

Title: *Endless Loop Book 7: Last Waltz*

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"Bakura, you're an idiot."

The room is completely empty except for me. That's not exactly a big shock. The sun's up, so most of the people who live in this house are dead to the world. No surprise there, I guess.

Maybe the surprise should have been that I was halfway expecting there to be someone else here. It sometimes seems like I'm never quite alone. I seem to have picked up a few dozen ghosts in the last few years, usually more than enough to keep me company on a day to day basis, but for once, they seem to have all wandered off. Wandered off? Whatever it is that ghosts do when they're not standing right on top of me, I don't know.

Most of the time, even during the daytime, I can pick up Seto in the back of my mind. And let me tell you, that it is damn weird to feel a semi-unconscious vampire in my head in the middle of the daytime, if for some reason I happen to also be awake. It's been a bit, but we're still working out all the ins and outs of this whole master vampire-human servant thing. Usually, it's just really fucking weird stuff. I now know more about Kaiba Seto than I really ever wanted to know.

"And now I'm talking to myself. Great."

On that note, I should probably stop doing it. If I'm talking to myself – and worse, complaining out loud about the fact I'm talking to myself – then it's probably time to take a break. I've only been working on this same project for the last few hours, today at least. It's been a slow week.

There usually aren't that many people in the house to begin with, not any more anyway. Right now, however, there are surprisingly even less than normal.

Usually there are at least ten people who live here on a semi-regular basis. There's me, there's Seto, there's Kisara, and those are the main ones; we're almost always here. But then we tend to also have Varon, Dartz, Siegfried, Rebecca, a couple of those two's kids, Magnum, a couple of wolves, Isono, and so on.

Magnum's out for the week; he tries to spend at least one week a year doing a sort of team-bonding exercise of sorts with the other wolves, which is why none of them are really here. Dartz and the cats are therefore on guard duty, which surprisingly doesn't bring them up to the house all that often. Varon has lately taken some shifts at a clinic on the west side of

town, and I believe that's where he is. It's the middle (sort of) of the day, so Kisara and Seto are unconscious.

And that leaves me, of course. I'm up, obviously. But I'm awake for one simple reason. I'm working on something, and it's generally best to work on a secret project – and doesn't that sound all superspy? – when no one else is around.

I'm not kidding myself. I don't think I have managed to keep it a complete secret. I've tried, but since I still drift out every now and again, there is every chance that I've babbled it out and don't remember it. There's also every chance that Seto has managed to pluck it straight out of my head. That's one of the weird disadvantages of being the human servant to a damn nosy vampire: he likes checking up on me. Something like that, anyway. He likes knowing what's going on, I guess.

I'm trying not to think about my project too much because of that. And may I say that not thinking of something is incredibly hard? It's like one of those 'don't think of elephants' and you immediately think of elephants things. The harder I try not to think about my little project, the harder it is not to.

I don't think Seto cares one way or the other either. It's keeping me busy, out of his hair, and I haven't blown up the mansion doing it. I think we've all had quite enough of that for a lifetime or two. After all, we just finished getting the house rebuilt last year. It probably wouldn't have taken nearly as long, but there were many changes that we ended up making along the way.

I have this little area all to myself. It's one of those sections we added. And I can actually say 'we' because I asked Seto for some private space, and he had the architect add on an entire extra room, just for me to work on whatever I want to.

I seem to have developed a new power. I can ask Seto for something, and nine times out of ten, I get what I ask for. I'm trying to use this power for good and not evil, but goddamn, it's tempting sometimes. I have my area downstairs, I have my own bedroom suite (as Seto and Ryou call it), and I have the lake house. The cats didn't want to stay there after everything that happened, and I can't say as I blame them. It would be incredibly difficult for me also, but honestly, I'm using it for a good purpose. The lake house is the center of my 'Find Kitty and the Ishtars' efforts. I suppose you could even say it is campaign headquarters. It's also my place away from the occasional madness of the Kaiba household, but that's neither here nor there.

And every so often, I catch myself at thinking 'Seto' instead of 'Kaiba'. Okay, maybe it's less 'every so often' at this point and more 'frequently'. Hell, Seto even thinks of himself as 'Kaiba,' so I have no idea at all where this came from. I'm seriously tempted to lay blame for it on Kisara, with her 'Seto-sama,' but I really, really have no idea.

Kaiba. Not Seto. Kaiba. Yes, there are somewhere around five dozen Kaiba vampires, but still... Okay, that's a slight exaggeration on my part. There aren't five dozen. It's more like five total. But still! When you're around them, it gets confusing.

Not that there are any other Kaiba vampires around right now. Mokuba and Noa left right after Seth kicked it. Now, don't get me wrong: I am damn glad that Seth's dead. It just sucks for Kaiba that his little brother and Noa have gone on sabbatical since then. I mean, it's been a very long time. It's been years since then, and neither of them has shown any sign of coming back for longer than a few days at the time.

For that matter, neither has my brother. I don't expect Ryou's boyfriend, Yuugi, to show up here at any point in the near future, but I still live in hope that Ryou will at least come to visit more frequently, if not move back in here. It's a vain hope. In fact, it's reasons like this why I prefer to think that hope can fucking bite me.

Ryou and Yuugi moved out right about the same time Mokuba and Noa did. I guess I can understand why. No, I know I can understand why. Yami died here. If I were his brother, I would never want to come back here either. Hell, I was his boyfriend – lover, partner, whatever – but I still live here. I can get why Yuugi wouldn't, though. To some extent, I can get why Ryou wouldn't either, why he would prefer to be with Yuugi as close to full-time as possible now.

It's like Yuugi's severed all ties with the supernatural world. He's trying to at least. He has very little to nothing to do with anybody in any way affiliated with the supernatural. Ever since he took over Kame Games, he's made some pretty interesting rules about who and what will be allowed in that building and his home. No vampires, no shape shifters, no witches, no one affiliated with any of the above. So I can't even go visit my brother. I have to pretty much wait for Ryou to come visit me or meet him someplace neutral. And it sucks. I can get the reasons why Yuugi's doing this, but it sucks.

It's been nearly a month since I saw my brother. We talk on the phone, at least, about once a week, and that's okay. But we're twins. It really sucks being separated from my twin brother like this. I almost hate to admit it, but I miss him. I miss him a lot. I miss him like... like... breathing.

Maybe that's why Seto – why Kaiba – has been going out of his way to be nice to me lately. He too has more or less lost a brother in Mokuba. Neither of us get to see our sibling very often; I can't even tell you the last time I saw Amene, but it has to have been at least a year, if not more. Maybe that's why I have this little room for my little secret experiment.

Years ago, I managed to bring Mutou Yuugi back to life. I don't remember how I did it. I remember that I was in the act of beating my father to death with a fireplace poker, and Yuugi tried to grab me to make me stop. I pushed him out of the way, and he was alive. I don't know how I did it. Honestly, I haven't the foggiest on how it is even theoretically possible. Somehow I managed it, though, and I need to know how to do it again.

You see, as I figure it, it's my fault that Yami got killed. I seriously doubt that Seth was all that interested in actively trying to kill him. At that time, I was the one with three out four marks to Kaiba Seto. Seth was giving serious thought, it seemed, to trying to take over Domino. To do that, he needed to take out Kaiba and anyone likely to raise hell if Kaiba died suddenly. I have been known to do that. Raise hell, I mean.

Plus there's the whole thing where Seth shot Yami through me. The bullet that killed him passed through my body and damn near killed me as well. If Kaiba hadn't given me the last mark towards being his human servant, I would have died with Yami.

I'm still trying to decide how I feel about that. I mean, I guess it's good to be alive and all that. I still get to see my brother on occasion and all that. I get to piss people off every damn day, and I have to say that I enjoy that. But otherwise, if Kaiba had been five minutes later, if even that long, there's every chance I might be with Yami.

And isn't that a damn depressing thought?

I miss him. I miss him all the damn time. Sometimes I miss him enough to even think about trying to do something to join him. But...

But if I die, there's every chance I might hurt Ryou if I do that. He might feel me die, like he felt me nearly die the last time, and I don't want to do that to him. He is my twin brother and all, and it would be horrible of me to cause him pain if I can avoid it.

But if I die, there's a chance I might drag Seto along for the ride. I've been talking, mostly to Kisara since she's one of the few people who are willing to tell me about these things, and there have been cases of the death of either vampire or human servant dragging the other down with them.

So if I die, if I kill myself, I could very well end up killing Kaiba too. I don't want to do that. He's a pain in my ass at the best of times, but he's good for this city. I wouldn't want to do something like deprive it of the first Master who ever gave a damn about it.

But if I die, I would be depriving Kisara of the person she vents to. Apparently, I'm one of the few people she does talk to, anything more than 'yes, Seto-sama' and such. It's a good thing, I guess, to have someone around to talk to. She has this sense of humor that I can appreciate, even if she isn't too big on taking it out on too many people.

There are too many 'but's to this. There's no way I can kill myself now. Maybe someday, but it won't be today. It might be if my experiment turns out to be an utter failure.

I brought Mutou Yuugi back from the dead. I have no idea how I did it, but I'm trying my damndest to find out. If I manage to find out, I'm going to try to do it again. If I can crack the secret, figure out how I was able to do it in the first place, then I'm going to bring Yami back.

Yeah, I've been working on this for years now with no breakthroughs. I'm not ready to throw in the towel yet, though. I promised Yami I would give it at least fifteen years. It's been twelve so far. I've got three more to try to puzzle out how I did it. I'm not giving up until then.

I would say that Yami would be displeased if I gave up, but I'm honestly not sure. I know I promised fifteen years, but I think Yami's just about given up on it working. It's kind of depressing.

But then, I don't know what it's like being dead. I don't know what it's doing to him. I've never asked one of my ghosts that before, not even Mai. I guess I could ask one of them, but I get this feeling like it's something that's best not discussed. I don't know if it's awful or nice or painful or numb or what. I do want to know, but at the same time, I don't want to know. I don't want to know if I'm causing Yami pain by keeping him with me. I would hate to think that was the case, and I don't know if I could live with myself if that were the case.

I love him. I love him still, even though he's been dead for ten-plus years now.

I still see him every now and then. He doesn't come by as often as he used to either. I'm not sure if I see him or Ryou more often. I still dream of him when I manage to sleep, but I'm not sure if that's him or if it's my memory of him.

Now that's a depressing thought. I'm not sure I have a happier subject to turn my mind to, though. It's not like there's a lot of good stuff going on lately.

Not that everything is going to hell again either. Far from it. In fact, I might even be willing to go as far as saying that it's been boring as hell as of late. That's especially true when everyone else is either dead to the world or otherwise occupied... and all my ghosts have wandered off. Even Yami's wandered off, and that sucks.

It's not like there's a lot we could be doing even if he were around, but at least it would be someone for me to talk to besides myself. There comes a point where talking to yourself dashes right past a line that pushes it from odd to crazy. I'm starting to wonder if I have left that line in the dust a long time ago.

I shouldn't say all of my ghosts have wandered off, though. Mai is still around. She's pretty much my constant companion these days. It's both annoying and nice. She is there every time I turn around, but at least she can tell me what happens after I have a blackout or a whiteout or just zone out for a few minutes.

I had a demon in my mind for a week once upon a time. It felt like a whole lot longer, in fact, but it was only a week. It messed me up pretty bad. I'm starting to think that I'm never going to fully recover from it. If getting the fourth mark and being bound to a master vampire of Kaiba's caliber wasn't enough to fix me, I guess I might not be fixable... which sucks. It sucks like few other things in the world suck.

I'm never quite sure, minute to minute, if I'm going to remember what's happening an hour later. I never know if I'm going to lose my vision for a bit. I'm still trying to decide which one of the two is more disturbing.

But for those rare occasions when Mai isn't with me, I do have a digital recorder. If I'm doing something where it might be important to remember it later, I switch it on to record. If I can remember everything when it's over, I can record over the message. If I don't, then at least I have it on file. I've used that trick a couple of times already, when I had to meet people in the daytime for Seto – for Kaiba.

I don't need to turn on the recorder when I'm working on my little experiment, though. Mai finds all of this too amusing, it seems, so she always seems to be around when I'm working on this. Or maybe she's hoping that I can bring her back too. I think I would like that. I like Mai well enough. She's been with me longer than any person I could begin to call a friend ever has. She's been with me at least as long as Malik now, in fact.

Okay, yeah, sometimes she treats me like I'm her puppy or something, but she's still pretty cool. I would like to be able to bring her back as well. It would be a wonderful way to pay her and Magnum back for all they've done for us, for me and Kaiba and everyone.

Yeah, Malik may be my best friend, but Mai is quickly usurping the title of longest friend. I guess I can't call Yami in that category. Mai's always here, while I see Yami so rarely as of late. It's weird. I wonder why that is. No, wait, I thought that a few minutes ago.

Damn it, I'm slipping a bit here. I can't seem to hold on to much of anything right now.

Why am I still bothering to try going through all of the spell books I can find? It's been years, and I haven't found anything that would help me. What I want to do, though, isn't exactly the magical equivalent of kosher. In fact, if there is an opposite of kosher magic, this would probably be it.

From what little I remember about bringing Yuugi back from the dead, which admittedly isn't all that much, I was beating my father to death, that damned demon was talking in my head, and I was a bit pissed. It could have been any of those. It could have been the blood all over me when I touched him. It could have been the demon Zork (which is an even more frightening prospect, since Yuugi is still around but the demon isn't) or its power that brought him back to life. Or it could have just been a freaky side effect of all three combined together.

Obviously, none of these ideas are pleasing, hence the need for experimenting. To bring Yami back, I would be willing to do a lot of things, including murder if needs be, but I'm not sure I want to risk opening myself up to another demon. Zork was bad enough. Tempting fate with another one would be... Well, to be frank, it would be stupid. I try not to do too much that falls into that category.

Yes, even for Yami. I love him dearly, and I miss him like... like... like I can't even begin to put into words. I'm not sure I'm up for risking the world yet.

And it may sound bad, but I would like to be somewhat sane and at least a bit in possession of my own mind to enjoy Yami being alive again, and I don't think that's too terribly possible if there is another demon involved. The last one was aiming for world domination – or something of the sort – using my powers, and I barely made it through the experience with my mind intact. I'm pretty sure another one would just make the problem even worse.

So, no demons. That seems pretty self-explanatory. It's probably not even my worst decision ever. Or, at least, no demons yet. I'm not sure if I'll get that desperate. I'd like to have Yami back, but I'm not sure about that badly. It'd be good to still have a world here and all.

And I think I already thought that a few seconds ago. Looks like I'm all over the place today. Just as well, then, that I'm indoors, going over books, instead of trying to work some sort of case for Kaiba or annoying Magnum at the wolves' pack bonding retreat or whatever.

It might be nice to be outside, though. Even just pestering the wolves has to be more productive than this.

I'm not going to find what I'm looking for this way. It's not going to be in any book – or at least it's not going to be in any book that I'll easily be able to get my hands on. I'm pretty sure that the stuff I will need to do will be pretty damn dark, just thinking about what was happening when I accidentally brought Yuugi back: blood, anger, hatred, death, demon...

This isn't adding up to be something that any of my witch friends will gladly allow me access too. And I'm running out of contacts to ask. I've long since exhausted Mana's collection. I've blown through the pixie's collection as well, years ago, as well as what she was able to hang onto from Mom's books. Hell, I've even made the trip to Osaka to visit their coven and the collection that they wouldn't let travel.

Nothing. I haven't found a goddamn thing.

It cannot have just been a freak, one-time occurrence that let me do that. Someone has to have been able to do it at least once before in the history of the world. Mahaado even said that there have been others with the same power as me. There are other people in the world living right now who have the same power as I do. Granted, he said that there were probably less than five hundred people alive who can do what I do.

Less than five hundred people, out of all the people in the world. What are the odds that one of them would end up being me? What are the odds that I will ever find another one, and even if I do, that he or she will be able to do what I did with Yuugi for Yami? Powers like mine aren't exactly a picnic. Rather, I would call them a fast track program to the loony bin.

All I can figure, though, is that it was some dark shit, and therefore whatever was written down about it might have been destroyed. I mean, who wants somebody to raise the ghost of some horrible warlord or dictator then use that to bring them back to life? I would wager that no one wants us to know that we can do this, so that nothing like that ever ends up happening.

And this is all too depressing. I just want to find a way to bring my boyfriend, my lover, my Yami, back to life, but nothing's working out right.

The books I have now are a few I borrowed from Cynthia. Of all the ones I've been through, they have taken me the longest. Part of that is because these are some awfully damn old books, and if I damage them in any way, Cynthia will have my hide, possibly literally.

The age of the texts is part of the rest of the problem. Cynthia and Pegasus only came to Japan during the mid-nineteenth century, after the Isolationist period ended. Cynthia was collecting these titles for many, many years before that. Some of them aren't in languages I

understand. Some of them are in languages that probably aren't even spoken any longer. I know I've certainly gotten a crash course on Latin since I started going through these.

The fragility of the text and the fact I have to translate so many of them are only two of the problems. There's also the issue of the fact that I may read something, drift out as I keep reading, drift back in, and have no idea in the least what it was I may have been reading. I can't even begin to guess how many times that's happened, but it has to have been at least a few dozen.

Really, I just want Yami back. Is that so much to ask? I have this sneaking suspicion that Mom would tell me that nothing worthwhile is easy, but isn't over ten years long enough?

Funny. I just thought of it, but I'm now older than Varon predicted I would live to be after the encounter with Zork. I never really thought of that before. I've been so busy trying to get all of this straightened out, get Yami back beside me and breathing, that I hadn't really put any thought to the fact that I'm over thirty now.

Weird. It's funny how some things like that just jump in your head sometimes. Okay, so maybe that happens to me a lot, but still, it never quits being odd.

"Bakura? Are you okay?"

I find myself nearly jumping out of my skin at the sudden sound of a voice beside me. Mai looks concerned, really concerned, more concerned than usual for her. I wonder how long she was trying to get my attention.

"Yeah, Mai, I'm okay." I guess I am, anyway, but I'm going to try not to say that out loud.

"Are you sure?" she pushes. It used to be that this wasn't like Mai to do, but lately, it has been. She's been very big lately on pushing to make sure of things. I don't ask why.

"Yeah, I'm pretty good."

One elegantly sculpted eyebrow goes shooting up questioning. Really, only Mai could make something that simple look so fantastic. Just because I prefer the guys doesn't mean that I can't admit that Mai is quite possibly the most beautiful spirit I have ever laid eyes on, because really, she is. Hell, she was pretty damn gorgeous when she was a werewolf too, but she is definitely the prettiest spirit I've ever seen.

"'Pretty good'?" she echoes. "Bakura..."

I hold up both hands in mock surrender. "I'm good, I'm good, I promise."

"I've been trying to get your attention for the last twenty minutes." Oh crap, I thought it might be something like that. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I nod slowly, even as I take a brief mental inventory on myself. I may not be firing on all cylinders at the moment, but I think I'm good for now. "Yeah, I'm okay. I guess I drifted out a bit. What did you need?"

“Well, for starters, cut on your light. The sun’s going down, and it’s getting dark in here.”

See? What’d I say? She treats me like I’m her puppy.

Wait, what? A quick glance out of the south-facing window shows me light that is starting to fade towards grey. Obviously, it’s a lot closer to night than I anticipated it being. I must have been out of it quite a while. I seem to recall it being closer to the middle of the afternoon, the last time I looked at a clock at least.

“Damn,” I have to say with some feeling. I had hoped to make some progress this afternoon, but I’m pretty much betting that I didn’t. And fuck, I don’t remember a single thing I read. Looks like today was a bust. Fucking typical.

Mai smiles sympathetically. “Drifted a bit?” I scowl because, really, that much should be perfectly obvious. “Think maybe you should mention it to Kaiba or Varon? See if they could do anything?”

“Oh yeah, like I’m letting either of them in on this.” Okay, I didn’t actually mean to say that out loud, but at this point, I might as well run with it. “Kaiba will just worry, and Varon will want to use me as a guinea pig. No, thank you. I think I’ll pass on that.”

Mai frowns, and frankly, I actually feel a bit bad about saying that. I probably could have toned down on the vitriol on that. It’s just... I really just don’t want anyone to know too much about what’s going on, what’s been going on for so long now. I didn’t want to even tell Mai, but it was hard not to, when she’s with me nearly every minute of every day, at least the ones where she’s not with Magnum.

(I know she would like to be with him more often, but it’s a little hard carrying on a relationship with half of the couple is dead – and I speak from experience on this – and the other half can’t see them. He can scent where she’s at a majority of the time, but that still does not a stable relationship make.)

“You know I’m not going to try to make you,” she snorts and even it is elegant sounding, “mostly because I know it’s impossible to make *you* do anything you don’t want to do–”

I snicker. “Damn right.”

“–but I do think that it might be worth a shot. One of them might be able to turn something up. One of them might be able to help.”

“Kaiba already knows about it,” I feel compelled to point out.

The look she gives me is frankly disbelieving. “Come on. I seriously doubt you have told Kaiba everything about it. I *know* you haven’t told him how bad it’s gotten.”

I shrug, conceding that, yeah, she’s right about that one. Kaiba does know that I still have the white outs and the blackouts and the occasional spell of drifting, but I’ve been trying my damndest to keep him from realizing how bad they are. That’s no easy feat when as it stands right now; the fourth mark makes things very difficult in that respect. And if I can

pick up when he wakes up – like he’s starting to right now – then I’m sure he can pick up at least some of what I feel on a nightly basis. Trying to keep stuff like this from him might be futile, but I’m still trying.

Speaking of which, I need to start tucking away the exhaustion that always seems to linger for a bit after one of these spells. I’m not too sure how I’m going to go about doing that this time, when it’s hitting me this hard, hard enough that all I want to do is go upstairs to my room and go to sleep, but I need to give it my best shot. Because, frankly, if Seto – Kaiba – starts worrying, if I give him any reason to worry, then he’s going to be up my ass all the time until he’s satisfied I’m okay. That’s the last thing I need right now.

“So?” Mai prompts, though I’m not sure I remember what she’s prompting me on. It must show on my face because she at least elaborates, “Does Kaiba know all that’s going with you lately?”

I have to roll my eyes at that. Okay, actually, if I roll my eyes any harder, I’m going to end up really hurting myself. “I might be his human servant, but that’s just because there isn’t a better term for it yet. It doesn’t make him my keeper.”

“You *need* a keeper, Bakura.”

“I’m hurt.”

Joking tone in my voice aside, that actually did sting a bit. I’ve tried not to let my new... handicaps get in the way of my life. I actually do try my best to make sure no one sees how bad it actually is. I’m the one who’s supposed to be taking care of them, not the other way around. Even after everything else that’s happened – no, *especially* after everything that’s happened – I still need to take care of my people.

Mai is definitely one of my people, but she might be even harder to keep things from than Kaiba. I mean, for one, she’s almost always here. Just by virtue of that, keeping secrets from her is damned near impossible. And secondly, she’s been with me so much that she knows me pretty damn well by now. Hell, it’s possible that she knows me better than Malik ever did.

And damn it, I miss the nutball. I miss all of them, even Marik. I miss Kitty.

One of these days, the minute I lay eyes on him, I’m shooting Akunadin. I’m going to shoot him in the goddamn face. Thanks to him, his bitch Vivian, and his boy Seth, I’ve had most of my family taken from me. Yami, Ryou, Jounouchi, Malik, Marik, Yuugi... I can’t even visit Shizuka or Amate too often for fear that the bastard’s goons might do something to them.

Cold hands hover just beside my cheeks. If Mai were in any way tangible, she would have been holding my face. God, right now I wish she *were* tangible. I could stand to have someone touch me for real, someone who isn’t a ghost or a spirit. Don’t get me wrong: I don’t even come close to swinging that way – dead, ghost, or female, none of them are my kink – but I love Mai like a sister, a really annoying older sister who worries way too much, and I would love a hug.

That's kind of pitiful, isn't it? I mean, I'm supposed to be all big and bad, the one who takes care of everyone else for them, and I just want someone to take care of me for once. I guess... I guess I'm just tired of it all. Part of me is really ready and willing to throw in the towel, but I can't. It would hurt too many people if I did, including Mai. So, yeah, maybe I just want to be taken care of for once. Just once, I would like for someone to hold me so I can fall apart, no matter how damn sad and really fucking pitiful that might sound. I think I've earned that by now.

I open eyes that I really don't remember squeezing closed and stare right into Mai's just inches from my face.

"I didn't mean it like that, silly." Damn it, she really does know me too well. It's so not fair. "Even before all of this, you weren't exactly well known for taking care with your own life. That's what I meant. I can't take care of you anymore, not like that anyway."

"It's okay, Mai." And I'm not ever going to admit to anyone that I'm actually a little choked up about that. If I have to, I will swear that I'm sick or something; my voice isn't like this just because of what she's saying.

"No, it's not, Bakura. I failed you. I wasn't able to keep you safe."

I'm already shaking my head. If Mai were tangible, her hands would be moving with my head most likely, if she didn't hold me in place and keep me from denying it; as it is, I can feel the ghostly cold of her body going through my skin.

I know what she means. Of course, I know what she means. Mai was my bodyguard, until an assassin my father hired shot her. Even after that, she stayed with me. She's been with me when any sane person would have run for the hills. I mean, she's a ghost, and I even managed to drag her into the dream world. She wasn't there when I got shot myself, though, when Yami died. She was taking care of Ryou and Yuugi, like she knew I would want.

If I had died that day along with Yami, like I sometimes wish I had, I would have died content that my little brother was safe. That would have been fine by me. I don't fault her for that. She probably blames herself for it, but even she can't be in two places at once. The place she happened to be was where I wanted her to be.

"No way."

She snorts, and for once, it is completely unladylike. It doesn't sound elegant or refined or any of those words I always associate with Mai. It just sounds kind of thick, like if she weren't a spirit, she might actually be crying. That's an alarming thought. Thinking of Mai crying might be enough to shake my entire worldview.

"Bakura, you do know you're crazy, right?"

And yeah, I have to do that same kind of wet snicker back at her. "Absolutely. They don't make them any crazier than me."

“Thank God for that.”

“Bakura?”

That’s Kaiba’s voice. I guess I should have been expecting to hear him sooner or later. Maybe I was hoping for later rather than sooner. I would have preferred a few minutes to pull myself back together. At least the sun is still out, even just a little bit, so he can’t come in here yet, not unless he wants to get very crispy.

I don’t even mean to, but I jerk back away from Mai. Damn, I’m glad she can’t actually lay a hand on me – I mean, I make good ghosts, but I don’t make them that good, not yet at least – because, from the look on her face, she would beat me for that. I wince, mouth an apology at her, and then answer Kaiba. “Yeah?”

Okay, as an answer, it lacks a bit... as Mai’s very obvious rolling of her eyes points out. I’m not going too much further until I have a second to figure out what he wants. I am *not* having another heartfelt moment tonight. I just won’t do it. I have met my quota for the night. Hell, I’ve met my quota for the year, actually.

“What’s wrong?” Oh yeah, I never remember to give Kaiba enough credit for picking up on stuff like this. He might be utterly the Ice Prince of Domino, but he is getting way too good to picking up stuff off of me and actually knowing what it is. Damn it.

