's gotten more than proficient at first-aid over the years. And really, the Bossling's pissing me off enough that moving is a lot less of a problem. I think I'm going to bruise from hitting that damn shelf, though. I'll just check on Makiko then head home. The brat will fuss at me a while, and I'll put His Highness out of my head for the next few weeks.

"Then I'm taking you home," he continues, giving my elbow a tug. Damn, I didn't even realize he was still holding on to me. "I've got a car outside."

He's all but dragging me out the door, and I don't have much choice, it seems, but to let him. I don't think I could get my elbow back at this point unless I do what he wants - or cut off my arm. While neither of those prospects are appealing, I'll have to go with the first one. "Do you think your car even still works after all this?"

He's silent, but that's because he's managed to drag us to said car and his driver is explaining the electricity did... something to the car and it doesn't run anymore. What? I don't drive, so I don't know

anything about cars except gas makes them go. I'm trying to save up and maybe get the brat one or something and *then* I'll learn about them, but in the meanwhile...

In the meanwhile, I fish the brat's cell phone out of my coat pocket as well as I can with the Bossling hanging off my arm like I'm his last link to sanity, which is rather amusing given my own tenuous grip on it. Well, the phone's definitely had it (or it needs to cut back to a pack a day, since it's definitely smoking), so I guess I'm going to have to surprise the brat. Well, shit. Might as well get this over with.

I march to the end of my human tether and give the Bossling a sharp tug of my own, unbalancing him for all of a minute. That's what he gets for wearing boots with heels anyway. The completely confused expression on his face is great, though. I'll have to save it to review later. I can always use something new to laugh at; I think I've just about exhausted that mental image of Tree Up His Ass Seto in a French maid outfit. Don't ask, really. Tequila was involved. I just wish I could claim I was drunk tonight. Anyway, before I can start to talk myself out of this...

"Come on. You can call another car from my place." And there it is: out in the open. His Highness looks about as pole-axed as I feel, which is another good one to add to my mental collection.

To his credit, he doesn't ask if I'm sure - and I'm not too certain what my answer would be - and merely says, "Lead the way." I'll note he still hasn't let go of my elbow. He doesn't seem to notice, and I think I'll just wait and see.

It's eerily quiet walking back. I guess I'm used to Ryou's chatter when I actually have company on these walks and my own plotting when he's not with me. What? You don't get to be as great as I am without some scheming along the way. Lately, though, a lot of my scheming has involved the man walking next to me, a knife (sharpness is entirely optional), and lots of bleeding on his part. Have I mentioned lately how much he gets on my fucking nerves? Yeah, it gets that bad.

I never thought I'd ever be so glad to see the apartment house. Even when he isn't saying anything, His Highness is a nerve-wracking bastard. And generally, it gets worse once he opens his mouth. "You live *here*?" Case in point.

"Sorry, they were all booked uptown. You'll have to stand it a few minutes."

It's actually a pretty nice place. I could wish we live on a lower floor, but that's just about my only complaint with it. A lot of people won't live here because there are a few Weres, vamps, and witches living here, but they're actually a pretty good lot. There's one witch on the floor below ours, Mana, who's definitely on my permanent good list. She's patched me up almost as many times as Ryou. But this is Japan, and while otherworldly creatures are legal, following America's lead, they're still different and different is still bad in Japan.

"Do we not pay you enough?" the Bossling is saying. Why am I having the urge to kick him in the ass for my neighbors' sake? Not that I don't get the urge to kick his ass frequently, but still, I don't usually get charitable impulses. Don't tell anyone.

"Shut up, Bossling, or you're walking the rest of the way back to your house." Never mind that he could just walk back to the broken-ass car and wait with the driver for the police, but I'm not reminding him of that. He's the one that should have to remember such things for himself. "And while you're at it, ease up on my arm a bit before you put it out of commission too."

His Highness doesn't even blink an eye, though his grip does loosen a bit. Good, since I do need that hand, to punch up the elevator if nothing else, and hit the button for the sixth floor. Okay, maybe I shouldn't complain about us living on the sixth floor of a thirteen story complex, but it would make a quick

escape rather difficult - and I'm not trusting Mana to remember how to do a flying spell correctly without giving us permanent wings or rabbit ears or something equally screwy. She still isn't nearly as talented (or controlled) as her brother Mahaado, but she works nicely in a pinch. Most of the time. Unless she's had sugar. Then the world needs to fear.

The elevator works its way up to our floor soundlessly. His Highness hasn't said another word, and I'm not starting a conversation with the likes of him, arrogant ass-

"It looks like someone tore mirrors out of here." Whoa, did *he* just try to start a conversation in some weird princeling way? I'll be damned, hopefully not literally.

"Vampires don't cast reflections," I explain slowly. "The landlord didn't want to insult any of his tenants by leaving them up." I remember thinking at the time it was a very Japanese thing to do, not pointing out people's difference directly. Indirectly, however, is a whole other thing.

The doors slid open to our floor. I guess I should be glad Ryou isn't waiting right outside them. Then again, our door isn't too far from them. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he's laying in wait for me or something. On that note, I wonder if I should warn the Bossling about Ryou or about his secretary being in there, but no, I want to see his reaction. This is going to be great. I wonder if he'll do that strange squawking sound Miho did or, better still, something like that confused cat sound that Jounouchi did.

I have my hand up (as much as I can, mind you, with a princeling hanging off my arm) to knock when Ryou flings the door open. Hell, even *I* jump at that one. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Yami - *the Bossling* - go white like he's just seen a ghost. Ryou stares at the man behind me and his hold on my elbow, apparently trying to decide if I need help or if His Highness is trying to kidnap me or something. He reaches his decision at last, locks his eyes on me, and demands, "What happened?"

"Inside, brat, not on the front stoop."

He fixes the Bossling with a look that I would be proud to send him, but he moves out of the way so we can come in. Miho's in the living room, presumably still going over stuff for school since I don't hear the television or music going. She's got her eyes trained on the book in her lap, staring so hard she doesn't even seem to notice us behind her. The Bossling is starting to regain some color in his face and stares at the back of Miho's head questioningly before following Ryou and me into the kitchen.

The Brat's got me dropped in a chair before I can blink, making the Bossling release me or be dragged down also. He opts for letting go and sinking more leisurely in the other chair. "Why's Nosaka-san here?"

Ryou doesn't even blink. Or maybe he does. It's hard to tell when he's rooting around under the sink for our personal first-aid kit. Either way, he doesn't miss a beat as he answers, "Miho-san's in my math class. I'm helping her study." He stands back up, box in hands, and brings it over to set it down on the table next to me. "So what happened this time?"

"Hell if I know." He fixes me with a rather stern look. "What? I don't know. Some witch was having spazzes, lots of electricity, stuff blew up, the end."

"Should I call downstairs?" he asks, unwinding the rather shoddy bandaging job His Highness and I did.

I shrug. "I doubt Mana'd know anything, and Mahaado's out of town for another three days." What can I say? It pays to keep up with people's movements, especially the man who added some sort of magical extra layer of protection on the building. Don't ask me to explain. I just know no one who wants to hurt anyone in here can even get in the front door. Damn useful, if a bit limited, I think.

"Bakura," the Bossling pipes up. I glance over at him in annoyance, vaguely noting Ryou looking up as well. He focuses on me, making it clear which one of us he's speaking to. "Are you going to explain, or do I need to start guessing?"

Ryou frowns across the table. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Mutou Yami," he answers. He sounds like he's introducing a god, and I have to roll my eyes; it's a biological imperative.

Ryou glances over at me, and I mouth out 'Bossling'. "Oh, so *you're* him." I've taught him so well. I'm so proud. I didn't know the brat could do such a dry tone. "You need to to work on your first-aid skills a bit, I think." And there goes that wonderful dryness as he starts getting self-conscious. "I'm Bakura Ryou, by the way."

Crimson eyes turn back to me. "Then you are?"

I shrug nonchalantly. "Just Bakura." I smirk. "You could always do like Jounouchi-kitty and call me 'thief', if you absolutely need a first name. Otherwise, I don't have one."

"And the two of you are brothers then?"

"Twins," the brat volunteers. I would be speaking up, probably with something sarcastic and probably involving pod people, but of course, His Highness timed his question to the exact moment that Ryou starts putting on the butterfly sutures, and I'm too busy hissing because it hurts! "Niisan's older, though. Do you have any brothers or sisters, Mutou-san?" Have I mentioned that Ryou babbles when he's nervous? When Malik's around, he doesn't shut up.

"I have a younger brother, Yuugi."

I finally rally myself away from the brat's work to deadpan, "So that's Mini-Me's name. And I was starting to think it really was 'Aibou', after all." Hey, did I make him growl again? The thief is definitely on a roll.

He's still growling when he speaks. "Why does Aibou like you?"

Hmm, that sounds like a rhetorical question, but I've never let that stop me. "Because of my charming personality, I'm sure."

"That's what they're calling it these days?" I will not flip him off. I will not flip him off. I will not flip him off. "I thought it was just plain stupidity." I flip him off, and he smirks.

"At least I don't act like I have a stick up my ass," I turn in my chair to eye him speculatively, "or dress like a boy slut. I mean, the collar alone..."

"Niisan!" Ryou's looking scandalized again. Not that *that's* a shock or anything.

It's taking everything I've got to keep my face straight. "Come on, brat. Even you have to admit the collar just screams 'Dominate me,' don't you think?"

"I think you have way too much time on your hands, niisan." He finishes winding the gauze around my hand and tapes it in place. I spare a glance over my shoulder; I think the Bossling's turning his fourth or fifth shade of red and is now progressing to purple. Hey, pretty soon he should match his hair. That should be interesting.

Once the brat's finished with my hand, I turn the rest of the way in my chair, prop my hands on the table, and smirk at the Bossling. "The phone's on the counter behind you. Go ahead and call whoever you need to pick you up."

And yeah, I'll admit to being shameless enough to eavesdrop. The brat tries to make himself too busy putting a band-aid on one of the worse cuts on my cheek to be listening, but you'd have to be a complete idiot or blind to miss his interest.

There's this weird buzzing in the back of my head, kind of like a hundred pissed off bees flying around my head at once. It's not a pleasant sensation, I don't like it, and I'd like it to stop! Now! I let my head drop down on my uninjured hand and will it to stop. Not that it works, of course, but it was worth a shot. And I can feel the weird look His Highness has fixed me with, but he does that regularly so I'm used to it. "What's your problem now?" I wonder if he hung up the phone first or if he's just covering the mouthpiece. I'm not curious enough to look up though. The Bossling's not *that* interesting. An intriguing distraction, maybe, but not interesting enough to get my mind off that damned noise. Thinking of it makes it like a hammering - or rather, a pounding against the side of my skull.

I find myself on my feet, though I can't say I remember standing, and following Ryou to the front door. When exactly did my body decide to go on a field trip without me? Better still, why is the brat humoring it? Or is it following him? I'm seriously fucking confused. Of course, the Bossling looks a lot more puzzled than I feel. Don't look at me; even if I *could* explain, that doesn't mean I *would*, not to him.

Ryou opens the door before I have the chance to say something either way (close it or open it) and before the person can even knock, and Makiko's standing on the other side. She looks... different somehow since I last saw her. And how the hell does she know where we live? I never breathed a word about the apartment to her, and I damn well know the brat wouldn't have mentioned it. "What're you doing here?"

"There was nowhere else I could go. Besides, I have a favor to ask of you."

Me? A favor? I thought everyone knew me better than... Wait a minute. Ryou's staring about a foot too far to the left, and Yami's looking at me like I've lost it, so... Shit. Fuck. Damn it. I was hoping to have left that in Tokyo as well. I guess not though. Damn. "What?"

"These attacks are only going to keep getting worse until the new Master of the City is found." Of course. Everything comes down to the missing Master. It's been three months since the previous Master met with his rather, umm, spectacular ending, and the new Master has yet to put in an appearance or so much as put his foot down on all the Were activity. Not that the previous one did that much about the Were problem, but at least he could be bothered to keep them from outright warfare in the streets.

"You want me to find him?"

She nodded. "Yes, please. And -"

"Make him start doing his job?" I guess next. This isn't exactly brain surgery after all.

She smiled faintly. "Again, yes. There is no excuse for this to happen." Now, that I can't disagree with. The whole city is suffering because some bastard won't get off his ass and do his job.

"I'll do it." Not that I have much of a choice. I know how this goes: either I do it now of my own free will or I do it later after more pressuring than anyone is meant to endure. It's easier - and a lot less of a headache - to just agree now. Forgive me, but I tend to be rather pragmatic in such matters. It's better in the long run.

She bows low. Much lower, and she would be kissing carpet. She straightens again quickly and smiles for real. "Thank you."

And she's gone. I swear, I'm never going to get used to that misty dissolve into the hereafter. It's damn creepy.

Well, at least the buzzing in my head's died down. The brat pushes the door closed as I back into the living room and collapse into one of the chairs. Has -? Nope, Miho *still* hasn't looked up yet. She must be direly close to failing if all this has yet to disturb her. Hell, she hasn't fallen asleep sitting up, has she? Nope, her eyes are moving and, look, she just turned a page! I could probably go down on the Bossling right now and she'd never notice. Not that I'm going to! I was speaking figuratively, really. I promise, all my plans involving the Bossling feature his death - and quite a few are rather messy. The brat and kitty would not approve since they'd have to clean up the mess. Then again, maybe if I kill him away from the apartment... Wouldn't want to risk messing up Mahaado's protection spell, after all. Though if some of Mana's more spectacular fuck-ups haven't killed it, maybe me killing Yami won't either. And wow, I'm rambling worse than Ryou when he's around Malik's more psychotic half. Not that Malik isn't psychotic enough on his own, but his other half is enough to make even me shudder, much less the brat. And I'm still rambling, aren't I? This happened last time I was around such a focused ghost - and the last time I got a concussion, but I think it's the former this time. I guess that explains her zipping around the store like she was despite all the glass.

"...Niisan?"

Whoops, looks like the brat's been trying to get my attention a while. "Yeah?"

"Who was it?"

I rub at my temples, halfway hoping it'll help, and answer absentmindedly, "Makiko."

"We left Makiko at the store."

"Makiko-san's dead?!"

The Bossling and the brat glance over at each other, realizing they spoke at the same time. Other circumstances, it might be hilarious, but right now... I can't hold back a snicker. Actually, it's still pretty damn funny right now. Not quite 'laughing till I freak everybody out' funny, but still amusing. Not 'picturing Oyaji's face when he found out we'd vanished' funny and more 'switching the salt and sugar on Ryou at breakfast' amusing. Not - Damn, I'm rambling again. Shit. I hate it when I do that. I really do. At least it wasn't too bad this second time around.

"Yeah, Makiko's dead," I answer Ryou, opting to ignore the Bossling for now. He can stand to learn the world doesn't revolve around him. I think it'd be fun to take him down a few pegs, and it sounds like a job I'd enjoy doing.

"Since when?" Hmm, keep ignoring him? Nah, this should be interesting.

"Since it started raining first-aid kits." The brat's giving me one of his looks he so likes to do when I'm being more of a sarcastic ass than normal. Like that's ever made a difference in my behavior, except to make it worse sometimes. And the brat *knows* it does that too, which is what makes it so amusing. "You didn't really think it came from heaven, did you?"

The look the Bossling's giving me could fry meat. Good thing looks can't kill, right? Otherwise, I'd be six feet under, pushing up daisies, right now, via His Highness. And the brat, he looks like if it was possible to die from embarrassment, he'd be kicking up flowers right now as well. By the way he's eyeing the

couch, I think he's trying to will himself beneath it. "Niisan..." he groans, and I smirk, all too ready to make the situation worse when we hear the door open and close.

My smirk drops, and I give Ryou what I hope passes for an evil glare with me as out of it as I am now. "You didn't lock it?"

"I knew he'd be home soon too."

Times like this make me regret my promise to myself to never hurt the brat. He's just asking for a swift pop on the back of the head. Not even hard enough to really hurt, but just let him know he's getting on my nerves. Stupid promise.

Silence stretches a long moment before I feel myself start to crack. "Lock the fucking door!" I snap.

"Oh yeah! Thanks!" I hear all the locks slide home.

