

Title: *Endless Loop Book 3: Spellbound*

Author: Apollymi (Eternal SailorM), apollymi@gmail.com

Website: DarkMagick.net, [Apollymi's Grimoire](#)

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She's all dolled up like Marilyn Monroe as she belts out "Happy Birthday, Mister President". I wonder what it takes to bleach (or dye or whatever) black hair to that shade of platinum blonde, because even I can tell that's not a wig. Yami would get a kick out of her, if he were here. Damn shame he's not; this is more his thing than mine. He's the American movies fan, after all, not me, so I'm sure he could get a lot more of the clichés that abound here that I know I'm missing.

This place certainly wouldn't have been my idea of a fun place to spend my Friday night, but it was better than the alternative: namely, sit around the house and watch TV. Now mind you, Treeboy's TV is roughly the size of a movie theater and he's got surround sound going, which I can definitely appreciate, but weekends are just... Well, they're tough for me. Nine out of ten weekends, the Old Man steals Yami and his Mini-Me for the entire weekend. I try not to care too much because he's mine the rest of the week, but three days of sitting around the house gets really old really fast, and I really don't enjoy it.

So Treeboy asking a favor of me sounded like a good thing, at least till I heard what the favor was. Then it just sounded exciting. So far in my life, I've run a street gang, I've been a professional thief, I've killed someone (but I usually try not to advertise that one)... and now I'm working for a master vampire, trying to track down a serial killer. Not too shabby for nineteen, if I must say. As long as Treeboy doesn't get too many ideas about what kind of work I can do for him. I *am*, sadly, retired from stealing.

The longer I'm here and the more nights I have to show up, though, the more I want to rip Treeboy a new one. It's loud, it's smoky, I've been propositioned more times than I want to think about, and there's a Jean Harlow who's apparently not going to give up till she gives me a lap dance. If it didn't mean finding a brand-new Master of the City and getting that one broken in to my satisfaction, I'd kill him. I've spent the last few weekends working on this, mostly to keep Yami from worrying, and I don't think I'm any closer to finding the guy than when I started. I mean, a killer that preys exclusively on low-end hostesses?

This is the kind of case that should be high on the police's priority lists. With all the bodies completely drained of blood and marks of multiple vampire bites, it almost looks like there's a group of rogue vampires prowling the city. I mean, in Tokyo and in America, there are entire police squadrons devoted to preternatural cases like this; here in Domino, though, they don't seem to want to have anything to do with it. That's how things were handled under the previous Master (fucking Gouza-bastard): if it was supernatural in nature, they were to leave it to his people to handle. Treeboy can't change everything overnight, no matter what he thinks. That's our Kaiba, though: the consummate idealist.

Harlow gives me another wink and what's probably supposed to be a 'come hither' look, and I do my damndest to ignore it. There's something whispering in the back of my head that says tonight's Marilyn's last performance. It might be the ghost that I spotted walking in the door the first night, or I might finally be developing a sense for this kind of stuff. Either way, it's getting close to closing time -- and maybe Marilyn's final curtain if I don't start coming up with some kind of an idea here. Last thing I want, after all, is a bleached blonde ghost warbling "Happy Birthday, Mister President" at me till I track down her killer. It's killing me enough to listen to it from her living without hearing a ghostly rendition of it.

"I see you're making friends as always, Bakura."

It takes everything in me to *not* jump or reach for a knife or anything like that. I don't know why the supernatural people I live with tend to think, for some ungodly reason, that just because I can't

benchpress a truck, I'm not a dangerous person -- and therefore it's okay to sneak up on me. I swear, if one more leopard tries to sneak up on me, I'm going to superglue bells to every last one of them. Usually the vampires are a lot less playful with the whole idea, but every so often...

"You know me: the whole winning friends and influencing people is what I do best. What the fuck are you doing here, Seth?" I turn as I ask... then have to turn around again to face the other way because he's dropping into the seat next to me.

"I needed to get out of the house for a while. Helping you out on this seemed like an interesting way to do it. Besides, it's a full moon and my cats are all out..."

Woah there. 'My cats'? 'My'? Only two people say that: Kitty and Treeboy. That means this isn't Seth. And now that I think about it, the eyes are too light a shade of blue, there's absolutely no red to speak of in his hair, and he's a few centimeters too short. How the hell did they get his skin so close to matching Seth's?! And better still, why?! "What the fuck, Treeboy?!"