You know what, let’s give this truth thing a try. “Just having a little heart to heart with Mai. Nothing’s wrong, really,” I tack on at a thread of doubt I can just barely pick up.

“Good.” See? What’d I say? He’s like an overgrown mother hen. As if a Mai mother hen isn’t enough, I also have a Kaiba one too. “I have some information you might want to look at in my office.”

I have to take a disbelieving glance at the clock on the wall. “What? Already?”

There’s a loud snort that I can hear very clearly through the thick wooden door. “It would serve you right if I said ‘yes’, wouldn’t it? I turned up some stuff last night after you went to bed.”

And *that* certainly doesn’t mean anything like he’s making it sound. No way in hell am I ever going to sleep with Kaiba Seto. I’m pinning all my hopes on eventually raising Yami from the dead, which might be the dumbest idea ever conceived, but it’s what I’ve got. I’m not even considering anything else until I’ve completely exhausted that avenue. And ghost sex and dirty computer messages don’t count. Just because they worked for Ryou and Yuugi when the younger Mutou was still dead doesn’t mean it’s going to work for Yami and me.

“What kind of stuff?”

I can actually hear him heave a sigh. Unless I totally miss my guess, which I’m pretty damn sure I’m not, that was a sigh of utter annoyance at having to yell back and forth through a closed door. Well, tough shit, Kaiba. I open that door, and you will crispy fry. No one wants that.

"I might have a lead on one of the Ishtars. Meet me in my office?"

Okay, now that I can get behind. "I'll be there in five minutes." That will give him long enough to leave the hallway and get to his office where there aren't any windows.

It's quiet long enough that I can feel him at least move a bit away from the door. A beat or two later, Mai speaks up again, "A lead? That's good."

I nod. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"A year or so at least."

"At least."

It feels like a lot longer. When I have a chance, when I finally have Malik, Marik, and Jounouchi all right in front of me... I'm going to punch them for disappearing so well. I've followed up on at least eight or nine leads now, all of which have turned out to be a bust. If Vivian taught them that, then I'm going to kill her, raise her from the dead, and then kill her again. If someone else taught it to them, well, then I'll just have to get creative. Don't worry: I'm getting good at creative.

"I've got a good feeling about this one."

Honestly, this is the first time that Mai has said that about any of these leads. Maybe she didn't want to give me false hope before or something. Maybe false hope is better than no hope at all. I don't know. Listen at me being all morbid.

"I hope you're right. I kind of miss having them all around." I snicker to myself as I push myself to my feet. "Besides, it would be nice to have someone to keep those damn cats in line."

Mai chuckles briefly, lounging gorgeously across her favorite couch; I hate to tell her that, if she could feel the material on that couch, she wouldn't like it nearly as much. I keep it in here solely because it's sturdy and can hold any number of spell books that I might still need once I run out of table space. "And to have someone around for Kaiba to fret over besides you?" she guesses.

"That too." I can admit it easily. Kaiba likes to fret, and I would like for it to be over someone other than me. Mokuba and Noah aren't here for him to worry over, at least not too much, since I'm pretty damn sure he still call Mokuba once a night, but I bet having Kitty back, at the very least, would be enough to keep his worrying nature more than satisfied. "I'll be back, Mai."

"I'll be here," she answers with a wave.

I step out of my room – my office? my study? my what? – and pause. One of these days, maybe I should ask Mai just what it feels like being dead. No, not just what it *feels* like, but what it *is* like. She's honest enough with me that she would probably give it to me straight.

Does it hurt? Does she feel stretched too thin? Does she want to move on? Does she want me to let her go?

Werewolves, any shape shifters, live really long lives ordinarily. Mai definitely would have, if she hadn't caught a silver bullet meant for me. You know, for how incompetent that assassin was over all, he at least thought far enough ahead to use silver bullets. A silver bullet kills just about everything, short of the fae I'm told, so it really was kind of smart. Damn it. I wish I had been able to help kill him a bit.

I almost turn right back around to ask Mai all of those questions, but I stop myself. There will be time enough for that later. I will do everything in my power to make myself remember to ask too. They're important questions after all.

Right now, though, I have something equally as important I need to deal with. There is every chance that this lead might be as worthless as all the others, but it might not be either. Malik or Marik Ishtar -- and there's no knowing which until I get right there and can see them in person -- might be somewhere nearby. They might be in Japan, at the very least, though I doubt they're in the city. They've been hiding way too well for that to be the case. They won't slip up now, no matter how much I want them too.

Kaiba and I have been floating messages through every friendly City Master, every friendly wolf Ulfric or Lupa, and every friendly ghost that we can find, trying to get word to the Ishtars and Jounouchi-kitty that things are okay here in Domino, that they can come back whenever they're ready. So far, it's a no go. I'm actually starting to wonder if maybe Vivian told them that Seth might do something like that to try to catch them off their guard.

I really should address the next message along the lines of 'hey, nutball, no one's dead, come home, from Bakura'. That might be enough to convince him it's actually from me. I don't think too many people call Malik 'nutball' on a regular basis. I've tried everything else I can think of to convince them it is actually Kaiba and me sending these messages, not Seth or one of his flunkies.

Of course, give me much longer, and I'll be addressing a message to Wingnut, Screw Loose, and Crazy Cat. I'm seriously running out of ideas.

Worse, I'm starting to wonder if maybe they don't want to be found.

If they don't then I don't know what I'm going to do.

I'll deal with that later too. Right now, I have this to do, and I push open the door to Kaiba's office.

The room is pretty much where his old study was, but it's a lot better at light blocking than the study was. For starters, the study actually had windows, though they were heavily shuttered and blinded, so that very little light ever came through. The office, on the other hand, is completely windowless. In fact, there are very few windows in the entire house at all now. There's the one in my downstairs room, the one in the front room of my bedroom

suite, and the ones in the cats' and wolves' rooms. All the rest of the rooms, even the kitchen, completely lack windows.

I'm cool with that. Sunlight kills vampires, a vampire owns this house, and a vampire paid to have it completely rebuilt. The vampire can do whatever he wants with this house. In fact, I would have been just as happy without windows at all; I mean, I really don't care about them one way or another; but it was nice of him to think of me like that.

"Hey," I comment as I close the door quietly behind me. I know I've already spoken to him a bit tonight, just a few minutes ago, in fact, but it's a quirk I've noticed that Kaiba appreciates, being acknowledged when someone comes through the door. In fact, it's one of those quirks that I'm very tempted to trace back to Gouzaburou, and I haven't found a good one of those yet.

"Bakura." He doesn't even glance up from whatever it is he's working on. I've learned to let it go. There's apparently a lot of paperwork involved in running both a city and a business, and there are only so many hours in the night to work on them all. Surprisingly quickly, though, he sets down his pen, the really nice one that Mokuba sent him for his birthday, and glances up at me. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I have to roll my eyes as I drop down into the chair I have unofficially claimed as my own; it's not like anyone else sits there really. "I promise you, Kaiba: I'm fine. Mai just wanted me to... I don't know... be a 'sensitive New Age guy' and talk about my feelings or whatever." I resist the urge to do the finger quotes, but it's a near thing.

He eyes me for a moment, clearly trying to assess if I'm telling him the truth or not, before nodding once. "If you're sure..."

"Of course I'm sure." I take a second to have a closer look at him. If I didn't know better, I would think he didn't sleep a wink all day. That is, of course, impossible because usually once the sun's up, there's no choice: vampires go out like light bulbs, or whatever the analogy is. I don't know. It's impossible, but... "What about you? You look like hell."

And there's that frustrated groan I've become very well familiar with over the last several years. I'm getting really good at causing it too. You'd think after this long he'd be used to how I am and all.

"I can always count on you to be couth, can't I?" He's breaking out the Kaiba sarcasm too. Wow. Someone woke up on the wrong side of the coffin, not that I'm saying that one out loud. Hell, I'm even going to try to keep from thinking it where he can hear it, so to say. "There's a new Master of New York City. Apparently, whoever he is, he's causing problems with some of the other Masters in the area, and they want Pegasus' advice. They couldn't reach him, so they harassed me all damn day."

Swearing and everything. Badly, but it's still more swearing than I usually hear from Kaiba. I'm impressed. "Do I need to call them up and explain time zones to them?" It might be phrased like it, but it's not a joke either. If Kaiba's cranky, then everything else is off.

"If they call again in the morning, then by all means, explain away to them." I open my mouth to ask another question, but Kaiba knows me that well at least. "And yes, by all means, be as... colorful and creative with them as you would like. Whatever it takes to keep them from calling me in the daytime."

"Cool." I can't resist a bit of an evil smirk. I'm really hoping that they don't take the hint and call again. I have a bit of frustration I would like to take out on them myself, and with free and clear permission? That's all the better. "Permission to kick ass and neglect to take names noted."

Kaiba actually lets out this noise that's not quite a snort and not quite a chuckle. I'm not sure what to call it, but it was suspiciously close to a laugh. A quick check on the internal gauge, the one that makes it stupidly easy for me to feel what and how he's feeling, actually tells me that he's perilously close to amused. Go, Team Me. I managed to amuse Kaiba. It's been quite a while since I've managed that.

As quickly as it arrives, though, it's gone again. Oh well... Kaiba doesn't really like me checking up on him. Apparently, it's fine for him to check up on me all he wants, but the other way around is a big no-no. A bit hypocritical perhaps, but hey, it's Kaiba. What can you do?

I shake my head minutely and carry on. "So? The lead?"

He nods, effortlessly fishing out one single sheet of paper from all of the hundreds on his desk. One of these nights, I would love to know how he does that. "Someone used the last name Ishtar to check into a hotel in Tokyo. It might be something, it might be nothing, but it's worth a shot looking into at the very least."

It is a pretty decent lead. In fact, it sounds like one of the best ones we've had in years. "I'll give it a shot, and see what I can come up with."

Kaiba nods again. It was pretty obvious that I was going to try to find out what I could. I've chased every lead we've turned up between the two of us so far, and I'll probably keep chasing leads as long as they're around to chase. I'm not about to give up on our friends, not any time soon -- and probably not at any point in the future either. Maybe if I'm sure I will have outlived them all, then I'll give up, but I am hoping to have some degree of success before then.

"Of course," he says mildly, because it really was a foregone conclusion that I was going to go. "Do you want me to see if I can free up Akito to take you to Tokyo?"

That's actually really tempting. The man -- well, wolf -- is fast creating a legend of himself for his ability to drive anywhere in Domino in five minutes or less. Stoplights and stop signs are for the weak: this seems to be his philosophy of the road. Last time I needed a Tokyo pickup and Kaiba sent him, he was there in an hour. They may not sound too great, but then you have to remember that it only takes the train forty-five minutes to get between the two. An hour by car? Not so bad.

But Akito is at Magnum's all-wolf bonding session. Granted, he might be glad to escape from it, but Magnum wants all the wolves there for their team building or bonding or giant fluffy pile or whatever it is. I like Magnum. I like him a lot. I also know that I do not want to tick him off. I like him too much for that... And plus, I've seen him mad. I don't want him mad at me if I can at all help it. (That's another point in the column of finding a way to bring Mai back to life. I'm betting Magnum would be happier with his mate back.)

I finally shake my head. "Nah, I'll take the train. Don't want to interrupt Magnum's seminar training thing unless it's something dire."

"Of course," Kaiba intones again. Yeah, he must be exhausted. Even for him, this is being unusually reticent. "I'll get you a ticket on one in a couple of hours. You probably have stuff you need to finish up here first, right?"

"Not as such," I comment vaguely. "I've been working on Cynthia's spell books most of the afternoon, and I haven't made any progress. I'm thinking it's time for me to step away for a bit."

One dark eyebrow goes up questioningly. "Do you need help with the translations?"

Now that is definitely tempting. It would have to be a witch, though, or someone who knows their way around spells. Even translating them can mess them up beyond functionality. Some of the old spells even require rhyming in whatever language it is recited in, and let me tell you this: finding rhymes for some of the words I've found in these books can be a real challenge.

"Maybe. It's a bit more to it than just translating word for word. Sometimes it takes a bit of... creative nudging."

He lets out that noise again, the one that's somewhere between a snort and a chuckle.

"Well, that should be your area of expertise then. 'Creative nudging,' indeed."

"Yeah, it's my specialty," I return with a grin. "Creative nudging. Though generally speaking I prefer to creatively nudge people, not books and translations and stuff. Compared to people, the other stuff is just boring."

"I'm sure."

This does *not* pass for witty banter from Kaiba Seto in my book, by the by. In fact, Kaiba has gotten a bit better at it since, you know, everything went down with Seth and all that. I wouldn't say he's good at it, but he's better than this at least.

"Kaiba? Go back to bed. Try to get some more sleep or something. You look like hell, and you sound even worse." I pause for no more than a second, considering another possibility, briefly weighing it in my head, and finally deciding to tack it on. "Or we could always try fixing the espresso machine. It seemed to do wonders for Mokuba."

Until Mokuba, I had never before known that it was possible to have espresso-laced blood. I always thought that blood had to come straight from the tap, so to say – in other words,

direct from a living body – but the Kaiba vampires proved me wrong on that. I have fond memories of coming in the front door of the old house with Yami at my side and seeing Kitty trying to force-feed Kaiba a cup of warm blood, while Mokuba stood on the sidelines and laughed like a loon. Those were the good times, and God, I miss them.

Kaiba must too. His eyes shutter, already tired blue darkening slightly. "I think I will pass on that, Bakura. And I have too much to do tonight to try going back to bed. I thank you for your concern, though."

I actually start to object to that. I have a hard time thinking of myself as the worrying type. I mean, I have my... little bit of apprehension about Yami and Ryou and Kitty and Malik and Marik and everybody else. I have an entire list of people that I have claimed as my own, and I will do everything in my power to keep them both safe and happy if at all possible, even if it takes the last damn breath in my body to do it. I wouldn't say I'm the type to be concerned, though.

Of course, there is a possibility that, if anyone needs worrying over, it's Kaiba. Well, no, that's not how I mean to think that. I guess I should have said something more along the lines of Kaiba and I being a matched set in that way. He's every good at worrying over people, but he needs someone to fret over him. Meanwhile, I have a talent for being too concerned about people and claiming people as my own, but it's entirely possible that I need a keeper, at least in my ghostly bodyguard's opinion. And you know what? I think I'm going to trust Mai on this one. It seems like something she might be knowledgeable on.

Kaiba might annoy the hell out of me, and I am certain that I more than do the same to him. That might be part of what makes us a good pair... Well, a good set of partners, at the least. I don't think it's ever going to be anything more than that. No, I *know* it's not going to be anything more than that. I'm not giving up on Yami yet, and I have this feeling that there's someone Seto – Kaiba – isn't giving up on yet as well. But partners? Yeah, that definitely. No matter what the titles may say about master and servant.

And once more, for the record, may I state that I really don't like those titles? I am no more Kaiba's servant than he is mine. To bind me to him, he had to give up almost all his power over me, if not all of it, so how does that make him my master? I certainly don't feel compelled to obey him in the least.

In fact, honestly, a lot of the time, I feel more inclined to beat him until he starts listening to me for a change. I'm not saying that my ideas are better than his or anything, but it's more that he gets his head up his ass about some stuff and I want to make him at least listen to someone else.

So yeah, we might be well suited for one another, but at the same time, we're also probably eventually going to end up beating each other to death at some point. I give a purely mental shrug. And that's utterly fine. Some days and nights, I could care less about waking up again the next day or night. I wonder if Kaiba ever feels the same way. If he does, he does a better job hiding it from me than I think I might do hiding it from him. To any effect, I've never picked up a hint of a similar feeling from him, but that doesn't mean anything. I *did* call him the Ice Prince of Domino for years after all – and with good reason.

"Just... think about it, okay?" I push. "Try to take it easy tonight. if they call back tomorrow, let me deal with them."

Because if I deal with them, they will not be calling here again for trivial bullshit again. I will explain to them in no uncertain terms that Kaiba is not Pegasus' secretary, and they do not need to bother him in the middle of the day with shit they can't wait to take to the older vampire. I will also explain time zones to them and that, if it's night time in New York City, then it's probably day time or close to it here; if they really want a favor from Kaiba, they will call him when it's night time here, as a courtesy to him.

He looks a tiny bit annoyed, but he's at least nodding slightly. I wonder if he got to pick up on anything I was briefly thinking of saying to those other vampires or not, because he has this vague semblance of a smirk on his face. I've been told I can do that to people: make them be both annoyed and amused at the same talent. It's a talent of mine, it seems.

"I will... try to do that," he finally concedes, "if you will be careful in Tokyo. I know it's not a place you enjoy going."

And yeah, it isn't a place I enjoy. I used to equate it with hell, as a matter of fact. I still don't like it, but it's not that bad anymore. I conquered some of my demons associated with the city over the years, and while it may never be my favorite place in the world, it's not the equivalent of torture going there any longer.

"I will keep both eyes peeled, and I'll have Mai with me. I'll be fine. I'm just following up on a lead, after all."

"You've had some close calls on some of these leads."

And that's true. There have been some tight situations I've found myself in trying to track down Malik, Marik, and Jounouchi over the years. I've actually been shot at least two more times since the one that killed Yami and necessitated my becoming a human servant. I've been stabbed once, which is actually kind of amazing, because I had been starting to think that I was the only bastard on the planet who prefers knives and blades to guns and projectiles.

What doesn't kill me makes me stronger, though. I suppose, in turn, it might also make Kaiba stronger as well. We're both getting really good at surviving things that we have no business living through. The fire, Seth, Yami dying, Seth dying, a few assassination attempts... What can I say? It's been a busy few years.

Still, there's no point in worrying needlessly. "I'll be fine. This is a milk run. So, what hotel are we looking at?"

He glances briefly down at the sheet of paper he's been using as a reference thus far. "The Imperial Hotel Tokyo."

And I think my eyes might have just popped out of my head. I can't see Marik there. Hell, for that matter, I can't really see Malik or Jounouchi there either, not unless a lot has changed

over the last ten or so years. Maybe it has. Maybe a lot has changed for everyone else over the last decade. Maybe they have changed that much.

Kaiba reads me easily, figuring out exactly what I was thinking before I have a chance to say anything. "It's not what I was expecting when I got the notification. It... doesn't seem like it would be their type of place."

"That's phrasing it very diplomatically. I can't even begin to picture any of them there."

"Prior to three years ago, I wouldn't have been able to picture *you* there, Bakura."

And that's certainly true. This huge group of master vampires from all over the world was in Tokyo to visit Pegasus, who in turn requested that Kaiba be there. It was something about Kaiba's first big meet and greet as a Master of a city. I tagged along – No, it's better to say that I was dragged along, as Kaiba's human servant, to help with the schmoozing.

Cynthia has a phrase for what I felt like in that room. It's one she doesn't break out all that often, mainly because it apparently does not translate well into Japanese. I think it was something like 'as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.' I had to look some things up, but yes, that was definitely how I felt.

Mostly, I just kept my mouth shut and hung with either Kaiba or Cynthia and Pegasus. That did help at least: I only got hit on three or four times, and there was almost always someone there to shoot my would-be suitors down for me, so that I didn't have to cause an incident. Causing an incident is always best avoided, I'm told.

Besides, it looked like Cynthia was having a grand time turning away my admirers. Kaiba only looked more annoyed than usual, if I recall correctly.

"I was trying to forget about that, you know," I reply archly. "How the hell did I let you talk me into that?"

"My charming personality." Now that sounds a bit closer to the Kaiba wit I have gotten used to hearing over the years. It's not exactly high on the witty totem pole, but it's still better than he has been showing so far tonight. Just like that, though, the amusement flees his face, and he's serious again. "When are you heading out?"

I take glance at my watch. It's just after six, so the sun is barely set. By the time I get the train to Tokyo and get to Imperial Hotel Tokyo, it'll be well after seven. 'It would probably be best if I catch the next train.'

"Then I suppose you had best get to the station. Take Mai with you, if she can resist these heart to heart conversations in public."

I have to roll my eyes. It's a biological imperative. "Of course Mai can control it in public. I should be back before morning," I continue as I push myself to my feet and start towards the door.

"Take your phone with you."

"Of course I will, dad."

"Bakura." I pause, the door open as I lean against the doorframe to look back at him. "In absolutely no world do I want to be your father. As I recall it, you killed your last one."

I hold back on the snickers that are threatening to break free and pull a serious face to match his own. "True, too true. But it was so much fun."

"For you, perhaps. I imagine he didn't enjoy it very much."

"That *was* the point. If he would have enjoyed it, it wouldn't have been worth it."

I pointedly don't mention the fact that he killed Kaiba Gouzabourou, the guy who turned him into a vampire as well as some degree of ancestor back from him, and in a manner that was somewhat spectacular in and of itself. Supposedly, Gouza-bastard got duct taped to a chair, tortured a bit, and then pushed out a window at dawn. I still wish I could have seen that. Hell, I still wish I could have helped make Gouza-bastard's exit from this world be a bit more painful.

"True. Still, don't forget your phone. Call me as soon as you know anything."

"Yeah, yeah, I will."

With that, I step out of his office and pull the door closed again behind me. There's not a lot of light in the hallway; what little of it there is, of course, is artificial; but it's enough to see to head upstairs to my rooms.

I still want to know whose bright idea it was to give me rooms, plural. I mean, hell, the three rooms combined are nearly as big as the apartment, if not the same size. There's a living room – though most people seem to call it the sitting room, for whatever that's worth – there's the bedroom, and there's the bathroom.

If I remember correctly, there was even talk of installing a miniature kitchen in here too. I just repeated the story of the Toaster Incident, and those plans were quickly scrapped. I do have a microwave. I can mostly use that. There's also a mini fridge, which is nice.

Sometimes I think Kaiba is trying to spoil me. Other times, I remember that he's like this with all of his people. If they are his people, then he goes out of his way to do stuff like this. I can get it behind the concept. I like to take care of my people too, but I prefer to take care of their physical safety as my number one priority.

Besides, no matter how much I stole, it would have never been enough for all of this that Kaiba seemingly has pulled out of thin air. You don't get that kind of money stealing. You get that kind of money by being born into it, one way or another.

Just inside my closet – which might I state is the same size as my bedroom in the apartment, just for the record – I keep a 'go bag.' It's always packed and ready to leave with me on the off chance a decent lead turns up. It's for situations like this, in other words. I grab it, sling it over my shoulder, and head back downstairs.

It's not surprising at all that Mai is already waiting for me by the front door, looking all too ready to go already. I haven't even had a chance to tell her where we're heading or even that we are chasing this lead. (To be fair, though, there haven't been that many leads that I haven't chased yet. I meant it when I said I'm not giving up.)

"So where are we headed?" she asks, casually rocking back on her heels. Even as ghostly as she can be, she still looks like she's spoiling for a fight.

I'm oddly hoping that we don't run into one. Yeah, I'm bringing my ghostly bodyguard with me, but it's not like she can do a lot in a fight anymore. If we get into one, it's going to be all on me to get me back out of it. And of course, we will be in Tokyo, where the Master of the City has a vested interest in keeping me alive.

"Tokyo. We might have a lead on an Ishtar," I answer briefly. I wave an acknowledgement at Dartz at the gate.

It's no surprise that there's a cab waiting already. I'm really not known for turning down promising leads, so Kaiba must have gone ahead and called one up for me, in case I turned down Akito. Really, I might be a tad bit too predictable lately.

Well, once I have my family, my people, back home, I can go back to being as absolutely out there as I like. Once I have my people back, at least. Until then, I'll do what I have to and be whom I have to in order to get them back, as many of them as possible.

Mai remains surprisingly silent until we get to the station, even then speaking up just to suggest I get a private section. It's more a reminder that that's what I usually do, but I do appreciate the effort she's giving into making it seem like she's not trying to point out my memory's shortcomings.

She doesn't say anything else until we're seated and the door is closed behind us. "If that guy had gotten more up in our space, I was going to find a way to punch him."

I snicker quietly. There was one rather pushy guy who obviously wanted to be the first on the train and so took it upon himself to crowd in way too close for both Mai's and my comfort.

It is a little funny, though, because until I met Magnum's pack, I had never met a shape shifter with any sense of personal boundaries before. Even the shape shifters in the gang Malik and I ran back in Tokyo years ago were the types to be up close and personal and touching people all the time. Magnum's pack has a slightly larger personal bubble – I think that's the correct term – than most shape shifters, and I choose to attribute it to the fact that most of them work as personal bodyguards or security.

"He was all up on top of you, wasn't he?" I return quietly.

"So what's the lead, Bakura? Tell me it's at least a good one this time. The last few ones were utter crap."

"It's a decent one. You heard the bit about it being on an Ishtar. Someone using that family name checked in a swanky hotel in Tokyo. We're just going to check it out. If it's not Malik or Marik, then no harm, no foul. If it is..."

"You're going to punch them in the face," she finishes with a laugh. "I've heard you say it plenty enough times by now."

"Aww, does that mean you're getting tired of hearing it?" And yeah, that's definitely me being as sarcastic as I can be... which is pretty damn sarcastic. Maybe I'm not at my best lately, much like Kaiba, but I'm still giving it my all.

A hand over her heart, she actually manages to look completely affronted. "You, threatening to kill and/or beat people? Why would I ever get tired of hearing that?"

And this is why I love Mai. She gives as good as she gets.

And yeah, I guess I just admitted something to myself that I've been very determinedly not thinking about: I guess I do kind of love Mai. Not 'in love' kind of love, though. For starters, she's all wrong for me: one, she's a woman and I don't swing that way, and two, she's very taken and I don't get involved with people who are taken. But I guess I do love her, the same way I love Ryou and Jounouchi and Malik... and maybe even Marik and Kaiba: she's part of my family.

You know, I never thought I would end up getting more 'in touch with my feelings' after getting bound to Kaiba. Maybe one isn't connected to the other, but it seems odd to me that Kaiba made me his human servant and suddenly I start getting a hell of a lot more sentimental.

Of course, that would mean that the Ice Prince has emotions hiding somewhere way deep down inside. His relationship with Kitty aside, I'm still not too sure I believe it. I still sometimes want to crack him open and see if there are gears inside him.

Maybe it has more to do with everything else that happened right around the same time as I became a human servant: getting shot, almost dying, Yami actually dying, Ryou leaving... *It was* a lot all happening at once.

I guess that does make Mai my older sister, in that case, which in turn makes it quite all right for her to try to take care of me like she's been doing. Not only has she kept being my bodyguard even after I got her shot and killed, she's stuck by my side for over a decade now. She's mediated a few fights between Yami and me, before and after he died. She's been able to coax me out of some of my deepest funks after Yami's death, and she doesn't dwell on the fact that I don't seem to be much of a worthwhile monster lately. She doesn't rag on me about my memory, and she takes care of me during my white outs, as well as filling me in on the blackouts and drifting areas of time. Yeah, I guess all of that does make her qualified to be my older sister.

"Thanks, Mai." And yeah, it comes out a little sentimental, but frankly, I don't give a rat's ass. I'm allowed to be sentimental every once in a while.

"Don't go getting soft on me now, Bakura. We still have to go to Tokyo and find out what's going on."