I heave out a sigh. We have such an absentminded housecat. Not that he's a *real* housecat, mind you, but he's as close to one as he can get and still be human - most of the time. Domino's such a strange town. We moved here to get away from all the weird and bad shit that was going down in Tokyo, and within a week, we had a wereleopard for a pet. But we did end up with him - and he's good company for the brat when I'm on jobs - and between the two of them, they manage to keep the place decently clean and feed us respectably tasty food - and no matter how absentminded he is, I can think or plan or just plain plot better with him around. If I didn't know the situation we got him out of, I'd think we got the better end of the deal.

"Shoes!" the brat calls out a second later. Really, we have this routine down a bit too well.

"Thanks, Ryou!" Two heavy thumps follow, his motorcycle boots hitting the floor.

And at *that*, Miho *finally* looks up. "Jounouchi-kun! You're finally home!" What? Was she using our living room as a stalking ground, a prey zone? Lying in wait for our kitty? And if I don't stop now, I'm going to get pissed on top of... woozy, whatever the hell it is that I am now.

Jounouchi looks distinctly uncomfortable, if the put-out expression on his face and the way he's edging towards the brat is any indication. Miho seems oblivious, the brat looks like he feels trapped, and the Bossling appears to be confused and thinking on something hard enough to, hopefully, break his brain. A guy can hope at least.

All in all, the situation in my living room is starting to resemble a bad anime, one of those horrid situational comedies Mana's always watching. And I swear to you, if she walks in that door right now, I'm swan-diving off the balcony with an anvil attached to my ankle, like something off those stupid cartoons that creep Pegasus watches - and has playing throughout his entire building, even after hours. I can personally attest for that one. Pegasus J. Crawford is a freaky, freaky man.

Somewhere behind me, I hear a loud, put-on sigh, and for once it's not Ryou's. "Nosaka-san, don't you have somewhere to be?" I'll be damned. The Bossling speaks. "Since you have to *be* at work at seven-thirty tomorrow?"

Miho looks away from Jounouchi and slowly goes white. I guess she really did miss the fact her boss' son (grandson? I need to find that part out.) was right in the room with her. "Mu- Mutou-san?" Please, someone, don't let her pass out. I don't want to have to wait long enough for her to wake up to get my apartment cleared out. She ducks into a quick bow and snaps back up before I can wonder if she's out for the count. "O- of course, Mutou-san. Bye, Jounouchi-kun, Ryou-kun, Bakura-san." And she's out the door like someone's shooting at her.

The second the door closes behind her, Jounouchi lets out a loud sigh of relief and comes out from hiding

behind Ryou, which was actually rather amusing since Jounouchi-kitty's several inches taller and broader than the brat. Ryou's just not a good person to hide behind, unless you're Mini-Me and even that's a maybe. It's his scrawny chicken legs, really.

"What happened, Dorobou?" I blink over at Jounouchi. What? People always think I'm joking about him calling me 'thief'. He called me that the first time we met, and he's called me that ever since. I'm just surprised he called me that in front of the Bossling. Apparently, silence on my part in situations like these can be - and usually is - taken as a sign of a lack of understanding. "What happened to your hand?"

"Glass." I'm hoping to again avoid a long, drawn-out explanation this time. I really need to get to work on this problem Makiko's left me with.

A frown settles heavily on his face. "What'd you hit?" I swear, instead of a younger brother and a housecat, I have two mothers.

I return the frown in kind. "A door, and it hit me." I can see the next questions as his mouth starts to open. "Witches, and no, I don't know which coven."

Okay, damn it, I need to think, and I need to do it now. I squint my eyes closed and try to concentrate on the problem at hand. This would be a lot easier if they would quit moving around! Finally I hear someone settling on the couch, someone collapsing in the chair opposite mine, and a warm weight settling at my feet, a head in my lap. I barely think about it as I start going through what needs to be done. Now if I could just tune their talking out. At least Jounouchi-kitty's quiet, excepting a ragged-sounding purr. I hadn't noticed I'm petting his hair, but we've been doing stuff like this since he pretty much moved in two years ago. Okay, so what are the Bossling and the brat whispering about?

"When did Jounouchi-kun start wearing leather?"

Wait a minute! That was the Bossling talking! How the hell does he know our housecat?

I can hear the suspicion in Ryou's voice as he answers, "As long as I've known him, so at least two years." If I know my brother, his eyes are narrowing. Tree Up His Ass Seto call this his 'rabid bunny' expression. "Why?"

"Last time I saw him, he didn't."

The hell?

"When was that?" Thank you, Ryou, for asking for me.

"About three years ago. He and Aibou used to hang out."

Beneath my hand, I can feel Jounouchi-kitty stiffen slightly, and I know one of my eyebrows has shot up to my hairline, but I force myself to tune them out and work out something vaguely resembling a plan. Only thing is, I'll need a vampire's opinion. I'm not on good terms with the ones in the building ever since the Toaster Incident, and the only other vamp I know is Treeboy. Oh well, I guess I know where I'm headed next.

So why am I standing outside Kaiba Mansion half an hour till dawn? Okay, scratch that. I know why I'm here. I'm just not quite sure why I'm not here alone. Scratch that too. I know why Jounouchi-kitty's here: (1) there's only one of me and all Treeboy's guards are vamps, so a Were should even the odds, and (2) he has a bit of a crush on Tree Up His Ass Seto for reasons I'm sure I don't understand. And it's not like this is the first time he's snuck into Treeboy's house.

But why the hell is the Bossling here?! Apparently, he refuses to cotton on to the fact we're trying to ditch him. Is he bored or something? Didn't I read once that spoiled little rich boys like to hang out with the bad elements (and the kitty and I definitely fit *that* bill) for fun and thrills? Maybe breaking into another little rich boy's house with us fits *that* bill for His Highness.

Of course, even with the Bossling here, breaking in is a piece of cake. What else was it supposed to be with a master thief and a wereleopard working together? I hope he's enjoying his grand adventure at our expense. Still, he's not *too* much of a hindrance, and it makes up for one of my hands being out of commission. It's a good thing I'm not left-handed is all I have to say, because His Highness is *not* convenient to have around. Though, watching him walk between Kitty and me, I have to admit he's not exactly hard on the eyes. He does nice things for all that leather...

It's a good thing Kitty knows where we're going because I think I got a little distracted there. Then again, like I said, he's been here before. How many times? Five or six dozen, I think. He gets bored easily, and if it's close to morning or already day, he zips over here. Security's pitiful during the day.

It makes me wonder, though, just how old Treeboy is. Usually only really old vamps are elitists like this, only having vamp guards, not to mention he'd have had to have been grandfathered into the legal system since he looks about our age. But, at the same time, I know he was in the brat's school till about fifteen months ago - and I always make damn sure Ryou goes to day classes. I guess I don't know as much about Tree Up His Ass Seto as I should. Most of what I *do* know is secondhand knowledge from the brat and Kitty, and I just found out enough to steal from him and left it at that. Why do I have a feeling I'm going to regret that some time soon? I really don't like that feeling, mind you. It's right up there with guilt for Most Hated Emotion.

Kitty circles us around to the back of the house and leads us a back door. If it weren't so close to daybreak, I'd say this is too damn easy. Any sensible vamp would already be tucking themselves away from the light after all. Kitty's already assured me, though, we've got half an hour to forty-five minutes before Treeboy's unconscious though. Sounds like Domino's favorite prick likes to try to outlast the dawn. I thought he's supposed to be intelligent. Maybe stubbornness counteracts brains. I don't know. I *do* know if I don't start concentrating, I'm going to start nicking Treeboy's stuff and we'll lose his help before we even gain it. I can't help it. I chose to become a professional thief because I'm a bit of a kleptomaniac. Just a bit. I *can* control it if I have to. Really. Promise.

Finally, Jounouchi-kitty stops outside a door and speaks so softly that I almost don't hear him. "He's usually in here working till he's just about to pass out." Yeah, and even I can hear keys clacking on the other side of the door.

"I hope you *have* some idea what you're going to say to him," His Highness murmurs.

I hope I do too. I push the doors open and stride in the room like I own the place, though. Confidence is everything in this business, after all, and I have an abundance of that. The clack of the keys stops immediately, and exhausted blue eyes glare at us. "What the hell do you want?" he snarls, not even a hint of fang. Impressive. I'm told it usually takes years, even decades, for most of them to learn that trick; it's even more impressive if my guess is right and he was only turned a bit over a year ago or so. Then again, Tree Up His Ass Seto's always been a paragon of control. And he's still waiting on one of us to answer, and I guess it'll have to be me.

I flop down in a chair opposite him, making myself as comfortable as possible before answering. "I need to know how to find the Master of the City." Never let it be said I beat around the bush... and I think His Highness is going to hurt himself if he hits himself in the face like that too often.

I think I just managed to throw Treeboy for a bit of a loop. Yep, I'm definitely on a roll tonight. He recovers quickly, though. "The Master of the City died three months ago. He took a dive out a skyscraper window at dawn if you'll recall."

What did I tell you? Definitely in the realm of a spectacular end, don't you think? "That's the previous Master," I counter. "I'm looking for the current one. You know: the one who's MIA? I need to know how to find him."

Wow, and I thought he looked suspicious before. "Why are you looking for him?"

Damn. I hate 'why' questions, especially when they're directed at me. If I'm not completely honest, though, he won't help, if he's willing to at all. "Everyone's going completely apeshit without the Master keeping order. They're going to war in the streets."

He rolls his eyes. "Everyone knows that. There's been some injuries, but it's not like a bystander's been killed."

Ah, an opening! "Tonight one was. It'll just get worse from here on out."

Jounouchi-kitty leans his arms down on the desk. "We're all older brothers here." Wait... we are? I definitely need some more intel on Kaiba Seto, and I need it yesterday. "Don't you want to make the city safer for Mokuba?"

So there is a chink in Treeboy's emotional armor. I should have known Kitty'd be the one to know it too. "It wasn't particularly safe for him under the previous Master." I'm missing something here, and I do *not* like it. "What makes you think a new Master will make any difference?"

Kitty shrugs. "*Make* him make a difference." Like it's the simplest thing in the world. Maybe to him, it is. He tends to take the bald-faced approach to everything and make it work for him. Well, for him it works. The rest of us, however, have to complicate our lives.

Treeboy lets out a soft sigh, steepling his fingers and resting his forehead against them a moment. "I'll ask around tomorrow - tonight and see if anyone knows anything."

"There has to be some kind of rite of succession." I didn't... Kitty didn't... Holy shit, that was the Bossling! "There must be some sort of standardized way of choosing. Otherwise, someone would have seized control by now." Okay, maybe, *maybe*, it'll be worth keeping the Bossling around. I hadn't even considered that. Perhaps he's smarter than he looks, not that that's a stretch or anything.

Guess he got Treeboy's attention too. He looks mildly surprised, which would be a 'What the fuck?!' expression on a normal person, before clicking a few things on his laptop and typing something down. Apparently, he's not one for a pen and paper list. Then again, this is the head of Kaiba Corp, one of the biggest technology and gaming businesses in the world today; pen and paper is probably Stone Age for him. "So we're probably looking for someone the previous Master tapped to be his successor," he thinks aloud.

His Highness drops in the seat next to mine. "It might even be someone he turned himself especially for that purpose."

A cold chill runs through me. It's a feeling I definitely recognize. If you're around something enough, you definitely will remember it, and I damn well know spirits. Until tonight, it may have been two years since I've been around them - let alone have one go through me again - but I recall the sensation well. It's not exactly something one forgets. Usually, though, it's not nearly this cold: a November breeze, maybe, not an Artic chill. And since the spirit in question seems to quite content to hover somewhere over Seto's right shoulder and hum some kind of happy buzzing noise, all I can guess is it's a vampire's soul - and not Kaiba's. So it's true then, and they do die at dawn.

Yami's hand feels hot on my arm as he pushes me back into my chair. I hadn't even realized I'm shivering hard enough to start curling up on myself. It's getting better though. I'm starting to feel warmer already. Definitely odd.

At the edge of my attention, what little of it isn't worrying on how cold I am or how warm His Highness is or how strange it is for a spirit to be hovering around a vampire, I can hear Treeboy demanding, "What the hell's his problem?"

I'd growl, but I think Kitty just beat me to it. Then again, I don't think I can snarl like that. I don't think it's possible to snarl like that unless you spend part of every month in a four-legged shape. "Dorobou can feel spirits, ghosts as you'll have it. That's probably what it is."

"I thought cats were supposed to be able to sense stuff like that."

"Well, I'm not a cat right now, am I?"

Treeboy shrugs. "Tomcats will be tomcats, no matter what form they're in."

I wonder if they realize they have an audience for their little drama. This is one of the most entertaining things I've seen in a while, and, if I'm judging correctly how rapt he seems to be, the Bossling appears to concur.

Kitty looks spitting mad for a second before grinning broadly, fishing his cell phone from God knows where, and flopping down to sit on the desk. He shakes it in front of Treeboy's face, still with that demonic grin of his, and singsongs five words, "I have Ryou on speed-dial."

And how incredibly weird is it for the Bossling and me to smack ourselves in the face at the same time? Must make a mental note: avoid doing that again at all costs.

Treeboy pushes himself to his feet. I don't think any of us misses the fact he's holding on to the desk to keep upright. "As fun as it's been, it's time for me to retire now. I trust you can show yourselves out?"

I stand as well, trying not to notice His Highness still has his hand on my arm. I'm failing miserably, mind you. "Consider us gone. We'll be back tonight and see if you've found out anything."

"You'd better be planning on looking some yourselves." Even exhausted, this man can put out nastiness like nobody's business. He's still an asshole though.

"We'll see what can be found out from people who are alive during the day." Snarky princeling there. I guess they really don't get along worth a damn.

The Bossling and I are at the office door before I notice Kitty's not with us. Glancing over my shoulder, I can see he's still half-sitting on the desk. "Staying, Kitty?"

"A little while."

I nod. "Be careful coming home then."

"Okay."

We leave him there and let ourselves out. It's remarkably easy now that the sun's clearing the horizon. With the exceptions of Jounouchi-kitty and maybe Seto, everyone in Kaiba Mansion is unconscious. I think I like thinking of it that way better than considering we just left a house full of corpses. It's not possible for me to completely hold back a shudder at that thought.

"Still cold?" Huh? Oh, His Highness. What's with him tonight? Does keeping him out late make him nicer or something? If so, someone needs to hire a night staff to keep him up after hours. It's definitely a change for the better. "Was Jounouchi-kun right about it being a ghost?"

I shake my head. "A spirit, yes. A ghost, no. There's a difference. It's just hard to explain. But it was a spirit, yes."

"Does that make you one of those animators, like they call them in America?"

"Nope. I can talk to spirits and ghosts, but I couldn't raise a zombie if my life depended on it." Hell, even if the brat's life depended on it, I probably couldn't, but I'm not admitting to that, especially not to him. "Don't you need to get home to your Mini-Me?"

He looks at his watch and winces sharply. "Yeah, Aibou will be getting worried. Can you make it home okay?"

I'd resent that implication if I didn't know I've been about to fall over all night. "I'll make it."

"I'll come by your apartment a little after one. That should give us long enough to turn up something before dark." I guess he really doesn't get we were trying to ditch him. Wait a minute. 'Were trying to ditch him'? We're not anymore? He's somewhat useful, though, so I guess I can stand to keep him around a little longer.

"All right. Sure. Whatever. Go home before Mini-Me starts getting worried." I turn on my heel and start stalking away. I just have to make it home then I'm going to sleep. See? I do make plans other than to murder His Highness.

A loud and annoying ring drags me out of a rather nice sleep. I think I'm going to have to kill someone, preferably in horribly painful ways. Evisceration might not be a bad plan. Yep, that sounds like the way to do it. I fumble around till I have my cell in my hand, cursing briefly but rather thoroughly before switching it over to the uninjured hand. I stare at the number a second or three, long enough to note I don't recognize the number, click it on, and snarl, "I hope you have a damn good health plan because I'm _."

"Bakura?" Huh? What? It takes me a few moments, and I still haven't placed the voice. "It's Yami. Aibou and I are outside. Let us in?"

I glance around, blearily looking for a clock. "What time is it?" I can't have been asleep that long, can I?

"Ten after one. The door, Bakura. We can't walk through it."

It's tempting to cut the phone completely off and go back to sleep, but somehow I get the feeling His Highness is twice as persistent as any spirit and a dozen or so times harder to get rid of. I start to roll out of bed, literally, and stop when I encounter a body. It almost blends in with the white pillow, but that's definitely Ryou's hair sticking out from under the blankets. And now that I'm thinking semi-coherently, this isn't my room; it's way too clean and uncluttered. Guess I didn't make it all the way back to my own this morning. Not that this hasn't happened before; I think I've crashed in Ryou's room and he's slept in mine almost as much as we've slept in our own. It's not Sunday, though. Why isn't he in class?