"You have no volume control, do you?"

I narrow my eyes and glare, not that it has any effect, since the bastard's not even looking at me. He's checking out the crowd. "Not right now. It goes right along with your lack of common sense. What the hell are you doing here?" At least I manage to keep it down to a volume between a hiss and a stage whisper. Anyone else wouldn't be able to hear me over the noise in the club, but Treeboy acts like he might as well be the Six Million Dollar Man... or would that be the Six Billion Yen Vampire? Hmm, food for thought. Anyway... He should be able to hear me.

"Because Mokuba reassembled the coffee pot," oh fucking hell, I'm so not coming home till after the sun comes up, "my cats are completely preoccupied with keeping Ishtar from getting killed," because no matter what Marik says, pink kitty Larry doesn't like his tail pulled (and if Amare ever sees him in cat form, she'll definitely be dressing him up), "and I thought you could use my help getting this over with this year."

...Huh? Did Treeboy just offer to help me out, in his own roundabout, high and mighty way? It's not like he's giving me a lot of choice in the matter, but that's a typical Treeboy maneuver -- and this is still counting as a favor paid off for letting the brat and me live at his place... and paying my hospital bills last year... and not killing Yami no matter how many times he mouths off... and a small host of other things. I really dislike being in anyone's debt, even if he's been oddly silent about it, and I don't think I'm ever climbing out of this particular hole. Not any time soon anyway.

"Do you really think that's a wise idea?"

He finally turns to look at me, one eyebrow slightly raised. "Do you have any better ones?"

"A few," I shoot back. "I know who the next one is going to be."

"Really?" Ignore the dripping sarcasm, Bakura. Just ignore it. He's just trying to piss you off. Pretend he's not succeeding. You're going to get him back in a moment. "Who?"

"Marilyn Monroe."

There is something extremely gratifying about seeing Treeboy look utterly confused. Making him look anything other than calm and collected sort of makes my day; it's such a rare event. "I know you get confused about living and dead, but Marilyn Monroe's been dead for sixty years. Even you should know that."

I didn't even bother to try hiding rolling my eyes. "Not the actress, Treeboy. The hostess..." I turn to point at her... and she's not there. "Fuck!" When the hell did I get to my feet? Oh well, no worrying on that right

now.

There is a steady stream of foul language escaping me as I run for the door, Treeboy on my heels. The only reason I can see why he hasn't passed me is likely because I'm the only one who knows where these people have been killed (not where the bodies were found) and which back alley all the ghosts in the area are pointing to -- and there are no shortages of those in this part of town. I hate the west side.

We've circled the building and are closing in on the alley when I spot them. My God... If every sense I have wasn't screaming 'vampire' at me, I'd swear they're zombies. Each one of them is more emaciated than the one standing next to them, and I can't tell if their skin is so pasty white that it makes Treeboy look tan normally or some new and ghastly shade of grey. The only way to determine if they're male or female is by the clothes they're wearing, and even some of those are if-fy; it's hard to tell the difference between male cut and female cut clothes when they're covered in dirt and... and, well, ick. I don't even want to think what some of this 'ick' might be because, if I do, I might lose it. So I'm staring at various bits of gross that would have definitely had that Croquet guy who works for Pegasus tossing his cookies -- and I'm trying not to puke myself.

On a purely academic level, I've always known there were many *kinds* of vampires, just like there are many kinds of Weres. Some of the stuff I've overheard from Seth and Noah talking alone guarantees that there are at least three types, including Japan's local variation -- and something gives me the sick feeling these guys might represent either the ones Seth so eloquently described as 'rotters' or a whole new kind. And if it is the latter... Well, we're in trouble anyway, but that might make it a whole lot worse.

Almost like they're all running on one mind, they turn to stare at us, and I feel a shiver go down my spine that I'm never going to admit to. That many lifeless eyes, and they're all focused on us.

No, scratch that 'us'. Me. They're all looking at me, like yours truly is a steak to a starving man. I've been living with two packs of Weres for the last year; this is like the most twisted pack mentality I've ever seen. I can practically watch the bloodlust enter all their eyes at once, and there goes that shudder again. I'm not too proud to admit to falling back a step into Treeboy... and then a scream echoes through the close streets, bouncing off these close walls so that it sounds like it's all around us. On the other side of the pack is Marilyn -- and even *I* can tell how scared she is and I'm probably the only one in this alley not *smelling* it.