"Yeah, I know. It's just—" I can't actually make myself say it out loud. It took everything I had to say it to Yami, and look what happened there. I said it, and it wasn't too long until he was dead. Theoretically, I shouldn't have to worry about that with Mai, but I'm not taking any chances, not anymore. I am never, ever going to say 'I love you' to another being again as long as I live. "It's just... Thanks, for everything, Mai."

You know, most people probably smile or something when people say things like that to them, not look all suspicious and stuff like Mai does. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" The train starts to move. I nearly lose my balance as it lurches slightly, but I manage to catch myself quickly. "I guess I'm just feeling a little touchy feely tonight."

"Now that's a laugh: you touchy feely. Fine. I'll drop it for now. Don't think that I'm going to drop it forever, though."

"Of course not." I restrain myself from rolling my eyes only by glancing out the window to stare at the moving scenery.

I could ask Mai my questions. If anyone would be the expert on ghosts and all at this point, it would be her. I'm not sure I want to know the answers to my questions, though. I'm not sure I want to know if I'm keeping her and Yami from some place they would rather be. I'm not sure I know how to let them go, in any meaning of the word: I'm terrible at goodbyes and I'm not sure how to release them if they want to go.

Aside from my own hesitance, I almost don't want to ask in case it brings up some bad memories for her. It can't be too good to know you're dead and you can't do anything with your other half. In fact, I know it's not too good, being the other half as I am.

"What's bothering you, Bakura?" And there's that familiar suspicious tone back. I swear, I hear that tone so damn often that I can almost copy it.

I start to shrug, but I stop in the middle of the way through it. She's glaring at me, like she knows I'm trying not to say something. Damn it, she knows me too well. I guess this is the downside of the two of us being friends for the last decade or so.

"It's probably a bad and way too personal question to ask, but... you're probably the only person I know who would answer it."

I feel the ghostly tingle of a hand trying to wrap around my own. It's so weird to me still that I didn't manage to make Mai with enough energy to be able to actually touch things and interact with them. I mean, Yami managed to make Yuugi like that without even trying – or knowing he was doing it. How did I screw up with Mai?

Unless maybe I was trying to not copy Yami's mistake with Yuugi. If I remember correctly, Yuugi was draining on Yami's energy levels to be able to do stuff like that. I don't really have energy to spare, so maybe I was trying to avoid that happening to me.

"Just quit fretting over it and ask already, Bakura."

"What does being dead feel like?"

She pauses, actually giving a moment to think over her answer, which is honestly more than I was expecting. "It's not that different from being alive, I guess. A little... disconnected, I suppose is the word... but not that different at all."

"It doesn't hurt you to be like this then?"

She looks confused for all of a second, then her face drops into her 'oh Bakura, you silly but adorable idiot' face; I've seen it enough to accurately deduce its full meaning. "You've been worrying about this, haven't you?"

I shrug again, this time self-consciously. "A bit, I guess. I just don't want to be keeping you and Yami here if it hurts you or anything."

"Do you know how to let us go?" She raises an eyebrow, clearly suspicious again. "Do you even want to?"

Oh yeah, there's that 'long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs' feeling again. It's actually all I can do not to start shifting in my seat. "Who else do I have to hang out with? Kaiba? Yeah, right."

"It doesn't hurt, not for me. If anything, it's just sort of like floating. I can talk with you and I can visit my mate, but other than that it's like floating through everything. "

And now to ask the question that I really, really don't want to. "Do you want to move on?" Worse still, does she think Yami wants to? I'm not going to ask that, though. I'm not that pathetic a person... yet.

"Maybe someday," she answers after a brief debate with herself, "but not anytime soon. I want to spend as much time with my mate as I can while I can, and this works as well as anything else. And I rather enjoy having you to mess with."

"I guess that really does make you my older sister then." I blurt that out before I can catch myself and wince hard. I really didn't mean to say that. How embarrassing.

"So you've claimed me now too, have you?" She switches sides to sit on the seat next to me, instead of facing me as she had been, and wraps a freezing cold arm around my shoulders. "Good. I'm glad to hear it."

I wonder if this development would have happened if she hadn't died on the job taking a bullet meant for me. I don't know. Maybe it would have. It doesn't matter though. It happened, and I'm glad for it, if not the circumstances that led to it.

"Good," I manage to get out almost evenly, even if I do still feel completely and utterly uncomfortable right now.

"And for what it's worth, I'm pretty sure that Yami feels the same way. I can't imagine him ever wanting to leave you."

And maybe it's a little needy of me, but I have to ask, "Are you sure?"

That freezing cold and mostly intangible arm's friend wraps around the front of my shoulders. Damn, I must have been more pathetic than I thought. "I don't know Yami well enough to be completely sure, but I really can't imagine it." She pauses. "Why?"

Why? Now that's a complex question, and it's one I've never really liked anyway. "I'm me, for starters," I manage to blurt out, mostly by not even thinking about what I'm saying as I'm saying it. "And there's Yuugi. And I haven't seen Yami in a while."

"Well, it has been a while since he died." She shrugs slightly. "And yeah, it's been longer since I died, but I think people deal with it in different ways. I mean, there was Yuugi, but he was only dead a little over three years." That's right: he died about a year before I first met Jounouchi, and I managed to bring him back to life two years after that. "I've been dead for nearly seventeen years; I'm starting to forget what being alive feels like."

I wince at the sudden, shooting pain in my chest. If I weren't nigh on immortal, I would think I'm having a heart attack. I know what it is, though: it's guilt. Mai did take the bullet meant for me. "I'm sorry, Mai."

I think if she tries any harder to hug me tighter, I might actually start really feeling it, not just as cold spots. "Don't be. It's not your fault." Except where it is. "Anyway, Yami's been dead for nearly fifteen years. I don't know how it's affecting him."

That's true, and...

Wait...

"Fifteen years?"

She leans back away from me, dropping her arms to her side. "Roughly so, yeah. Why?"

I can actually feel my eyes going painfully wide and my breathing getting way too fast. I can actually feel myself hyperventilating. How interesting. I'm freaking out, yet at the same time, I am freakishly calm.

"I can only really account for about twelve or thirteen years since Yami died." And then the panic grabs me by the throat, and my vision starts going a bit white at the edges. "I promised Yami that I would spend fifteen years looking for a way to bring him back, like I did for Yuugi. Fifteen years, then he could move on if he wanted to. How could I not notice it's been fifteen years?"

"Bakura." Her voice is completely and utterly calm, and it's like a bucket of ice water on my panic. It helps calm me down some, but I don't think I'm back to normal again yet. "You haven't exactly been at your best. And you have been working, quite diligently, in fact. Don't sell yourself short. I know I don't."

“Do you think he’s given up and moved on and that’s why I haven’t seen him?” Oh God, I’m fucking pitiful tonight. Someone, please, put me out of my goddamn misery. I can’t stand myself right now. I take a deep breath and quickly pull myself back together a bit further. “Never mind, don’t answer that. Sorry for unloading on you like that.”

“Don’t be sorry, otouto.” Relief and amusement wash over me almost as one. All my life, I’ve been ‘niisan’. I never expected to ever be called ‘little brother’. It’s kind of nice. “I want you to listen to me on something, though, then we’ll drop it. Okay?”

I nod slightly. This doesn’t sound like it’ll be good, but at least the subject will be behind us. “Okay.”

“You’re not as bad a guy as you think you are. You’re not even as bad as you make yourself out to be. You’re a bit rough around the edges, but you are loyal to a fault and you honestly care for your family,” she smiles faintly, “even the ones of us who aren’t related to you by blood. If Yami has left you and moved on, then it’s not on you. Okay?”

“I can’t say I actually buy a single word of that, you know.” And if my voice comes out a bit shaky, I am completely content to blame it all on her adoration of these heart to heart conversations. “But Mai-babe, thanks. It’s nice having someone in my corner.”

“Bakura, hon, there’s more than me in your corner, if you ever decide to look around and notice it.” She leans back against the seat, and for a long moment, she’s so still that she looks frozen. It would almost look like someone took a picture of her and that’s what I’m staring at, if it weren’t for the darkening scenery flashing by outside. Abruptly, though, she turns to look at me again. “Kaiba’s going to kill me a second time for upsetting you, you do realize.”

I snort, and yeah, maybe it’s still a little shaky, but that’s okay. “Kaiba’s a bit overprotective sometimes.”

And she laughs. “Can you blame him? You have to admit: it’s been a busy few years.” She pauses a second, clearly thinking. “Okay, more than a few years. You’ve been keeping all of us busy for as long as I’ve known you, Bakura.”

I’m... not sure if I should be proud of that or not. I mean, I met Mai after my father had me kidnapped and tortured for Ryou’s whereabouts. I had been working off and on for Kaiba Corp, even though my primary employer was Kame Games, for two years prior to then, but I had only really gotten to know Kaiba – even a little bit – a few months before I met Mai. During that time, there wasn’t a Master of Domino, and we got kidnapped in Tokyo. After I met Mai, there were at least a dozen assassination attempts on me that she kept me safe during, including the one that killed her.

Since then, there has been some downtime, with more than enough insanity to go around. There was that Halloween, when Kaiba and I found those other vampires. There was the note that sent us out to a cemetery in the middle of the night, only to find it full of zombies... which in turn led to me pulling almost everyone into a dream world.

A month after that, Seth pulled his coup attempt. We lost a lot of our people, and Akunadin and Vivian took some of them. And Yami died. Yuugi and Ryou left after that. For that matter, so did Mokuba and Noa. Seth died, but that's a plus in my book. That's all but a freaking parade of pluses in my book.

"Yeah, I guess you have a point."

"You guess I have a point? Gee, thanks, I really appreciate that."

"You're welcome." Somehow I manage to keep a straight face saying that.

Mai looks annoyed briefly, but it only takes a moment for a snicker and then giggles to break through the stern façade. "You, hon, are crazy. You know that, right?"

This time, it's perfectly obvious what she means, so there's no need to take offense, even in jest. It has nothing at all to do with my current mental troubles – and everything to do with the fact I can't contain my sarcasm.

"But of course. Unlike the Ishtars, though, I don't have the paperwork to prove it."

"I don't think anyone meeting you would doubt it in any way." With a grin, she slides back over to the other side of the booth. "So, do we have anything resembling a plan once we get there?"

"Plan? Since when do I plan?"

It's only partially a joke. I prefer the fly by the seat of my pants approach. Mai doesn't. It's one of our points of contention. She would prefer to know next on the agenda as far in advance as possible, while I very much don't.

I mean, aside from the fact that I may or may not remember the plan in ten minutes or that I might babble it out at an inopportune time, there's always the fact that, no matter how far in advance you plan, the plan can change. Things have a way of going downhill fast in my experience, both as a thief and as a consultant later on, and that's when improvisation, my specialty, comes in handy.

But before I can even begin to make an additional smartass quip, Mai fixes me with one of the darkest looks I've seen that wasn't on a Kaiba. "When it comes to Tokyo, I thought we agreed that planning at least a little ahead was best." It's somewhere between a prompt and a question... and not one I particularly want to deal with.

"Yeah, yeah. We know the hotel for once, which makes things easier. We go in. We ask for the front desk to contact the room. If they say we can't come up, then you go check it out, while I try throwing Kaiba's name around and see what it gets me. Either way, we find out if it's Malik, Marik, or someone else using their name."

She nods, looking almost content. "Good. Glad to know you see it my way."

"Sure. Wake me up when we get there."

It actually doesn't take me that long to fall asleep, mainly because Mai is right there. She may be a ghost, but she'll do any- and everything in her power to keep me safe. She's one werewolf who takes her day job way too seriously. Of all the people I know, Mai is one of the few that I depend on to take care of me, not the other way around. Right now, that's a huge relief.

I wake up to cold.

Something absolutely frigid is touching my skin, and it feels like it's chilling me straight to the bone.

Without a thought, I jump straight up, bypassing sitting up from where I was slumped across a bench to instead be on my feet, a hand already on one of my knives ready, just in case. It's still easier to go for a physical weapon than my powers, and it's what my instincts have me immediately reach for first.

It's laughter, happy female laughter in a tone I recognize, that stays my hand, though. "You are too much, Bakura. I can't believe how jumpy you are," Mai chortles.

"Weren't we just talking about all the crap that's been going on in Domino in the last dozen—"

"Seventeen," she reminds.

"Seventeen – whatever – years. Don't sneak up on me."

"I didn't. I've been sitting right here the entire time. You said for me to wake you up when we got to Tokyo. We're in Tokyo. The train just pulled into the station, and everyone's getting off. Probably time to be heading out now."

Crap, that's right. I did ask her to wake me up. How else was she supposed to?

And I must have been more tired than I realized if I didn't even feel the train pulling to a stop. Well, I never got any real rest after the attack earlier, and the train ride to Tokyo was the perfect excuse.

"Yeah," I finally state. "Thanks." Completely and utterly uncomfortable by this point, I shift foot to foot slightly and eventually continue, "Let's get out of here and get this over with. I would like to get the hell back out of Tokyo before the night is over."

"No time like the present then."

We push and shove our way through the otherwise orderly group of people exiting the train. Well, I push and shove, while Mai just sort of walks through them. That must be a terribly handy thing to be able to do. At least, that's one of the perks, though I wouldn't like some of the cons of being dead, like... well... being dead. I've hung out with enough of the dead to know it's not my thing: I like being able to *talk* to people way too much to be able to stand being a spirit, much less a ghost.

After all, there are billions of people on the planet who can neither see nor hear ghosts. There are people with enough psychic ability to see or hear them, occasionally and only if they're really trying. Some people catch glimpses of them out of the corner of their eyes. Most of the planet is blind and deaf to ghosts.

And there are only maybe five hundred people on the planet who are like me: who can see them, who can hear them, who can interact with them.

I'm still not sure what to call what it is I do. It's not animating, like they call it in America, because I'm not raising zombies, unless Yuugi has a lot of explaining to do. It's not voodoo; there's no sacrifice to be able to communicate with them. It's not being a medium because I don't let them take over my body to talk to others.

I suppose the closest thing there really is to call me, sadly enough, is a necromancer. I have power over the dead, I communicate with spirits and ghosts, and I can command them. There are so many negative connotations to necromancy, though. A lot of people tend to picture black robes, human and animal sacrifice, demons, and other dark stuff like that when they think of necromancers.

I think necromancers are probably a bit like everyone else: there can be good and bad ones. It all depends on the person, not the ability.

Besides, I've met a lot of ghosts and even more spirits who are a lot easier to deal with and talk to than living people. That's, sadly, saying quite a lot, but then I don't like a lot of living people. Most of the people I count as friends, as well as most of my family... Well, they tend to fall on the 'monster' side of the divide.

I guess that makes me one too. That's fine. At least I'm in good company.

Once we're on the street, the Imperial Hotel Tokyo isn't actually that far away. Before I lived in Domino, I was from Tokyo. In fact, I ran a street gang here with Malik Ishtar as my second in command. Once we both left, Otogi Ryuuji got left in charge of the old gang. I'm assuming they're still around, but I haven't the foggiest who it is that's in charge now. I don't know if Diceboy stayed in charge, even after he and Shizuka-pixie hooked up, or if he in turn passed it on to someone else.

I'm hoping it's still Diceboy. I want to take a moment to speak to him, see if Shizuka's heard anything from her brother, check in on the two of them while I'm in town, that sort of thing. I never thought I would see the day when the head vampire from my old gang ended up living with my adopted baby (witchy) sister. They're even talking kids, which part of me doesn't even want to think about, part of me is shocked by, and the rest of me can't decide

whose honor I should be defending in this case. They're both my people, after all, which is the only reason I haven't dusted off the shotgun and paid a visit.

You know, you would be surprised how many ghosts and spirits are walking on the streets of Tokyo in a given night. With over thirteen million living people in the city and the city being as old as it is, there were bound to be a few, but honestly, it's not like they outnumber the living. Still, there's at least a couple thousand of them walking around any given night. Mai's definitely not alone in this city.

I used to have a hard time telling the ghosts and spirits from the living people. I think Yuugi did a good job helping me with that, however unintentionally. It took me quite a while to realize that Yuugi was actually dead and a spirit the entire time; in fact, it took until I saw his shrine before I realized. The subtle things about Yuugi, when he was dead at least, are what have helped me be able to pick out spirits even more easily than before: that faint buzzing in my head, the temperature changes, stuff like that.

If he weren't keeping my brother away from me, I could almost thank the Mini-Me.

A chatty guy in a kimono that's a few centuries out of style tries to chat up Mai for about half a block. She's always a hit when we come here; that miniskirt of hers always manages to turn heads. She brushes him off, and then we're there.

The Imperial Hotel Tokyo... I've only been here the once, for that meeting of Masters, and I said then that I didn't want to come back. I'm not overly fond of posh places like this.

Kaiba's place used to be posh, back when Gouza-bastard was still alive. I know: I used to have to sneak in there to get secrets for Industrial Illusions or Kame Games. Once Kaiba offed him and took over, most of the posh met with a bonfire.

That bit was fun; I was fresh out of the hospital and got to help with it. Kaiba informed Ryou and I that we were living with him, he moved me out of the hospital and into his place as soon as my doctors permitted it, and we had a huge bonfire of Gouza-bastard's shit. Oh, I sorted out the expensive shit and fenced the hell out of it, of course; it's in my rainy day stash. It's not *all* of my rainy day stash, but it's a good chunk of it.

God, I hope this *is* Malik or Marik in here. I miss the rest of my family.

And I oddly wonder if Kaiba called ahead on me or something. By the time I get to the front desk, the guy that's standing there is sweating bullets. Not for real, though, because life is not awesomely literal like that, but close enough. Mai gives me this arch look like she wants to know if I can believe this shit.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Someone checked in here last night using the family name 'Ishtar'. Can you give me their room number?" Might as well try being a little bit polite and see what it nets me.

Suddenly he looks even more nervous. Oh yeah, Seto definitely called and had words with him about me showing up. "Generally speaking, sir, it is the policy of this hotel not to give out guests' information. However, this once..."

And that's how we end up on the elevator headed upstairs with a keycard and a strict request never to mention the name of the guy who gave us said keycard... which is fine, because I think I've already forgotten it. Good thing I'm not really a thief anymore.

Then there's the door right in front of me, all of a sudden. It's weird, but I'm oddly nervous. If this is Malik or Marik, then I'll be seeing friends I haven't laid eyes on in ten – *fifteen* – years and who probably think that they need to stay hidden, an illusion I'm going to have to ruin for them. If it isn't either of them, then I'm going to be beating the shit out of someone who thinks it's funny to use that name. I'm not sure which is better or worse.

"Knock first," Mai hisses, though I'm not too sure why. It's not like anybody but me can hear her.

"I was going to," I return at a similar volume. Maybe that's why: to make sure I don't raise my voice too much.

I do knock. I even wait almost patiently until I hear a voice, female in accent Japanese, call out, "Who is it?"

It's not Malik. It's definitely not Marik. There's no way it's Jounouchi-kitty.

With that in mind, I swipe my way in the door, barely catching Mai shaking her head in mock dismay at my doing so. I walk into the room in time to hear a shriek that would put a lot of scream queens to shame.

Something white hits me in the face, blinding me for a second; it's almost enough to panic me into thinking I'm having a white out, and that *is* enough to piss me off enough to yank it away furiously.

Though I have to say that my anger takes a distinct sidestep when I realize who threw something – a towel – at me. "Isis? Isis Ishtar?"

The screams trail off as turquoise eyes stare at me for a long second uncomprehendingly. I can see it when she figures out who I am. "Bakura-kun? You're alive?"

I'm getting really fucking tired of people thinking I'm dead. "Yeah, I'm still kicking. What about you? I heard you left the country."

She nods, slowly sinking down to sit on the side of the oversize bed in the room. I take a quick glance around then have a seat in an armchair next to the bed. Mai perches on a table, looking all too interested in everything that's going on. Clearly she didn't see this coming either.

"I went to Egypt for a while, looked into my brothers' and my family and roots for a bit." She frowns, staring at me. "I received a letter from my brothers, telling me to get out of

Japan for my own safety. They said you and Kaiba-san were dead, along with everyone else."

"Yeah, that does seem to be the popular rumor. As you can see, rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated." I frown, looking down at my lap to see my hands clenching each other hard. "It's true, though, that we lost a lot of people that night. It looks like there were a lot of rumors spread about Kaiba and me dying, and it seems they were used to lure your brothers and Jounouchi out of Japan."

She is nodding again, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Yes, yes, I can see that. It would explain why my brothers thought it best for me to leave the country. Their letter did say something about my safety."

"That matches what Jounouchi's letter said to his sister." I'm not even going to let myself get my hopes up. This is going to fail miserably. "Did their letter happen to say where they were, by any chance?"

And she's shaking her head no. "I'm sorry, Bakura-kun, but it didn't. There was a postmark for US Mail, but the rest was illegible, even by my brothers' standards. They at least mailed the letter from the United States. Does that help?"

"It does. It's a lot more than I had before." I swallow briefly before I continue with "Thank you, Isis".

She really shouldn't look so damn impressed, though, nor so confused. I wasn't exactly a boor completely without manners before. Rough around the edges, like Mai said, perhaps, but not bad enough to warrant that look. "You're welcome, Bakura-kun."

Get the conversation back off of me. That's what I need to do now. "What all did their letter say?"

"Even for my brothers, it was cryptic. The section in Marik's handwriting only said for me to get out of the country, everyone was dead, and he couldn't say when he would be in touch again. Malik's section was, of course, more... detailed."

I squeeze my eyes shut and swallow hard. I'm not going to let this get to me until I'm on the train heading back home. "Yeah, that sounds like Malik, rambling all over the place."

"You miss them," she surmises. In fact, she states it like it's a bold fact.

"All the time. All the damn time. You know, when we were younger, it was going to be me and Malik against the world forever."

I open my eyes again in time to see her nodding, a fond smile on her face. "I remember him talking about that. He was over the moon to have you as a friend, especially since you could understand and accept his unique situation with his brother."

"We ran together for years, him and Marik and me," I offered.

"And then he followed you to Domino and even took that job spying on Kaiba-san for you." She laughs softly, delicately. "Both of them loved that."

"I know they did."

Isis sniffles, and it is in no way gentle or ladylike, not unless the lady is about let out with the big tears. I'm really hoping not. I'm not good with people crying. Ryou has only cried twice that I can think of, and even Amate barely lets a tear show. They spoiled me for dealing with other people. You know, people who aren't emotionally stunted. I don't know what to do with them, especially when tears start threatening to come. "

Honestly, my first instinct is to get the hell out of there. It wouldn't be right, though. For one thing, this is Malik and Marik's older sister. Pulling a runner because she started crying would be wrong, and one or both of them would probably beat the hell out of me for it if – *when* – they get back.

And for another thing, I think Mai must be reading the panic on my face because she's got that 'Bakura, you had better not be thinking what I think you're thinking' face on again. I try to avoid getting that look too terribly often.

But what am I supposed to say? I am, like I said after all, emotionally stunted.

"I miss them too, Isis." It's weak, but it's really all I have to offer.

There are another couple of sniffles and the first tear, but her voice is remarkably steady. "We were never a close family, not like you and Ryou." And that's quite a stretch right now, but I know what she means all the same... and I'm not interrupting her. "I hardly ever heard from either of them while they were in Domino or even all that much before then, but... but... But one letter in fifteen years isn't enough for me. I can't get by on this."

"I know, Isis." I'm utterly floundering, but maybe it's helping. "I'm doing everything in my power to find them, to find all of them," I clarify.

I can almost see the moment when she realizes what's going on here. "You didn't come here expecting to see me. You were trying to track down my brothers."

I nod, a bit relieved to see that her face is clearing. "You have to admit: there aren't that many Ishtar in Japan." She nods, and it seems like as good a time as any to assuage my own curiosity. "So what are you doing back in Japan anyway?"

She shrugs. "Lady Cynthia is calling a meeting of all the covens she helped found."

"Does she do this sort of thing often?" I have to ask with a frown. If something unusual is going on...

But she's shaking her head no already. "No, she does... 'this sort of thing' once every ten years or so. It's sort of a big reunion: a chance to get together and share anything new we've learned with everyone else. That way all the information gets passed down."

Count on Cynthia to think of something like that. "Give her my best."

Isis smiles faintly. "I will be certain to do so. Now, if you'll pardon me..." She gestures towards the bathroom door.

Speaking of a light bulb going off in someone's head... Somehow I managed to *not* notice that she's wearing a hotel bathrobe; I knew she threw a towel at me. Connect those two dots with the third one that the shower is still running in behind the closed door, I guess I interrupted her right before she was going to get in the shower. At least she's nicer about it than Amane ever will be. Amane doesn't throw towels; she prefers something with some heft behind it to throw.

"Yeah, I'll get out of your hair." I push myself to my feet and circle past her towards the door. I have my hand on it before I turn back. "I hate to ask, but if you hear from either of your brothers..."

"I will be certain to let you know, of course."

"And if there's anything you need, Isis, let me know on that too. I'll do whatever I can to help you out."

I may not get to see my own brother often, but I do seem to have picked up more than a few extra sisters in the last fifteen years: Shizuka, Mai, Isis... I seem to be going for some sort of record or something.

Diceboy and the pixie have their own place in the city. At least it's nicer than Otogi's old place. I wanted to get a full round of tetanus shots every time I went over there. There was a reason that we ended up commandeering an abandoned warehouse as our hangout.

None of us came from terribly great family situations. Otogi was the only one with his own place, but it was barely fit for a vampire like him to live in, let alone have anyone who was still vaguely human come over. Some of the other guys pretty much lived at the warehouse and, before that, on the streets. Malik and Marik lived with their sister and were sharing a body at the time. And my place had the Oyaji problem.

And aren't I glad that *that's* over and dealt with?

I mean, the new place isn't big and fancy or anything like that. It's just a fairly decent size place in a fairly decent neighborhood. Ryou probably would comment that it was a perfect place for someone starting a family in Tokyo, but then, he's not here.

At least this time I remembered to call ahead from the taxi on the ride over. I would say I'm getting better about that, but in all honesty, Mai reminded me.

In fact, if I'm going for full disclosure, Mai is less my bodyguard now and more my brain. And yes, I apparently keep it on the outside of my body. Or maybe she's my personal assistant who can now walk through walls and used to be able to lift cars one handed.

That would be the kind of personal assistant I would like to have, truth be told.

It's a good thing I called ahead too. Shizuka-pixie meets me at the door, a huge smile on her face. "Bakura-kun!"

You know, as bad as I am with tears, I'm only slightly less nervous when it comes time for overly enthusiastic and happy people to start doling out hugs. Shizuka... I love her dearly, like a second little sister, but my God, she is fond of the hugs.

Though I do have to say that the lengths of her hugs is more than enough time to let Mai come in through the door like normal people.

"Boss." And there's Otogi, somewhere behind Shizuka. He sounds about as laconic as ever. Nothing much really gets to him.

I guess, out of all the guys I used to run with, it's easiest for me to picture Otogi as a father than the rest of them. Easier than picturing, say, me. I already raised a few kids: me, my twin, Amane, Malik, and Marik... That's more than enough for me.