A pale hand slips out from under the covers and bats at me. "Lemme sleep, niisan," he complains sleepily. "They cancelled school today."

I pat the lump beneath the blanket that is his head. "Sleep then. I'll deal with the freaks."

I roll out of bed the other direction and am to the door before he gets another word out. "Don't kill them, niisan. I don't want to have to get blood out of the carpet."

Can I even kill anyone anyway? With my luck, I'd kill someone's body and their spirit would rip me a new

one. Ugh, that's a mental image I didn't want this early in the morning - afternoon, whatever. I stumble towards the door, barely registering my reflection in the hall mirror. My hair looks almost like... it's growing antennae. Big, fat, white antennae. And ugh, I'm still wearing the same clothes as yesterday, so I must have slept in them. Gross, but I guess that's what they get for waking me up. Still, I want a shower *now*.

I'd say they knock on the door before I can detour into the bathroom, but it's less a knocking and more a pounding. Guess His Highness is impatient, but I already knew that really. I'm not even going to ask how he's going to run Kame Games. He'll be more of a terror than Treeboy. He'll... be my boss... And I'll be answering to him instead of the Old Man! Great. Someone, shoot me now, please.

At least I can see I remembered to lock the door when I managed to drag my sorry ass home last night. Good thing too, because otherwise the freaks would probably already be in the apartment and making themselves at home. I shudder to think of it, really. I finally manage to get all the locks off and open the door. I'll be damned. The Bossling owns semi-normal clothes after all, though I would be willing to bet he had to be poured into those jeans. Mini-Me doesn't change much, I've noticed; I think he's worn that same damn school uniform every time I've seen him. Doesn't he own any other clothes? Does the princeling spend their entire clothing budget or something?

I step aside and let them in without a word. I swear Mini-Me bounces into the place like a kangaroo on speed. It's all I can do to watch him. I mean, it's exhausting to do just that much. Where the hell does he get that kind of energy?

"It took you long enough to answer the door." I will not smack the Bossling. My hand would probably end up getting impaled on one of those spikes or something, and frankly, I don't fancy another injury, even if it would be entirely his fault.

"I was asleep. Deal with it." I shove the door closed behind him and throw all the locks home again. I glance into the living room, where Mini-Me is looking through the framed pictures Ryou's built up of us over the past two years. "Did you give him sugar for breakfast or something?"

The Bossling smirks, staring at his brother. "Aibou loves sugary breakfast cereal, has for years really. He'll bounce it off sooner or later." And apparently, the Bossling gets babbly where it concerns Mini-Me. Funny; the opposite applies to me where the brat's concerned. But we've spent much of our lives hiding what we can about ourselves. It's understand, right, that we'd be a bit tight-lipped? Too many people know too much about us as is. That can't be good. Sooner or later, it might get back to sources we'd prefer it didn't. Again, I shudder to think of it.

"Well, I hope it's sooner rather than later," I mutter in response, stalking past him on a direct course for the coffee pot in the kitchen. A caffeine IV would be better, but maybe after half a pot or so, I'll be ready to deal with the Bossling.

I'm being trailed. I'm pretty sure it's just the Bossling, but they've already proven they're freaky enough to time their footsteps. A quick glance over my shoulder proves it *is* His Highness following me and Mini-Me's still checking stuff out. Are we really that interesting? Doesn't he get out much? See, this is why I don't much care for Mini-Me; I always end up with more questions than answers.

"You look like hell, Bakura." Once again, I could hit him. Or maybe this passes for concern his little 'holier-than-thou' world. Still, he needs to brush up on his methods of conveying this, if that is indeed what it is. Wow, did that make sense? Need caffeine. Ah, coffeepot. Good thing I can handle this part on autopilot. "Did you get any sleep?"

"A bit, I think." Mouth, kindly stop and consult with brain before going off. Okay, thanks. "So what's the plan for today? Unless we're intending on hanging out in my apartment all day."

"It's a thought." The hell? I guess my confusion must show on my face because he elaborates, "I mean it. You really don't look like you're feeling great."

I roll my eyes at the coffeepot then turn to face him, leaning the small of my back against the counter. "How I feel doesn't really matter. If I don't get this worked out soon, Makiko'll be back to drive me nuts. She'll probably bring friends along next time too, for that matter. So, since I value what remains of my mind, I'd like to get this over as soon as possible."

He picks up like he's been agreeing with me the entire time. Freak. "Then we should start by going over what we do know about the Master role. Some of the covens might be helpful there." Okay, he's a useful freak, but a freak all the same.

I nod. "I know some people we can talk to then." It'd be better if Mahaado was in town (I swear, the man's a walking, talking encyclopedia), but we might be able to get some info out of Mana or Jounouchi's girls. I mean, his mom know some stuff and Shizuka-pixie's no slouch, but I'd still prefer to go through the database that passes for Mahaado's mind. It's so much fun to pick his brain. "Or did you have someone specific in mind?"

He considers it a moment then shakes his head. "Then only person I know is Isis, and she's in Osaka right now." Which probably shouldn't amuse me as much as it does, except that's where Mahaado is also. To hear him explain it, some kind of routine possession case. Really, he tries so hard to make his job sound boring.

Ah, coffee's finally ready. Whoever invented this stuff should be canonized, deified, something. Right up there with the guy who invented chocolate, French fries, and sake. What can I say? I'm a creature comforts kind of guy. The brat's worse, though, honest.

A cup or so later, and I'm feeling a little closer to ready to deal with His Highness and all the other problems headed my way. "So, Mister Man-with-a-Plan, when do you want to get started?"

"When does the sun set?"

"Roughly six-thirty, give or take fifteen minutes."

"Then as soon as possible. We wouldn't want to keep Kaiba-*sama* waiting." Wow, he can do dripping sarcasm that I'd be proud to do.

I nod, setting my cup down in the sink (No, the brat's domesticating me!), and state, "Just give me long enough to get a shower and change clothes then. I'll be back in ten. Don't. Touch. Anything."

Yeah, right. Like that'll happen. The freaks are twice as curious as any cat. Just watch. I'll come back out and they'll be going through the... souvenirs I've held onto from various jobs.

So, of course, coming back out to find Mini-Me and His Highness sitting on the couch is something of a shock. Well, His Highness is sitting; Mini-Me's leaning over the back, watching the brat pattering around the kitchen. "Are you sure you don't want anything, Mutou-san?" he calls to him. How the hell did he turn out so polite? It's strange.

"We ate before we came over, Ryou-kun!" the Bossling returns.

"How about you, niisan?"

I can't help snickering to myself. His Highness is going to get whiplash turning his head that fast. Guess he didn't hear me coming. Damn, I'm good. I rub the towel over my hair, trying to get it to dry a little faster. "Nah, I'll grab something while we're out." I move past the couch and lean on the doorframe leading into the kitchen. "I want you to stay in the building today, brat. If you get bored, go hang out with

Mana, but don't leave the building." I let my voice drop a bit, till only the brat should be able to hear it. "At least till we find out what's going on with the new Master."

He stops bustling around to stare at me. "Why he's been slacking off on the job, you mean?" I nod. "You think this is going to be his way of running this city?" This time, I offer a shrug, resisting the urge to shudder as well; I can feel eyes boring into the back of my neck, and it's taking everything I have not to start trying to rub the creepy-crawlies off my skin. The brat's grinning. This'll be interesting. "Well, if it is, I'll just whip him into shape like I did Kaiba-kun that time!" He turns and... flounces back into the kitchen.

Crap. Did *he* get into the sugar also?

Behind me, I hear a soft thudding sound and a muffled "oww". The hell? I turn, just as the Bossling starts to snicker. Mini-Me's picking himself up off the floor, rubbing his nose. Unless I miss my guess, and I don't believe I do, he fell over the back of the couch. He turns a glare on His Highness that might even be funnier than Ryou's 'rabid bunny' glare, and I lose all ability to hold back laughter. Of course, he starts pouting. "It's not funny," he mutters. Which just makes it more so. I don't think I've laughed this hard ever.

"What's so funny, niisan?" The brat's standing in the doorway shoulder to shoulder to me.

"Mini-Me's embarrassing himself. Nothing bad," I reply, mustering my most innocent look (something Ryou says reminds him of a cat caught with canary feathers in its mouth) and slowing my laughter to mere chuckles.

"Bakura-kun!" Oh, that was definitely a whine. I have to resist snickering more.

"Oh, okay. Yuugi-san, you need to be more careful," he scolds before returning to the kitchen once more. Well, that's certainly low-key for him. Then again, he hasn't been up that long either. Neither of us are good at this waking up thing.

"Are you going with us or staying here, Aibou?" Somehow I get the feeling he was not intending on me overhearing. "I'd feel better if you stay here with Ryou-kun."

"I want to help you and Bakura-kun. Besides, bad things happen when we get separated, remember, Yami?"

And against my better judgment, my interest level's officially gone through the roof. Hmm, kind of like the Toaster Incident, but that's another story all together. 'Bad things' happen when they get separated? What the hell does that mean, anyway? Better yet, why would it make the Bossling go completely white as a sheet? Typical for those two, I have more questions than answers; all I can do is guess.

Apparently, they've been separated before and something happened. And I guess this would have had to have happened more than once for Mini-Me to make such a broad statement like that and the Bossling to react like that. And I guess it now makes a bit more sense to me why this is the first time I've seen the Bossling letting Mini-Me any place other than Kame Games (and their home, I assume). It makes a lot of sense to the older brother in me: it's easier to protect the people you care for on your home turf than anywhere else.

Does this mean they trust us or something? I don't know whether to feel proud of that fact or upset by it. There is still honor among thieves, but still... What kind of an idiot trusts a thief after all?

Mana's obviously at her day job and no one's answering the phone at Jounouchi's mom's place, though we did leave messages for them, so it looks like we're going to have to hit the books a bit. I doubt the university here in Domino is going to have the preternatural interests section that University of Tokyo has,

but it beats standing on the street corner and asking the people passing by what they think. And I guess if we don't luck out here with the info, it'll be on to one of the shrines. I suppose we'll have to leave University of Tokyo on the list, even if I'd really rather avoid the entire city for safety's sake. I don't want to go back to Tokyo. In fact, I think I'd rather be locked in a room with a pack of starving wolves and no gun than go back there.

I send the freaks a rather comparatively mild glare as I push the door open and head inside. Mini-Me follows me closely, like I'm going to ditch them if I get a meter away. The Bossling brings up the rear (I am *not* going to think of the implications of that!), with a scowl of his own on his face. "What?"

"They don't cover this sort of stuff in school here?" I know before we left Tokyo, we were about to start the unit on vampires, but that was in biology - and was two years ago besides.

Both of them are shaking their heads. "It's not offered at my school. Sorry," comes from Mini-Me.

"All we have available is preternatural biology, not preternatural law." He glances around. "Our section's in the back of the library, next to the rare documents room."

Okay, so His Highness knows his way around the local library. Color me shocked. Guess he is smart enough to know how to crack a book after all. I need to quit hanging around him like this. He's ruining all my preconceived notions of him.

Of course, if I'd realized the preternatural interests sections here consists of so few books, I probably wouldn't have wasted the trip and would have gone with that street corner idea. "Four books?" I demand as Yami sets them on a table. "That's all they have? Four books?"

Mini-Me scrambles up on the table and seizes one of the volumes, pulling it close to him and starting to flip through it. Just as well he's on the table, I guess; I didn't see any booster seats coming in. "It's better than none at all, isn't it, Bakura-kun?" Have I mentioned how persistently optimistic Mini-Me can be? It's somewhere between really annoying and kind of cute, one of those where it's hard to decide if you want to pet him or smack him. In a strange way, it reminds me of the brat. They might sweetness and light each other into early graves, though, but it'd be fun to watch, provided one can live with the cavities it'd produce.

"It's scarcely better," I have to sourly put in. "We'd probably have better lucking asking opinions on the street corner." Mini-Me looks up with a pout that quickly turns to a grin when he notices I'm sitting down and grabbing up one of the books.

"You can try that later if you want to." How rude would it be for me to hit the Bossling? I mean, this isn't exactly the part of the library I'm used to; that's the part of the reference section that has blueprints for several of the buildings here in town.

Why does it strike me as fairly odd to see the Bossling with his nose in a book? I still can't quite wrap my mind around the image of him being enough of a bookworm to know his way around a library. Better still, why haven't I seen him in here with as often as I've been here researching for jobs?

Okay, I think I need to pay more attention to what I'm supposed to be doing - and less to the Bossling and his weirdness. That'd be a lot easier to do, of course, if he wasn't so good at being distracting and if my mind didn't keep wandering away on its own. That persistent buzzing is back (What? Did Makiko out me to every ghost and spirit in the area?), and Yami - *the Bossling* - does a pretty good job of keeping my mind off it. I can't say which is more annoying: that damned noise or the fact the Bossling's presence is just about my only chance of a break from it. I'm not even going to try to figure out why that is. As far as I can tell, he's stone cold normal, nothing special about him. Of course, I'm hardly the best judge; I mean, hell, I thought Malik was *sane* the first time I met him. I learned better later though. That might be true again here. And, damn, I'm babbling again, aren't I?

Still, I have to at least take a glance around the room and try to guess who it could be setting me off. With the exception of Mini-Me, no one I can see is even so much as looking at me. There seems to be no shortage of odd characters in here. Then again, giggling schoolgirls are strange to me, and we have plenty of those to choose from in here. I don't see any of them sitting alone. Why is it that those creatures always travel in packs?

Let's see, who else is there? Who else is alone? I know I saw an older woman in a kimono when we came in. Ah, there she is. She would be the most likely suspect - if it weren't for the fact one of the schoolgirls just bumped into her and nearly knocked her over. I didn't know little old ladies could glare like that. I mean, that's really impressive. Anyway, moving on... Well, there's the creepy-looking little guy with the strange glasses in the science section of reference, there's the blonde flipping through magazines at a table not too far from ours, and there's the brunette striding purposefully our direc... Holy shit, she just walked *through* the creepy-looking little guy? Now, why does she look familiar?

Mini-Me's voice goes real soft. "Yami?" Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the Bossling look up from his book. "You have an Anzu incoming."

Anzu? Anzu? Why do I know that name? Evidentially, she must not have struck me as important enough to remember well. What's a lot more interesting is the way the Bossling is trying to disappear under the table. I'd been wondering what was bumping my legs; it's him, apparently. Very faintly, I hear him mumbling, "You don't know me. I'm not here. I am *not* here. She does *not* - will *not* - see me." Words can't describe how hard it is right now for me to hold back laughing my ass off.

She breezes right by Mini-Me and me like we don't even exist then stops before the Bossling (or rather, what is still visible of the Bossling, which is pretty much from the eyes up) and is all sunshine and flowers and smiles. People like that piss me off to no end. I think if anyone else was ghost-scoping right now, they'd probably decide Mini-Me and I are ones, with the way we don't exist in her world. Hmm, makes me wonder if I could rob her blind if she's not seeing me this hard.

Believe it or not, it takes till she opens her mouth for me to place her. "*Atemu-kun*," she drones out. Good God, how long did she just make his name? I think I just heard about twenty or so of each vowel sound and at least ten of each consonant. So Bitch Queen Mazaki has a bit of a crush on the Bossling? How... disturbing.

"I thought your name was just 'A-t-e-m-u'." I can't resist teasing him; it's too good to pass up. He sends me a level glare as he sits up slowly. Not really any point trying to hide now that she's acknowledged he's there. It'd be like hiding behind a leaf and hoping the wereleopard doesn't notice you. Like I said, kind of pointless. And the Bitch Queen doesn't even so much as blink in my direction. "So this is what it's like to be invisible?"

Mini-Me grins. "Anzu ignores everyone when Yami's around." A sudden, confused expression covers his face as he looks at something over my shoulder. "Eh?"

I turn, for now not paying attention to the Bitch Queen's attempts to gain the Bossling's attention, and snicker. The creepy guy with the insect glasses is hauling a book that's got to weigh more than he does over. I guess that, to anyone else, it looks like it's floating our way. I take it he doesn't like being run through like a rabid bull. "Well, that's something you don't see every day," slips from me.