Again as one, they turn towards her. Treeboy whispers, "Bakura, get her out of here, and I'll handle this lot," just loud enough for me to hear over my own heart pounding. How the hell are they not getting to him? If we get out of this alive, I'm cracking him open to see if there are gears and cogs inside him or not. I swear to God I will. Still, robot vampire or not, he has a point, and I nod my understand. This is going to be... interesting, is all I can think for a long second.

As a thief, I've prided myself more with stealth than speed. With all the crap that's happened lately and especially with all the attempts on my life last year, though, I've gotten to where I'm decently quick. I mean, I'm not beating a leopard in a foot-to-paw race, but I'm no slouch. Still, this may take a bit more physical strength than I've got to get through this lot.

Like they're one creature in many bodies, they take a shambling step towards Marilyn, all of them moving their right foot in time -- and I'm vaguely reminded of the brat's bootlegged 'horror' films, where the killer is just ambling along behind the running victim yet somehow manages to keep pace. I have no doubt at all in my mind that they'll be able to keep up with us, but goddamn it, I don't want another ghost on my conscience. If I have anything to say about it, I won't tonight. No use thinking about this...

I take a deep breath and hold it in as I run, darting beneath the arm of the one closest to me, elbowing another aside, dropping to escape a grabbing hand, skirting around as much of the group as humanly possible, and generally trying to avoid the smell and getting caught. It seems like a few terrifying forevers, but finally I have my hand around Marilyn's. "Come on!"

To give her proper credit, she's only frozen in place a moment, then she turns and runs. And damn... If she ever decides to give up on being a hostess, she should try out for Olympic track. I have several centimeters on her, not to mention I'm not wearing heels, and I'm having a hard time keep up with the woman. "What about your friend?" she calls over her shoulder at me.

I glance back myself. Treeboy's holding his own in that mob. No surprise there. One, he's a master vampire despite his age, so he should be more than capable these punks because, two, they're not interested in draining a fellow vampire dry, not when two tasty humans are so close at hand. "He'll be fine, and he's not my friend!" And damn it, I'm not worried if he'll be okay because it's Treeboy. He's always okay; it's the rest of us that catch the crap.

The shuffling footsteps behind us corroborate my thoughts on them keeping up with us; the accompanying smell confirms this. I'm not turning around again. I don't want to see just how close they really are. We start to turn a corner, and something, one of *them* I suppose, grabs my hair and yanks me back. Now I really regret never cutting it all these years. Okay, new order if I survive this: chop my hair off short so it's not as easy a target as now, *then* I'll see if Treeboy really is a robot or not. I'll also need to inform Treeboy of his new nickname of RoboVamp, whether he is or isn't one, again assuming we both survive.

Whatever I hit when I fall back gives and not in ways that I really want to think about. The human body doesn't give like that unless it's dead, well and truly dead -- and maybe a little bit hollowed out. I have to admit that I panic. For as much time as I spend around ghosts, I don't do well around dead things. At least Marilyn is out of sight; that's one less thing to worry about. Thankfully, though, my version of panic amounts to finally putting to use some of the assbeating skills Treeboy's been insisting on my learning. I'm completely on autopilot, but there's kicking and a bit of punching... which actually further serves to turn my stomach as I can feel my fist go wrist-deep into the side of a face. I mean, on anime, it looks really cool, but in real life, it's just gross... and *fuck!*

I'm yanking hard, trying to get my hand free when two others of them grab at me. Someone yells my name, and I think it's Treeboy, but I really have no clue because I'm really just trying to avoid yellowed teeth. I can feel the ghosts of the west side reaching for me and I don't know if they're trying to help me get away or help me die and that voice is back and louder than ever and all I can hear is *Call upon me, and I will destroy these creatures that seek to harm you. Kill them, call on me, and it will all go away. Call on me, little thief, and do it now! Just say my name: Zork...!*

Fuck, fuck, fuck... Usually when I hear that voice, I'm under orders to get my ass wherever Yami is right away. There's no doing that now, though. Teeth close down on my arm, and a scream breaks out of me. If I could form coherent words, I might yell the name I keep hearing whispered in my head, but there aren't words, just a scream.