(Mai would probably argue that I also raised Yami, Yuugi, and Kaiba too, but it's probably best not to get into that right now.)

"Diceboy," I return his greeting. Once Shizuka finally lets go of me to close their door behind us, I add, "You know you don't have to call me that anymore. It's not like I'm in charge of the old gang anymore."

He shrugs. "If you want it back, it's all yours. It's like trying to herd cats."

And that's a mental image, one that I might could have done without. We still have cats in Domino, but not my favorite one, sadly enough.

"I have enough cats to herd back in Domino, thanks. These misfits are all yours."

"I'll try not to murder them in the meantime, then."

"Bakura-kun?" Shizuka cuts back in. "You didn't say on the phone why you were going to be in town tonight. Is something wrong?"

I shrug. "I was just following up on a lead. It turned out to be a bust. I wanted to check up on you two while I was in town." I glance around. The place is cleaned up, at least more than usual for these two, and there aren't house shoes waiting inside the door for any of us. "Unless you were planning on heading out to Cynthia's big shindig soon or something?"

Shizuka's eyes narrow. "One of these days, Bakura-kun, you're going to tell me how you know about these things ahead of time."

I chuckle and shrug again. "It's a talent."

"Yeah, we're leaving for Cynthia's meeting soon," she answers. "We can be late."

I wave her off. "Don't worry about it. I'll come back another time, when you're not on your way out the door. Or you know you can always come to Domino."

"Maybe we will," she offers. She says that every time. She has yet to come there yet, though. I'm not reading too much into it. Well, I'm trying not to read too much into it. "So what was this lead you were following up on?"

Shizuka's a witch and a fairly powerful one at that. She's really good at telling when someone is lying, and so I've made it a habit never to do that around her. "I thought I might have had a lead on Malik and Marik, but it was a bust."

"Damn." Surprisingly, that comes from Otogi.

Still not getting my hopes up on this question. "Have you happened to hear anything from your brother, Shizuka?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing in years, Bakura, not since the first letter."

I sigh aloud. I was right, it seems, in not even bothering to get my hopes up. "I can say this much: they at least stopped in America somewhere." I rake a hand through my hair in annoyance. "Fifteen years, and that's the biggest break I've found."

"When niichan wants to hide, he does it well," she offers sagely. She's taking all of this a lot better than I thought she would have. Hell, she's taking all of this a lot better than I am.

"And let's not forget that Malik and Marik are involved in all of this," Diceboy unexpectedly puts in. "Between the two of them, they could have taken over the world if they had really set their minds to it."

I have to snicker, just a little. "And then they would have immediately gotten tired of it, and I would have had to run it."

Otogi doesn't deny it either. He just stands there and nods.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can just see Mai gesturing towards the door. Yeah, she has a point.

"Anyway, we'll get out of your hair so you can get out of here. If you hear anything..."

"You'll be the first to know, Bakura-kun." Shizuka leans in for yet another hug, taking a brief second to plant a kiss on my cheek as well. "Take care of yourself, okay?" she demands in a whispered voice, still not letting go of me. If anything, her grip tightens. "You look like you're running yourself ragged, and I don't want to see you do that, okay?"

I don't even want to know how she knows that. It might be a witch thing, or it might be a woman thing. I'll have to ask Mai in either case. "I'll try, Pixie. Take care of yourself and Diceboy, okay?"

"Absolutely."

She gives me one more squeeze – and damn, she's surprisingly strong, like she's been practicing to break her brother by hugging him the next time she sees him – and finally lets go.

I nod at Otogi. "Later, Diceboy."

"Later, Boss."

This time I don't say a word about the name. I'm just going to take it as the mark of respect it's meant as. I was one of the most human members of my little Tokyo street gang, and I still managed to be its leader. That's something to be proud of, in my not so humble opinion.

All the same, though, I wait until they're both back inside with the door closed before I leave. It's a long way back to the train station from here, and I would rather walk it than take another taxi. I have some thinking to do.

It didn't take me nearly as long in Tokyo tonight as I thought it would. I manage to catch the ten o'clock train back to Domino, and I step off in my city and just before eleven at night.

You know, I've always had either Akito or Kaiba with me when I come back from Tokyo. I don't think I've noticed before just how much livelier it's gotten in Domino since Kaiba took over as Master. It's like a lot of new vampires are moving to town. Maybe it's not just vampires, though; there might be new shape shifters in the city too.

Domino has changed a lot since I first moved here. I've been here nearly twenty years now, if Mai is right about how long has passed since she died – and I guess she would be the expert on that.

When I moved here, I was just trying to get out of Tokyo. I wanted some place close enough for work, if I ended up taking any jobs in Tokyo, which it turned out I did, but yet far enough away that Oyaji wouldn't be too likely to try to track us down. As an added bonus, Oyaji hated Domino. That was a major plus as far as I was concerned at the time.

We weren't even in town a week before we had developed a third roommate/house pet named Jounouchi Katsuya. A month or so after that, I managed to secure my nonexclusive contract with Kame Games and had Malik installed at Kaiba Corp to spy for me.

A very quiet two years later, Gouza-bastard took his flying leap out of a skyscraper window into the daylight, assisted by being taped to a rolling chair and beaten to hell and back. A few months after that, Kaiba was the new Master of the City. A week after that, Oyaji's favorite goon kidnapped me to try to torture me until Ryou agreed to be his heir again. I don't remember it, but apparently I managed to sic my ghosts on him. Kaiba moved me into his house once I was out of the hospital from that, and apparently he set himself to work cleaning Domino the hell up.

Now it looks like our little city is getting popular, along with that damned card game Yami loved so damn much. If I didn't know that it started elsewhere, I would say that this is becoming its home.

I'm none too fond of Duel Monsters, obviously. Okay, honestly, I can't stand it, even less so now after the dream world. Ryou played it occasionally; he may still play it, since Yuugi enjoys it. Pegasus plays it. Diceboy plays it. Kaiba used to play it, back when time still permitted it and he had someone in the house that did as well, such as Mokuba or Noa or even Yami, though admittedly, those matches tended to get a bit... heated.

Yami... He loved the damned game, and he was damn good at it, good enough that he managed to earn the title of Game King, apparently for being among the best in the world at it. That takes more dedication than I have time to give a game. Hell, that's almost more dedication than I have time to give *anything*, at least other than family.

Even I have to admit, though, that the game has gotten a lot bigger in the past fifteen years or so, especially here in Domino. If I were a more cynical person than I already am, I would think people are flocking here to play it because of Yami. Who am I kidding? I am cynical, and that's probably why they're all here to play it.

If Kaiba gets any ideas about hosting a Battle City, like he did in the dream world, then I do not hold myself responsible for whatever I might do to him for that. I saw how that turned out in the dream world. It ended up with a crazy Malik possessed by an even crazier Marik, a giant penis extension blimp, and me in a coma. I'm going to really hope that he doesn't get it in his head to try it. I'm not sure how I feel about beating him any time in the near future.

"Are you seriously planning on walking back to the house?" Mai's voice cuts across my thoughts. Somehow, I had almost forgotten that she was right here with me.

I recover quickly, though, and shrug nonchalantly. "I just want to walk a little further. I'm not too interested in being back home yet tonight."

She nods slightly. "He did look a bit frazzled earlier. Of course, if I had people calling me when I was supposed to be asleep, I would be cranky as hell too."

I can feel my face settling into a frown. How did she know that? She wasn't in the room when Seto was telling me about it earlier. At least, I'm pretty sure she wasn't. I should have been able to make a mental note about if she was or wasn't.

Still, I need to cover all my bases here. "Did I tell you about that?"

She grimaces, and it looks sympathetic. "Yeah, you did, Bakura, hon. You told me about it on the train, on the way home."

At least Mai is kind enough not to ask about whether or not I remember the conversation. It's pretty obvious that I don't.

And this is the bane of my existence now. Once upon a time, that was Oyaji, but I have since taken care of that problem. It has also been my ghostly abilities, but I have come to accept them now, and that actually makes them easier to live with now. Now my biggest pain is my mind.

Either it's the blackouts (where I lose track of myself, what I'm doing, what I'm saying, and who I'm with) or the white outs (where I can't see a single thing right in front of my face, no matter how hard I may try and strain) or it's the drifting away (which I have yet to actually understand enough to explain).

The drifting away is very much like the blackouts, but at the same time, it's nothing alike. When I blackout like I do, I have absolutely no knowledge or memory of what happens around. When I drift away, I'm still vaguely conscious of what's happening, but I have no ability to affect it. I'm not sure which is more terrifying some days. Other days, I think the two might be a tie.

I mean, which would be more terrifying? Not knowing what you're doing or knowing what you're doing but being unable to stop yourself? It's not an easy answer, at least not for me. Maybe I'm overanalyzing it, but I've had plenty enough time to fret over it, as Mai might say.

"Of course," I answer quietly.

She sets a cold hand on my shoulder and comments softly, "I'm sorry, Bakura."

I nod, accepting the condolences without comment. Mai doesn't mean it like she's apologizing for something she did or wishes she could have prevented. I can tell that much. I think she means that she's sorry it happened to me and she wishes she could change it. I can understand that much at least.

And then something catches my eye that has me checking the gamers again. I can't have just seen what I thought I saw.

But yeah, there's that distinctive Mutou purple, magenta, and gold spiky hair mixed in the group. His back is to me, so I can't tell if it's Yuugi or Yami. No one really seems to be paying any attention to him, so my bets are on Yami.

Here I am, worrying about running out time on how to bring him back, while he's scoping out the local Duel Monsters group. Typical. Honestly, it's not that far from how we were even when we were together and both alive. I think Jounouchi said that Yami and I put the 'fun' in 'dysfunctional,' but it worked for us.

I don't even stop to think and start easing my way through the crowd, Mai trailing right behind me. Maybe she saw what I did, or maybe she was just following me. Either way, it is kind of nice to have her at my back, like always.

The closer I get, the more certain I am that this isn't my Yami. I may be misremembering, but I'm pretty sure that Yami wasn't nearly this tall. The eyes are all wrong too. Yami's were bright red, like freshly spilled blood; this guy's eyes are clearly contacts. Not to mention that his leather is all knockoff stuff, while Yami's was tailored to fit him exactly; granted, he always looked like he had to be poured into his clothes, but hey, I wasn't complaining.

The guy glances up from observing the game and actually looks right at me. There isn't the faintest spark of recognition. It isn't Yami. Maybe it's vain, but I like to think that any version of Yami will always recognize me. If he recognized me in the dream world, when I was wholly unrecognizable even to myself, then he should always know who I am. I'm holding on to that.

Silently, I stop, standing completely still for a long moment and maybe staring at this not-Yami a bit too long to be in any way comforting; in fact, it has to be at least bordering on creepy. So I make myself turn around and head back out of the crowd.

"It did look like him," Mai comments.

"Just watch: next I'm going to be seeing phantom Jounouchi-kitties," I mutter darkly.

"I guess this is a sign of how popular Duel Monsters is getting, if people are dressing up as Yami," she offers. With half a smile, she continues slyly, "Do you think anyone cosplays as Kaiba?"

The image that flashes through my mind in a split second is hilarious enough to snap me out of any funk. More than that, the idea that Seto might pick up that mental image only makes it even more hilarious. In fact, I really hope he did actually 'overhear' that. It would make my night. Kaiba picks some of the funniest reactions to some of the things he 'overhears'.

Then again, I might make some pretty damn good faces at things I 'overhear' from him. For instance, the fact that he rarely cusses well, even in his own thoughts, can make me fall out of a chair laughing at any point in the day or night. When he thinks about Mokuba, even I want to hug the bastard – or sic Shizuka or Amene on him. When he's thinking about work, I have a feeling I get a little cross-eyed, and whenever Gouza-bastard or Seth crosses his mind, I have a long session in the gym with a punching bag.

Oh yeah, we had to add a gym. The wolves begged, and the cats put up the most pitiful faces. I think Seto would have given it to them either way. I just put a few things in there

that someone with human strength can use and wrote my name all over them. I wish I were joking.

We're getting better at modulating the link between us. It's an ongoing process and one that sometimes involves swearing (on my part) and growling (on Kaiba's part), but we're still trying. We might kill each other in the process, but we're still trying.

"You know, I think I am going to call Akito to come pick me up," I comment once the snickers subside a bit.

In all honesty, I'm actually a little surprised that Kaiba hasn't called me yet himself. I've sort of been all over the place, emotionally speaking, tonight, so it's a little bit odd that he hasn't called to check up on me. Either I'm getting better at tamping down the emotions on my end of things or else he's really busy with something that has him wholly occupied.

Truthfully, that doesn't happen often. I think I've said it before; I know that I've at least *thought* it before, if nothing else; but Kaiba *is* our resident genius. There isn't a whole lot that can occupy his entire mind, not for any length of time longer than half an hour or so. Hell, I've barely even seen him fully occupied that long.

Have I ever said it out loud? Maybe to Ryou, maybe in the dream world. I couldn't have said it around Yami; he and Kaiba never got along. Actually, that's a huge understatement. Saying they fought like cats and dogs is a huge understatement. All I can really say is that Yami lived in the Kaiba house because that was where Yuugi and I were and that Kaiba let him live there because...

I actually I don't know why. The easiest answer might be that Yami moved in when I came home from the hospital. I guess maybe it was easier to humor him and then it was damn hard to throw him out once he was there. I don't know if that's the right answer, though. Maybe the right answer is just that Kaiba is a (very) secret softie.

Ryou had the theory he told me once that Kaiba has a soft spot for guys named 'Bakura'. I think I call bullshit on that one. Yeah, I get my way a lot – okay, a whole hell of a lot – but that does not a soft spot make.

What exactly does make a soft spot, I don't know, but it has to be more than just me getting my way almost all the time. There has to be. I refuse to accept that that's all it takes to make a soft spot.

"Are you going to call, or do you want me to start learning smoke signals?" Mai interrupts my thoughts. And it's just as well, given the darker turn they were making.

"Why don't you hop on those smoke signals, babe?" I fire right back.

"Sure thing. I'll get right on it. Oh, how do you say 'Bakura is an ass' in them?" God, I love Mai's sense of humor, I think to myself with a smirk, even as I flip her off. "You are so not my type."

My phone is in the front pocket of my jeans, the better to avoid pickpockets, so I fish it out and hit speed dial 2. I didn't actually set Kaiba as my first speed dial; he set it himself when he bought the phone. Ryou is 3, Amane is 4, Shizuka is 5, and that's all the numbers I ever really use. I'm pretty sure Magnum and Dartz are both preprogrammed in as well, but I rarely call either of them, so I'll be damned if I can remember.

The number Kaiba put in is for his personal phone. Only a few people have the number – Mokuba, Noa, Ryou, Yuugi, and me – and an even fewer number have ever actually used it, namely Mokuba and me, usually me. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out who's calling in that case. Besides, that's what caller ID was created for.

"Well?"

Yep, that's Kaiba all right. He's never going to win any awards for friendliness. Then again, neither am I, so that works out pretty well.

"Bust. It was Isis Ishtar, not either of her brothers." And I'm still kicking myself for not even considering the fact that it could have been her before I got up there.

"Did she have any news?"

I shrug, and maybe he can feel it too. "She got a letter from them. It was post stamped in America, but she couldn't make out where. Look, I'm back in Domino. Can you send Akito to come pick me and Mai up? I'm ready to crash."

There's a long pause, and I can almost see Kaiba looking at the time on his computer. A glance at my watch tells me it's only just after eleven. But it's been a long-ass, busy day of disappointments, and I'm fucking ready for it to be over.

"Magnum has all the wolves out for the rest of the week for their pack training session. It would take at least an hour for Akito to come get you. Would you still like me to call him?"

Fuck, I forgot about that. And didn't I turn down a chance to pull him away before, when I was leaving? Fuck. I smack myself on the side of the head for my forgetfulness. "Nah, I'll catch a taxi back to the house instead."

"Quit hitting yourself." And okay, did he hear that or feel it? Either way I'm not asking. "I'll come pick you up."

Oh fuck no. I've been in a car with Kaiba before, and it's one experience that I never want to duplicate. Akito may drive fast as hell, but generally speaking, he drives fairly safe. Kaiba drives like he's going to get points for every speed bump, sidewalk, and pedestrian he hits. His left hand turns were possible originally designed to make little old ladies wet themselves in fear.

"Nah, the cab's fine. I'm waving one down right now. I'll be home in twenty minutes."

"See to it that you are." And then there's the click on him hanging up and silence.

Yeah, it's not the first time that Kaiba's hung up on me. Hell, it's not even the first time this week he's hung up on me. But that was a bit more authoritative than usual. Maybe he was looking to make a break for it, if he's in some boring meeting or something. I'm not risking my life or stomach to get him out of a meeting, though. There are some things I won't do for anyone.

Thankfully, it doesn't take too long to wave down a cab. There are a few in this area of town, and business seems to be doing quite well, if the number of taxis I see is any indication. And at least I managed to find a cabbie that didn't hear where I wanted to go, the Kaiba compound, and immediately floor it. I could use a few minutes to collect my thoughts and all.

I'm tired, and I might be starting to drift a bit. It has been a long night following a long day, both of which were full of disappointments. It makes for an exhausted me.

So they stopped through America at the very least. I almost wonder if that's where they stayed, but I don't know. Marik could speak passable English, and Jounouchi-kitty was learning; Malik would have been on his own.

I always, somehow, thought it would be Germany. Jounouchi-kitty spoke the language pretty damn fluently, but that was about the extent of the thought I put into it.

America makes sense too. The problem is that the country is too goddamn big. If I had a state or even better a city, I might be able to track them down further. Isis' letter didn't have that kind of detail, though, at least not from what she told me.

There are reasons why she wouldn't tell me if she did know anything else. I hate to admit it, but there are. Not everyone is totally keen on the fact that I'm a human servant to a Master of a city. Not everyone is all right with the fact that what they say to me stands a good chance of traveling back to Kaiba.

There have been insinuations made about the relationship between Kaiba and me. I usually do everything in my power to make these particular gossip spreaders as miserable as possible for that one. The truth is, I live at his house and I help take care of things during the day (but only on certain things, things Kaiba is pretty sure even I can't fuck up). Occasionally, I show up with him at vampire events, but only since that one's part of the job description.

Speaking of which, the job needs a title change. I do very little 'serving' where this particular vampire is concerned, so that makes the title inaccurate at best. Human partner? Nope, that sounds like something the gossipmongers would eat up. Human companion? Ditto for that with the gossiping. I'm going to have to keep working on this and try to find something that is both accurate and unlikely to get people talking.

At last the gate is in sight. I think all the cabbies in this town know to drop people off just outside the gates because there is very little chance they're getting through them. Hell, very few people get up to the house at all anymore. It's yet more of Kaiba's paranoid security

measures at work. I pay the man and head up to the house with Mai right behind me as usual.

Isono is working gate duty tonight, which actually says a bit about how short-staffed we are at the moment. Typically, he only works the front if there's really no one else to handle it. His usual area is the house itself, making sure the people in it are safe. I have yet to see anyone get the drop on the man and Kitty liked him, and that's all good enough for me.

"Bakura-san," he intones briefly. It was actually an effort getting him to that. When I first moved in, it was 'Bakura-dono'. I nixed that one pretty quickly, but it only led to 'Bakura-sama'. I'll take '-san' over either of those any day. "Kaiba-sama is waiting for you."

It's all about choosing your battles with Isono. Kaiba clearly decided that this wasn't a battle he wanted to fight. I mean he lets Kisara call him 'Seto-sama' so I guess 'Kaiba-sama' isn't any better or worse than that.

"How deep of shit am I in?" I have to ask anyway. It's probably a pointless question, but still, it's worth asking. You never know; he might actually answer this time. "Scale of one to ten?"

"Kaiba-sama said he would be waiting in his office for you."

And yeah, I figured that I wasn't going to get a straight answer out of him. Isono isn't really that type of guy. He's not big on the talking, which makes him a bit frustrating for me because I enjoy talking. I enjoy it even more when the person I'm talking to answers me. Something more than a 'yes' or a 'no' is even better than that. That's how Isono rolls, though, so I guess I can't fault him for that.

It's maybe a five-minute trek up to the house. The downside of our being so short staffed at the moment is that there is no one running the golf cart, and apparently, I'm not allowed to use it. I haven't wrecked one or anything. I guess this is just one of those examples of Kaiba being proactive or something. Maybe I look dangerous to golf carts. I don't know.

The front hall is at least somewhat brighter now. All the lights along the walls have been switched on, making it much easier for those of us who can't practically see in the dark to navigate to where they are going. I guess there's really only two people here who fit that description, though, and I think Varon puts up enough fuss on the matter for the both of us.

I give it maybe half a minute's worth of debate before I just head into his office without knocking. I like to consider being a pushy bastard to be one of my more endearing traits.

It's just as well that I didn't knock anyway, seeing as how he's on the phone and all. There's this frightfully pissed off look on his face, and I take a moment to discern if it's because of me and my intrusion or whoever is on the phone. From what little I'm picking up, it's mostly the bastard on the phone (description as provided by Kaiba), but I could also stand to learn some manners.

Take it or leave it, Treeboy. This is as good as it gets.

From the brief glare he flings my way, I think he got that message.

Now to work on assessing Threat Level Kaiba... He's still sitting down, which is a fairly good sign. However, his hair is all over the damn place, so he's pushed the hand not holding the phone through it quite a bit, giving him a bad case of bed head. I'm not catching even the faintest glimpse of fang, so that's a good sign as well. However, there are about eight broken pencils on the desk, which is a sure sign he's frustrated.

I'm going to rate this one about a five out of ten on Threat Level Kaiba, pending any growls that may send it up to a six. If he breaks that phone in his hand, though, it catapults it up to at least a seven. I try to avoid things getting above sixes, though. It swiftly becomes officially Not Pretty at that point, and I'm not sure I'm ready to deal with that tonight. It's been too long a night to deal with a pissy Kaiba on top of it.

"We'll deal with it," he's saying. Whoever he talking to probably thinks he's fairly calm. I've known Kaiba long enough to know that this is pretty damn close to the hearty 'fuck off' tone. I have not heard it in quite a while. Whoever he's talking to is doing a pretty good job of pissing him off. "I said we would handle it. Now if you don't mind, I can handle the situation better if you let me get off the phone and deal with it." There's about a beat of a pause. "Fine. Goodbye."

There is about half a second where I debate on making a break for it, but frankly, he's a lot faster than me. I've seen him beat the shit out of weird new vampires and I've heard him beat the shit out of Seth. If he can beat other vampires, then there's no chance of me getting away before he can catch up, pass me twice, and still catch me.

"Whatever it is, I didn't do it" comes out of my mouth the moment he hangs up. This is my new philosophy: deny early and deny frequently, and maybe that way they will never suspect me.

"Yes, Bakura, for once, you didn't do it." He sounds tired, and that's frankly a bit alarming. Either it's filtering through me into him, which would really suck because I don't think that's how this link thing is supposed to work, or else he's tired of putting up with people's shit.

"So, spill. What's up? What do we need to 'handle'?" The urge to air quote is strong, but I manage somehow to resist it.

He sighs, and there's the first peek of fang of the night. It's pretty damn uncommon and actually says quite a lot about what's been going on since I left. Okay, it doesn't actually say anything directly, but on how much whoever it is happens to be frustrating Kaiba, yeah, it says volumes there.

"Osaka has lost a rogue shifter. Last time any of those... people heard, she was heading towards Domino."

And yeah, that's my eyebrow shooting up to my hairline. We don't get many rogue anything, much less rogue shape shifters, and more than that, female rogues are incredibly rare. Neat, this ought to be interesting.

"So what do they want us to do about it?" I prompt when he's silent after those few words. "Do they want us to return her or kill her or keep her or what?"

"I doubt we would want to keep her. It's Chono, from Hirutani's pard."

There's this coldness inside me at the names. I took it upon myself to personally gut Hirutani years ago, but I couldn't get his pard. They had scattered by the time I got done with him, so there was nothing I could really do to them. Oh, I made mental notes of who was left, so that I could hunt them down when time permitted.

But then I started putting it on the backburner. Helping Kaiba with rebuilding the house and running the city and all those damn human servant jobs, they started to taking priorities. And then I started on my idea to try to bring Yami and Mai back to life, and it definitely took precedence over killing. I never shelved the project, though, but it was definitely pretty far back on the backburner.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Kaiba must find it very easy to read me right now, either my emotions or my face.

"Do they want her back alive?"

He frowns. "Unfortunately, yes, they do. Apparently, she is in some way beholden to the Master down there."

"Damn." And I mean that one, quite a bit actually, no matter how softly it was said. I wanted the chance to kill Chono as well as Hirutani. Marik beat me to Keith, the last of the major players in Hirutani's pard, but I wanted Chono. She's grated me the wrong way from minute one. Still, there is one small hope. "Does she have to be able to walk when we return her?"

Kaiba snickers briefly in amusement. "No, they neglected to specify that." He shrugs. "Even if they did, as long as you didn't use silver..."

I feel a smirk building on my face. "As long as I didn't use silver, she would heal herself in time for us to turn her in. I like the sound of that. But they didn't specify that she had to be unharmed?"

"Not a word," he confirms, and it's music to my ears. "In fact, I rather got the impression that they didn't think it would be possible to bring her in without some damage. For what that's worth, of course."

I really only have one more question, but it might be pretty damn important at this point. "When do they want her?"

"Not immediately, for which I am rather grateful." He eyes me closely, and it's a bit more scrutiny than I'm strictly happy with. "If he wanted her back immediately, I don't doubt that

you would be right back out the door tracking her down. You're about to drop, Bakura. I can feel it from here."

"You're one to talk." And there's me, unable to keep my damn mouth shut or my temper in check. "When was the last time you took more than ten minutes away from work?"

"I honestly can't say, but then, I'm not the one still running on a human body's endurance. I can afford to do this. You can't."

I roll my eyes and send a glare that could almost qualify for Kaiba's impressive arsenal at him. "No, you can't, honestly. Mokuba warned me that you would do this: work until you dropped."

He winces slightly at his brother's name. Damn it, I know better than to bring Mokuba into this argument, but I forgot. I'm not dropping this, though.

"I'm not the point here. You are. I've been able to feel how exhausted you are for a while now. You slept on the train, yes, but you're still tired."

"So what?"

"So you're still sick, Bakura." This time, he winces as he realizes what he just said. There's this unspoken agreement: I don't mention Mokuba, and he doesn't mention my... condition. I broke the truce, though, bringing up his brother, so I guess turnabout is fair play. I can see him take a deep breath that he really doesn't need and push himself to continue. "We skirt around it, but it's the truth. You're not getting any better. In fact, Kisara seems to think you're getting worse."

I'm going to have to have a talk with Kisara about making assumptions about my health one of these nights. Maybe it's fine if she has her assumptions, so perhaps the talk should consist of why she shouldn't share these ideas with others. The last thing I need is anyone coddling me.

"Yeah, fine. I'm still sick. I still have the white outs and the black outs. I still drift away sometimes. Hell, I've drifted away twice tonight so far. So yeah, maybe I am still sick, but I certainly didn't want it spread all over the place."