My eyes are locked on the freaky guy (ghost?), Mini-Me's seem to be glued to the book, Bitch Queen's blathering on about something or other, and the Bossling looks ready to try *seppuku* to get away from her already when the ghost pitches the book. It hits her in the back before falling to land on one of her feet. Now that had to hurt. "What the -?" She whirls, trying to see who did it, and I can't help bursting out laughing. Hell, while the bitch's back is turned, I give the ghost a discreet thumbs' up and point towards the globe on one of the nearby displays.

"You can see me?" God, what a nasal voice. It's almost enough to make me want to start twitching, but I

resist and nod. "Hmm... Interesting..." And he goes after the globe.

I think this might be the first time I've been kicked out of a library. I'm almost positive it's the first time I've been kicked out when I wasn't doing anything. (Okay, maybe I was encouraging it a bit, but still!) The brat'll never let me live this one down. Oh well, at least we got rid of Bitch Queen Mazaki. And I don't particularly feel bad about taking the four books they had, especially since the guards nearly tried to literally throw me out. Of course, the best part was when they tried to toss the Bossling out, and he went all "Do you *know* who I am?" on them, and then when he told them who he was, they went all white. I couldn't tell who was laughing hardest: Mini-Me (who made a break for it at the first sign of guards, and so was already outside), my new ghostly friend we left in the library, or me.

Glancing over, I can see the Bossling's still being all huffy. I mean, pouting, jerking steps, the whole nine yards. It's just great. Mini-Me keeps bursting out in spontaneous laughter, and honestly, I'm not much better. It's just too funny to watch and not be amused. I doubt we'll be getting away with laughing at his expense long, but...

Finally, he lets out a put-upon sigh and turns long-suffering eyes on us. "Well, that was a wasted trip. We didn't even get to finish going through those books."

I can feel a grin about to split my face. I can resist picking on him. Really. "Oh well. Ready for lunch?"

Whoops, I think I went too innocent there. The Bossling looks suspicious. "Bakura, what did you do?"

"Who? Me? Nothing? I just... 'borrowed' the books we need."

"...I think most people call that stealing."

"Well, I'm not most people."

"Of that, we are already aware."

Smirking bastard. That's what the Bossling is, a smirking bastard. Not that I'm all that much better, but at least my head isn't as swollen as his no doubt is. "Look, I'm going to eat and go through those damn books. I know you've already eaten, so you're welcome to scam if you want. I don't give a shit either way."

Hmm, in hindsight, stomping off might have been more effective if I wasn't wearing sneakers. Note to self: next time I feel the need to go stomping off, nick Jounouchi-kitty's boots first. They would make an impressive sound when you're stomping around in them. At least, better than sneakers do.

"Yami!" Hey, cool, I got the Bossling in trouble without even trying! That takes talent, so yeah, I'm good. "Bakura-kun, wait up!"

I slow down a bit and glance over my shoulder. Mini-Me's just about caught up back with me (not that I left them all that far behind), and His Highness is slumping his way towards me. God, that's just great!

Still, I do have a nice bone or two in my body and pick the first restaurant we can sit down in to eat at and pull out the books to start going through once again. It's always been so much fun trying to eat and read at the same time (mind the dripping sarcasm if you will), and it's even more so with a bandaged hand. I vaguely note the Bossling ordering something to drink and starting to go through one of the other books. I'm not even going to look up to see what Mini-Me's doing.

I push away the first book in disgust. I'm sure I've seen a more useless piece of shit, but it's been a while. If this is what they keep in stock, they deserved to have them stolen. I wonder if I can make better

use of them in a bonfire. I grab the next book and open it roughly.

"Hmm..."

I glance up at the Bossling. "What'd you find?"

He shakes his head slightly. "I'm not sure how much it's worth, but this one quotes a witch's journal from about seventy years ago, and she wrote about when the last Master took over."

Interest finally perked, I nod. "Kaiba Gouza-baka, yeah." He sends me a rather droll look this time, and I have to grin in response. It's fun to be as annoying as shit. "So what's it say about him?"

"Not much. 'The old Master is dead. We must now welcome the new Master.'"

"'The king is dead. Long live the king'," I quote absentmindedly. "Nothing on how he actually became Master though?" I lean over across the table to look closer at the text. Hey, you never know! He could be missing something important! I'll maintain till my dying day that the Bossling's no rocket scientist. That, we leave for Treeboy.

"Nothing. Some vague reference to a transfer of power of some sort, but nothing on how."

"Damn." I lean back and rub at my head. Please, tell me it's still the freaky guy with the glasses. Tell me I haven't picked up another one already. "Know anyone who was close to Gouza-baka? Maybe he told them how he became..." Hang on. Where did my train of thought go? Oh yeah. "Became Master."

Red eyes glance up at me briefly. "I would think Kaiba would know, wouldn't you?"

Oww... Not looking up. Not looking up. There's going to be a ghost coming up to stand right behind Yami's shoulder shortly; it's somewhere in the restaurant right now. This settles it. Someone told all the spirits in this accursed town about me, and when I find out who the one with the loose lips is, I'm going to find a way to kill them a second time. It's either that, or someone stuck a goddamn welcome mat on me. Either way, someone's going to be wearing their guts for garters. Hmm, that's a pretty good one. I wonder where I got it. Some movie for sure.

Yuugi's coming back. I'm not quite sure how I know, but I do. A second later, he slides in on my side of the booth. That's weird. Why's he sitting here when Yami's over there? And why am I thinking of them by their names? Augh! Mind, get back on track here!

"Gouza-baka turned Seto, didn't he?" I answer, still keeping my eyes glued on the book before me. "So, yeah, he might know something." That came out fairly coherent. I'm rather proud of myself. But wait a minute. If Seto knew -

"If Kaiba knew something, why didn't he mention it before?" Whoa, freaky. Maybe he's a mind reader. God, I hope not.

"Because he was moments away from unconsciousness? I can't even begin to guess how his mind works." Fuck, it's starting to get worse. Probably a ghost and not a spirit then. Ghosts tend to have much shorter leashes on their tempers, while spirits usually are at or are moving towards some kind of peace. Whoever this is, they're not happy.

Yami's quiet a moment. It's weird, but I can practically feel worry radiating off Yuugi. And behind it all, I can faintly hear a dripping sound over all the buzzing. Yami - *the Bossling* - bites his lip and speaks, "There's a spirit behind me, isn't there?"

I half-nod. "A ghost, I think." I finally look up - and have to fight the urge to lose my lunch. It's hard to tell if this used to be a man or a woman, beneath all the blood and gore. Whatever it is, only half its face

remains, with the other half being little more than scraps of meat, bone, and brains. I can see far more of its internal organs than I would ever want to. The sad thing is, I think I recognize the work. You don't work Domino for long without getting to where you can recognize the locals' trademarks. And the more I think about it, the more likely lunch is to make a reappearance, so I focus on its one remaining eye and ask, "Something I can help you with?"

"The Master," it gurgles. How the hell is it talking without a throat? I hear two well-muffled gagging sounds. Gladly dragging my attention away, I can see they're coming from Yuugi and Yami as they both reaffix their concentration on the table. The hell? Not now. "Find the Master," it repeats, and I force myself to meet that one perfect eye again. "Find the Master and end this."

"I will." At this point, I think I'd promise it just about anything, as long as it leaves. And it does, fading away. I let out a sigh, glance down, and shove my plate away. I don't think I'm going to be eating anything else today. And now that I look, the Bossling and Mini-Me look a little green around the gills. Someone's not telling me something, and I. Do. Not. Like. It. "How?" And I think Jounouchi-kitty would be proud of that snarl.

His Highness looks up from the tabletop. Yeah, he definitely looks a little queasy. "What?"

"You both," I turn slightly to include Mini-Me in this, "saw that. How?"

I'm not really sure how this happened, but I just got off a train here in Tokyo with Kitty, His Highness (I need a shorter nickname for him; that's getting a bit cumbersome), and Tree Up His Ass Seto. I never pictured myself coming back to this damn city, but if I had, it wouldn't have been with this group. Well, Kitty maybe, but definitely not the other two. Hell, we couldn't even let them near each other on the train, and squeezing Kitty and myself between them was... interesting. I think the Bossling (Hmph, still too long) has an imprint in those jeans where I ended up half-sitting in his lap. And I'm still a little stumped on why Mini-Me is still at *my* apartment, alone with *my* brother, and Kaiba Seto took his seat. I know Bossling (not any better) had a royal hissy fit, Mini-Me did those lethally pitiful eyes, and I was forced to agree on that front. Treeboy pretty much said, "I'm coming," and that, as they say, was that. I'm surrounded by weirdoes. My cat is most normal of the lot, and that's definitely saying something.

So... Tokyo. Hell. Same thing really. Why did it have to be here? Why couldn't it been Osaka? Kyoto? Or even Okinawa? No, it *had* to be Tokyo. Damn you, Mahaado. Somehow, I'm sure this is your fault. I'm not sure how yet, but it has to be his fault. I've already established it cannot be mine, after all.

An elbow taps my side, and I glance over to see the Bossling (I'll have to keep working on this) staring at me curiously. "Are you okay?"

He sounds a lot better. Guess the nap helped. I wouldn't know. I didn't get one; between arranging our tickets, arguing about Mini-Me, getting everyone on the train, and keeping the children separated the entire way here, there simply wasn't time. Their loss. They'll be the ones putting up with my cranky, sleep-deprived ass.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

"You've been glaring at that trashcan for five minutes."

"...I hate Tokyo."

He looks confused, and for once, I can't really blame him. I'm not following my own logic there. He seems to recover quickly though. "Kaiba and Jounouchi-kun went on ahead." He raises his arms over his head to stretch. And I'm not admiring the ab muscles that reveals. Really. I swear. "Or I think Jounouchi-kun went ahead, and Kaiba decided to follow."

"What's your problem with Treeboy anyway?" slips out of my mouth, and even I blink in surprise. Sure, I've been wondering about that for a while, but I wasn't exactly planning on voicing that question any time soon. Might as well press on while I'm at it, though. "I mean, he pisses me off the way he tries to come of all cold and badass and shit, and he's damn sure not good enough for Ki- for shit, but I don't *hate* him like you do. So why?"

He narrows his eyes to regard me suspiciously. Great, I made him paranoid. "Why do you want to know?"

I shrug. "I guess I'm just curious. And I want to know how much of a jackass he can be." So I can try to anticipate how many bones I'll have to break if he hurts Jounouchi-kitty in any way.

He kicks an empty can that clatters into the street to be crushed and sighs deeply before finally speaking, like he has to decide if he's going to or not first. "He beat Jiichan then went on with that 'I'm the best - look at me' attitude of his. It pissed me off. Then a few months later, all sorts of bad stuff started happening to our family. It was like the Game King title was our personal talisman, and he took it away from us, making us lose our protection. I don't think I'm ever going to forgive him for that."

He starts walking away from me, and for a few long seconds, I can only stare after him. I don't know what I was expecting the answer to be, but it sure as shit wasn't that. I mean, that was unexpectedly deep for him. He seriously needs to quit making me rethink my positions on him. Of course, me being me, I recover quickly and run to catch up with him with a smart-ass comment already formed. "And here I thought he stole your favorite card or something. I was all prepared to call you immature."

That catches his attention. I rather thought it would. "Me? Immature?"

I can't help but laugh. "Who had to have two people sitting between him and Tree Up His Ass Seto? Sure wasn't me. I mean, I'm fucked up, and I'm more mature than you two were acting."

It seems to take an effort, but he mutters, "Sorry about that. He just grates every nerve in my body wrong."

"Just put up with him till we leave Tokyo, is all I ask, Yami." I glance around, gauging where we are. "So where do we want to start?" University of Tokyo is quite a walk from where we are now, so -

"So you *are* capable of calling me by my name and not one of your weird nicknames."

I blink a few times. I called him Yami? Or Atemu? Oh, wait, yeah, I did, I realize on mental backtrack. I didn't even notice. That's twice tonight I've slipped.

"Yeah, well, all the names I have for you are either too long or not fit for polite company, so you'll have to be 'Yami' till I come up with a new one," I retort. Not one of my better ones for sure, but hey, it is short notice and I'm still a bit puzzled as to why I keep slipping up on his name. I mean, not only is it annoying, but there's also a little danger to it: What if I slip up somewhere else, on a job maybe? Thieves cannot afford to slip up.

Have I mentioned before that he's a smirking bastard? Because he is. But that definitely broke the funk he was slipping into before it even got started good, so I'm going to go ahead and count that a tentative check in the positive category. Now I have to add another question to my ever-growing list - why do I give a damn if he's in a bad mood or not? Okay, this one I can work out on my own: He's a lot easier to work with when he's in a good mood, and like it or not, I am stuck with him, not that I think that it'd be too hard for me to lose him, since I'm pretty sure I know Tokyo a lot better than he does, even after two years. I don't want to hear about it from the Bossman, though, so I'll be good - for now. I'm allowed to pout a bit though, and I think I shall.

And while I'm pouting, I'll work on what we need to do next. I should still have contacts here in town, but I probably shouldn't contact Diceboy or the others just in case word gets back to people I'd really rather *not* see again. God, I hate -

"-me?"

I actually have to stop and look over my shoulder at him. Now that was just fucking *weird*. "What?"

I don't think I can describe the look in those red eyes: hopeless, nervous, resigned, and... something else I don't want to think about, all trying to fight their way out at once. "You really don't like me, do you?"

I scuff the toe of my shoe against the sidewalk. We're blocking traffic, but somehow I fail to give a shit, like I ever do. He's not looking directly at me, but then again, I'm not exactly staring eye-to-eye on him either. "...I'm starting to dislike you less," I finally mutter then have to wonder where the hell that came from. I mean, I usually try to be honest, but not that honest. And where did my 'off' switch go?! "You're not too bad most of the time. I... don't hate you."

He's still another moment then smiles. Not a smirk, for once - an honest-to-God smile. I didn't think he could do that. "I'm glad. In spite of everything, I've been enjoying getting to know you better and hang around you and all."

"It's been interesting," I concede. I guess I've been enjoying myself around him as well, when he's not acting like a spoiled brat. No one else can quite keep me on my toes like he does. Not that I'm telling *him* any of this. It'll go to his head, I'm sure.

"I think I'm starting to like you." Based on the sudden splash of color across his face and the expression he's wearing, I don't think he intended to toss that one out there, at least not quite like that. It's kind of amusing to see him squirming, though. The hard part is not laughing when he covers his mouth and starts to walk away.

After a moment, I run to catch up with him. "You're pouting, Yami."

"Shut up."

I snicker at how uncomfortable he sounds. Now, how to put this? "You know, you confuse the hell out of me, but when you're not being a brat, you're not too bad."

"Thanks, I think." He pauses and looks around. "We should talk about this later."

I nod in agreement. "Jounouchi-kitty didn't say how long he'd be gone, did he?"

He shakes his head. "No. He just took off with Kaiba on his heels."

Well, the latter part is a bit of a surprise, but somehow I'm not surprised Jounouchi took off after the trouble Treeboy and Yami were on the train. The surprising point was that I didn't kill them or Kitty didn't eat them or they didn't get us booted off the train. Which was more likely is hard to say; neither Kitty nor I are renown for our long grasps on our tempers.

"Then I'll call his cell when we've turned something up." It's the best I can come up with for right now, especially since he'll need more time to calm down than I do. I'm not going to try for anything better anyway, not tonight anyway. I know my limits that well at least.

"You think we'll find something here?" Yami asks.

"Mahaado said the answer we're looking for would be here, somewhere in the city." Normally I'm not one for blind faith, but something tells me the clock is ticking and that's a feeling I find I don't much care for.

And Mahaado hasn't steer me wrong (yet) so I guess I can give him the benefit of the doubt for now. And yes, I am a suspicious bastard, but people who claim to be nice for the sake of being nice and aren't the brat make me nervous. I can live with ulterior motives, really. "I think he knows what he's talking about."

Yami snorts in apparent amusement. "We'll see, I guess. On to the University?"

I shrug. "Might as well. We're damn sure not turning up anything here on the -"

What feels like a ton of... something hits the back of my head. I have about half a second to see stars and feel someone - Yami, I guess - grab me before I hit the ground before the world goes black.

I fucking hate being knocked out.