And suddenly all those ghosts are here in the alley, and the only order I can give is a purely mental 'Don't kill Treeboy' because anything else is beyond me right now. I shove at the walking corpse that has its fangs in my arm at the same time as Treeboy finally wades his way through the diminishing mob, only a bit worse for the wear, not that I can actually see that much of him aside from the hand reaching in and grabbing the vamp trying to eat my arm, yanking it away from me. It reacts with remarkable celerity for only having a few seconds of unlife left and counters by shoving me away hard.

I think I'm actually airborne for a second before I hit something hard with first my shoulder then my head. And hmm, that's interesting. Yami's not the only thing that stops that voice. Unconsciousness works just as well in a pinch.

I think I'm going to throw up. I feel like a quarter mile of well-traveled road, my entire right shoulder aches, my left forearm feels like someone shoved a red hot poker through it, and my head is going to explode in

the very near future. Can I go back to unconsciousness now?

Wait a minute. There's someone sitting next to me and a cool hand touching my forehead. Last thing I remember is a bunch of vamps trying their level best to make me into a meal and/or silly putty. Who the hell is this now? I wrestle my eyes open... and apparently I must have a concussion; why else would I be seeing a Treeboy sitting on the dirty ground of a west side back alley with me? But that doesn't explain why my vision is slowly clearing and the pain is even more slowly receding. There aren't a lot of things that explain that, except...

The hand draws away and all I can see are blue eyes. "Bakura?" I'll be damned. He almost sounds worried. I'm impressed. First I rate the 'fangs and a hearty fuck-off' tone, and now I get the worried voice that's usually reserved for someone with the last name Kaiba or Jounouchi, as well as the first mark. Yeah, color me impressed.

"I'm here." I'm not going to lie and say I'm fine, mainly because lying to a vampire is kind of stupid; they can always tell.

"Can you move? We need to get out of here. It's half an hour till dawn."

Fuck. How long was I out? And how much worse can this night get before it's over? Okay, think, Bakura. Akito might be able to get us anywhere inside the city inside of ten minutes, but getting him moving this early might be a bit of a trick, not to mention all these narrow streets will certainly slow him down. We wouldn't make it back in time. Fuck fuck fuck *fuck*... What are the other options? Where can we get inside of half an hour in the condition we're both in? Only one place is coming to mind, and even that will be tight time-wise. Not like we have any other choice really, not unless Treeboy has places scattered throughout the city that he hasn't mentioned in a year.

I don't waste the breath to say I can move, and I just start pushing myself to my feet. First mark or no, I'm still a little shaky and I hurt like a son of a bitch, but damn it, I'm moving. And this makes another one I owe Treeboy. He's not going to know about the RoboVamp nickname at least; that'll be a start... and maybe I won't break him open to see if he's a robot. "The apartment's the only place close enough to get before you turn into a crispy critter," is all I say. I have a feeling it's going to take every bit of breath and energy to get there.

Sometimes I hate being right. Let's just say it's a good thing Treeboy is adept at trying to beat the dawn because as it is, I'd say we avoided sunlight by all of two minutes, if that. We take the elevator up, and I pick the lock to my own apartment. What can I say? I quit carrying the key five months ago. Anyway, the brat's bedroom is the only one without any windows, so I direct him in there. I've got the door open to my own old room and am about two seconds from just crashing on the floor when I hear a tired voice say, "Bakura?"

I'm hearing my own name a lot more in the last few hours than I have in quite a while. "What?" I demand, barely turning towards him.

"This didn't happen." For half a second, I stand there and stare at him in confusion. Yes, it takes that long for me to remember what happened last year with the assassins Oyaji sent after me, that he never let anyone who didn't witness one of the attempts know about them till it was completely unavoidable.

"There's no need worrying anyone about this. The problem's taken care of, so there's no need to mention it to *anyone*."

"Wasn't planning on it." Last thing I want is to see the brat or Yami worried over something that's over and done with, and it's not like I'm ever letting him give me another mark. Treeboy's decent enough in his own way, once you get to know him, but I don't think I want to be bound to him for the rest of his life. I'm not

exactly human servant material after all. "We kicked ass, we neglected to take names, over and done with." I pause, debating on if I want to say anything or not. I might be wrong, after all. "I don't think this is over, though."

"I know. Me too."

Great... More fun times ahead. Just my luck. Fuck.