Kaiba kind of sighs, almost like he was expecting this but was hoping it wouldn't happen. "It's not 'spread all over the place', Bakura. The only person she's told has been me, and I'm the only person she's going to tell. Kisara is not in the business of sharing secrets."

"She shared this one, didn't she?" I might like Kisara quite a bit, but right now, I'm a bit pissed at her.

And if I didn't know better, I'd think I just made Kaiba groan out his frustration. "Then it is true? You are getting worse?"

That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? Am I getting worse? I don't know. It's hard to objectively judge yourself when you realize that it's been fifteen years but you thought it had only been thirteen tops. When you realize you can't account for two years of your own goddamn life, you lose a lot of objectivity. And since honesty has become my ongoing policy...

"I don't know. That's the best I can give you. I really don't know. All I can say for sure is that I keep drifting."

He's frowning in that way that means I'm not out of this yet. "The drifting is fairly new, isn't it?"

Yep, I'm definitely not getting out of this, so I might as well make myself comfortable. With that in mind, I flop down hard in what might as well be my chair. "In the last few years, yeah. Before that, it was just the blackouts and the white outs."

Uh-oh, bigger frown. "Now, for clarification's sake, what you call blackouts are where your vision goes out and you can't see, correct?"

I shake my head briefly. "No, those are the white outs. Because that's the color everything goes," I clarify before he can express the disbelief he's obviously feeling. I don't have to be able to read his emotions to pick that up; if you know how to read a Kaiba, it's written all over his face.

"So white outs are when your vision goes out, and the blackouts are...?"

Kaiba is nearly as lousy at prompting as he is at swearing. Someone needs to make sure he gets more practice with both of them. Don't look at me. I'm a lousy instructor. No patience and all that, doesn't work well for keeping my students breathing.

"Blackouts are more where I wake up and find I've been doing something, but I have no memory of doing it."

"And then drifting away is...?"

Yeah, someone definitely has to work on his ability to lead into a question, I think to myself with a quiet sigh. I masterfully resist the urge to roll my eyes, but it's a difficult thing.

"That one's a bit harder to explain. It's like– It's like– I find myself doing something with no idea about how or why I'm doing it. I can feel myself doing whatever it is – talking to someone, reading something, riding on a train, whatever – but I can't break out of my head enough to do anything. It's a little bit like maybe being stuck in my own skin. I don't know. It doesn't make sense, even in my own head."

Actually, no, it doesn't make sense, *especially* in my own head. My head is a dark and scary place where sense frequently does not exist.

And if the look on Kaiba's face is any indication, he's probably thinking something along the same lines. Kaiba does have this sort of expression that says he has a lot of doubts about my

sanity. Sometimes I don't even blame him for it. Hell, *I* have doubts about my sanity. Some days I still expect to wake up and find out we're still in that damn dream world. More than that, some days I expect to wake up and find out that my ghosts aren't real, that I've been talking to my hallucinations, and I've finally gone around the bend. Kaiba does humor me enough sometimes to make it a plausible theory.

Right now, though, not so much on the humoring. If he were humoring me, he'd be letting me walk away from this conversation and either go sleep or go rough up Chono a bit for fun and profit.

"Have you talked to anyone about this? Besides Kisara and Mai?" Kaiba demands. You know, something tells me that this is what passes for careful concern in the world of Kaiba. To other people, though, it just comes off as rude, and I'm the expert on rude. In fact, I specialize in it.

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

"That's not what I mean. I—"

"I know what you mean, Kaiba. What am I supposed to do? Go up to some shrink and say 'hey, I got possessed a few years back –' he looks ready to interrupt me, so I clarify "fifteen years ago – my mind hasn't worked right since, so please fix it'? Are you trying to get me locked up in the loony bin?"

I can actually see him physically restraining himself. I've been told, however, that I have the ability to try the patience of all the saints, all of the bodhisattva, and the Buddha himself – and one of these days, I'm going to have to try it out. I'm not sure *how* yet, but I'm going to find a way to try. I'm resourceful like that.

"I meant have you talked to Varon? It's not his area of expertise, but he might be able to come up with some ideas, something you haven't tried yet."

That's... actually not a bad idea. There's just one small problem with it. And you know, I thought I would actually be ashamed to admit it, but Varon intimidates the shit out of me. I know I'm not the only one in this house he does or has intimidated, but that's hardly reassuring.

When Malik was here to commiserate with, yeah, that was one thing; when two former badasses are intimidated by another badass is one thing, but when one former badass is intimidated by another, it just doesn't look right; but there's no Malik here to be in this with me anymore.

I mean, I know what Varon used to do before he became a doctor. So far I've only killed a few people: my father and Hirutani, to be specific, and I didn't exactly stop Malik from feeding someone and their *entire car* to a fucking shark once. There were a few other incidents like that, mostly involving me not stopping one of the Ishtars from killing someone who pissed them off or they just didn't like. Varon's record puts me to shame, though.

He's handy to keep around. He's hooked up with Dartz for starters, so keeping him around keeps the cats around. He's a damn good doctor; he patched me up more times than I strictly recall before the whole human servant thing, and he does patch up the wolves and cats when they're hurt worse than their own healing abilities can handle. Aside from that, I would be too damn intimidated to try to run him off.

I respect Varon. He's very good at what he does, both now and before. It's for those reasons that I don't mention to anyone what I know. Oh, I'm sure that Kaiba likely already knows; I can't imagine him *not* knowing; but *I* didn't say anything.

"No, I haven't, and before you say anything, no, I'm not intending on bringing it up to him either. If you do..." I break off, trying to come up with an appropriate threat. "If you do, I'll give your personal number to those New York guys and tell them you *love* phone calls at two in the afternoon."

"Is this an attempt to see if I'll kick your ass? Because if you keep this up, I will."

"And if you do, I'll project it at you for months afterwards." It's not a threat. It's a goddamn promise.

"I lived with Gouzabourou. I can take whatever you can throw at me."

Okay, ouch, that hurt me, him bringing the bastard up. Fine, though, two can play at this game. "Yeah, well, I lived with my father. You have no idea what I've learned to dish out." I raise an eyebrow and give him a Look for good measure. "Are we going to keep doing this all night like assholes, or can I go ahead and go to bed? It's been a long day, and tomorrow promises to be much the same."

"Fine."

From the look he's giving me, I'm not even pretending that this might be over at any point. All I've done is won myself a reprieve. I'm sure I'll get to hear more on this tomorrow night.

That's fine, though. Hopefully by then, I'll be in a better place to deal with Kaiba than I am now. Right now, I'm not sure I'm fit to be arguing with anyone, let alone Kaiba, except perhaps the backs of my eyelids.

"Fine. Thanks. Good luck with the rest of your night."

And yeah, that might be oddly polite for me, but hey, he let me off the hook for the night. That deserves something, some small bit of kindness, I suppose. I don't have a lot of kindness to offer, not on a general basis, so Kaiba is just going to have to take what he can get on that particular front.

And as an added bonus, it throws him off his game when I'm even halfway nice, and it's always a bit hilarious to see Kaiba even vaguely flustered. "Th—Thanks. Good night."

It sounds more like a question than a statement, but that's okay. I manage to hide my grin before I get up and head out of the room. See, I'm not always a complete asshole; I didn't laugh in his face for being flustered. I'm just usually an asshole.

It's okay. I don't mind saying it. Hell, I don't mind hearing it. There are plenty of things I *don't* like hearing myself called, but 'asshole' is one I can usually stand to hear.

Right now, however, I don't feel like being much of one. Right now, all I want to do is sleep. I don't even want to give Kisara a piece of my mind for ratting me out, at least not right now; I fully intend to do so, but it will be at a much later point, when I am closer to my best.

The temptation is there; of course it is; when I head by her on my way upstairs. I think the fact that I'm actually fairly quiet as I head upstairs is probably a tipoff that I'm not at my best and that I might even be a bit pissed off with her. Kisara isn't exactly what you would call dumb nor is she unobservant.

Rather, I think she's a sort of secret defense the Kaibas have had in place for years: no one minds talking in front of the maid, especially when she's cute but quiet, both of which Kisara fits, but she also unbelievably strong, maybe even more so than a Were. She's the perfect trap like that.

But she's also way too sweet. Once she takes someone in, she's loyal to them for life – or until they betray one of her charges. Seth made that mistake when he betrayed Kaiba, and I like to think that, if Kaiba hadn't beaten him first, Kisara would have done it for him and probably with a lot more gusto. I would have paid money to be there to see that.

Right now, though, I'm a bit ticked off at her, and I think she knows it too.

"I'm sorry, Bakura. I had to tell him. He's worried about you. We all are." And yeah, I would say that she most likely knows I'm less than pleased with her. I'm actually proud of the fact that I'm not subtle in the least with this fact.

"I just wish you hadn't, Sara." And I must be tired, slipping to my old nickname for her from when I first moved in, before I changed it to Dragon Lady after seeing her in action. "When Kaiba worries, he makes my life unbearable."

She's shaking her head. "Bakura, Seto-sama is a master vampire. Taking care of their people is what good master vampires do. Otherwise, he would be more like Gouzaburou." She glances me over, her eyes considering. "Unless, perhaps, you would prefer that?"

I really hope that the look I give her perfectly displays the sheer incredulity I feel at that question. "In no world do I want Kaiba to be more like that asshole, and you know it."

"Then accept the fact that he will occasionally feel the need to take care of you. Also accept that if I think he needs to know something about anyone in this house, even and including you, Bakura, I will tell him about it – and yes, even if it is about you."

"You drive a hard bargain, Sara." And this is just one small example of why I started calling her Kaiba's scarier dragon lady. "Fine, you've got a deal. Now can I go to bed?"

There is instant chagrin on her face, and it would be hilarious to see if I weren't so damn exhausted. "My apologies! I didn't know that was where you were going!"

I shrug it off. "Don't worry about it." All of that finally out of the way, I head the rest of the way up the stairs. It's not that far from the stairs to my bedroom. From my sitting room, whatever it's called, it's only a few more feet and another door to my bedroom. The bed in there is calling my name, or else I probably would have just dropped on the couch in the sitting room.

That bed, I think, might be yet another example of Kaiba being a big softie deep, deep, deep inside. I swear that this bed has to be the same size as my entire *bedroom* at the apartment. Maybe that's not that big a stretch, since the apartment wasn't exactly huge, especially when there were three people living in it.

I don't even bother changing clothes, instead collapsing across the bed and letting sleep drag me down – and it feels wonderful.

A final thought manages to worm its way through my head before I'm completely out: way too many of the vampires I know are actively working on ruining the badass rep of vampires everywhere, by being some of the biggest worrywarts that I have ever met.

That shouldn't be so amusing, but then I'm tired. I'm allowed to find stupid things hilarious.

When I wake up again, the first thought that goes through my head is that something is wrong here. I can't immediately place it, though, and that's a bit distressing. Not a whole lot, mostly because I still feel so damned tired, but I can tell that something is subtly off and I should not like it. No, I don't like it.

I'm still lying across my bed lengthwise. I give a moment's thought that perhaps that's what pinging wrong to my senses. It's not like it's the first time I've fallen asleep like this. It's not even the fourth or fifth time I've fallen asleep like this. All the other times, I have never had this sense of wrong like I do now. I'm still laying most of the way across the bed, my sneakered feet dangling on the floor. Whoops, guess I neglected to take off my shoes when I got home last night. It wouldn't be the first time I've done that before. Kisara has given up on scolding me for it.

I used to not be so bad at that. Hell, I used to be the one who reminded everyone else about it (like a good little housewife). Now I'm doing good to remember that on a regular day, let alone a bad one like yesterday was.

Was it yesterday? How long have I been asleep?

I'm not getting any answers laying here like this, so I slowly push myself up. Nothing really looks off in my bedroom. The door to the sitting room is still open, but that doesn't really mean anything: I can't remember if I closed it last night or not. I might not have. I was pretty damn tired, barely putting one foot in front of the other.

I can just see Mai in the sitting room. She's sitting in one of the chairs and is obviously engaged in a protracted conversation with someone sitting on the couch. If she's actually talking to them, then they must be either another ghost or a medium -- or another person like me. I have serious doubts about the latter; five hundred people in all of the world is bad enough odds for that; so that leaves the first two options. Of them, I place the strongest bets on the first one. I haven't met a medium yet who is willing to set foot in this house with so many vampires. Ghosts, though? They'll go wherever they damn well please and damn whoever might have boo to say about it.

You know, I think I just figured out why I spend more of my time with the dead and the undead than the living.

I gingerly pick myself up off the bed and make half an effort to straighten my clothes. I'm not even going to look in a mirror to see how badly my hair is sticking up all over the place. Whoever this is, they're just going to have to live with my hair being something between bat wings and antennae. If they want to see me, they'll have to take me as they can get me.

Mai is heavily involved in the conversation, and it looks like she's been passionate about the topic for a while. She has this look like she's gotten all worked up at a few points in the last little while. I wonder whom she is talking to and how long they've been talking.

Stepping into the door between the sitting room and my bedroom finally gives me a view of whom it is she's been talking to all this time. I probably should have expected it, but somehow I wasn't.

"Yami." For a long second, that's actually all I'm capable of saying. Imagine that. Me, struck dumb. Somehow, though, I manage to recover enough to continue with a mild, less than great witticism. "Fancy seeing you here."

He offers a tight smile. I hate to admit how much I have been missing that smile. I've been missing everything about it. Hell, I even miss the way he smells, and there's nothing I can do about that until I manage to find a way to bring him back to life. I still have a bit of time. Not quite a whole year, but part of it. I'll find a way to make it work somehow.

"We have to talk, Kura."

And this might be pretty good proof that this isn't all in my head. I don't think I could make up someone as contrary as Yami can be. Sometimes I used to wonder if he said the opposite of me just to be contrary or if we were legitimately disagreeing. I still don't actually know. It's not something I want to discuss in our very limited time together.

"I still don't like this idea of yours, Mutou," Mai cuts in, suddenly on her feet and between Yami and me.

What exactly did I miss here? Yami is being way too serious, and Mai is way too worried. Neither one of these facts bears well on my sanity, such as it is.

"Mai, this is between Kura and me. We don't need your input."

Big violet eyes go wide then narrow sharply. The last time I saw the face she's currently sporting, she was still alive. Someone had taken a shot at killing me by running me down with a car but thankfully missed. Mai ended up flipping the car, dragging the guy out, and trying to beat an answer out of his corpse. As I recall correctly, she also tried shape shifting and damn near disposed of any evidence, such as the guy's body, for us.

The point is, this is the face she wears when someone she's in charge of or someone she cares about is threatened. I've seen variations of it plenty of times since she's been my bodyguard, spectral and physical. What exactly, though, was threatening about Yami saying he and I needed to talk? We do need to talk.

And why does it sound like Mai is already in the loop on whatever it is that Yami wants to talk to me about? I feel like I'm utterly in the dark here, while someone else is wandering around in another room with the flashlight.

"Yeah, Mutou, it might be between you and Bakura, but it's going to be me dealing with the aftermath while you swan off again."

Oh yeah, Mai's pissed. She only says stuff like that when she's good and pissed off.

"Mai," I cut in as soon as I'm able, "I do need to talk to Yami, and I'm sure I can handle whatever it is he needs to talk to me about. Please?"

The look she gives me is frankly disbelieving. In fact, it's so disbelieving that I'm almost tempted to change what I just said, to say maybe I can't handle whatever it is after all. What in the world would be making Mai act like this?

"I'll be in the next room when you're done," she finally says, her voice utterly a tone of compromising. She's not happy about this, but she's willing to go along with it, probably because I broke out the seldom-used 'please' card. "Mutou, bear in mind that I am not happy with you doing this. We will have words later."

"Of course, Mai." Yami sounds like he's placating her and refuses to do anything else, to go any further. I'm not liking the sound of this. "Kura, please, have a seat." He gestures to the other end of the couch. I hesitantly pick my way over to it, taking a seat as Mai pulls the door to behind her as she goes into my bedroom. "We have a lot to talk about, Kura."

"Way to make it sound ominous there, Yami." Even in the worst of times, I really don't seem to be able to restrain myself from cutting some kind of joke. It's not in the least bit funny, but it helps keep me together as much as anything does. Yami doesn't seem too amused by it, so I make myself get at least half as serious as he is acting. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Kura..." He reaches out like he's going to touch my face. If I close my eyes, it almost feels like he actually is. The cold, hard truth, though, is that he isn't. I don't make ghosts or spirits that good. "There is no easy way to say this."

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God. Fuck. No. Breathe, Bakura. Breathe.

"To say what, Yami?" I feel like I'm completely numb. No, actually, I *sound* like I'm completely numb, but I *feel* like I'm holding my breath.

"I'm going to move on. It's time for both of us, and it's what's best, especially for you."

I can feel my head shaking and the rest of me start to shiver. "No..."

A cold settles around my hand. I'm willing to bet that Yami is trying to grip my hand. Being one of my ghosts, though, it's not like he can hold on to anything, even me. Fuck, how much do I suck? And why the fuck is that what's on my mind right now?

"No, Kura, it is. It's been fifteen years already. You're going to be alive for quite a while, and there's no reason for you to keep waiting on me, at least not like this." He sighs, and I can imagine him raking a hand through his spiky hair. It always amazed me how soft it actually was, especially for staying in that position naturally. "I know it's been hard for you."

"Yami, you have no idea." Yep, still sounding numb. No surprise there, not in the least.

"Actually, I do. I've been around here quite a bit in the last few years, even if I haven't let myself be seen." That just isn't right. "You've been working yourself to death trying to come up with a way to bring me back. And... Well... I don't want you to keep trying, not for me."

That just isn't right. I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding as a deep sigh and finally open my eyes to lock with Yami's. It looks like it's hurting him to say all of this. Good. It's hurting me to hear it.

"Do you know how often I've needed you in the last thir— fifteen years, Yami?" I'm little more than hissing the words. That's fine. At least I'm able to get the words out without growling. "I lost nearly all of my family in one night. I can't lose you too. I just can't."

"I'm not planning on leaving right away. I just want you to move on past me. Do you really think we would have lasted this long had I been alive the entire time?"

And that's... That's something I have never thought of before. I always thought, ever since we first got together, that it was going to be the two of us forever. Yes, we fought like cats and dogs sometimes, but I don't get into a relationship without thinking it was going to be long term one way or another.

Hell, the only relationship I had before Yami was Malik, and we were still friends up until the moment he, his brother, and Jounouchi disappeared. I don't do short term. I don't give out my heart easily, and I give out my body even less easily.

"I like to think that we would have been," I finally make myself answer. "Obviously, you have a different answer."

He holds up both of his hands like he's surrendering to something. "I'm just being pragmatic, Kura. Death has a way of making you like that. In truth, we didn't exactly always get along. I can't be certain that we would still be together. If we were, would we still be friends — or would we be together because neither one of us were secure enough to break it off?"

This is a bit deeper than I really want to delve into. Would we still be together after seventeen years? I don't know. Ryou and Yuugi are still together and still annoyingly sappy sweet all the damn time, but then that's them. If they've ever had a fight, I've never heard about it. If they've ever so much as had a moment where they gave each other dirty looks, I've never heard about it. I still say it isn't normal, but it's them. They're like death by sugar, if such a thing ever existed.

Yami and I, we were nothing like that. In fact, sometimes it felt like we fought all the damn time. It was a lot of fun making up from the fighting, though, and sometimes I thought that maybe that was why we kept it up all that time.

All that time? All of those two years we had together, I mean.

It should have been longer. Either I should have died with Yami or Seth never should have shot him or Kaiba should have found a way to save him too. It's just not fair, not fair at all, for us to have only had two years.

So I'm not going to answer Yami's question. I don't know if we would have still been together. I suck at short term, but maybe it would have been the exception. Maybe it wouldn't have. I just don't know.

"Do I get a choice in all of these decisions you're making for me?" I ask instead. I'm doing one of those things I hate, answering a question with a question, but turnabout is fair play after all. He is the king of games, so... yeah. Okay, I lost my train of thought there. Back to my question. "It sounds like you have all of these plans, and I'm involved in a lot of them, but I haven't said that I agree to any of this."

"Kura..." You know, I might be way too good at inducing that sound of wariness and annoyance in people. Kaiba... Yami... What does it say that I am capable of making them both use the exact same tone of voice without me even really trying. "It's my life, my death. I think if I want to go ahead and cross over or be reborn or whatever, then it's my choice."

"Yes, but you're predicating it on my letting you go, and maybe I'm not ready to do that." Fuck that 'maybe'. There is absolutely no chance that I'm ready to do that. "I mean, I've spent years now working on a way to bring you back to life. You're telling me to give all that up. You're telling me to give up. Yami, when have you ever known me to give up on anything?"

"Never," he concedes. "That doesn't mean I'm not hoping you are capable of doing it now. Kura, I'm dead. I've been dead for fifteen years now. That was our arrangement: if you didn't have an answer after fifteen years, then I could start moving on. I've given it the full fifteen years. It's time now." He sighs and rakes a hand through his hair. "And it's not like

I'm planning leaving right away. I can promise to come back a couple of times a year until... until whatever happens, happens."

Until whatever happens, happens. That's so not reassuring. "And that's supposed to make me feel better."

"Kura, I love you dearly, but my gods, you're being selfish on this."

Selfish? "Selfish? *Selfish*?" Forgive me if I sound a little incredulous on this, but I do believe that this is the first time anyone has ever accused me of being selfish in my entire lifetime. "Because I don't want my lover dead, I'm selfish?" And I might be yelling. I do hope it's daytime or I might have the entire population of the house in here shortly. "You know what? Fuck you, Yami. Leave if you want."

I can hear the door to my bedroom open just as Yami does that fading out thing he is so annoyingly good at. And might I say that Mai looks beautifully pissed off?

"Did he...?" she demands. Or maybe it's more that she starts to ask, but then she realizes that it's written all over my face. "He did." She lets out a growl that would put her wolf half to shame, and that's honestly really saying something. "I'm going to kill him."

"He's already dead, Mai." God, I sound numb. It's just as well, though, I guess, since that's how I feel: like every single emotion I have ever had has been sucked right out of me.

"I don't care. I'll kill him all over again." She pauses, as though she's considering something. "No, screw that. It'll be over too soon. I'm just going to beat him within an inch of his unlife and make him wish he could die again."

You know, if what happened just now with Yami hadn't actually happened, this might have been the funniest thing I have seen in years. Even now, it's still kind of funny, just now in a bit of a hysterical way. I don't like that overly much. I'm not like that.

No, I take that back. I was like that at least once before: back when I was first realizing that Mai was dead. Jounouchi-kitty and Marik pretty much directed Yami and me into the den, where Kitty tried to get me calmed down. Of course, that was also when I got shot by the same crap assassin who managed to kill Mai, which is actually a pretty good cure for the hysteria, believe it or not.

"I wish you could, Mai. I wish you could."

I might even mean that. I love Yami. I wish I didn't at the moment, but I do still love him. Right now I'm pissed as hell at him, but I do in fact still love him. Damn him. And for that matter, damn me too.

"I mean, maybe it is for the best," I can hear myself saying. Great of all the times for me to drift away... Actually, no, I think this time it might actually be rather welcome. I could completely stand to be divorced from my feelings right now. "You know, maybe I do need to move on. I've spent fifteen years pining after him, after all."

"I'm so sorry, otouto."

I can just barely feel Mai's arms around my shoulders. I wish to all the gods that I could really feel it. I wish I could feel my best friend, my only remaining friend, touching me right now. Because right now, I could really stand to fall apart, and I don't want to do it alone.

"Should I be trying to move on, Mai?" I turn to look into huge purple eyes, and I might venture a guess that she looks as broken up as I feel. She and Yami might have had no love lost between them – and that does seem to be a common theme among my friends and him – but I don't know. Maybe she just doesn't like seeing me hurting. She's a good friend that way, if that's the case.

She's shaking her head. "I'm not the best person to ask on this. I'm a wolf. We mate for life. " She snickers faintly. "And beyond it too, it seems. I wish I knew the answers. I wish I knew exactly what to say, but I don't. I don't know what to say to make it all go away. I doubt there is such a thing."

"Mai?"

"Yeah?"

"You seriously need to work on your therapy routine." I somehow manage to squeeze out half a smile as I say that. It's not easy. In fact, it might be the most difficult thing I've ever done, but somehow I am barely able to do it. "In fact, you might just want to stick to the bodyguard routine. You have that one down pat."

"Why, thank you." She pretends to preen a bit, and I can feel the beginnings of a small grin building on my face.

I wish I could make Mai living again right now. Hell, I wish Malik were here right now. I could use my best friends right now. Maybe it's not very badass of me to say it, but it's the truth. It's part of my honesty policy I have going on right now. I really, really could use my two best friends at this moment. I could use my housecat too for that matter, as well as my twin brother. Hell, I would even take Marik. I feel a little battered and bruised on the emotional level right now.

I push myself to my feet, and I'm actually only a little unsteady. Once I feel like I can stay standing on my own two feet without falling over, I declare, "I need to get out of here for a bit, Mai."

She's nodding even before I finish talking. Yeah, this is why she has become my new best friend. "Absolutely. Let's get out of here. Just be sure to leave Kaiba a note. You know how he gets."

Oh God, but do I know how he gets. He and I had a bit of a yelling match over that last night, if I recall correctly. And wait a minute; now that I'm thinking about it, did I actually manage to get him to threaten to beat me within an inch of my life? Wow, I didn't know I had it in me to be able to make Kaiba lose it that much. I don't know if I should be proud of myself or not. Is that something to be proud of?

"Yeah, I know how it gets. I would rather avoid that right now, if at all possible." I take a glance towards my bedroom, but it's not like I can see the window from here. "Is it dark yet?"

Mai shakes her head. "Not yet, but it will be before much longer. You slept most of the day away, baby boy."

And somehow that actually manages to startle me out of my daze. I might have been able to keep on going with barely a blip on the emotional radar if it wasn't for that. I give people a lot of nicknames, and not all of them are nice ones. I've only been given a few nicknames of my own through the years, though: Boss, niisan, otouto, Dorobou, Bakura-boy, Kura...

But an actual nickname, like what I tend to call people, I can't say I've ever really had one of those. It's a new and different experience for me. And I think I might like it. An actual affectionate nickname... Wow. I think I might have hit the jackpot on the awesome big sister lottery.

It takes a few minutes, but I do manage to recover enough to talk, though surprisingly not enough to be sarcastic or even funny. "I guess that explains why I feel a bit lived in right now."

"That might be the best way I've ever heard of phrasing it, because you look like you got up on the wrong side of the bed and then proceeded to shoot the mirrors immediately thereafter."

"Is that a nice way of saying I look like hell?" I counter. Oh yeah, I might just be getting my groove back.

"If there is a nice way of saying that, then yes, that's what it is. Because, yes, you do look like hell. You could probably do with a shower, you need a new change of clothes, and your hair could stand to be introduced to a brush sometime this century. Other than that, you look fine."

I'm almost grinning as I flip her off. In fact, I might even be feeling a bit better than I was expecting to feel at any point in the foreseeable future. I probably feel better than I have any right to.