My head is fucking pounding. Yes, that's the first thing I notice. I don't think I've got a concussion though. I hope I don't. I've had enough of them to last a few lifetimes, thank you very much. I should be an old pro at them, I guess, but that doesn't mean I like them any more now than I did way back when I got my first one. And every one I've ever gotten, I got in Tokyo. I fucking hate Tokyo. I guess we're still in Tokyo now. I'd hate to have been out long and missed much of all this fun and joy. I wonder if they - whoever "they" are - grabbed Yami and the others too. I wonder how many pieces they're in if they grabbed Kitty and Treeboy. Damn, I wish I'd seen that. I bet it was a riot. Probably blood, guts, and body parts everywhere.

I have to snicker to myself at that thought, and whatever I'm leaning against shifts most displeasingly. "Kura?" And that's Yami's voice. I wonder why he sounds worried? It couldn't for me. I mean, really. Until recently, we hated each other, didn't we? No way he's worried about me, right?

Anyway, I guess this means whoever decided to use my head as a piñata decided they wanted a Yami too. Who knows why? I don't think the collection value is that great, but that's just me. Then again, we are talking about someone's who is definitely a one of a kind - and what the hell am I babbling on about now? Okay, opening my eyes to see what the hell is going on here.

The first thing in my field of vision is a pair of legs encased in too tight jeans. I guess I *could* have smacked my pillow when it moved since apparently I was napping on Yami. So why am I using him as a prop? I mean, what in the name of hell is going on here?!

"Are you okay?" And even though he's whispering and I've finally sat up, we're still close enough that his voice sounds loud in my ear. Which, may I add, is rather odd.

"I'm fine," I grump, feeling the back of my head gingerly. If we're talking goose eggs, this one's probably not a prize winner, but it's most likely a contender. Not to mention it hurts like a son of a bitch. At least it's not bleeding though. That'd be all I need, especially here in Tokyo.

And looking past Yami, there's Treeboy and Kitty on the other side of the small room, sitting on some kind of oversized chair. Or rather, Treeboy is sitting in the chair with an unconscious Jounouchi-kitty in his lap. Hell, he's even wearing Treeboy's jacket and - unless I miss my guess - nothing else. Even his collar's gone, so he must have shifted and shifted back quickly. No wonder he's out for the count. Obviously it wasn't here either, since I don't see any piles of Werekitty goo on the floor. Guess 'they' picked us all up after all.

"He shifted?" I have to ask Treeboy, even if I already know the answer. Hell, maybe I can find out what the hell I missed while they had me counting sheep or whatever.

"He did" was all the answer Treeboy gives. Why am I not surprised? Man of few words, our Kaiba is. Why the hell does Kitty like him? I guess I should have tried starting with a smaller miracle. Anyway...

I turn on the bed we're sitting on so that I'm facing Yami and start taking his collar off. "Hey!" he exclaims, slapping at my fingers. He sounds so offended that it's actually rather amusing. "What're you doing?"

"Kitty told you what Hirutani did, right?" He nods slowly. "He needs this more than you do right now." Finally getting it off, I eye the buckle critically. "This isn't silver, is it?"

He shakes his head. "No, it's not."

"Good." Collar in hand, I climb to my feet warily. Thankfully, the room only spins a moment, and I cross over to the chair. Starting to lean down to put it on Kitty, even I'm startled when long fingers wrap around my wrist. I follow them up to Seto's face and have to blink in surprise before regaining my composure. "Help you with something, Treeboy?"

"I'll do it." I open my mouth to retort when he continues, "I've seen the scar."

Well, I think you could knock me over with a feather right now. The hell? When? How? "Excuse me?" Hey, at least I kept it mild. Better than 'the fuck?', you know.

"When we get back to Domino, I'm picking your brain. I want names and addresses."

I feel my eyes narrow. Oh, how I hate being talked down to by someone acting all high-and-mighty. "Well, I'm glad you acknowledge my omniscience, Treeboy, but -"

He interrupts me, plucking the collar from me. "Sit down and shut up, thief, before you fall down."

I'm going to take this collar and shove it so far up Treeboy's ass that it comes out his eyeballs. I'm going to kill him in the most creative ways possible. I'm going to - Apparently, I'm going to fall backwards onto the bed. What the - Oh hell. Oh hell no. "Yami," I grind out.

"Yes, Bakura?" He says so casually too, like he didn't just grab the back of my jacket and yank me down on the bed with him.

I start to cross my arms over my chest then think better of it and just scowl. I'm not going to resort to acting as immature as him and Treeboy. I'd love to flip him off, though, or do something he wouldn't expect. Maybe later, when we're not up to our asses in trouble... again.

"Jounouchi?" Well, well, sounds like Kitty's stirring. And Treeboy sounds like he might just have half a nice bone in his body, if the faint concern I can barely hear in his voice is any indication. Kitty's definitely awake now though, since he's staring up at Seto. I wonder what he sees there though. "You've been out a while, ki - tomcat." Oh? I grin. What did he almost say? "You all right?"

Jounouchi-kitty is silent a second then winces. If I know Kitty - and I'm pretty sure I do - he's doing some pretty fabulous mental cursing. Finally he lets out a quiet meow.

And Treeboy looks so damned confused for that split second that I have to put my two cents worth in. "Take that as a 'no'."

"Why can't he speak?" And there Treeboy goes with that high-handed attitude of his. Hell, he's not even bothering himself to look at me when he's talking to me. I guess I can't blame him for keeping his attention on Kitty, but still... And good, Kitty noticed the collar. Yami looks like he's feeling naked without it, but oh well, he'll live. I guess I should just be glad there wasn't a reason like Jounouchi's for why he wears it.

So, should I be nice and answer? Hmm, this once I guess. "Full moon is two days away. It's taxing on Weres to shift and shift back again this close. Kitty'll be fine in a little while, but for now I'll play

interpreter... maybe, if you're lucky."

If looks could kill, I think Seto would have planted me just then. Of course, I missed the full effect on that since Yami was trying to implant his elbow into my ribcage.

"Hmph. Well, I know of at least two Weres who won't have that problem anymore." The way Seto's grinding that out sounds almost painful. He's still petting Jounouchi though; how cute. Looks like Kitty's eating it up too.

"What do you mean, Kaiba?"

"Four Weretigers tried to grab us," Treeboy answers Yami's question, "literally. Jounouchi snapped the first one in half and tore a few limbs off another. The second one attacked him from behind." Figures. That'd be the only way they could get the drop on - Holy shit, I didn't know Seto could snarl like that. That'd do a lot of big cats proud. "That is cowardice, and I will not tolerate it. Suffice it to say, I doubt I'll need to feed again tonight."

"Holy fuck" slip out of my mouth, right about the same time Yami's muttering "shit." Did I understand that correctly? He drained a Were? Killed it-type drained it? By the new laws, that's murder. I mean, Weres can do whatever the hell they want to each other, and no one really pays attention, but vamps is a whole other story. Then again, we are talking about Kaiba Seto, Japan's golden boy. If anyone can get away with murder, he can. Still, I remember hearing once about how much power is in Were blood. Damn, Treeboy's going to be riding high for a while.

And hell, now that Treeboy's got me all keyed up, I can't help but notice all the energy humming around us. How many spirits - no, ghosts - are in this place? As angry as their humming sound seems to be, I'd be willing to bet most of them died here. They feel awfully focused too; not a good thing, since it usually means they're angry and not particularly willing to see reason. We don't have any guests in this room yet, but I bet it won't be very long. Still, it's enough to make a guy paranoid, since I have to glance around to see where they're likely going to come from.

"You're sure you're okay?" Yami asks again. Why is he bothering to whisper? We're in the room with a vampire and a Were. He has to know they can hear us perfectly well. I mean, that's junior high-level preternatural biology stuff, if not younger. I guess it's the thought that counts anyway.

"A lot of people died here," I return, just as quietly. "Most of them were murdered."

"They're still here?" I nod slowly, and Yami's hand sneaks around mine, threading our fingers. "I'm not going to let them near you."

The hell?! What, is it Confuse Bakura Night and no one told me? "You have some kind of master plan you're not letting me in on there, Mister King of Games?"

He just does this enigmatic smile and replies, "Maybe, maybe not. You'll have to see."

He's saved from my possibly kicking his ass by the sound of a key turning in the lock. And of course all my knives are gone. Of course. Anything else might be... I don't know... fair? I really fucking hate Tokyo.

A dark head appears around the door. Whoever he is, there are a few things I notice right away: 1) he's obviously some kind of Were; 2) he has a scar on his left cheek, which is probably how he was turned; 3) that's the ugliest damn headband I've ever seen; and 4) Jounouchi-kitty *really* doesn't like him, if the hissing is any indication. Either that, or he's doing the cat version of protecting Treeboy's nonexistent virtue. Or maybe that's what Treeboy calls himself doing. Who knew eyes could go subartic?

"The Master wishes to extend his apologies for the trouble we may have caused you." He's hissing out his words. I wonder if this is one of the guys who tried to grab Jounouchi and Treeboy. That would

explain the hostility.

Treeboy's about to say something, not sure what (but it is probably something very sarcastic) when another man enters the room, pushing past Headband Boy, and marches himself over to the bed Yami and I are still sitting on. If this creep lays a hand on me, I'm going to tear him a new one. I swear to God, I will.

I can feel every muscle in my body tighten, ready to at least attempt to do some serious damage, as the newest guy starts to speak. "The Master wants to see them *now*."

He reaches down and grabs Yami's arm, yanking him to his feet. To my surprise, Yami stumbles, letting a soft pained gasp escape him, and that when I finally notice the darker spot on the right upper leg of his jeans: blood, no doubt about it. He's been hurt this whole time and didn't say a word about it - hell, kept asking if I was okay? And this fuckhead is going to - Hell no.

It's like a floodgate opens. All the ghosts I'd felt before are suddenly *here*, still pissed off and looking for someone to take it out on. It's like a thousand buzzing voices in my head, all demanding what I want them to do, and all I have to do is point them in the right direction with a simple thought. A thought is all it takes to sic them on the stupid goon who dared to put a hand on Yami.

Is this the difference between just accepting my power and really using it? Or is it riding me? I can't tell. I'm not sure I'm in the driver's seat here. Fuckhead's little more than goo and splatter paint, and they're still not satisfied. We - they - we want more, more blood, more vengeance, more revenge. We'll teach them to touch what's ours, teach them to kill us, teach them not to fuck with us. We want to destroy, maim, kill. Who shall be next? Who? We need to consume, feed, destroy. We need more power. There. Far, far below us... calling to us... something old, dark, evil, powerful... Yes, power... calling to -

"Kura?" A voice. A face - and a familiar one at that. Strange hair, though. There is a feeling of enjoyed annoyance attached to this person but also something else? Ours? No, wait. Mine? Limping closer when no one else is moving, both hands touching the side of my face and drawing me in closer to speak close. "Wake up, Kura."

The floodgate closes the second he touches me, like a door slammed shut against the wind, and my mind is my own again. "...Yami?" I have to ask, just to be sure. And someone tell me I didn't just hear a few loud sighs of relief. And that was Kitty growling; he sounds pissed too.

"Yeah, it's me." If my head wasn't fucking spinning, I'd probably better appreciate the feeling of his hands on my face and in my hair; actually, it's still rather nice right now. It's helping me ground myself once more, reminding me that I'm just me and not all of *them*. "Are you all right? Are you... you again?"

"Mostly, I think. My head still feels a little muddled, but not as bad." Keeping my gazed focused on those red eyes helps.

"Good."

"Eww."

I hear both words at the same time, and only one of them is from Yami. I push my focus past him a moment to stare at an older man as he hops gingerly over what could be either a spleen or maybe a liver but looks like just so much goon goo. Ugh, I'm about to gross myself out. Focus on the old guy. Better yet, focus on Yami; he's a lot easier on the eyes.

I still can't believe he managed to hide being hurt for so long. I'm sure he didn't fool Treeboy or Kitty, but I completely missed it. I guess when Fuckhead grabbed him, it opened the wound further or tore at it where the blood had been drying it to his jeans. Blood's bad that way, especially in large amounts. Before he puts any weight on it, we should try to do some kind of makeshift bandage.

And I'm going to continue ignoring the old guy for the moment and focus on Yami's leg. It's starting to bleed sluggishly, further darkening the cloth around it. "Stand still," I murmur. Well, I hope these weren't good sheets, as I rip a strip off and drop down to my knees in front of him. He does a half-shuffle step backwards, and I send him up a glare. "I mean it, Yami. Do *not* move."

If I'm not mistaken, I could swear he's blushing. Not much, mind you, just a little red at the cheekbones. It's almost adorable. "Kura, wh- what're you doing?" he asks as I start working the bandage around his leg. Hey, I'm kind of proud of the fact I made him stutter. That takes talent.

"You're not leaving this room bleeding," I say softly, glancing past him at the others briefly. They seem to have the supernatural equivalent of the stare-down before the big gunfight in those old American Westerns. They'll keep long enough for us to finish up here. "I trust Kitty, and Treeboy's yet to put the bite on you so he's fine. It's everyone else that might want a..." I debate a moment between words, "taste."

And he's back to being the smirking bastard we all know and... yeah. "Trussing me up like the sacrificial lamb?"

I hope he doesn't honestly think that, that I would sell him out to the monsters. Though, given my performance a few minutes ago, maybe I should sort myself into that group as well. Still... "I should smack you for that," I grumble. I tie one last knot in the dressing a little too tight and stand. And hey, I'm suddenly the center of attention again. I didn't kill anyone else, did I?

"If you're done, um, conjuring the local ghosts," the old guy cuts in, drawing all the attention onto himself, "the Master would like to speak with you." Hmm, if he's trying to regain his dignity after the "eww" thing, he has a long way to go. And I'm not going to be the one to tell him he has some kind of goo on his back. Ugh, I'm not even going to figure out what that used to be. "Just please don't kill anyone else."

I think I hate him already. I mean, he's familiar in that 'I've seen him somewhere, at some time, with someone, probably last time I was in Tokyo' way, but I'm drawing a blank beyond that really - and I've decided I hate him enough to make his life hell. "I'll try, but if I do kill anyone, it's so damn hard to hold back the smirk so why bother, "you'll be the first to know." I grab Yami's hand (just in case he needs help walking - really!) and step past the old fart before giving out my last comment, "I think you have some brains on your back."

The sound of someone losing their lunch is music to my ears. Oh, it's so tempting to go for broke and see if I can make one of the monsters wet themselves, but I'll resist for now. A hand smacks my arm, and Yami hisses, "You're horrible."

"Absolutely," I return, watching Treeboy go all chivalrous and pick Kitty up. How sweet. Note the sarcasm, please. Know Seto, though, who knows what he's telling himself is the reason he just did that.

At least I seem to have put the fear of Bakura in Headband Boy. He looks properly cowed. "Um, well, I'll just take you on in to see him now." Kitty hisses at him, and I'm going to be good - mainly because Yami hits *hard* - and not say 'boo' to see if he'll jump or, better still, screech like a scalded cat.

"Lead the way," I reply. I'll be so glad to have the answers we're looking for so we can go home. I want to sleep for a week, minimum. Whatever it was I did with the ghosts, it was plenty exhausting; I feel like I've run a marathon or two. Still, no time like the present.

Headband Boy gives me a small nod and heads out of the room. No way I'm giving the old man my back, so Yami and I go next, leaving Treeboy and Jounouchi to come behind us, with the others trailing behind them. Yami's limping but not too badly; he probably shouldn't even be walking, but no way in hell am I going to leave him back there alone, no more than I think Treeboy would have left Kitty back there. Thankfully, it's a relatively short walk till we're standing before a set of doors. Kitty and Seto - and the

nonhuman assholes we're with - seem like they're listening to something that I can't pick up on from the other side.

The right-hand door opens, and a smallish (not as short as Yami but shorter than Kitty or me) guy hurries out, pushing a... shopping cart with another guy in it, this one without an arm and a leg, though I can't say he lost them as they're in the cart with him; he's still bleeding and breathing, so he's got to be a Were. Kitty growls at him. either he's feeling territorial or this is another of the guys who jumped them. Geez, how many did they take?! Therefore, I don't even attempt to *not* be a smart ass. "Defective Weres, aisle three," I deadpan, just loud enough for even Yami and the old guy to hear. It earns me a light smack on the arm, not hard enough to even begin to hurt, and a chuckle from Yami.

The old guy slips around us and hold the door open, now putting on the English butler act. "The Master of Tokyo will see you now."

One more, just for the record. Let it not be said I don't antagonize with the best of them. "Thanks a lot, Alfred. And... you missed a spot." Insta-green. I love it.