If it was Malik here with me, we probably would be setting out on a grand spree of larceny and burglary to make the police shake their heads in confusions for at least months to come. I doubt I can do that with Mai. Not that she doesn't seem like the type to be able to pull off a good heist, but more that she probably has much more expensive tastes than I do. I mean, I've stolen some things that were valued upwards of a few million yen, but I think Mai's tastes run a lot higher and a lot shinier than that.

How is that she's not a cat again?

"Let's get out of here," I offer with a smirk that I almost feel. She grins and winks in response.

"Don't forget to let Kaiba know," she reminds me once we get downstairs and are walking past his office.

"Yeah, yeah, I haven't forgotten." Except where I had actually forgotten, and Mai knows it too. That's why she reminds me of stuff, and it's why I would be lost without her. It's like she's my mind, walking around outside my body and invisible to everyone but me.

The easiest and best way to leave a message for Kaiba when he's literally dead to the world is to attach a note to his computer. It's taking your life in your own hands, but it is the most likely way of leaving a message that he might actually get.

And never let it be said that I am afraid to take my life in my own hands. I think I've said before that one of the benefits of being among a master vampire's chosen people is that said master vampire is very unlikely to be willing to kill me. I might ruthlessly take advantage of this fact.

And, again, why not? I'm reasonably sure that Kaiba can't kill me without offing himself as well, and I do know that I am capable of projecting enough to make beating the crap out of me a choice he's unlikely to make.

Kaiba doesn't do much of anything without weighing and reweighing the options, especially after Seth. I can't imagine him not realizing that I would, could, can, and will exploit what I can out of this little arrangement of ours. It sounds terrible saying it that way, but it's more that I have to be me. That means taking chances, conjuring the local spirits, and pissing people off.

It takes a few minutes to find a pad of sticky notes once I slip into Kaiba's office. I scribble down something, basically saying that I'm out with Mai and I have my phone if he needs anything. I even take a second to check my pocket to be sure that I actually *do* have my phone before I stick the note to the screen of his computer.

"He's going to pitch a shit fit of epic proportions at you for doing that," Mai predicts direly from the doorway. "You know he doesn't like anybody touching his stuff, especially his computer."

I shrug. "He'll get over it. I'm too damn adorable to be mad at for long."

Mai laughs, a huge grin spreading out over her face. "Now that sounds more like the Bakura I know. Let's see about getting you out of the house for a while."

I chuckle. I wish I felt like myself right now. Right now, I feel kind of drained. Maybe that's what happens when you get dumped out of the blue. I don't know. My only relationship before Yami was Malik, and we mutually broke it off; even then, we were more friends with benefits or fuck buddies than anything else.

"Oh?" I return with a matching grin. "Does that mean you're buying?"

She pats down her vest and miniskirt. "Whoops, sorry. I must have left my wallet in my other clothes."

"Can I pawn your gun for drinking money then?"

She glances down at the pistol in the shoulder holster she's still wearing beneath her vest, as if she had forgotten that she was wearing it. I guess these things sort of fade to the background once you can't use said weapon any longer.

"If you think you can get money for this thing, baby boy, you're more than welcome to it."

"It would certainly be a neat trick," I manage after a moment.

I think it's going to be a while before I get used to my new nickname; it still kind of floors me to think that Mai likes me well enough to give me a nickname, all this talk of being pseudo-siblings or not. I might be in a slump or something, but honestly, all I can think is why would anybody like someone such as me enough to do that. I don't get it.

"Bakura, are you okay?"

There is half a second where I actually stare at Mai and wonder why she's trying to change her voice, before it dawns on me that the voice is coming from behind me, out in the yard, and actually is male.

Of all the cats that are still here from Jounouchi-kitty's pard and all the cats that have turned up since then, Dartz is the only one who just calls me by my name. It took some insisting, but anything else felt way too weird. And apparently, I'm easier to deal with that Kaiba, so I have been seeing a lot of both Dartz and Magnum, ferrying their reports to Kaiba and his orders back to them. I'm a glorified messenger sometimes.

And I'm possibly further losing my mind if I mistook Dartz' voice for Mai's. I'll plead emotional exhaustion and stress, though, if I'm ever asked about it.

I whirl around on my heel and offer Dartz the same grin I've been giving Mai. It never hurts to keep your story straight, after all. "What?" I pause, as something else occurs to me. "And what have I said about sneaking up on me?"

He snorts quietly. "I will make every effort to make more noise next time."

"See to it that you do that, or I'm going to start gluing bells to every single cat on this property, starting with Rebecca's kittens."

I've probably made that threat too many times if all the reaction I get is a laugh. I do mean it, though. I'm a little sick and tired of all the supernatural creatures on the estate thinking it's funny to sneak up on me because I'm the only one here with human reflexes. Well, aside from Varon, but even the monsters are wary of Varon. Predators can sense other predators, it seems.

"Are you sure you're all right? You smell... off."

"First off," I begin, enumerating each point on my fingers, "please lay off the smelling me. I feel like I should be taking a shower every ten minutes when you guys start talking about

how I smell. And secondly, I'm fine. Yesterday just kind of sucked, and I didn't sleep well after it all. You don't need to worry."

He actually looks a bit sheepish. That's sort of surprising; Dartz doesn't usually do that sort of thing. He's probably the most reserved leopard I know. Then again, most of the leopards I know are the very opposite of reserved. "I guess Varon has me doing that at everyone now. If you're sure..."

I have to roll my eyes. It's impossible not to, really. I do temper it with a smile, though. "Yeah, I'm sure. I'm just going out with Mai for some drinks, if anyone comes looking for me." I'm not anticipating that, but stranger things have happened.

"Sure thing," he agrees. For half a second there, I actually almost expect the word 'Boss' to come out of his mouth. I guess sometimes Dartz reminds me of the furry parts of my Tokyo gang. "Have fun with Mai."

I nod. "I will."

Now that I've managed to get past the kitty patrol, I head to the gate and slip through it, once it has been opened enough for me. Mai just glides through it like it's not even there. For her, it isn't.

"You know, this might be the first time I have ever heard you talk about drinking," Mai remarks once we're away from the house. It's not like anyone would overhear her, but they would hear me answering her. She sometimes tries to make sure I don't look crazy, walking around talking to myself. "Going drinking, having a drink, anything like that."

"I'm not much of a drinker," I admit. It feels like a lie as soon as I say, so I push myself to continue and clarify. "My father, however, was a bit of a drinker. When he drank, he would get... mean." Well, meaner, anyway. "I always did my best to make sure that Ryou and Amane didn't catch too much crap off of him. It made me want to avoid alcohol like the plague after that."

It's a very brief summary of my life before I met Malik and before I moved to Domino. To say Oyaji was a mean drunk is probably an understatement, but I'm not sure I'm up for clarifying it. There was a reason I spent as much of my time away from the old man as possible, while still trying to be there enough to catch the brunt of it so that my younger siblings and stepmother never had to. It was a fine line.

"So why are we going drinking now?" She sounds suspicious, like she already has her own theory about the reason why and like she already disapproves.

"Because I had a really shitty day yesterday. Because my dead boyfriend broke up with me just a little bit ago. Because I want to see if you drinking me under the table makes Kaiba tipsy. Because I'm bored. Take your pick. They're probably all right." And whoops, that came out way too bitter.

"Bakura..." I have to say that I haven't heard this tone of voice from Mai before. It's almost like she feels sorry for me or something. I can feel myself start to bristle before she

continues. "Fine. You can pout and mope all you want tonight, but tomorrow we are going to sit down and find a way to work this all out somehow."

"How?" slips out of my mouth before I can even realize that I was going to say.

"I don't know. We're going to start with a 'how to move on once your jackass boyfriend leaves you' seminar, we're going to pull some damn good pranks, we're going to find Chono and make her suffer, and we're going veg out in front of that gigantic TV Kaiba thinks no one knows he bought and watch lots of movies where things blow the hell up. That will be Phase One of Project Moving On. How's that for starters?"

I have to nod. "I like the sound of it." I'm not sure how I feel right now about moving on, but it's probably for the best. Even Yami said so.

And I'm not thinking about Yami right now. I'm pissed at Yami right now. Again.

It's actually a long way from Kaiba's place to the nearest bar. I guess I probably should have just locked myself in the TV room with what little of Gouza-bastard's good liquor didn't get torched after I got out of the hospital; it probably would have been the smartest thing to do; but I also needed to get the hell out of the house. Drinking crappy liquor in a seedy bar is all but in the breakup manual, though, after all, or so I'm told. I really wouldn't know.

The first bar we get to does fall on the seedy side of the line, and that's quite fine. All I want to do right now is forget.

I think I got my wish, and I got it in spades too.

I find myself waking up with the worst headache I have ever had, short of a demon attacking my brain. That's saying quite a bit. I'm not sure if I want to groan or throw up or possibly both. I do know, however, that I don't want to move.

To say I feel like shit would be the biggest understatement of the century, if not the millennium.

Okay, I'm not making that crack about waking up with hangovers when I'm not a drinking man ever again. If this is what a hangover feels like, I'll take a demon attack and concussions any damn day. At least they usually aren't full body events.

"Good morning, sunshine."

I'm going to strangle Mai. Unless she turns the volume down about six points, I'm going to strangle her. Oh, wait, she's already dead. I'll have to bring her back, and then I'll kill her. I

manage to grunt something completely unintelligible that might manage to be an acknowledgement of her words.

"Are you back among the living now?"

I peek one eye open. At least it's fairly dark in the... Where the hell am I? Mai's sitting in a chair that is in no way familiar, and I'm lying on a bed that's likewise unfamiliar.

"Where am I?" I croak out. Honestly, I sound like a monster from one of those bootleg horror movies Ryou loves so much, and talking hurts, both the act of doing it and the volume of my own voice.

"First off, there's water on the nightstand. Drink as much of it as you can; it should help with the hangover. You really should have listened to me when I told you to slow down."

I sit up gingerly and drink about half of the glass before my stomach starts feeling queasy. I carefully set the glass back down again before I speak. "I don't remember any of that, Mai."

She snorts, and for once, the sound is not at all pretty. "Oh, I'm not surprised. When you don't drink, it's generally not advised to go straight for the hard liquor."

I wince hard. "I'll bear that in mind, if I ever decide to drink ever again."

"Secondly, I can understand want to move on from Yami, but drunken sex is not part of Project Move On." Oh God. I can actually feel the blood rushing to my face. "Thirdly, you are apparently a clingy drunk, and I do *not* want to be in the room with you having sex *ever* again. It is not in my top ten list of awesome things, and gay sex is not one of my kinks."

"Can I just go ahead and die of embarrassment right now?" I moan to myself.

"Nope," she declares cheerily. "You paid the front desk for three hours, and I think your time is about up, unless you want to pay for another hour."

And apparently, I can check 'visit a love motel' off my bucket list, if it weren't for the fact that it actually was never on my list. Apparently, I managed to completely fall off every wagon I was ever on in one go.

"No," I declare decisively. "I want to go home and die quietly in my room. Why the fuck do people drink if the aftermath feels like this?"

"Well, for starters, they don't usually have the aftermath the same night. It looks like you have some of Kaiba's metabolism in this aspect. At the rate you're going, in fact, you might be perfectly fine again before the night is over."

If I weren't completely certain that it would hurt like hell, I would thump my head down against the wood of the door. "It's still the same night?"

"Yep. You've been here about three hours, and I would guess you were drinking an hour or an hour and a half pretty steadily. I mean, damn, I've seen wolves that wouldn't have been able to keep up with you, the way you were chugging back shots. Magnum might have, but

he knows when it's best to quit drinking. For the record, it was five drinks before you left the bar with some random guy."

"Great. I'll try to keep that in mind." I have to groan the minute I hit the street. "Goddamn, I feel like shit."

"After all those drinks and all that drunken fumbling attempts at sex, you should."

"Mai, babe, sweetheart, please quit talking about the sex," I plead. "I'm having to repress every time you say it."

"I'm not sure I want you repressing anything. I'm pretty sure that's what led to this." She shakes her head. "At least it wasn't much more than blowjobs and frottage, but it was still more than I wanted to see. Please, please, learn how to let me wander out of the room when you start that stuff."

Well, that's a small relief at least. Maybe. I think. I'm not sure it's a moral victory I really want to call; yeah, I had a one night stand in a love motel, but it's not like it was actual sex or anything; and I'm completely certain that it's nothing I want to talk about from here on out.

"I'll work on that, Mai." I swallow against the bile in my throat. "Thank you."

"Thank me by never doing anything like this ever again, please." The words sound like a joke, but I'm pretty sure that she doesn't mean it that. I'm pretty sure that she's dead serious.

"I don't want to." I summon up a smile and try it out on her. "In fact, I'm pretty sure I want to have a ceremonial burning of the rest of Gouzaburou's liquor. Once my head quits hurting and my stomach calms down, I mean."

"Good." She wraps a frigid and intangible arm around my shoulders. "I'm sorry about Yami, otouto. If I see him, I'll kick his ass for you. Just please don't do this ever again. I hate seeing you like this."

"Thanks, Mai." I'm still not sure if I want her to, but I guess that she offered is...

Well, actually it's really awesome. Somehow I managed to strike gold in the Awesome Ghostly Big Sister contest. I'm none too sure on *how*, unless I stole someone else's ticket, which oddly makes a lot of sense. Nice shit just doesn't happen to me.

"And hey, on the bright side, maybe Kaiba was too busy with Chono or whatever to pick up on everything that's happened tonight."

"Oh God. Please, Mai, kill me now. I don't want to have to sit through another Kaiba lecture."

She rolls her eyes and chuckles. "He doesn't lecture."

"No, it's worse. He just sits and stares and gives me this disappointed look and sighs. It might as well be a lecture. Hell, it might as well be a funeral, it's so depressing to sit through."

"You haven't exactly been to a lot of funerals, baby boy." I offer a shrug. It's the truth. "Remind me sometime to take you to a wake. Now that's one hell of a party."

"I'm pretty sure I don't want to know."

How the hell far from the bar was the love motel anyway? I don't think we're that far from the house now, but I'm not looking up. Even just the light on the street is almost too bright for me; I don't want to glance up and risk streetlights. That's one headache I really don't need, literally as the case may be.

"It's only half a block further, if we cut through onto the back of the property," Mai supplies.

Okay, so that means we just have to cut across... Oh. Oh, fuck.

"Did I say that out loud?" I have to know.

She nods slowly. "You have a pretty good monologue going here. I didn't want to break it up." She rubs a hand over my hair, and I can almost feel it, like you can feel a soft breeze. "Sometimes your little monologues are the only way I can tell how with it you are. You're too damn good an actor."

"You shouldn't take advantage of sick people like that, Mai."

"Oh, so now you admit you're sick? I thought you told Kaiba that you weren't sure, and you sure as hell sounded like you thought you weren't."

I wince. "You heard that, huh?"

"Bakura, I think half of Domino heard that." Well, fuck. She stops right in front of me, hands on her hips, and fixes me with one of the sharpest looks I have ever seen from someone who didn't have the last name Kaiba. "Pick a point, Bakura. Are you or aren't you still sick?"

She's not going budge until I answer her. Furthermore, she's not going to let me go anywhere until I answer her. Better to get it over with in that case.

"I don't know. Maybe. I'm not with it some of the time... Okay, I'm not with it a lot of the time. I'm somehow missing about two years. And I can't keep my mind on task most of the time. Hell, I carry around a recorder in case I drift off or black out."

Which seems to be curiously missing from my back pocket. My money and all were still in my shoes, but my pocket recorder seems to be missing. I guess I can only blame it on my one night only friend.

"So you are still sick?" She repeats it, almost as if she's trying to put it to memory – or drill into my head. I shrug.

"I guess so."

"Damn," she huffs. "I would have thought that the fourth mark would have taken care of it."

I shrug again. I'm actually starting to get a little tired of this, but it's less the fed up tired and more than hopeless tired. "I guess that demon messed my brain up more than I thought. I mean, hell, even Varon said it nearly killed me, even with the first mark back then, and Kaiba had to give me two more before I could even wake up. I don't know. Maybe there are some things that are outside what even the marks can fix."

And isn't that a goddamn cheerful thought? It's one thing to know these things to yourself, in the semi-privacy of your own mind, but it's another altogether to actually have to say them out loud. Mai is getting way too good at making me doing these confessions. I know they're supposed to be good for the soul or whatever, but I can't say that I like them.

She nods slowly; she's giving herself a moment to think over what I just said. The hands are still on the hips, though; she still not going to budge. "So does Varon think that it's, what, physical? Psychological? What?"

I find myself shuffling from side to side, foot to foot. Okay, now this is going to fucking suck. It's going to suck out loud. Better to get it over with, I guess. "I haven't told Varon about it," I finally mumble.

"Speak up. I'm sorry. I don't speak idiot very well. Did you seriously just say you haven't told him about this?" And yep, I was right. It sucks out loud. "God damn it, Bakura, he's your doctor! That's what Kaiba keeps him around for!"

I roll my eyes. "Kaiba keeps him around because Dartz and the cats would leave if Varon did. Besides, there's nothing physically wrong with me. It's all on a level that Varon can't touch, not with any amount of surgical instruments." She cocks an eyebrow in a very clear question. "The damage was done to my *soul*, Mai. This is just how it is manifesting in the mundane world."

"Okay, break it down into stupid werewolf terms. I really don't know that much about souls and demons and such."

And yet she's walking around a spirit that I created, even if it was completely by accident and without any actual knowledge on my part that I was doing it.

"The long and short of it is pretty simple. The demon tried to use my powers and my soul – and me too, I guess – to break into this world from where it was imprisoned. With me so far?" She nods. Good. That was the simple part. I would have hated to have lost her there. "When it was doing that, trying to break into this world, it used my powers as a two-way conductor, more or less, which they were never supposed to be. It left great big holes in my souls, in a manner of speaking.

"Most of the holes are plugged one way or another, either with the marks or my ghosts or the little bit of me I left in Marik, but there are still some gaps."

"And then these gaps are where your problems are sliding in," she surmises.

I nod. "It's the simplest way I can think of to explain it. It's not perfect, but it functions. It's a functional explanation at least." I would have preferred, if I had no choice about explaining on this but actually had time to prepare, to give her something a bit more elegant and complete. For what I had to work with, it's okay, though.

"So is there any way to fill in the holes?"

I find myself blinking in surprise and confusion. "What?"

"The holes that are causing you so much trouble. Is there any way to seal them? Maybe the same ways you've sealed the ones that are dealt with, perhaps?"

I actually haven't given too much thought to a fix for my problems. In all honesty, I am pretty much at the acceptance stage of the game. The holes are there, and there isn't a lot I can do about them. Patching them over oddly never really occurred to me, mainly because... Well...

"Actually, I have no idea how the holes that were there got patched in the first place. I don't remember doing it. In fact, it's completely possible that I did it while I was in that coma to be able to wake up at all. At this point, Mai, it's all one big crap shoot."

"Well, then, let's see about changing the odds. We need to find things to plug up the holes, so to speak. Not literally, of course," she offers with a smile and a wink. The hands finally come off her hips, and she sidesteps to move along pace with me. Good, we can finally get out of here, and I take immediate advantage of it. "So what all do you have in the gaps that you do have closed? Specifically?"

I sigh quietly. There's absolutely no chance that she didn't hear that, but I feel a little better just getting it out. I adore Mai, but sometimes she is too damn persistent. I guess that's what makes her so damn good at her job, but still, it's a bit uncomfortable having it turned loose on you. I don't think I'm ever going to be used to it.

"Most of the gaps are filled with the marks. There are great big chunks of my soul filled up by that." And that doesn't make me uncomfortable. No, not at all. Why would anyone think that? "My ghosts are the next biggest pieces."

"By 'your ghosts', who exactly do you mean? The ghosts that come to you for help or the ghosts that you yourself created?"

Yep, I was right. She's not going to let this go, not until she gets the answer she wants. Somehow I get the feeling that that answer is how to fix me.

"The latter."

"So me and Yami," she murmurs. She doesn't look particularly pleased to be bringing up his name, even in passing like this, but I guess she kind of has to if she's going to keep pursuing

this line of questioning. And then suddenly her eyes go a bit wide. "So what are you going to do once Yami finally moves on? If he's one of the things holding your soul together?"

I shrug tiredly. The thought has actually occurred to me. I put it off every time it came up, though, hoping that I would have found a way to bring Yami back before it became an issue. "I don't know. Find a new bit of putty to stick there or just have another gap. I really don't know."

"We'll have to come up with something. Is that it? I thought you said something about Marik?"

I nod slowly. "When I separated him and Malik, a little bit of my power lodged itself in Marik. Not enough that it would hurt either of us, but enough that I know he's there. I can tell that he's alive, though that's about it. It does give me a little bit of him to patch into a gap as well."

Mai is silent for several long minutes. Glancing over to my side as we walk, it's pretty easy to see that she looks a little impressed. Some days I can't even believe I managed to do it. I mean, feeling like crap as I was, barely out of the coma, and I still managed to separate the two of them all on my own.

Hell, I even managed to use a wee bit of my power – boosted a bit by Kaiba's – to help Marik build a body just for him. And that's how Marik is always going to be one of mine. Malik was one of mine from the very beginning. I have to say that I claimed Kitty pretty soon after Ryou brought him home.

But Marik? Him I never really claimed. As the more psychotic half of Malik, he was a full part of the gang and a great asset and maybe even something of a comrade, if not a friend, but I'm not sure I would have risked my life for him if he weren't sharing a body with Malik – and Malik I would have risked my life for. I still would.

But yeah, now Marik is mine. No force in the world is ever going to be able to change that. I can't influence him, and apparently, he can't feel me in return. On the other hand, he can't influence me, as far as I can tell anyway, but he's always going to be walking around with a piece of my power stuck inside him.

Obviously, I think this is all kind of awesome. It's nice to know that my power can do something that doesn't directly involve the dead.

"Do you think you would be able to stretch that to fill the gap Yami's going to leave?"

I know I've said it before, but goddamn, Mai's persistent.

"I don't know. Maybe. I haven't ever tried anything like that." And there's that 'long tailed cat' feeling sneaking its way back in again.

"How hard would it be to try?"

I blink at her. Hell, I have to blink at her a couple of times, maybe even more than a couple. "Mai, we're talking souls here. It's not something you try on the street corner, not without a spotter at the very least. You don't do a damn thing with them unless you have time and space and backup who know what they're doing when they're around souls."

"So you do have half an ounce of common sense after all," a chilly voice cuts in behind me. And God damn it, I know that voice. Only one person in the world sounds like that. That's Kaiba. Oh, fuck me.

"Kaiba," I greet him, turning to face him. Somehow I even manage to sound halfway level and almost not at all shaken up by the fact he snuck up behind me. Frankly, he looks pissed as hell, though, so my efforts might be wasted.

"We need to talk."

Oh yeah. I'm fucked.

Mai mouths out the word 'busted' at me. Why is she bothering to be quiet? It's not like Kaiba can hear her, even if she shouts directly in his ear. It's both one of the advantages and disadvantages of being a spirit, I suppose.

Getting home with Kaiba around and pissed is going to suck out loud.

There was actually a car waiting for us, not even half a block away. Seriously, Kaiba had someone drive him less than a block to come retrieve me. If he didn't look so damn pissed, I would be laughing my ass off at him.

He actually seethed all the way back to the house. The car let us off at the door, and with one sharp hand gesture, he motioned for me to follow him back to his office. He didn't say a damn word until the office door was shut.

Seriously, he didn't say a single word from when he picked me up until we get in the door. Even for Kaiba, that's a bit odd. He tends to run cold, yes; anyone with eyes and a brain can tell that; but this is a new level of cold even for him.

He takes a seat behind his desk, steeples his hands before his face, and stares at me in consideration.

It doesn't take me long to break. Maybe that's predictable, but still, damn, I hate it when he pulls this kind of shit. "Will you quit doing that? You look like Ikari Gendo."

I can actually watch the anime reference go right over his head, mostly thanks to the utter lack of reaction in his eyes. Now that I can actually meet Kaiba's eyes, I've figured out that almost all his tells are right there. His eyes are what make the subtle difference in each expression, even when almost every expression is just a variation on one blank face. Without those tells, let's just say that I would hate to play poker against him.

"What the hell were you thinking, Bakura?" The words by themselves might be angry, but his voice is deceptively calm. If I didn't know better, I would think he was bored out of his skull having this conversation. He's not bored, though. In fact, he is actually angry. It might be a bit of a glacial angry, but it is angry nonetheless.

"What was I thinking about what?" I prevaricate. I'm not admitting to anything, not until I know what he's pissed about.

"Tonight. Where you went. What you did."

I roll my eyes exaggeratedly and flop down hard in my chair. "I was thinking that I needed to get out of the house for a bit. Do forgive me for trying to have a normal life."

"You and normal aren't on a speaking basis," he mutters. "So your idea of 'normal' is to go out, get blind drunk, and do who knows what else for hours?" He actually growls faintly. I think I might be shocked. "I wasn't able to pick you up at all for hours, Bakura."

I can't help it: I perk up at that. "So if I drink that much, the connection dies down?"

I probably shouldn't sound so happy about that, but it does mean that Kaiba wasn't able to pick up what was going on after the drinking. It also means that if I have a need for privacy in the future, I might have a method of achieving it now.

Nope, I definitely shouldn't have sounded so happy about that, if the growl Kaiba's letting out is any indication. "You..." He trails off before he even really gets started. He even glances away from me and takes a couple deep breaths that he doesn't need to calm himself back down. Damn, I did manage to piss him off this time. When he speaks again, every word is very deliberate. "Let me see if I can put this in a way you would understand. You went dark and silent for several hours. Chono is in the city. You and I both have enemies, in addition to her. Can you connect the dots yet, Bakura?"

I can't resist letting a smirk grow across my face. It's probably the most honest expression I've worn in the last two days. Another day, that might even bother me. Not today, though. Today, I seriously don't give a shit about much of anything. "You were worried about me."

He lets a breath hiss out between his teeth. "That's what you take away from this? We have a credible threat, and your biggest concern is that I was worried about you?"

It's honestly probably a bit bad, but I shrug. "Chono isn't a threat. Hell, the first time I met her, I nearly shot her arm off... and I don't even like guns. She's a bad penny. She's not a 'credible threat'."

"Akunadin and Vivian are, though. We have no way to track them or trace them. For all we know, they might even be back in the city."

"Not if they know what's good for them," I mutter under my breath.

Of course, he hears me though. He's a vampire. Why wouldn't he hear me? "I don't think either of them really care too much about any threats you might make against them."

"They will," I state direly. It's not a threat any longer. By now, it's become a promise.

He sighs heavily and rests his forehead on his hands, massaging his temples lightly. And here I thought that vampires didn't get headaches. I guess Kaiba has to prove them wrong on that front. It's either that, or I have spontaneously developed the ability to cause tension headaches just by talking. It would be a neat power to have. Why can't I have neat ones like that?

"Do you know that my head starts spinning at least once a night trying to follow your logic?" he finally complains quietly, just loud enough for me to hear him.

"You should probably see somebody about that. I hear we have a very good doctor here on staff."