However, I only get a few feet in the room before I get the shock of my short life to date and slam on breaks mid-step. Of course, that misbalances Yami and I have grab and catch him to keep him upright, not to mention Treeboy's too busy playing Romeo (Or would be Juliet? I'll have to ask about that later if we make it out of this alive.) to notice me stopping, and he bumps into my back.

"Welcome back to Tokyo." Oh hell no. No way. Not him. Anyone but him. "How have you been, Bakura-boy?"

I *really, really* fucking hate Tokyo.

"...You?" Treeboy sounds as stunned as I feel. Kind of like that damned Funny Bunny just dropped a ton of bricks on our heads. "You're the Master of Tokyo?"

"I've beaten you at Duel Monsters how many times?" And that witticism comes from Yami. I hope he got hit with that ton of Funny Bunny bricks too and that this is *not* normal. This time I smack him on the back of the head for being a game-obsessed moron. He scowls at me. "Already injured here, Kura."

"Obviously not enough."

Kitty lets out a confused meow, and Treeboy look to me. "What'd he say?"

Hmm, opportunity to harass Treeboy, can't pass it up. "I could give you the direct translation, but it boils down to 'the fuck?'. Really, you need to be learning these things."

Why do I get the feeling Seto is mentally flipping me off? Oh yeah, because he's glaring at me hard enough to burn a hole through my skull. Glacier, laser, glacier, laser - I wish he'd make up his mind one of these days... err, nights.

And that's enough ignoring the freaky, freaky man staring at us expectantly. I guess it's up to me to ask the questions I'm sure we're all thinking, starting with: "Since when are you Master of Tokyo, Pegasus?"

The fr- Pegasus blinks and stares at us a second before doing that weird smirk-smile he's so fond of. He's about to say something that's going to make me want to beat him with a baseball bat, I can see it in his eyes. "But, Bakura-boy, I've been Master of Tokyo longer than you've been alive." The fuck? I mean, it was pretty obvious he's a vampire, especially when you've known him as long as I have and studied him as extensively as I have for jobs. Hell, I even knew he's a master vampire, complete with an animal to call, hence all the tigers in the room. That he might be the Master of the City never occurred to me though. I thought sanity figured into the job description too. Silly me. "Besides when you and Ryou-boy

vanished," hell, I let out a growl at that; as much as I dislike the names he's chosen to call us, the brat detests it twice as much, "it seemed like a good time to start cracking down."

Now I'm a little worried. "...He's not still working for you... is he?"

"I said I'd been cracking down, didn't I?" In Pegasus-speak, that means 'no, he's not,' and I breathe a sigh of relief. One good point for tonight at least.

"Kura?" Yami's voice sounds curious, with a hint of confusion tossed in and maybe a little pain. His leg must really be starting to hurt. Why are the two humans the ones catching most of the crap? I mean, between my hand and head and his leg, we're starting to look like a walking ad for better medical insurance or something. Jounouchi looks like he got jumped, but he's healing quickly; that's got to be useful.

Kitty makes a confused noise like something out of one of the brat's video games (something between a meow, a purr, and a chirp), and even I find myself feeling a little confused at what I means. Headband Boy seems to get it, though, as he turns to Pegasus and prompts, "Master?"

The freak frowns moment. "Where *are* my manners tonight?" Don't make me answer that. Really, don't. You won't like the answer. "Please sit." He gestures at the two chairs before his desk, and I waste no time claiming one by maneuvering Yami's ass down in it.

Hmm, and he's about to match part of his hair again. Does he always blush this easily or is it just me? "Kura, what-"

"You're injured," I cut in, circling around behind the chair and putting my right hand on his shoulder so he quits trying to get back up. "Sit and rest, Pharaoh." Then I have to stop and blink at myself. 'Pharaoh'? The hell? Well, it kind of fits. As long as he doesn't start thinking he's some kind of god-king...

Yami just looks stumped. "'Pharaoh?'"

"Pharaoh," I say decisively. His new nickname is decided then. And like I said, it fits him, maybe a little too well. I wonder if Jounouchi-kitty's figured that out also since he's snickering. Of course, that turns into a sort of squawk when Treeboy plops him in the other chair and briefly straightens his jacket around Kitty then circles to lean against his chair, much as I'm doing to Yami's. "Now, question two: why the fuck did you kidnap us?"

And Pegasus sounds offended as he responds, "I'm going to let you go, so it's not *really* kidnapping." Under my hand, Yami's shoulder tenses. Almost unconsciously, I squeeze it lightly. "I think it'd be rather gauche after Yami-boy's last experience with it." The faint relaxation I got out of him is gone again. Yami got kidnapped? When? How? And how the hell did they get past the Old Man and Mini-Me?

"Master of Tokyo or not, you're an ass." Why am I not surprised that the first thing Kitty says after getting his voice back is something like that? Pegasus just looks amused, and I'm counting that in the good category, more or less. Freaky, freaky man... Jounouchi-kitty looks a little surprised by the sound of his own voice but recovers quickly enough to whip around towards Headband Boy and yell, "Four on one!" Oh, so that's how... He's never forgiving Headband Boy for that one.

"I'm sorry!" Catfight building, must resist urge to make things worse.

As amusing as it is, though, Yami's still so tense he's practically vibrating; hell, he's jumping just slightly every time they yell back and forth. I lean down on the chair, sliding down near his ear and my right arm moving to hold him back close to me, and whisper, "What's wrong, Yami?"

He jumps slightly when I speak, but I'm not going to let that bother me. I refuse to let that bother me, especially since he's been jumping at shadows. "I - I just don't like to think about it." I've heard that tone

a thousand times in my own voice. This is one of those subjects best left untouched. Why do I get the feeling I'm going to have to sooner or later? "It's why Aibou and I don't like being separated," he surprises me by continuing to volunteer almost too quietly for me to hear.

I glance up briefly to check the progress of Were World War III going on around us, long enough to note Treeboy and Jounouchi are doing fine without us, before leaning down to return, "We'll have to talk about this later, Pharaoh, but I think we *do* need to discuss it."

He nods slowly, and we both turn back to the mini-war that's slowing down, him holding my arm in place around the front of his shoulders. Odd, but I'm not commenting. I think if Jounouchi were in cat form, all his fur would be standing on end, but he seems to be relaxing under Treeboy's touch. Dare I hope the icecube returns Kitty's feelings? Nope, no way. I'm playing matchmaker, yeah, but on my own time - and that time will be at some point when the Master of Tokyo isn't right here in front of us.

"You didn't answer my question, Pegasus," I prompt. "Why did you grab us? And did it have to involve jumping Kitty, *shooting* Pharaoh here, and clubbing me over the head?!" Yeah, maybe I'm gaining volume, but I'm pissed! What do you expect? Hugs and bunnies?

He frowns hard. "Believe me, Bakura-boy," I will not groan, I will not growl, I will not try to remove his vocal chords with my bare hands, "all I said was 'I need to see them'. It was not my intention that anyone be hurt.

"So all this happened because your people are a bit... overzealous?" If I haven't mentioned it before, let me say now that I'm damned glad Treeboy's on our side because, frankly, when he goes glacier, it's fucking scary.

Not that it seems to faze Pegasus in the least. "I'm afraid not, Kaiba-boy." Then suddenly he's doing that over-dramatic pout that always used to make me want to pound his face in. "The least you could have done was call first, instead of just barging in like you own the place. This isn't Domino City, after all. Then we could have avoided all this entirely."

Jounouchi's hand shoots up in the air. I guess feline gracefulness and vampire reflexes are all that keeps him from smacking Treeboy in the face. "Question: the hell?"

Yami picks up after him, sounding a bit better already. "I thought only master vampires had to announce themselves." I guess he did learn something out of those books I... liberated from the library after all. "No way Kaiba's a master; he was only turned two years ago."

"Nevertheless, he *is* a master," returns Pegasus. "Now why don't you ask him what happened to the previous Master of the City?"

Hell, even I open my mouth to ask before Kitty steps in. "What're you driving at?"

He's building up for the big reveal, I can see it in his face, even if I'm carefully not meeting his eyes, and Treeboy's being awfully quiet, like he thinks if he's silent, no one will see him or something. Finally Pegasus lets the ball drop. "Whoever kills the previous Master becomes the new Master."

If it's all possible, Treeboy goes ghost white for a brief moment, then he states in this quiet monotone, "He turned my little brother. I don't care what happens to me, but no one touches Mokuba."

...I could hit myself. Still, what did I say to myself just a few minutes ago: if anyone can get away with murder, it would be Kaiba Seto? And apparently he has been these last three months since Goza-baka kicked it. But, damn, we had the Master of Domino with us the entire time. I feel like such a fuckwit.

"Doesn't he have to have an animal to call?" I may have revise my opinion of Pharaoh-boy's intelligence, since he apparently *memorized* those crappy library books.

"What is sitting before him?" I'm going to hit Pegasus one of these nights. Wait a minute. Did he just say-

"How can he call leopards?" I find myself asking. I guess I came up with something else to say after all. "There's only one pard in all of Japan."

"And yet there *are* Wereleopards in Japan." And somehow I missed Cynthia standing just off to the side. I hate it when she does that. Don't get me wrong; I have nothing against most witches (okay, all but one witch I don't have any major problems with), but I do dislike those Jedi mind tricks, 'you don't see me', and all that. "Welcome back to Tokyo, Bakura."

"I intend to make it a short visit." I can feel Yami staring up at me and I can feel the questions he's not asking, yet, but not now. Maybe when we get out of Tokyo and when we're alone, but not now. "So if Treeboy here is the new Master of Domino, why did you grab the rest of us?"

Pegasus perks back up. Oh great, something amused him. Just what we need. "Well, your Wereleopard wasn't going anywhere without Kaiba-boy." And here Jounouchi-kitty lets out a threatening growl. I mean, even I haven't heard one that good in a while - but Pegasus doesn't even blink. No fair. Why does he have to have a lot of cats around? Apparently they've made him immune. It's pretty easy to tell he's just humoring us when he continues, "And *Kaiba* wasn't going anywhere without your cat." One of these nights...

"And Pharaoh-boy and me?"

Cynthia takes a half-step forward so that she's mirroring Treeboy and me behind Pegasus' chair. "That was my doing, I'm afraid. I felt you two enter the city. Your power has grown in your absence, Bakura."

The hell? 'You two'? Pharaoh-boy's stone-cold normal, isn't he? Well, except for seeing that ghost in the restaurant... I wonder if he saw the kid in the library too. "Two?" Jounouchi-kitty beats me to asking. "I don't understand, Lady." Until I hear him saying something like that, even I sometimes forget he's from a family of witches. Mom and Shizuka-pixie would beat me if they knew I forget that from time to time.

Cynthia looks like all that is just dawning on her. I have to give her this: she's definitely the brains of their operation. For all Pegasus' cunning, I bet he'd be lost without her. "I suppose it's not really my place to say if you don't already know." Now that's a cop-out, and we all know it. "I *can* say his powers," she nods at Yami, "compliment your own."

My eyes narrow, and I lean down close to his ear again and hiss, "We have a lot to talk about later, Mutou," as I pull my arm away from him. Yeah, I'm pissed. I don't like being out of the loop. Hell, it's a bit of a phobia. You try living through what the brat and I did here in Tokyo and see if you aren't paranoid about knowing everything about everything going on around you. I half-glance to the side to see Kaiba and Jounouchi having a little powwow of their own, and for some reason, something inside me tightens and that only serves to piss me off more. I stand back up straight and affix the worst glare I can on Pegasus. "If you're done playing show-and-tell, Crawford, can we go now? I'm sure Kaiba has a lot to do with what's left of the night." And apparently I'm intimidating Jounouchi and Mutou more than Crawford. Damn.

Pegasus just grins the glare off. Yes, one of these nights... "Oh, of course, Bakura! Do you have a preference on how to return?" His whole face lights up. "Oh! The helicopter's gassed up. Will that be all right?"

"Whatever. I don't care. Just get me the fuck out of Tokyo."

"So long as it's fast," Jounouchi qualifies. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him stand and cross over to me. It's a testament to the last two years that I don't jerk away when he lays his head on my shoulder.

Usually only Ryou can get this close when I'm upset; I guess he's definitely family now.

"And I want my knives back," I demand. The first person to show his ass on the way home is getting one shoved up it. I'm not putting up with shit this time.

Cynthia is the one to answer. "Of course. I wish you all a safe journey home. Goddess go with you."

"May She smile upon you as well." How very formal for Kitty. Mom raised him well.

"Thank you, Cynthia." And the brat is trying to raise me well also.

"Ignorance is no excuse for impoliteness." Mister Iceboy has a smooth setting? What? Is this some kind of hidden function? "I apologize for any... inconvenience our presence has caused." Like now-dead or now-defective Weres. Only Treeboy could pull off saying our people killing their people is an inconvenience. "You are always welcome in Domino."

Again, Pegasus does that freaky smirk-smile. "Even so, I'll call ahead of time." Cynthia sighs in relief, I guess because it wasn't as bad as it could have been; who knows what's going to come out of that man's mouth next? "Your ride is waiting, and like you said, Bakura, Kaiba has much to do."

"I know the way," I snarl. I need to be out of this city. I need to be back home. I need to be away from here, five minutes ago. I grab Yami, pulling him to his feet and towards the door. Yeah, I'm still a bit pissed at him, but no way in hell am I leaving him behind; he's mine, whether I'm mad at him or not.

I sense more than see Treeboy and Kitty fall in step behind us. So help me, if anyone gets in our way, I'll do something to make the monsters wet themselves. I don't know what yet, but it'll be bad and it'll hurt a lot. That I can guarantee.

Yami does a half stumble, covering it well enough that if I weren't holding on to him, I'd probably miss it. As it is, though, I am, and I adjust how I've got him so that I can try to hold little more of his weight off his leg, slowing down just a bit.

As Pegasus promised, the helicopter is waiting. I help Pharaoh-boy in then climb in to sit next to him. I don't want a repeat of the train ride; no way are he and Treeboy riding next to each other. I don't want to have to kill either of them tonight and not in the helicopter - that might get a bit too messy for even me.

Treeboy reaches down in the coat Jounouchi-kitty's wearing as Kitty is stepping up into the seating area, and for a second, even I freeze; Kitty might as well be a statue. Of course, he comes out with a cell phone, and I let out a breath I hadn't been aware of holding. No way Treeboy would be that forward. That's more a Kitty thing. One of the Were hands me my knives and closes the door behind us, signaling the pilot to take off.

Almost immediately once we're in the air, Jounouchi-kitty has slid to the floor and dropped his head in my lap. I can't help glancing up at Treeboy. He doesn't stop talking on the cell phone, only gives me a faint nod. It sounds to me like he's arranging a press conference the likes of which Domino has never seen before. I don't think I'm going to be conscious for it. It's been a rough few days, but at least I have fulfilled Makiko's request. The pressure and the sense of urgency that accompanied me every minute since accepting the job are gone at last. It's like I can breathe a bit better now. Not normal though; there's still something missing. Letting my right hand start to pet Kitty, I go over the promise to myself: find the new Master of Domino and make him starting doing his job. Part one is accomplished, and it looks like we're well on our way to part two being a glowing success as well. So what's the problem?

No, I'll deal with that when I've gotten some actual sleep. I'll get some rest, I'll deal with whatever this problem is, then I'll see what I can do about keeping my promise to Mini-Me. A promise is a promise, after all, even if I'm still ticked at Pharaoh-boy.

And speaking of Pharaoh-boy, my injured hand is squished between his leg and mine. I pull it out with a hiss. It's not bleeding, which I'll count of the good. Sparing a glance over, I can see that I can't say the same for his leg; it's starting to bleed through the make-shift bandage I made. Seto must have a will of steel, really.

Without prompting, Jounouchi-kitty grabs the first-aid kit from under the seat beneath Treeboy and passes it up to me. Looks like I'm going to have plenty to do to keep me entertained till we get home. I already heard Treeboy calling two cars to meet us when we land. I'll take Pharaoh here home, then I'm getting my answers. All my answers.

I've lost count how many times I've shaken Yami awake since we got back in Domino. I know I had to wake him up to get in the car Seto called us and give directions, wake him up again to get out of the car, and at least twice since we've been inside letting the poor doctor he woke up look us both over. He rewrapped my hand and pronounced me concussion-free then did a much more professional wrapping on Yami's leg. Hell, I even got commended on the previous job I did on it. I'll probably be excited at a brighter point in the day, once I've gotten some sleep.