"You really don't have an off switch after all, do you?" It's an old complaint. I've heard it more times over the years than I can safely count. The first complaint might have been made in the heat of the moment of a zombie attack, but the rest of them have been made when I'm frustrating him over something. "Why did you have to go out and do this tonight?"

I sigh, closing my eyes, and leaning back in my chair. It really is comfortable enough for sleeping in, if Kaiba permitted such things as people sleeping in his office. He pulls out the card of 'You have a perfectly good bedroom' whenever I start drifting off down here, though, so I haven't gotten to try it yet, though not for lack of trying.

"Can I leave it at 'it's been a shitty couple of days'?" I don't exactly have high hopes for that one. Kaiba is, in his own way, as persistent as Mai. The only difference is that Mai will give me a breather every now and then from the conversation. Kaiba, not so much. He will keep asking in different ways, until he gets an answer.

"I would prefer not." It may sound mild, but it's not. He's completely immovable. He would wait right here until I 'fess up. He's nigh on immortal too, so he could.

"Fine, fine, though I don't see what business my personal life is of yours." He doesn't even dignify that with a single word. Instead he just fixes me with an arch look and gestures for me to continue explaining. I bite back a few insults, but eventually I start talking. "Fine. Yami dumped me." And God, it sucks to have to say that. I never thought that day would come, but here it is anyway. "Yami dumped me, yesterday sucked, and I just wanted to go drink a while and forget about it." I chuckle vaguely and rub at one temple where the last of my hangover is starting to fade away. "I learned my lesson about the getting plastered, so it's over and done with."

"Back up. Explain." Damn, I knew this was too easy. It is a very, very rare day when I am able to talk circles around Kaiba. "What do you mean about Yami?"

I shrug, trying for nonchalance that I don't really feel. "He said it was time for him to move on. He waited the fifteen years he promised me, but it's time. He's going to visit for a little while, every now and then. Of course," I add with a sarcastic chuckle, "that was before I told him to go fuck off, so I'm not sure if he's still planning on visits or not. I'm not sure I would, if I were him."

From the look in Kaiba's eyes, I have not done anything here to improve his impression of Yami. The two of them hate – hated – each other, and that's not changing any time soon. Saying he dumped me probably isn't helping matters, though.

I might have accidentally shocked Kaiba silent, though. It actually takes him a few minutes to recover enough to find something to say. "Why now? Did he have to drop that kind of bomb today?"

"I don't think he's been following what kind of cases I've been working on lately. If he has been, then he's been on the down low." Seriously on the down low. I never even got so much of a twinge of a feeling like he was nearby, not for several months. He said that he was around and hiding himself from me, but I'm not sure how he could go about doing that. It wouldn't have been easy. "He said that he was tired of watching me try to find a way to bring him back, that it was time for him to move on, that it was time for me to move on."

"So you decided that the best way to move on was to go out and get so drunk that you, what, blacked out?"

I can faintly hear Mai snicker from at the door, but I'm resolutely ignoring her on this. I don't want to go telling Kaiba about what I don't remember from tonight. "Yeah, pretty much I blacked out. I remember going to a bar and I remember starting to drink – then I woke up and it was several hours later." It's a decent glossing over of what all happened tonight from what Mai told me.

I am *not* discussing my sex life with Kaiba after all. Talking about my personal life as it stands right now is hard enough. I'm not adding my nearly nonexistent sex life to the discussion too.

There is stillness for a long moment, then he shakes his head slightly. "I'm having trouble with the whole idea that you actually went out and drank yourself under the table, Bakura. It's not something you do. Try to kill someone or rob a museum of everything worthwhile, yes, I can see you doing either of those, but getting drunk, that I cannot see."

"And yet, somehow, that's what I did. Maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do."

His eyes narrow. It looks like that barb hit a little close to home. "No, I think I know you quite well at this point, Bakura. I think you wanted to do something totally out of character for some reason. I just haven't quite placed why yet."

"Did you miss the part where Yami dumped me?"

He shakes his head slowly. "That's not all of it, though, is it?"

Okay, maybe I actually growl a little. "That's all of it that you're going to know."

And it's pretty easy to look at Kaiba and know that that answer pissed him the hell off. He actually looks like he just swallowed a lemon. It's not just in his eyes this time. Nope, right now it's written all over his face – and in full Technicolor too.

There's this twinge at the back of my mind. It's not one I pick up often. In fact, it's very rarely that it ever shows up, mainly because Kaiba very rarely tries to meddle in with my mind. In fact, he's said more than once that my mind is a terrifying place that he would generally rather avoid. Apparently, this is not one of those general times.

"Get the fuck out of my head, Kaiba!" I'm on my feet and scowling, and I don't remember moving. I'm not going to blame this one on a blackout or anything. This one is just plain that I'm pissed the fuck off. "You don't get to pry in there."

He pushes himself to his feet as well. The movement is controlled and smooth in a way that all but broadcasts just how angry he is. He's only this level of controlled if he's trying to keep it all together. "And you don't get to disappear for hours on end and nearly drink us both into a coma."

"You don't get to say anything about that."

"Then you don't get to say anything about if I need to pick information from your brain."

"It's my brain, and I think I have the right to say if anyone else can come in it." It's a less than compelling arguing point, but I like to think that it's a valid one.

"And it's my body that started getting drunk off how much you were putting back."

In some deep recess of my mind, I have to be a little amused that Kaiba just pretty much admitted to getting tipsy off how much I drank. If all of the rest of this were not going on, I would be laughing my ass off.

"So, what? I'm not allowed to mourn a relationship dying?" That came out a little melodramatic. I'm glad Mai's not in here. She would never let me live that one down.

"Mourn it if you want. I really don't care! Just mourn it... Mourn it in a more typical Bakura fashion. Knock over a museum. Steal Pegasus blind. Go beat Chono within an inch of her worthless life." He sighs, shoving a hand roughly through his hair. The thought oddly goes through my head that I think he picked that habit up off of me. I know I do it enough.

"Just..."

He's actually floundering. That more than anything actually breaks through some of that white wall of anger that was starting to build up.

"It was mostly an experiment anyway," I comment quietly. "I wanted to try to forget, to maybe be somebody normal for once."

He shakes his head. "Just be Bakura. That's good enough."

"Damn straight." Oh crap. That was Mai. So much for my hope that she wasn't in the room to hear me being melodramatic. I'm never going to live any of this down.

And yeah, okay, I guess I do smack my palm against my forehead a little harder than I meant to. It's not like there's that much to damage up there anymore.

"What?" The question comes from Kaiba. And yeah, I can understand the confusion. After all, I just facepalmed in the middle of us talking, more or less.

"Mai agrees with you."

He looks a little nonplussed for a moment before finally nodding. "Good."

I can practically hear Mai grinning from here. "I knew I liked him for a reason. See, baby boy. When the smartest two people in your life agree on something, it's time for you to start listening."

"Mai, I really don't need the 'in touch with my feelings' speech right now, okay?" And maybe I sound a little bit more pitiful than I strictly feel, but it gets even one of them to leave me alone.

And Kaiba actually snorts in amusement. "You would have to admit that you have them first, and that's never going to happen."

Okay, you could knock me over with a feather right now. That was something I never expected to hear come out of Kaiba's mouth in a thousand years. Is it Confusing and Pissing Bakura off Day again already?

"You're one to talk, Ice Prince," I fire back. It's not anywhere close to witty, but honestly, I don't care. I just want to get out of the conversation sooner rather than later.

"Touché" comes from Mai's corner of the room.

"I'm not the one getting lectured, though, am I?" Okay, suddenly, Kaiba looks way too amused for someone who was just engaged in a yelling match with me less than five minutes ago.

"I can change that, if you would like."

"No, thank you. I'll pass on that opportunity. Another time perhaps."

"Perhaps." There's a giggle from the back of the room, and it takes every ounce of restraint I have not to whirl around. "What, Mai?"

She's definitely giggling, a hand covering her mouth and everything. She shakes her head and waves off my attention. "Nothing. Nothing at all, baby boy. Please, do continue."

"Is Kujaku being... helpful?" Kaiba asks, and it's actually almost friendly. I'm not sure what to make of this. I don't know what to do with a friendly or cheerful Kaiba. It's a thing unheard of, truthfully. Maybe when Kitty was still here, but that's been years.

Actually, thinking back, has anyone in this house been happy at all since that night? Kaiba's been on lockdown and grumpier than usual. I've been burning myself out trying to find a way to bring Yami and Mai back. Just about everyone else has left. Damn, we're a miserable lot in that case.

"Way too helpful," I answer. "She's giggling like a schoolgirl at something, and she won't say why."

"If you don't know why I'm laughing, Bakura," she chimes in happily, "then I'm not saying. You're going to have to guess!"

"You're not laughing. You're giggling like a loon," I return. "And I'm not sure that I want to try to guess what goes on in your mind."

I can see Kaiba faintly shuffle out of the corner of my eye, and I turn my attention back to him. "Can you promise not to repeat tonight if at all possible?" he asks after what seems to be several long minutes' deliberation. "And especially not to do it for profit or as an experiment or anything like that?"

"I can try" is the best I can offer him. "I can't guarantee something won't set me off or whatever."

"If it does, all I ask is that you don't deal with it this way again. I just ask that you be Bakura, not someone else."

There's really no point in arguing this. It's not like I disagree with him per se. "Okay. Can we drop this now? This might be the most uncomfortable conversation I think I've ever had," I pause for a second, considering, "that didn't involve my brother."

"Good to know."

"Baby boy," Mai chimes in, "every conversation where you can't bully and push your way around is uncomfortable for you." This time I just ignore her. It seems like this wisest path.

"Any word on Chono?" Maybe it's a very obvious job of changing topics, but I would really rather get it off of me and my supposed intimacy issues. I've had this conversation with Mai in many forms too often over the years. "Is she still in town?"

Mai snorts in amusement, but Kaiba at least lets me get away with it. I'll just be glad for small favors in this case, I decide as he settles back into his chair. "Last I heard, no, she hasn't left town yet. It looks like she's trying to lay low here."

"I have to wonder what gave her the bright idea to come here, once she left Osaka. I mean, surely she has to have heard about Hirutani by now. It's been years, after all." It's thinking aloud, yes, but at least this time I'm doing it on purpose. I do it accidentally far too often for my taste.

I really sometimes regret Hirutani. Killing him, it probably wasn't the right thing to do.

I didn't do it right, the way I should have. Honestly, I let him die way too quickly. I should have tried to find a way to keep him alive and in pain until Jounouchi-kitty could kill the bastard himself.

I guess I was just too... too... too something, angry maybe. I was too blinded by what had happened that I didn't even think about drawing it out like I should have. I didn't think about saving him. I just went in, tortured him, and killed him. It wasn't enough. I didn't have nearly long enough with him to sustain over the years that have passed since then. I didn't think that it would take us nearly this long to find Akunadin and Vivian.

Though, of course, my killing Hirutani is how we managed to find out that Jounouchi, Malik, and Marik are still alive and out there somewhere. So that is a major point in the plus column. For that, if I had known it was true at the time, I might have been willing to let the bastard live. Might. He did a lot before then to seal his own fate, and if I didn't do it then, someone else probably would have well before now. The bastard really wasn't well liked.

Or rather, he wasn't well liked except by the bits of the pard that stayed with him after Jounouchi vouched out, the ones who stuck around after Dartz and them left and after Marik ate Keith. That might explain why Chono would have stuck in Osaka all this time, since it was where he last moved the pard before his unfortunate demise, but still, why come to Domino and why now of all times? It doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense, and I don't like it.

"Perhaps she thinks it's been long enough and that it's safe here now," Kaiba offers.

"Which just means that she doesn't know me very well." I don't let go of things very easily. I never have.

"Remember: you can't kill her when you find her." Good job, Kaiba. He said 'when' I find her, not 'if' I find her.

"I won't kill her, I promise." And I actually mean it. "I'll just make her wish that I had."

There's really nothing else to say to that, is there?

Patrolling Domino for any sign of Chono is actually really dull, I muse to myself. There are a few places a leopard could hide, even this close to the full moon, only one night away.

I've already exhausted the warehouse district, checking inside each and every one of them for any sign a cat was ever in here with Mai's help.

I've checked the business district. I've even broken into buildings it seemed likely that she might try to hide in. It was actually rather refreshing. It's been a while since I've committed breaking and entering. I was worried that I might have been getting rusty, and to some extent, I was. It took me nearly fifteen seconds longer than it should have to pick some of those locks. I'm going to have to get myself back into practice.

I'm running out of options on places to look. At this rate, I'm going to have to start going door to door, and that's going to take a lot of time. Frankly, I don't really feel like wasting that amount of time.

I do still have two major areas to check, and frankly, I would rather avoid the both of them. I don't have fond memories of the west side of town, with all the crap that has ever happened to me or mine there, and I would rather avoid the area around the Christian church that was the site of the mass zombie rising that led to the dream world, which in turn led to Yami's death.

From where I'm at, though, the church is closest. I may not like it, but it would be irresponsible of me not to check the area. And while I'm frequently irresponsible on a lot of things, this is not going to be one of them.

So reluctantly, I make myself turn the corner that will take me into that area of town. When Kaiba and I came here years ago, only to be attacked by zombies and ended up with me dragging everyone into the dream world by summoning Zork, all the businesses in the area were dark. All the homes were likewise empty. Everyone in the area had died, been sacrificed, so that their deaths would help fuel the zombies. It certainly also helped where Zork was concerned.

There are lights on here now. Not a lot, but it's enough to at least let me know that people are here and alive at this point. It's a step, I guess.

I suppose it means that Kaiba is doing his job correctly. He's getting Domino back on its feet, after everything it has been through both in his reign as Master of the City and Gouzaburou's before him. Kaiba, at least, gives a damn what happens to the city and the people in it.

You know, I would have thought that people would have left this area after what happened here. If anything, the opposite has happened. It's more like they're determined to all live here. There's nothing wrong with that, I guess, but it's definitely not what I would have expected. I guess I shouldn't be so damn surprised when someone is more stubborn than I expect them to be, since I'm frequently more stubborn than people expect me to be.

Other than the fact that there are more people here than I would have expected, everything seems to be much the same. Even those two bicycle racks are still there, standing sentinel in front of the alleyway leading to the church.

And I really don't want to be doing this. I mean, I knew I didn't want to be doing it, but I might be dreading it before than I thought I was. I'm not quite to hyperventilating or anything like that, but honestly, I don't feel like I'm that far off of it either. It wasn't quite the worst thing that ever happened in my life, but it was up there. I'm still not a hundred percent certain how we managed to survive it. Maybe it was Cynthia; I just really don't know, and that's part of the terror of it.

But I'm not giving in to that terror. I'm not. I swear that I'm not. Freaking the fuck out, yeah, that's a definite maybe, but I refuse to be terrorized.

The church... Well, it's right where we left it. Hell, it looks like it's exactly as we left it. Maybe this is the one part of the neighborhood that people have actually abandoned. I would have.

Generally speaking, I try to avoid any place with actual cemeteries with actual dead people buried in them, after what happened here all those years ago, just for safety's sake, you understand. It's one of those things I just prefer to be safe than sorry on.

There's no choice right now, though. Right now, if I'm going to finish checking the area, I'm going to have to go through the cemetery and inspect the church itself. There's no other choice. And I'm going to keep repeating that to myself until I've made it through this. It will be what gets me through this. I may not make it through this without the need for intense therapy, but I will make it through this.

At least for once I came prepared for just about anything where shape shifters are concerned. I remembered a gun; I even remembered to load it with silver bullets. Beyond that, I have something that I never would have prepared before I started working with Kaiba and had access to his resources: a tranquilizer gun loaded with something high enough grade to put an elephant to sleep... or a pissed off wereleopard.

There are a few other toys I'm packing, but those are the two I like best right now. I will admit, though, that I'm curious to see how well Chono handles getting tasered. It's a bit of an experiment, one that I've been waiting to try out on some unfortunate shape shifter for years now. I don't want to try it out on the ones I'm friendly with, but in no way, shape, or form am I friendly with Chono. She'll be the perfect lab rat for this. I can't wait.

Except for this whole picking my way through the cemetery. I can tell which graves have someone in them now. I can tell which ones are unhappy – and honestly, that's almost all of them.

I can even tell which ones have the wrong person under them; it's a high enough number that I try to make a mental note to have Kaiba come through here and get people back where they belong, so they don't start pitching shit-raising fits that might lead to more zombies. Honestly, that's the last thing we need right now.

The church itself looks abandoned. Appearances can be deceiving, though; I probably know that better than most; so I guess I should take the time to check inside the church itself. I've put it off quite long enough.

The inside of the church looks twice as abandoned as the outside. The pews are all still there – or at least that's how it looks – and they're all still in line, which probably shouldn't be as surprising as it is. The stained glass windows are all still intact, and somehow that surprises me less than the pews. What the hell, I don't pretend to make sense, even to myself.

I've been in a few Christian churches over the years, mostly since I fell in with Kaiba. In that time, I've seen some pretty damn impressive ones. This one isn't one of those. It isn't anywhere close to one of them. In fact, all that this one says to me is that it would probably be a damn good place to hide out. With that thought in mind, I start reaching for my gun.

I'm not overly fond of carrying or using a gun, but it does serve its purpose. It gives me distance from the people trying to kill me that my knives really don't. I'm not as good with them as Yami was either. I just don't like them enough for that, nor have I been training myself as rigorously as he did.

I do sit down, figuratively speaking, with Magnum every so often and basically prove that I know what I'm doing with the thing.

And reaching for the gun is probably what saves me from my arm getting bloodily ripped off.

One second it looks and seems like the church is abandoned, like I am the only one who has been in it in years. The next second, there is this mass of tawny fur and claws flying at me.

If there's one thing I've learned about living with cats all these years, it's that they are damn fast. I have never met a slow leopard, including Dartz with how laidback he is. Chono – if that is who this is – is no exception to that rule.

I don't even give myself time enough to think about it. I hit the ground and roll forward, *toward* the leopard that is pouncing towards me. That way, she overshoots me and I manage to come out intact, if a bit bumped and bruised.

However, it also means that I end up losing the gun. I didn't have my hand completely on it yet, and so I end up bumping it instead of grabbing it. It ends up flying out of my grasp and under a pew on the other side of the church's center aisle.

Damn. If I get out of this alive, Magnum is going to kill me. All his lessons, getting me to the kind of proficient where I can hit a target eight times out of ten, doesn't really matter when I drop the gun.

I do still have other weapons, though.

Chono flies over my head and slams feet first into a pew. Almost immediately, she's back on her feet and using the rebound to head back at me. I have all of a split second to think, but it is long enough for me to come up with a small delaying tactic.

Leopards are among the smallest of the feline shape shifters, but they aren't small cats. Rolling beneath one of the closest pews buys me a second. All Chono has to do is make her way through the wooden pew to get to me, and I can practically see it dawning in feline eyes when she figures that out.

One swipe of a powerful paw knocks away a good chunk of the wood, but it's going to take more than that for her to get down to where I am. And that gives me the time I need to get out the Taser.

I try my best to aim, but it's not like she is a cooperating target. I also don't want to have to emerge from beneath the pew and give her a clear shot at me. I'm pretty much holding my breath as I fire.

Twin prongs shoot out of the Taser. By some random bit of luck actually going my way for once, both prongs hit her.

What do you know? It looks like tasering works as well on leopards as it does on humans. She's down, if not out. Note to self: try to get a higher voltage next time.

Still, it gives me long enough to get out the tranquilizer gun and hit her with a shot from it.

Good night, Chono. I promise you aren't going to be happy to wake up.

If there's one thing I've learned over my years of dealing with wereleopards, it's that they can be amazingly messy. I lived with Kitty for years, and after he left, the rest of his pard stuck around the place with me and Kaiba. I have yet to meet a wereleopard who doesn't end up leaving a mess in his or her wake. Even Dartz with all of his mellowness tends to leave a trail wherever he's going, especially the closer to the full moon it gets.

Some leopards might be messier than others, though. Hirutani, for instance, was probably the messiest I ever had the misfortune of meeting, even before the gutting got involved. Once it did, though, God, it was awful.

No one ever tells you that, with actually gutting someone alive, the smell is one of the first things that get you. It just sort of starts and rolls over you until you think it's never going to go away. I still need to have words with Kitty, whenever I find him again, about gutting. Of all the things he could have wanted done to Hirutani, why gutting? Why one of the smelliest, nastiest ways?

At least with Chono, I didn't have to actually go about the whole gutting process again. Oh, I opened her up, of course. It goes a long way to cutting down on the smell, if not the mess. Some things that are on the inside of a person's body just need to stay on the inside, really.

A few years after I was done with Hirutani, I did come to the conclusion that I had ended it for him all too quickly. Yes, I wanted him dead, but more than that, I wanted him to hurt. I'm going to fix that error when it comes to Akunadin and Vivian. I like to think that I fixed that error when it came to Chono tonight as well.

If it wasn't for who she was, I might have had to thank Chono for choosing a place that is so secluded. It certainly beats the warehouse I had staked out to use. If anyone heard her, they didn't respond. That might be all that matters on that front.

There's something about having a word with a wereleopard that always seems to end with me covered head to toe in feline blood and bits. It's a good thing that leopard gene is hard to pass on and that I'm a human servant to a pretty damn strong master vampire; otherwise, I'm pretty sure I would be getting fuzzy once a month from here on out or after Hirutani.

I couldn't kill her. That was my one and only limitation. I got creative in getting around it, though. Once I got her open, I 'accidentally' dropped a few bits of silver – whatever I was able to find before I left the house – and let her heal up with them still inside her. It will hurt her from the minute she wakes up until she is able to find someone willing to cut open a wereleopard and take them out again. I can't imagine that will be easy.

The representative from Osaka came and collected her pretty quickly after I got done. I called Kaiba, who in turn called his counterpart in Osaka, who supposedly called his representative. Said representative had to have been waiting just outside the city, because he got to the church pretty damn fast, got her bundled up, and removed her from my sight.

And that's fine. I can live with that. It's one less thing for me to have to deal with later on. I can be amused later at how green the man looked when he was carting Chono out.

Right now, though, my most pressing concern might well be how to get myself home. I look like hell. No, actually, I look like I just murdered someone and decided to take a swim in their blood. This isn't the best look for walking across the city to Kaiba's place. Hell, it's not the best look for walking anywhere in the city, period, full stop. I look like an axe murderer.

I guess I didn't exactly think this part of the plan through very well, did I? I'm covered in blood and bits and stuff that I'm not very sure I want to think about the origin of. The representative from Osaka looked way too green around the gills for me to even consider asking for a ride home, even if it wasn't the opposite direction.

Jounouchi-kitty was damn sure that most of the monsters in nearby cities were utterly convinced that Domino breeds its monsters to be ten times scarier. I may not be a Domino-bred monster, but I think I've made up for where I was born. I've brought plenty of scary and horror to my adopted city. That should count for something, right?

Though it is possible that this isn't something to be proud of, you know?

Hmmm, nah. It's been my goal to make one of the monsters wet themselves for years now. It's an ongoing goal. I haven't even managed to make one of them puke yet. It's come close a few times, but no dice yet.

But none of this solves my problem: how to get home without getting arrested.

I mean, I have thrown around my weight before. Once the cops found out that I'm Kaiba's human servant, they were more than happy to let me go. But that does dictate that I get arrested again first. I don't enjoy that, not in the least, so I would really rather avoid it if at all possible.

Well, I guess I always have one tried and true fallback. It's not one I try to use too often, but there's not a lot of choice this time. I can't take a cab, and I didn't bring a spare set of clothes with me this time.

Oh, I have a spare set stashed at the warehouse I had prepped for this, but that doesn't help me when I found Chono in a church. And carrying the clothes would have been awkward when I needed to be traveling light.

So I guess I don't really have a lot of choices. I fish out my cell phone out of my jeans pocket; this would be why I started wearing cargo jeans, because I am always in need of pockets; and call Kaiba's line.

"Are you done?" he answers the phone with. Okay, obviously he knew it was me calling in that case, since that is what caller ID is for, but a little basic etiquette? Even I have had that much driven into me by Ryou. But on the other hand, it is a sign that I've managed to get him to loosen the tree up his ass a bit. That's an improvement, so I won't give him hell over it.

"Yep, I'm done. Chono is taken care of. I could use a ride though. I got drenched." I've gotten a lot better at asking for help, it seems, at least from Kaiba. I'm not too sure how I would be with anyone else.

"Do I even want to know?" I have to snicker, and I don't even try to hide it.

"Probably not. The Osaka courier picked up Chono about five minutes ago, and he looked a little green around the gills, so I didn't even bother asking him for a ride."

"So why didn't you take Chono to wherever you had your spare clothes and other stuff?"

I shrug. "I didn't know how long the tranquilizer would work on her. I didn't want to be moving her when she woke up. It might not have been terribly good for either of our life spans, you know."

"We have to get you a car." He may be complaining, but I can faintly hear him closing doors and starting up the engines on one of the cars. I should have my ride soon. "There is no need for Akito or me to have to come get you every time you need transport."

"You know you guys love it. Ferrying me around is the highlight of your nights."

"You certainly sound better." The words are said conversationally, like he's pointing out the weather or something. There might be a layer of concern under them. I don't know. It's harder to tell when we're on the phone. "I take it you're feeling better."

And yeah, now that I think about it, I do feel a bit better. I feel a bit closer to human. No, wait, that's not what I meant. I don't feel closer to human, but I definitely feel closer to Bakura. Weird that it took some blood, guts, and mayhem to get me to this point. Or maybe it was the adrenaline of actually going up against a fully shifted leopard and coming away with only a few bruises.

I think that that might be one of the more impressive feats of my career. After all, not a single drop of blood on me is my own. Yeah, maybe I had to cheat a little and use the Taser and the tranquilizer, but it wasn't like I was going to go after her barehanded, not and hope still be breathing when all was said and done.

Well, that's why the Taser was invented anyway: to even things out. It may be or it may not be why it was invented, but that's what I like to think, so please, no contradicting. I'm the crazy with way too many knives.

I can almost hear Kaiba blink over the phone. "I thought the Master of Osaka was sending a vampire to pick Chono up."

"Yeah, he definitely was one. He just got a bit green when he was packing up Chono."

"I don't even want to know, do I?"

"Nope!"

And apparently torture makes me a little hyper. Who knew?

No, thinking about it, it's not the torture. It's the blood. That shouldn't surprise me in the least. I am a creature of death, after all. All of my powers revolve around the dead. Blood is sort of a natural consequence of most kinds of death. But yeah, this does make a kind of sense.

I feel more alive, more like myself, than I have in years, and frankly, this is the only thing that's really different. I tortured a leopard within an inch of her life, and suddenly I start feeling better. I'm going to have to bear this in mind, at least for those really down, depressed bouts that hit on occasion.

And somehow that bring something else to mind. "And we might want to see about talking to whoever is in charge of the cemetery here."

"That's a segue I'm not sure I want to think about either. Why?"

There's a squeal of tires in the background; obviously, he's making a turn. I should be feeling bad about all the poor innocent people between him and here, especially with him on the phone with me. It's their own fault if they can't dodge him quickly enough.

"Some of the bodies got put back in the wrong graves." I can hear him sigh heavily, one of those deep resigned ones, like he was just waiting on this. "They aren't particularly happy about it, the spirits, I mean."

There is this faint growl that I'm pretty sure I'm not meant to hear. "They assured me they were doing DNA tests to compare the bodies with family members, to make certain that all the bodies were going back to the correct graves," he mutters just loud enough for me to hear. "When I get my hands on them..."

When he gets his hand on them, he's going to ream them up one side and back down the other. I've been in the room when he's done that to someone, though I forget who it was. It's actually a lot of fun to watch. It probably wouldn't be a lot of fun to be on the receiving end of, though. I wouldn't know, though.

Then again, I wonder if those lectures he tries to give me, like the one earlier tonight, are the version of the yelling match he gives everyone else. I just tend to yell back, not just stand there and take it. I'm not so good at standing there and taking it; I never have been any good at it.

"They must have decided to cut some corners," I offer. I am going to need to do some serious deep cleaning on all of my knives after this, I realize, glancing down at the one I still have in my hand. There's even blood in the hilt, as well as all the grooves of the blade. It would be a damn shame to let it dry on here. On that note, though... "Did the Osaka master chick say why Chono was here anyway?"

I can see him trying to follow my logic jump there, giving up, and then finally just answering the question. "All she said was that Chono has been leading the pard since Hirutani's unfortunate incident," I don't even bother covering the fact that I'm all but cackling, "and she was looking at expanding the pard from Hirutani's 'old stomping grounds'."

I can actually hear the quotes around the last words. "Wow. That was... dumb of her." She probably would have lasted a lot longer as Nimir-Raja without getting Domino involved. We're the scarier monsters, after all.

"Definitely not the brightest of all moves," Kaiba comments calmly. How he can sound so calm when he's probably taking corners at ungodly speeds I will never figure out? He does it well, though. "I will be there momentarily."

Now that I really listen, some of those horrible car sounds are coming from outside the church and not over the phone. He really should be here any minute. That's good. I think some of Chono is starting to dry to me.

"The sooner, the better" is all I say on that. I may feel giddy, but I'm definitely looking gross. Actually, no, I look like one of the extras on those bootleg horror movies Ryou so loves, the extras that are generally already portraying corpses.

If Chono were human and had deposited this much of her own blood all over me, she would probably be very dead. That is an advantage of shape shifters, I suppose. They're studier.

I can hear the car stopping, both over the phone and outside the doors. "I guess you're here then," I comment blandly.

"It didn't take as long as I thought it might. Are you coming out, or do I have to go in and retrieve you?"

I snicker to myself at his words. He just sounds so pissy. It's nothing like his old 'hi, I'm Kaiba Seto, and I have a tree up my ass' attitude. It's an improvement of sorts, something of a lateral improvement I suppose.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming out in a minute. I just need to find where I dropped my gun," I answer, hanging up before he can say anything else. He loves it. Really, he does.

Okay, he loves it about as much as I love the kittens sneaking up on me. It amuses me to cheese him off, though, and that totally counts.

The gun is pretty much right where I remember seeing it slide. That's good at least. If Osaka boy had taken it with him, I would have been very cross. I might have even had to pay him a visit.

I like this gun. It was Yami's, yes, but Magnum has been teaching me a hell of a lot that I can do with it, at least on the condition that we train with lead bullets. I've gotten better, but there were a couple accidental discharges at the beginning.

And Kaiba is waiting just outside the cemetery itself. There's no surprise there. There's no real way to get too close to the church itself without driving over a few graves. After our last experience here, neither of us really want to do anything to risk cheesing off the local spirits and ghosts.

Speaking of which...

I can feel them. They're a bit more awake now than they were when I first arrived here. Whoops. Guess I should have tried to avoid spilling blood in their vicinity.

But maybe I can use it to my advantage. I mean, my powers are all about the dead. I'm surrounded by the dead. It might be time to see what I can really do when I set my mind to it.

Under my breath, I whisper, "Go back to sleep."

I can see Kaiba's head lift. Of course he caught the words. There was no way he wouldn't. Vampires have this stupidly impressive hearing after all. Right now, though, I don't really care if he's listening or not. I'm conducting an experiment.

And it's a successful experiment at that. The spirits quiet back down, even if they don't go completely silent. I must not have phrased it quite right to put them completely back to ease. They are quieter, though. They're willing to bide their time until I have a chance to do something more for them. It's a decent compromise.

"Are you all right?" Kaiba finally asks when I walk up next to the car. I can't say where blame him. I look like I've been murdered myself.

I shrug nonchalantly. "None of its mine."

Kaiba's eyes go slightly wide. "All of that is from Chono?"

I might be mistaken, but he sounds (very) slightly surprised. It takes a lot to shock Kaiba. The fact I'm covered in feline blood and didn't have a drop of my own spilled in return might be enough for that, though.

I nod, and yeah, I might still be a little too excited. It's not every day I get to play like this.

And maybe I came out of the situation with Zork a little fucked up.

Okay, honestly, I knew I was getting out of it fucked up: I can't remember stuff, I still white out, and my mind drifts in and out without warning. But there is a possibility that I came out of the situation fucked up in the head.

Okay, I was fucked up in the head before Zork, but I think maybe I'm a little more. I'm a lot more violent than I was before.

Before, I had only killed one person in my entire life: my father. I may have looked the other way when people were being killed, most notably the time with the guy and Malik and the Volkswagen, but I only killed one person myself.

Since Zork, I've killed at least another person that I can immediately think of: Hirutani. I've tortured both Hirutani and Chono to the point that the only reason either of them survived the torture itself is because they're wereleopards; that I immediately killed Hirutani afterwards is irrelevant.

I'm not sure I could have stomached the idea of torturing someone before Zork. Having been tortured by my father's favorite goon before, I'm not sure I could have done that to anyone else, no matter what they did to me and mine. Now, well...

"It's all Chono's," I confirm. "Things got a bit... messy."

"I might be able to understand better now why the courier left ill," he comments blandly. Like it's no big deal. It's not the first time I've showed up covered in blood before, though admittedly, the last two times were after I actually got to kill someone: my father and Hirutani.

"I did say I got drenched," I remind him mildly. "The forecast isn't calling for rain. What did you think I meant?"

He gives me this withering look, like I'm trying on his patience. So what else is new? "I was expecting you with blood on you. I did not realize you decided it would be a good idea to take a bath in it."

And honestly, he's starting to look a little green around the gills too. Of course, I'm covered in leopard blood. It's not that vampires can't drink shape shifter blood. Far from it, in fact. It likely has more to do with the fact that it's getting really old and stagnant fast. It doesn't exactly smell pleasant to my human senses; it has to be a hell of a lot worse to his vampiric ones.

"Let's get you home so you can get all of that off of you." The look in his eyes says 'the sooner the better' very clearly.

"Fine by me."

And aww, look, he even brought one of the older cars so that the blood wouldn't ruin the upholstery in one of the newer ones. See? He's thinking ahead where I'm concerned now. The more he hangs around me, the better he gets at this sort of stuff, plotting around death and destruction and such.

I flop down in the front seat and try my best to ignore the squishing sound I make. From the wince on his face, Kaiba completely fails at ignoring it himself.

Over the years and over many car rides with Kaiba as the driver, I have gotten really good at learning to deal with death defying turns and breakneck speeds. I don't like it any better now than I did the first time, but I've learned to take it better. Now I just treat it like it's my own personal rollercoaster and just go with the flow of it. I do still bother with the seatbelt, though. It would suck out loud to get thrown from the car in the event of a wreck, after all.

"Is there anything I need to know about what happened in there?" he asks as we peel away from the church, the cemetery, and all the bad that comes with it.

"Anything that's going to come back and bite us in the ass, you mean?" I clarify. "Probably so."

"Such as?"

I can tell in his voice that he really doesn't want to know anything about what just happened. He's just being prepared, being ready to cover my ass if something I did in there doesn't sit well with the Master of Osaka.

"Well," I hedge, actually shifting around in my seat a little nervously, "I mean, I did torture the woman. It got messy." It got really messy, but that's torture for you.

"I know that much, Bakura. I can see it all over you." Literally, for once, at that. "Did you do anything that I'm going to have to cover for with the Master of Osaka?"

"I did leave a few bits of silver inside her." I can almost see him rolling his eyes. Whoops, that might have been on the not kosher list of things for me to have done. Oh well. What else was there? "And I did taser her, which works pretty well, I might add. And I tranqed her. Other than that, no, nothing."

"We might have some fallout from this." If I didn't know better, I would swear that he is running game plans by me. That would be new and interesting. At the very least, though, he is explaining what he's expecting to go on once Chono is delivered back to Osaka. "To be fair, though, nothing was specified about being out of bounds, as long as she came back alive. She did go back alive, right?"

I'm nodding my head before he even finishes speaking. "Yeah, she was alive when the courier packed her up and out of here. She wasn't awake or anything, but she was most assuredly still breathing." I frown in thought before putting forth my next question. "Is the silver going to cause some problems?"

"The Master of Osaka will not be overly happy about it, but unless it's huge amounts," this comes out like a question, and I shake my head, "then it's not like it would eventually be fatal."

"It wasn't really that much silver, just whatever little trinkets I could find laying around the house."

"We should be fine, then."

"Good." I sigh heavily, mostly in frustration. "And really, it's her own damn fault for coming back to Domino for her recruiting drive anyway. She would have been fine if she had just stayed the hell out of this town, like the sensible monsters on my shit list are doing."

Kaiba lets out that weird snicker-laugh again. "Of course. They're avoiding your shit list."

And yeah, now I'm snickering too. "Hey, I'll have you know that people live in terror of being on my shit list. I'm working on being the scariest goddamn monster in this city, if not the country."

"Of course, Bakura. Of course."

And if it sounds a bit patronizing, I'm just going to ignore that little fact. That's just how Kaiba rolls and all that. I'm sarcastic and violent as hell by nature. Kaiba, on the other hand, is cynical and withdrawn by nature. Patronizing is a step up from his former condition, one I liked to call 'tree up his goddamn ass'.

See? People can change, and I guess monsters can too.

I guess I should have been expecting to see Mai the minute I got back home. I should have been, yes, but I wasn't, for some reason.

Okay, I wasn't expecting to see her because, while I was checking the church, she was finishing up in the business district: getting behind those doors I couldn't quite pick (damn it) and stuff like that. I thought it would have taken her longer to get done. I thought I might have the rest of the night to myself, now that I'm done with Chono duty.

I guess that's what I get for thinking.

Mai's definitely made it back here. The temperature in my office actually feels a few degrees colder than the rest of the house, and that's saying something because Kaiba generally keeps it pretty cool; he said it was something to do with the computers, but I'm not sure I was following. So Mai's definitely at home, and she's not happy.

Okay, what did I do this time? I didn't include her in giving Chono hell. That's a big one right there. I did things to Chono that no one really wants to think about; silver is the bane of all of them. I left her going through businesses while I went to check the church, essentially going without any backup. If I know Mai – and after this long, I would like to think I do know her – then that's the one that has her most annoyed.

Kaiba hired Magnum's pack to keep the estate safe during the daytime. However, Mai was specifically assigned by Kaiba to be my bodyguard. She died on that job, yet she still continues to do it. You can say what you want about ghosts continuing their daily routines, but Mai is no ghost. She's definitely a spirit, but she isn't a ghost. She isn't still mindlessly following some daily routine. She's just dedicated to her job. She takes pride in her job.

And I might be way too good at frustrating her when it comes to doing her job.

"Bakura," she growls out, and oh yeah, she's definitely pissed.

And she might be a spirit, but that doesn't mean that she isn't a bit terrifying when she's pissed. I mean, I remember her being able to pick up a car to shake someone out of it. I remember her as a werewolf. In fact, I called her something along the lines of 'blonde, leggy, and able to bench press a truck' if I remember correctly. She may be dead right now, but I don't want her holding grudges against me when she isn't dead anymore.

"Yeah, Mai?" I even manage to reign in the sarcasm and tone down the annoyingness to reasonable levels.

"You went in without backup." See, what'd I say? That would be the thing that has her pissed off. "You left me behind and went after Chono alone. Is any of that blood yours?"

I shake my head quickly. "Nope, it's all Chono's. And I would really kind of like to be getting it off me, so if I can get to my desk..."

After my adventures in the bar and the love motel, I went upstairs and showered before going out after Chono. On some weird impulse, I locked the door to my bedroom behind me and left the key here though. It's probably mostly because I don't want anyone commenting that they can smell alcohol and sex on my clothes.

As soon as the sun comes up and all the vampires are asleep, I'm doing my own damn laundry. Rebecca has told me a thing or two about washing clothes to get the smell out well enough that even shape shifters can't pick it out. I'm all about doing that.

She shakes her head, moving between the desk and me again. "No way, Bakura. I'm not done with you yet. Obviously, you found Chono, so you didn't even try to contact me once you found her."

"Time kind of got away from me." It's a lousy excuse. I know it, she knows it, but it'll have to do. I don't have any other ones handy.

"Bakura..." And now she just sounds exhausted. I hate it when I make her sound like that. It's amusing on anyone else, but not Mai. I'm not sure what the difference is, but it definitely is there. "I'm trying to keep you safe and alive. Why do you make my job so difficult?"

I sigh and try to rake a hand through my hair. The operative word there is 'try'. For a second, I manage to forget that I'm completely covered in blood and icky bits and such, and I'm only making it worse.

"I'm not trying to." Damn it, how is it that Mai can make me sound and feel like this? I didn't even feel like a misbehaving child back when I was a misbehaving child. "I saw a chance, and I took it. I got Chono taken down, and then..."

"And then?" Mai prompts when I don't immediately continue.

Damn it. "And then I guess there wasn't a lot on my mind besides making Chono hurt as much as I could for as long as I could. You wouldn't have wanted to be there for that, Mai, I promise."

"Probably not," she concedes, "but I could have been watching the doors to make sure no one interrupted you or something like that. What if someone had come in on you doing that?"

I wince hard. "Okay, that would have sucked. I would have been on the phone to Kaiba all damn night if that happened." I sigh – and this time, I just barely catch myself before I try to run my hand through my hair in frustration again. "Look, Mai, I'm sorry, okay. I probably should have let you know where I was. It's too late to change that now, though."

"Fine." Finally, she relaxes and steps out of my way, though she doesn't look in any way reassured. "Just don't leave me out of the loop again, okay? I can't take care of you, baby boy, if you don't let me."

I move past her to grab the key to my room. I think I've embarrassed myself enough for one night: what with all these heart-to-heart talks, a one-night stand, and a little torture thrown in there. It's been a busy night, and I am so ready for it to be over. And frankly, I would hate to embarrass myself further by not being able to pick the lock on my own bedroom door.

That's my first plan, starting tomorrow. I'm going to start getting back into practice with locks. I am woefully letting my skills as a thief stagnate, if not completely wither away. I need to remedy this. Who know if I will ever need to use them again?

Key in hand, I turn around to head upstairs. There is a lot I still want to get done: another shower, set aside my clothes from earlier to wash the hell out of, maybe one more shower to be sure I have all of the blood off of me. But after all of that is done, I am going to crash so hard they will hear it in Osaka.

"I'm heading upstairs for the day," I inform Mai, because yeah, it is getting on towards morning. The sun should be coming up soon. "I am sorry, okay?"

She nods. "Okay."

She reaches out to touch my hand as I start past her to leave the room – and it's like this shock goes straight through me. I'm not sure what else to call it. It's like touching a live wire. And it's only ever happened to me once before in my entire life: seventeen years ago, when... Yuugi...

My eyes painfully wide, I whirl back around to face her. Even to my eyes, there's something different about her. That little bit of translucency and that spark of something otherworldly that I have long since gotten use to seeing in her... They're both gone. If anything, she looks completely solid.

She also looks completely dumbfounded. She looks like she's the one who got shocked, not me. And frankly, the way she's staring at her hands is a little unnerving.

"Bakura?" she whispers. Even that much noise seems impossibly loud in the stunned silence in the room. Her voice sounds breathy, like she's been running for hours... or like she is in utter shock. "Bakura, what did you do?"

Already I'm shaking my head. "I didn't do a damn thing." A bit more suspicious than even I usually am, I continue. "Why? What's wrong, Mai?"

"My heart..." She swallows deeply before looking up to meet my eyes in amazement. "My heart is beating."

I blink. I blink again, harder. Hell, I blink once more just to be sure and this time almost hard enough to hurt. I did hear her right, didn't I? She did just say her heart was beating, didn't she? I'm not going any further around the bend tonight, am I? "What?"

"My heart is beating!" Without another word, she grabs my hand again – thank goodness, this time there is no shock – and places it on her chest over her heart.

Awkwardness aside... My God, it is beating. For that matter, I'm actually touching her. Before, I wasn't able to. She was a pretty high-quality ghost, but I didn't make ghosts that I could touch or that could touch anything in return. And I'm touching her. I'm fucking touching her. Her heart is beating, and I can feel her breathing.

She's alive. She's fucking alive. How...?

The blood. It has to be the blood. That's the only thing that makes sense. Of course. It must – I don't know – act like a channel between the spirit and me. And my power, I mean. It's amazing.

All this time, I've been looking for something difficult, going through spell book after spell book after spell book, borrowed from everyone I could think of, and all this time, the answer was so damn simple. I just needed a conduit. I just needed blood.

And apparently, it doesn't even have to be any particular type of blood. I mean, I had human blood when I brought Yuugi back. It's were this time, bringing Mai back. Of course, I brought Yuugi back human and Mai back a were. At least, I hope I brought Mai back a were. I would hate to have screwed that part up. She *feels* like a were to me, in some weird way, like Marik *felt* like an *ahmet* to me after the separation.

So maybe the type of blood does matter. Human blood for humans, were blood for weres. I wonder if vampire blood would work to bring a vampire back, if you had a body, I mean. What about witches? Would human blood work for them, or would it have to be witch blood? I don't know. They're all good questions, but I really don't have any way of testing to find out.

So if I'm going to bring Yami back, am I going to need a shit ton of human blood? Would my own work? I don't know. There are just too many questions, and there are no good ways to get any answers. At least there are no good way to get answers that don't involve me killing someone, maybe even someone who doesn't deserve it, all to bring someone back from the dead.

It makes a bit more sense now, why I haven't been able to find the answer in any of the books I've been looking through. What I've been doing, how I've been managing to bring people back... This is about as dark as it gets, short of actually killing someone to make the magic work. This is strong, black stuff, the kind of stuff there is usually a lot of nasty repercussions from.

I brought Yuugi back, and two years later, Yami died.

Who's going to die because I brought Mai back? Who will die when I bring Yami back?

They're good questions, and again, no good answers are available. This is why people try to stay the hell away from the black magic stuff. It's wicked and it's tricky, and there are consequences that most people don't even want to think about.

Belatedly, I realize that my hand is still on Mai's (frankly rather impressive) chest, and I yank it back like her flesh burns me. "Yeah, you're definitely alive again, Mai."

Without a single bit of warning – unless extremely happy giggles count as warning somewhere in the world – she lays an enthusiastic kiss on my cheek. "I need to go call Magnum. You? Bakura?" She fixes me with a dire look that's spoiled by the huge ass grin on her face. "You need to get in touch with Yami. You can finish this all tonight."

No matter what the consequences are...

This is what I set out to do. I've been working fifteen years towards accomplishing this. It's time I actually do it. I wait patiently until Mai is out of the room before heading over to the door and closing it quietly. "Yami?" I call out, just barely loud enough for me to hear myself. "Yami, I need to see you. Please?"

"You've gotten a lot better at that 'please' thing, haven't you?" a familiar voice comments. It's far to the left of me. I turn, and yeah, Yami's sitting on my desk. "You've definitely gotten a lot better at saying it. Sounds like you're getting better at apologies too."

Great, just how long has he been here? No, I don't care. Right now, I don't care.

"I've figured it out, Yami." And if I sound way too excited, well, I have a very good reason to be. I'm not sure yet if I actually feel that way, but I definitely have cause either way. "I know how to bring you back. I just managed to bring Mai back. And..."

"And nothing, Kura."

Wait, what? "What? 'But nothing' what?" I hear myself repeating. I feel hopelessly confused. I think I might actually feel more confused that Mai looked earlier.

"I'm not coming back."

"What?" And that came out a bit like Volcano Kitty. I'm storming over to the desk, and yeah, I might even be stomping across the floor in my heavy boots that I forgot to take off, but I don't care. I really don't care. "Say that again, Yami. I have to have misheard you."

"You didn't," he answers easily. "I don't want to come back. I've put a lot of thought into it, and I don't want to."

"But..." But we all miss you. But we've missed you for fifteen years. But I've put said fifteen years into trying to find a way to bring you back, and...

"Kura..." he sighs out. "I've been around for the last fifteen years, and I've been watching. I know you miss me. I know Yuugi misses me. But it's time for me to move on. I don't want to come back to this life."

I'm shaking my head. Denial might actually get me through this... because otherwise, this might be the closest I have ever come to crying. "Why not?"

"What do I have to look forward to?" My eyes go a bit wide, and I open my mouth to answer, though I have no idea with what, when he continues. "Don't. I've already thought about it. I'll have a few years with you. They'll probably be really good years."

"But, Kura, you're all but immortal now. As long as Kaiba stays alive, you'll be alive. You are going to stay the same age, and I'm going to get old and eventually die again. I don't want to do that to you again."

"I've seen how hard these last fifteen years have been on you. I don't want to put you through that again. And before you even say anything," he cuts me off before I can even finish forming the idea in my own head, "I don't want to be a vampire or a were. I don't. I don't think I could live like that." He sighs. "Really, Kura, this is what is best."

I shake my head again hard, and yes, this is definitely the closest I have ever come to crying in my entire life. "It's what's best for who? I don't want to let you go. I doubt Yuugi does either," I add. It's worth a shot at least.

"Kura, we made a deal. Fifteen years, and I could move on. I told you earlier: I'm ready to move on. I'm tired of seeing you put yourself through this, trying to bring me back. I felt what happened when you brought Mai back. That's some seriously dark stuff, Kura, and I don't want it on my conscience with you using it for me. This is what is best for all of us, Kura. It's time for you to move on, and it's past time for me to move on."

"I'm not ready to." And that's more of a confession than usually comes out of my mouth. This time it was completely unexpectedly. "I'm not ready for you to move on, and I'm not ready to leave you behind."

"Don't you dare try to bring me back without my permission, Kura. Don't you dare," he growls. "I will make your life an absolute living hell if you do."

"It might be worth it," I say, not even letting a single thought cross my mind as I do.

"It wouldn't be." He slides off the desk, but he pointedly does not touch me. "Please don't, Kura."

"Okay, then," I propose, "how about a deal?" A brief look of confusion on his face prompts me to continue with this latest harebrained idea to pop into my head. It's worth a shot, right? "Give me a few years to persuade you to change your mind. Come visit for a few years, and if I can't change your mind about coming back in that time, I'll let you move on."

"You're not going to change my mind, Kura."

I shrug. "Just give me the chance."

"You have another five years." Ah-ha, opening negotiations. I can work with this.

"Fifteen."

The look I get is withering. "Five years, and that's my sole offer."

"Okay." Let it not be said that I don't know when to concede a point I'm losing. It's time for phase two of the bargaining anyway. "Once a week minimum."

"Your birthday."

I have to stop myself from doing that really hard blinking again. I'm not liking it for one, and it doesn't seem to be getting any results for another. "That's... pretty extreme, Pharaoh. Work with me a little here."

He's silent for a moment, clearly considering this, before he sighs and offers, "Your birthday, my birthday, and *Tanabata*."

You know, I've negotiated with Yami before. He was never this difficult before. I have a feeling I have an uphill battle ahead of me.

"That's fine."

And it is too. I'll get this figured out. I will convince him, one way or another. But pushing right now is only going to make him more stubborn, so I'm going to back off.

Not if he does it first, though, it seems. He takes a couple steps back, through the desk, and stops right in front of the window. "Why don't you go celebrate with Mai? I'm sure she's very glad to be back among the living. Go have a good time with her, at least until Magnum gets back."

"All right. Yami, I—"

I barely even start to get the words out before he vanishes right in front of my eyes. I really hate it when he does that.

The wolves threw a party to end all parties once Mai was able to get in touch with Magnum. I mean, it took just over a whole damn week to wind down. I didn't know it was possible for a single party to go on that long.

I'm happy for Mai. I really am. She and Magnum have been apart far too long, and I'm glad that they're able to be together again. I wish I had been able to do something like this much sooner.

I wish I had been able to convince Yami to come back immediately. I'm just going to have to work on him every time he comes to visit. It's going to be a challenge and a half. Yami can be a stubborn cuss, when he has his mind set on something. Then again, I'm a stubborn bastard myself.

I will find a way to bring him around. I will find a way to be more stubborn than he is. I will convince him to come back. I have five years, three times a year, fifteen visits to get him to change his mind.

I wonder where he goes when he's not here. It's something I might have to ask him, the first time I get him here to visit. That's if I want to waste what little time we're going to have on stupid questions like that. I would rather spend my limited time with him convincing him to come back and, well, to just be with him.

There hasn't been any sign of fallout from Osaka in the month since we sent Chono packing back home. I guess either Kaiba's keeping it from me (highly unlikely, given our rather unique circumstances), everything I did was perfectly fine with the Master of Osaka, or Chono hasn't said a peep about what happened.

Given the options, I think I'm going with number two. Chono isn't smart enough to stay quiet about jack or shit, and Kaiba is very unlikely to be hiding anything from me. That leaves the Master of Osaka being quite all right with what I did to Chono. I think I can live with that.

In that month, things have otherwise been pretty quiet. Mokuba came by for a visit, though as usual Noa stayed at a hotel just outside of town. I think he's still pissed about Seth. I guess I can understand. He may have been an asshole, but for Noa, Seth was the closest thing he had to a brother. Family's important that way.

Speaking of family, I did get to have a few hours to visit with Ryou and Amane over dinner. It was... nice. I'm not sure what else to say. Ryou and I were always so close, but it's starting to feel like we're strangers; Amane, it felt, only showed up as a courtesy. I miss my brother and sister.

My foster sisters are doing well, though. Isis has settled in and decided to stay in Tokyo for a while. I think she said it was to learn as much as she could from Cynthia directly before she went home to Egypt again. It makes a kind of sense, I suppose. Cynthia did found most of the covens in Japan. If I were a witch, I would want to learn as much as I could from her too.

And speaking of my witchy foster sister, it looks like she and Diceboy didn't have to try very hard. I got an amazingly excited phone call the other night from her, all about 'it worked'. So apparently, she's knocked up. I think I might be happy for her with that. She was so excited that it was almost breathtaking, even just over the phone. I wished her the best, but as her foster older brother, I assured her that I am going to be coming to Tokyo a lot more often to check up on her.

There haven't been any more new leads on Kitty, Malik, and Marik. I don't think I was expecting there to be. It took fifteen years for a new lead to surface this time; I can't expect two the same year, I guess.

I want more leads. No, scratch that. I *don't* want more leads. I want them here, back in Domino, now. Nothing yet, though. I'm just going to keep on having to give it more time.

That's okay, though. If there's one thing I have plenty of right now, it's time.