It's not helping that the bed I'm sitting on is so damn comfortable. This has to be the Pharaoh's room. It doesn't take a brain surgeon: Duel Monsters memorabilia and championship trophies everywhere, a chess set in one corner, Capsule Monsters scattered over a desk, puzzles galore, the works. He's such a game-obsessed moron.

I don't remember drifting over or my head hitting the pillow. I know I'm drifting in and out when the doctor leaves and I vaguely feel a warm body settling down next to mine, but that's all I recall before blackness for a while.

I don't even dream, probably a good thing in this case. After the last few days I've had, who knows what I'd dream if I had the chance. Still, it doesn't feel like it's been all that long when my bladder drags my eyes open, even if the sun is now shining down on the carpet. I struggle at the weight surrounding me, and obligingly Yami rolls over, not even bother to wake up. Damn it, can't he inconvenience himself enough to wake up and tell me where the toilet is? Never mind, I'll find it myself.

I drag myself to my feet, absentmindedly tossing the sheet someone put over me back onto Yami (and I think I'll call a few points that it completely covers all that spiky hair) and examine the rest of the room. Three doors to choose from, not counting the open (and stuffed) closet; one is the door we came in, so one of the other two must be the bathroom. I pick one at random, pushing it open and flicking on the light switch just inside the room.

This... isn't the bathroom, is all I can think as the smell of incense tickles my nose and makes me sneeze.

What the fuck is going on here?

"What the...?"

It's not often I'm rendered speechless, but frankly right now I'm floored. Never once in a million years would I have guessed... this. The incense smell is thick enough to make me feel ill, like it's crept into every surface. That must be the case because I only see two sticks burning before a portrait.

For a long minute, I stay frozen in the doorway before I find myself propelled forward. The face is so familiar, even in an old photograph, that I almost want to turn around and check the pulse of the person I woke up beside to make sure he's still with the living. It's not Yami though. The face is too innocent, the eyes too wide and trusting - and the wrong color completely. Yami's eyes are red, after all, and it's Yuugi's that are purple. The picture doesn't do those eyes a bit of justice, but that's Mini-Me beyond a

shadow of a doubt. What the hell?

"Bakura?"

I whirl, one hand going for one of my knives before I can register it's the Old Man. Even then, I'm not sure I'm too coherent beyond a "Wh-what-" or two and pointing at the picture like an idiot. I think my brain's exploded. We'll be wiping it off the nice white walls sooner or later, since we don't have an Alfred here to end up with it all on his back.

The Old Man shuffles past me, touching the portrait fondly, with more than a hint of wistfulness. "I know what you're thinking." That's quite the accomplishment. I wonder, if I ask, would he clue me in? I mean, seeing as how I have no idea at the moment what I'm thinking. "It's not Atemu. This is Yuugi. You weren't here yet when It happened."

I can hear the capitalization on that word: 'It'. Kind of creep. I finally manage to get out a semi-coherent response: "Huh?"

"Three years ago, Yuugi was killed."

Huh? Wait? What? "But I - Yami-"

The Old Man shakes his head sadly. "Atemu was there when It happened. He saw everything."

One thing, at least, clicks. I never thought I'd say it, but thanks, Pegasus. "The kidnapping?"

He's going to get whiplash if he keeps whirling about like that. "You know about that?"

I shrug one shoulder. "Pegasus mentioned it."

"Oh, he *did*?" And I'm treated to a few anatomically impossible (not to mention chronologically improbable) lists of things Pegasus' mother did with that goddamn Funny Bunny. All I can guess is the Boss doesn't know Pegasus is a vampire - or he's pissed and doesn't give a shit. Finally, he takes a deep breath and visibly calms. Damn, I think that was scarier than any Were or vampire could ever hope to be. "What else did he say?"

Nothing if you're going to do something like that again, I have to hold back saying. Instead I reply, "That Kaiba Seto is the Master of Domino." I can't help that coming out sounding like a question. The Old Man is scary.

"Oh. That's it?" I almost feel let down by the non-reaction.

"Yeah." I stare over my shoulder at the picture. "Yami said-"

"Atemu blocked the whole thing out. He swears Yuugi's still alive. The doctors said it's a coping technique and I should just let him be. It's easiest to humor him than try to convince him otherwise now."

Humor him? The hell? "Humor him?" Okay, if the brat ever kicks it and I start getting delusions, someone, please, smack me back into my senses. "How is humoring him-"

"Yuugi and Atemu were very close. You have a younger brother; you should understand." Yeesh, I didn't know the Old Man could go all scary like that. "It's almost night, by the way. You might want to call him." He's out the door before I can get another word out, and I'm left staring behind him.

"I'm sorry, Bakura-kun."

I whirl again, this time to find Mini-Me right before me. I think my heart is in my throat, which of course

only makes me belligerent. "What the fuck, midget? Trying to do me into an early grave?"

He chuckles softly, almost like the brat might do, and at least has the good grace to look ashamed. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you the truth, Bakura-kun, but now you know, right?"

"Yeah, now I know. 'Too close to the problem,' indeed." I sigh, sinking down to sit on the floor and stare at him. "So how the hell are you like this? You're too passive to be a ghost and you never once set off any vibes like a spirit - not to mention I've seen you holdings stuff and talking to Yami! What gives?"

He sits down on the bed, arranging himself with his legs crossed. "Niichan and I were kidnapped three years ago, and I was killed. Niichan blocked out what happened and, somehow, bound my spirit to him. He-"

"Here you are.." I nearly jump out of my skin at the sound of the Pharaoh's voice behind me. Yesterday was Confuse Bakura Night and today's Scare The Shit Out Of Bakura Day, isn't it? No fucking fair. "You were gone when I woke up, and I was-"

He just glided right by the small shrine like it doesn't even exist. Is this what Mini-Me meant about him blocking it all out? I know I've heard many times that the mind can do amazing things like Kitty forgetting everything leading up to his turning, but for fuck's sake... "What the hell are you trying to slip by me, Atemu?" I interrupt him to ask.

Both the freaks look confused, but it's Yami that speaks up. "Excuse me? What do you mean, Kura?"

It's been mentioned to me a few (dozen) times that I'm entirely too impatient when I'm between jobs. "I said, what are you trying to pull on me? Is this one of your games or something, Pharaoh?"

He looks totally bewildered. Good, since I was feeling that way not too long ago. "Wh- what are you talking about?"

"You know the trouble I have with stuff like this, and yet you bring me here." I could hit him - and I might if I didn't have a feeling it might be counterproductive. He looks so lost. Maybe I'll take some pity on him, but just a bit. "What's that on the wall?" Even with me pointing directly at it, he doesn't seem to see it, and frankly that's the last straw. "It's a shrine! You know, the kind you put up for dead people!"

"Who died?"

I didn't know Mini-Me could move like that. I *do* know that if he hadn't grabbed me, I was going to punch Yami for all I'm worth. Probably a good thing he did stop me, since I might have ended up regretting it, no matter how good it felt at the time, and I hate regretting anything. It still doesn't stop me from snarling, "Yuugi, you fucking blind idiot! Who else's face do you see plastered up there?"

He glances to the wall again, eyes widening just slightly, almost like he's starting to take this all in at last. We can only hope, I guess. Desperate red eyes turn back to me then down to the Mini-Me holding me back. "Aibou can't be dead. He's right there."

Stubborn son of a - I growl and step away from Yuugi, who obligingly lets me go. "You haven't been around me long enough to know that just because something is walking around doesn't mean it has a pulse?"

"Aibou isn't dead," he insists.

A growl escapes me again. He should be damn glad solving this mystery is more important to me than knocking his teeth in. "Yami, I like you, but you're an idiot."

"What do you mean?" Great, he's gone from confused and stubborn to confused and belligerent - and

probably still stubborn too.

I let my eyes flutter closed as I try to find Mini-Me's signature amidst everything else in this godforsaken city. Okay, that's him. Why am I not surprised his 'humming' pattern is light and entirely too perky for someone who's dead. I reach behind me and feel the chill of my hand going *through* him. Oh, I do *not* like this feeling, but if this is what it takes to convince him, then I guess I'll have to live with it.

"Bakura?" Mini-Me sounds nervous. I can't say I blame him; I'd probably be nervous too if someone had his hand stuck through me.

I open to my eyes to see Yami staring at me - and more precisely, my hand - all goggle-eyed. "I couldn't do this to someone who's alive, could I?"

"Stop it, Bakura." Oops, looks like I'm back to 'Bakura' instead of just 'Kura'. "Please, stop it. You'll hurt him."

I pull my hand back, cradling it close to my chest. Now, instead of the lingering sting of the glass cuts, it aches with so much cold that it almost burns. I guess that's why he doesn't let people get close enough to possibly touch him. Where does he get the energy to be that cold? Wait a minute, he said Yami bound his soul to him when he died. That means- Ow. That explains a lot.

"Yami," Yuugi speaks up, "you have to remember what happened, as much for my sake as for your own."

Nice job with the guilt trip there, Mini-Me. I don't think even I could have done better. Yami staggers between us to sit on the bed, though it's a bit more like he just collapsed. My body seems to be moving on its own as it moves to kneel in front of him. "Yami?" I try to pack as many questions as I can into that one word. He's silent though, so I reach up to touch to the side of his face. "Yami?"

"Your hand is like ice," he mumbles, grabbing it and holding it between both of his. I can feel a faint energy pulsing between them. Look like I was right: Yuugi was being supported by Yami's energy. It explains why he kept getting tired. Sometimes I hate being right, really I do.

"Do you remember something?" Mini-Me asks from right over my shoulder. And it also explains why I could never track him by his footsteps.

Yami nods slowly. Silence stretches a long moment till I finally have to prompt, "You can tell me, Yami."

His voice is miles away when he speaks. "I remember a couple of guys grabbing me after school and being thrown in the backseat of a car. A minute later, Aibou was thrown in with me, and the car flew away. I remember getting tossed around when the driver took corners too sharply but trying to keep Aibou from being jostled too much. I remember the car slamming on brakes and the two of us being dragged into the basement of a house that looked ready to fall down on us. There was a bright flash of a camera as they took our pictures to send to Jiichan." He draws in a shaking breath. "Do I have to go on, Kura?"

And we're back to Kura. I guess that's good, isn't it? "I think you need to, Yami."

"I don't want Aibou to disappear like your cat did, though."

Damn, I almost forgot I told him about that. "Still, you need to get it out."

"How about if I promise to stick around as long as I can, niichan?" Mini-Me pipes up. Hmm, bribery is good. It might get us through this more or less intact. I'll have to keep that in mind.

Yami nods again and takes a deep breath. "I remember us sitting down there for what felt like forever. I remember being told to be quiet often, even though I don't recall us making any noise. I remember one

guy bringing us water and the most horrible sandwiches." He shakes his head as though to clear it. Almost unconsciously, I climb up on the bed next to him and feel him wrap an arm around my waist as he lays his head on my shoulder. It's a little awkward, since I've never really done something like this, but I hold as best I can. "That last day... the door opened and I thought it was the burly guy who brought the food, but it was the others. One of them had a video camera and started filming their leader. He said something about it being a live broadcast to Jiichan and the other gaming heads and this was what happened when he got the cops involved and didn't pay all the ransom money."

He's starting to shiver. This can't be good. We - I may be - must be pushing him too hard. I just never would have dreamt it'd be like this, even with Pegasus' hint about the kidnapping. "Yami, you don't have to-"

"He put a gun to Aibou's head and pulled the trigger. For a second, I thought I was deaf, then I heard screaming - and it was me doing it. There was... stuff all over me, and Aibou was starting to slump against me. The leader turned back to the camera and said, 'Mutou, this will happen to your other grandson too if you don't come through soon.' He started to choke; the guy holding the camera was gasping. They started falling to the ground, then... I guess I passed out because I woke up in a hospital bed with Aibou standing right beside me. I thought it was all a bad dream, since, I mean, he was right there and he certainly didn't *look* dead."

"I was confused too, niichan," Mini-Me admits. "I couldn't figure out why I didn't go anywhere and just ending up staying near you. Once I figured out what happened, though, it made more sense why Jiichan didn't talk to me too and why Jounouchi-kun quit hanging around."

So that's why Yami didn't know about the changes in Kitty, that he's a Were now and all... Wait a minute. Wait a goddamn minute. Yuugi died three years ago. Kitty was turned only a couple of months after that. Suddenly everything's starting to fall into place. I have to admit I always wondered what Kitty had been doing on the bad side of town that night. I think I've finally figured out why. Damn it, Jounouchi. Damn it. But I can't say for sure I wouldn't do something similar if the situations were reversed, because something's happened here that never occurred in Tokyo: I have more attachments than just my brother. For better or worse, it seems I have people I've allowed myself to become close to, and I do for them like I would for the brat. They're mine, all of them: Ryou, Yami, Jounouchi, Yuugi, Seto, Mokuba, even Malik. What the hell's happened to me?

"Am I going to lose Aibou now?" He's talking into my shoulder, and I have a sneaky suspicion he's just barely holding back tears. Have to admire that kind of determination. Or maybe he's in shock. Either way, he didn't break down. When it comes to my brother, I'm a wuss; if something like this happened to him, I'd have followed him to the grave, one way or another.

I let my eyes close and find Yuugi again. I can't feel any difference in him, any weakening. If anything, I'd be more inclined to say he's stronger. And he 'feels' content. "I think you're stuck with him a while longer yet, Pharaoh," I answer, opening my eyes again.

"I like being here," Mini-Me puts in, all perky and happy again. "I like being around you, niichan, and you, Bakura-kun - and Ryou-kun too, even if he can't see me. I like him. He talks to me, even though he doesn't know where exactly I am."

"Whoa, whoa, back up there. You do *not* have designs on my little brother, do you?" And Mini-Me's staring at the skylight like it holds the answers to life. "Are you waiting for inspiration to strike or the floor to swallow you?"

"Both" comes promptly.

I shake my head, barely holding back a snicker. The midget at least has a bit of a sense of humor, one I can appreciate at least. "Make him cry, and I'll make sure you die for good this time."

And oww, that hurt. Have I mentioned Yami hits hard? He does. Not like... but still. "Bakura," he draws out, finally lifting his head to look at us. "Don't be mean to my brother. I'm not mean to yours."

"Sure. Whatever. I'll be good." This time, anyway. "I need to call Kitty. Where'd we drop my cell phone?"

"My room, I think." Yami stands and head back in there. There isn't even a trace of a limp tonight. I mean, the doctor said the bullet just grazed him and if he'd stayed still, it wouldn't have bled nearly as much. But Pharaoh-boy had to be all over the place - and we certainly weren't going to leave him alone and bleeding in a place crawling with Weres and vampires.

"Bakura-kun?"

Back to Jounouchi, though. I still need some answers there. I need to know if what I think happened is what really did happened. And Yuugi said something. "Hmm?" I mean-

"Who's Kitty?"

I mean, if he really wandered down to the warehouse district in a fit of depression or something - "Jounouchi." - am I going to have to keep an eye on him if something happens to one of the rest of us?

"Why do you call him that?" Curious little spirit-thing, that Mini-Me is. I'd almost say it's adorable, the way his face is all scrunched up in thought and his head is tilted to the side.

"Because he's a Wereleopard."

And it just got really cold in here. Did I miss a memo or something? Was Mini-Me not supposed to know this information? "Niichan," he calls and I shiver. Yami freezes in the doorway, my cell phone in hand. "Why didn't you tell me about Jounouchi-kun?"

This seems as good a time as any to beat a hasty retreat. "I'll leave this between the two of you," I excuse myself, hopping off the bed, grabbing the phone from Pharaoh-boy, and securing myself in his room. I don't get involved in family arguments unless they're with the brat; I damn sure don't get involved when it's not my own family.

Speed-dial three, having a seat on Pharaoh-boy's bed, and I'm listening to ringing noises as I wait for Kitty to pick up. It's really close to dark; I wonder if he's even gone home yet. I suppose I can live with him spending so much time around Treeboy, bad influence that he might end up being on my housecat.

"Jounouchi Katsuya's phone, Kaiba Seto speaking?" I can clearly hear the question mark tacked on the end.

"Don't you know your own name anymore, Treeboy?" I have to get at least one taunt in. It's a moral imperative. Messing with Tree Up His Ass Seto makes my nights.

"Bakura," he growls. "What do you want?"

"Is Kitty where I can speak to him?" I'm not even going to ask if he's decent or anything like that. Kitty's like me and is rarely far from his phone. If Seto's answering it, then... yeah. Either someone's in the shower, still in bed, or possibly getting fucked hard (in which case the background is awfully quiet - and if Seto's answering the phone, Kitty isn't doing something right). I'm going with Option Two, though, personally.

"He's... still asleep. Should he be awake by now?" There is the faintest edge of panic in his voice. I suppose Kitty's affections are returned after all then. Good to hear. However, panicking vampires is not something I want to deal with that other little revelation.

"Sometimes it takes days to sleep off shifting back and forth so quickly. It's hard to do at any time, but this close to the full moon especially. The part of him that's a cat would really rather stay a cat, you see. You really need to start boning up on Weres... before you start boning Kitty anyway."

Oww. As loud as that clatter was, I guess he just dropped the phone or maybe even threw it. Why do I tolerate Treeboy again? Oh yeah, Master of Domino, and Kitty likes him. There is silence for a moment, a shuffling sound, then a perky voice saying, "Hello?"

And that would be the nicer Kaiba brother. "Yo, half-pint. Where'd your brother go?"

"He dropped the phone, is all." Damn, I'm good. "I think you broke niisama, Bakura."

"Well, hand him the phone. I need to finish the job."

"Okay. Bye!"

Another shuffling noise, the phone shifting hands I suppose, and then Treeboy's voice comes through once more. "Yeah? What now, Bakura?"

Gah, how to put this...? "Do you know how long Kitty's been a Were?"

He's quiet for a second, like he's taking the opportunity to sit first before I make him keel over again. "Almost three years. Why?"

Getting to that in a minute, Treeboy. "Do you know of anything that might have, I don't know, led up to his becoming a Were?"

He's quiet for a second, at least till I realize he's mumbling to himself ever so quietly and, silly human that I am, I'm only getting a few words here and there. "Three years ago... was when... he went... couldn't have seen... but... Oh hell." The last bit comes in loud and clear. "I'll talk to him when he wakes up."

"He doesn't remember anything about when he was turned," I caution.

"I'll see what he does remember then."

"Let me know."

He makes some kind of noise, I can't tell if it's agreement or not, before shutting off Kitty's phone. With a sigh, I cut my off as well and lean back on Yami's bed.

What a fucking weird couple of days it's been. My abilities decide to make a vocal reappearance, only apparently they never rewally went into submission since I had no trouble at all seeing Yuugi. Then we get carted to Tokyo and back, after turning Domino itself upside down, only to find out Treeboy was Master of Domino all along and none of us knew it, not even him. And now I find out Mini-Me's been dead this entire time, and Yami somehow bound his brother's spirit to him - and that's another thing we have no idea about how it happened. Three weird-ass days indeed...

In my hand, my phone rings. Wearily, I lift it up and look at the caller ID: Mahaado. "Yeah?" I answer. Mahaado knows me well enough to know I'm rarely at my best; he isn't going to say a thing about me answering the phone less than is proper.

"I see you found your powers' key."

I'm not going to scream. I will not scream. I refuse to scream. Those are my first thoughts upon waking.

There's a long knife sitting in a hot fire a few feet away from where I'm sitting handcuffed too tightly to a chair; I can feel the metal cutting into my wrists. I don't want to know what the knife is doing there. Hell, if I didn't know swords thanks to Yami's little obsession, I'd swear that's what it is. He has swords that are smaller than that thing, though, I'd swear. The metal on it is so hot, it's starting to glow.

I manage to draw in a deep breath and take stock of my surroundings. Everything, from the chair I'm in to the brickwork on the fireplace, from the thick velvety rug to the medieval European tapestries on the walls, speaks of money. No taste, but money. In a weird way, it reminds me of Oyaji's place. I'm alone in the room, so I guess Ryou listened to me for once when I told him to run. I'll bet he ran straight to Kame Games, though. Damn, I don't want either of them mixed up in this - whatever "this" is.

The door opens, and a backlit figure shuffles in. The door creaks closed behind him, and he moves slowly forward, not in my direction but towards the fireplace. He picks up the knife with a cloth around the handle, turns - and I feel myself blanch, blood running cold, someone walking over my grave, the works all at once. "Takeshi." If his favorite ape is here, then...

Black dead eyes stare at me like he's not seeing me, like he's never seen me before. Hell, I've seen spirits look more alive than this, Yuugi being a case in point. If I didn't know better, I might think he was a zombie, but Takeshi's always been like this: cold, blank, and lifeless. "*Saichou* wishes me to convey a message to you." His voice sounds much the same as I remember too: like he's been gargling with razor blades and battery acid. "He does not tolerate his property being stolen, thief. Return what you took immediately."

I hate orders. I really do. He knows that; he's *trying* to piss me off. The bad thing is, he's succeeding. "He should be glad that's all I took."

He smiles vaguely, and I swear my blood runs even colder. Freaky flunkies who are human but could probably bench press more than a *Were* should *not* smile like that - or even at all! "*Saichou* said you would probably require convincing."

That knife moves closer and closer to my face till I can feel the heat coming off that red-hot blade. Hell, it's all I can see out of my right eye. He wouldn't... He wouldn't get his ape to... No, he would. I'm not going to scream. I will not scream. I refuse to scream.

Then the knife touches the flesh just above my right eye. The pain hits immediately. He starts to drag it down my face, down nearly to my chin. I scream. As he starts to carve twice more into my cheek across the first cut, I scream until my throat feels as bloody as my face. Then, finally, thankfully, blackness swallows me.

There are voices whispering in my head, some almost familiar, asking what I want them to do. I just want him gone, I try to think back at them.

There's screaming. It's not me anymore, I don't think. Warm liquid splashes against me, but it's not enough to drag me out of the quiet, numb room inside my head. I guess I *am* at least partially still conscious; I can vaguely pick up things going on around me, but I'll be damned if I can do a thing about them.

"Bakura-kun..."

Not now. Please, not now, Yuugi.

Perfume... Something light, flowery. Violets, maybe? A gentle hand touches the undamaged side of my face. An aching familiar voice whispers, "Niichan?"

"Amane," I manage to get out before blackness completely seizes me.

I can smell the antiseptic before I even really wake up. Hearing a steady blipping sound a moment later only confirms it: I'm in a fucking hospital. I *hate* hospitals. Not that I've ever been the patient before. How can I be? Legally speaking, I don't exactly exist. When Ryou and I were born, it was at home. If he hadn't been tiny and sickly enough to warrant hospitalization, I don't doubt that neither of us would legally exist. I think our grandmother was going to start my paperwork before she died, but that was many years ago. So, again, how am I here?

There's a very, very faint buzzing in the back of my head, but it's a tone and pitch I recognize easily: Yuugi. And if he's here, then so's Yami and, I'd imagine, Ryou. Guess that means I should open my eyes, huh? Might be harder than I anticipated; they feel like they weigh a ton or two each. Finally I get one open - and that's because the other one *won't*.

"Kura!"

"Niisan!"

I really wish Ryou and Yami wouldn't talk at the same time like that. It's rather unsettling, to say the least. "Why am I in a hospital?" I manage to croak out. The question I want to know is, of course, *how* am I here, but if Yami's here and if that dark shadow lurking in the corner is Seto, then I think I know the answer: money talks, especially when it comes from a Kaiba or a Mutou - and even more so when it's the Master of the City's money. Seto may be a young Master, but he's made it perfectly clear since he took up the reins a week ago that he has no intention of being as "hands-off" as Gozaburo was. Changes in Were policy alone...

Ryou's climbing up on the bed with me, wrapping himself around me like he used to do when we were a lot smaller. "They told us they found you on the hospital steps covered in blood. What happened, niisan?" If my brother ever cried, somehow I think he would be doing it now. I can't tell him, though. Not only because my throat feels like a quarter mile of well-traveled road, but also because I don't want to see the look in his eyes when I do, so all I can do is shake my head.

I can hear a faint noise to my right and turn my head slowly (because anything else makes the room spin) to see Yami pouring a little bit of water into a small glass. "Here." Any other time, I'd be annoyed at being... well, babies like this, but for once, I might actually need it. I don't think I can hold a cup right now while I'm feeling doped up to the gills and my wrists are bandaged. Not that I'm going to tell anyone just how good that water feels on my throat. When the glass is empty, he looks at me expectantly. "More?"

"No." Sounds like the water helped a little bit. It still doesn't feel great, even when I'm all hyped up on pain meds, but it's helping me ignore the bandages covering one side of my face and the throbbing beneath them. But I have to ask. "How bad?"

Yami's silent as he picks at the bandage covering one of my wrists. Ryou lets out a small whimper and manages to wrap himself around me closer, and I absently wrap my left arm around him, taking care not to pull the IV. Yuugi's biting his nails and looking away. (Every time I see him do something so... human, so normal, I have to marvel again that he's a spirit Yami bound to him.) I don't see Jounouchi since they're strict about known Weres in hospitals. So that leaves one person.

"How bad, Seto?"

"There are severe bruises and minor lacerations on both your wrists with the right one being the worst. The consensus seems to be you were handcuffed to something and struggled. There are marks that look like someone - a human male, most likely - tried to claw his way through your stomach and chest." Damn, I hadn't even felt those. "The worst is where someone carved into the right side of your face. The

doctors are predicting it will scar but shouldn't affect your eyesight." He sounds like he's reading a laundry list (or in Seto's case, probably a computer manual), but that's how he is. I wouldn't expect anything else. Nights like tonight I even appreciate it.

A snuffle from Ryou draws my attention back to him. "What happened, niisan?"

"It's not like you to let someone get the better of you," Yami adds.

Damn. How am I supposed to resist both of them? Not to mention the worry radiating off Yuugi in waves and the faintest stamp of concern in Seto's eyes.

"Takeshi happened," I rasp out.

Ryou goes impossibly paler. "He found us?" I nod slowly. "What does he want?"

"Don't ask that, Ryou. You don't want to know." You won't like the answer, little brother.

Another snuffle escapes him, and something inside me that Takeshi couldn't touch hurts. "We should get out of here then. Before anything else can happen. We should leave Domino as soon as you're released - No! Before then! Kaiba-kun, Yami-kun, you can get him transferred out of the city, right?"

I'm guessing he's about five seconds away from completely freaking out when Yami cuts in. "What is it, Ryou?" He glances from him to me and back again. "Who's found you?"

Ryou shakes his head, stubbornly silent, and crimson eyes turn to me once more. "You don't want to know." I know that won't work worth a damn with Yami, but that's all I can give him without getting into a long, drawn-out discussion of our past. Not even Jounouchi knows half of what I'd have to tell him, and Ryou doesn't need to hear it all over again; living it once was enough for both of us.

Yep, I was right. Yami's building up some massive retort - and Seto interrupts him. "I can't do a damn thing for either of you if you're outside the city."

You can practically hear that taking the wind out of Ryou's sails. For that matter, I hadn't even really considered just how *useful* it might be to have the Master of the City on our side. Imagine that: me not tapping a resource like this. I must be losing my touch - or things have just been *that* crazy around here lately. "How safe are we in the city, Seto? I was grabbed here. I'm not trusting Ryou to any maybes."

"Niisan..." Good, he's starting to go from worried sick to concerned and a little annoyed.

"No maybes." That's another thing I have to admit I like about Seto: he does nothing by half-measures. "You'll be safest at the mansion. I'll go arrange for your belongings to be moved over tonight. I'll... tell Jounouchi you're awake also." The last is said as he shuts the door behind him, leaving us to stare after him.

I turn to look at Ryou in utter confusion, half-hoping whatever drugs is being pumped through me made me see that, to find he's looking at me in much the same way. I guess I didn't hallucinate it. "Did Kaiba-kun just -"

"-completely take over our lives?" I finish. "I think so." Yuugi's laughing like someone let him into the good drugs. I shoot a glare as best I can. "Glad we're so amusing to you, Mini-Me."

He sobers abruptly and exchanges a strange look with Yami right about the same time as Ryou starts yawning. "Why don't you get some sleep, Ryou-kun?" Yami's being too nice. This is suspicious. "You've been up all night. Aibou and I'll watch your brother a while."

He nods and is out cold in a matter of minutes. Only when I'm sure he's asleep do I ask, "What's with the

looks, you two? And don't even try to pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

"What really happened out there, Bakura-kun?" Should have known Yuugi'd start this off.

"Who's Takeshi?" Yami presses on. "Who's after you? There's a lot you left out."

I let out a loud sigh. "Takeshi... Can we leave it at 'he's someone who doesn't like me'?" They're both shaking their heads before I can finish. "Fine, fine." I start brushing my hand over Ryou's hair, taking care not to get the IV stuck. It's not quite like Jounouchi, but it'll have to do to keep me calm enough to relay this. "Takeshi's... our father's favorite goon. He only uses him when he wants to send a message."

"What message was he trying to send this time?" Wow... Who knew Yami's voice could get so soft? I'd like to hear it again like that in other circumstances, but then again, like I said, I'm drugged to the gills.

"He wants his heir back. Ryou's the most normal of the three of us, after all."

"Three?"

"We have a younger half-sister, Amane. She talks to animals and plants the same way I talk to spirits."

"Why isn't she with you guys?" Trust Yuugi to ask the hard question.

"She wanted to stay with her mother and Tokyo friends, not take chances coming with us."

"So your father's behind all of this?" Back to Yami. It's almost like a tennis match. I'm starting to know how the ball feels anyway.

"Yeah, he is." Why does it bother me so much to admit that, at least to him? And damn, does he look pissed off! I think if he clenches that fist any harder his hand is going to start bleeding. "Now what's with the third degree?"

Yuugi fidgets and looks nervously over at Yami, who shakes his head. "You have to tell him, Aibou. I'm not sure I can."

The ghost nods slowly. "Several hours ago, after Ryou told us you were gone, I felt something. I don't know, a flicker."

Okay, if it didn't hurt to move my face, I'd raise an eyebrow. "A flicker?"

"For a moment, he flashed solid then vanished. He was back in a few minutes, saying you were in trouble," Yami cuts in.

"Bakura-kun, I think you tried to call as many spirits as possible to you again, to help you. When I got there, you were handcuffed to a chair, unconscious, and there were easily a dozen other spirits in the room," he swallows hard, "ripping a man apart."

"I thought it wasn't possible for a spirit to turn flesh." Corporeal. Whatever.

"Neither did I, but they were. I was." Yuugi sounds almost sad - or I think the term is 'wistful', like he enjoyed being real for a bit.

"It sounds like your abilities increased." I wish they'd quit switching back and forth like this. He pulls the chair up to the bed before he continues speaking. "I mean, before it was just ghosts that were close to you. We don't know where you were, but Aibou said wherever he was wasn't close to our home. Your powers taking jumps like this can't be good."

I'm not going to point out that I haven't bound a spirit to me yet. Hell, we just got him willing to accept that Yuugi is dead - or mostly dead - or something. He's not technically a ghost, since ghosts are unquiet and usually malevolent spirits, and he's a spirit only in the sense he doesn't have a flesh and blood body. And since Yami's accepted his death, strangely, he's aged to the point he's supposed to be, a year younger than us, not that he's grown much or anything. I've never seen a spirit age before. Yeah, I've said it before, but they're freaks. Cute freaks and freaks I'm starting to lay claims to, but freaks all the same.

"Yami, it's not like there are that too many others like me. I can't go traipsing around the world to find one - and hope they're still sane enough to ask." That's one bit of information I could have lived without Mahaado passing on to me. I'm still on the low levels of my powers, and I'm close enough to out of my mind as it is.

It's odd, though. Mahaado said there are probably no more than five hundred people in the world with powers like mine and, unless I deliberately look for them, I'd probably never meet another. So I have to wonder if my powers hunted down another like me in the Bossling. They seem to be similar enough, and his balances mine out when they start to overwhelm me. I'm not sure where his end and mine begin in all honesty sometimes. It's an odd little checks and balances system we have going, but I like the way Mahaado explained it better: my powers are a wide open door, while Yami's are the lock that can hold it closed.

"Do you have any idea where we might find one?" Yami's asking.

I shake my head slightly. "None whatsoever."

"Then Aibou and I will stay with you and Ryou-kun and Jounouchi-kun at Kaiba's. Make sure nothing goes wrong." I can practically see him biting back commenting on Seto's incompetence.

I'm almost tempted to say 'thank you', but I won't. For starters, it's not in my nature. And I think I'm officially in over my head. This... is going to get interesting.