

Title: *Endless Loop Book 5: Route 666*

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He awoke with a start, glancing around -- then groaning when he placed where he was. Not again. How many times was this going to have to happen before the world went back to normal?

Looking around, he was somehow unsurprised to see a similar look of shock and disgust on so many people's faces around the room: Jounouchi-kun, Yuugi, even Honda-kun. Now *that* was actually odd. *That* hadn't happened before. Why would Honda-kun realize what was going on? Especially when the rest of them were just starting to?

No, that wasn't important. What was important was...

//What the hell's got you so upset now, yadonushi?//

The Spirit of the... No, *niisan* sounded like a slice of raw hell. Each and every time this happened, these events repeated themselves, he sounded worse. That couldn't be good in the least. It worried him. Niisan wasn't supposed to sound like that. Niisan was supposed to be the strong one. He wasn't too sure *how* this could be happening, but he was willing to bet that this -- what was happening to niisan -- was a clue.

Frankly, he would be *so* glad when Kaiba-kun got here. He'd have an idea what was going on; he *was* their resident genius, after all.

Closer to the front of the room, Yuugi turned in his seat to shoot him a look that was first questioning then sympathetic. It made him wonder if Yami-kun was talking to his brother, like his own brother was to him. Poor Yami-kun and niisan... Zork must have figured that they were among the dangerous of the group, that they were the biggest threats to its power, to have done this to them.

But it wasn't like it had confined itself to just doing terrible things to niisan or Yami-kun. It had made every last one of them completely stone-cold human. The only ones with even the slightest abilities remaining were actually niisan and Yami-kun -- and sometimes Malik-kun. He wasn't too sure what it had done to the Ishtar twins, but if anything, it had made them even stranger than they'd been before.

//Even nuttier, you mean.//

/Niisan!/ He practically bounced in his seat. Fortunately, Jounouchi-kun covered it by yawning and stretching noisily. Still, every time they had been through this, niisan and Kaiba-kun were the only ones who didn't remember immediately. Niisan was worse than Kaiba-kun usually, but weirdly,

they both kept forgetting *this* wasn't the real world, like its hold on them was somehow stronger than on the rest of them. */I didn't expect.../*

//Me to wake up so soon? Yeah, I can't say for sure how long it'll last. Any sign of Treeboy yet?//

He had to resist the urge to shake his head. */Not until Duelist Kingdom./*

//What about Ishtars One and Two?//

/Not until Battle City./ He glanced down at the palm of his hand, wincing at the bandages that covered it. He'd been in the kitchen at Kaiba's house, getting a quick snack together for himself and Yuugi when they'd been pulled through. The best he could figure, he'd cut his hand then. Here, though, the game -- the loop -- the whatever it was that was keeping them here -- said that niisan had impaled his hand on a model castle tower. */We're still just at the beginning./*

//Damn.// Niisan sighed. *//Call Kitty off. He's growling at your teacher.//*

He winced and kicked the back of Jounouchi-kun's seat, nearly knocking him off balance. Thankfully, though it interrupted the low-level growl that had been teasing the edges of his consciousness. */Thanks./*

//What for?// The snarl was back in niisan's voice. Damn, he was out again already. And he'd had so much he was going to ask. Like what niisan remembered about before they were all pulled in. From what little he'd been able to piece together, niisan and Kaiba-kun were the only ones off the property of the Kaiba mansion when this all started, though if that meant anything, he didn't know it. But it was something. That was more than they'd had.

Class was winding down. Finally, the teacher stopped speaking and closed her book, giving them the exact same assignment she always did at this point. The entire class stood and bowed as she left.

On an almost hidden head jerk from Yuugi, he and Jounouchi-kun followed him out of the classroom. To his surprise, it was startlingly easy for them to just walk off the school grounds. By some unspoken agreement, they headed towards his apartment. Yuugi's grandfather would want to know why they weren't in class, and Jounouchi-kun's father was no better here than in real life.

At least the old apartment building was still mostly the same, he thought with some mild form of relief. It was still disconcerting every time to step into the elevator and see mirrors, though. The manager had torn them off the walls in the real world version, the better to not insult his vampire tenants who didn't cast reflections. That was just one of those tiny details it had picked up on that annoyed him.

They remained silent until they were inside the apartment (Why did it always assume he was a slob and created his apartment as a huge mess? Probably because niisan was a slob at times if left to his own devices, and it *was* living in niisan's head) with the door locked. Then, in typical abundance, Jounouchi-kun made his thoughts on the matter known.

"How many fucking times are we going to have to *do* this?! Because, seriously, I'm getting pretty damned tired of the perpetual *deja vu* that Zork apparently thinks is a good way to head off

complete and utter boredom." He then shot a look at Ryou before adding, "And I really wish one of you would just let me bite that bitch. It's the only opportunity I'll ever have to do it and not have to worry about possibly adding another leopard to the pard."

Unless he was gravely mistaken, niisan just rolled his eyes and chuckled. Which *version* of niisan it was, however, was completely up for grabs, but nonetheless, he was amused. But then, Jounouchi-kun's -- or really, anyone's -- rants tended to amuse him to no end.

//Tell him he'll get rabies or parvo or something if he tries that.//

He tactfully ignored niisan's statement and instead offered an almost embarrassed smile to his friend. "It wouldn't do any good, Jounouchi-kun."

"It'd make me feel better!"

And niisan *did* laugh at that, loudly enough to make him jump. Yeah, that was a good way to prove his sanity: jumping at the voice in his head. It was a good thing everyone here knew about niisan. He'd hate for someone to report him to the nice men in the white jackets with the padded rooms and jackets that fastened in the back.

//Not happening.// Niisan sounded a lot more pissed off than Jounouchi-kun had been. *//I'll tear their eyes out and feed them their own still-beating hearts. No one touches my little brother.//*

"Gross," he couldn't help muttering aloud. That was a lot more violent than niisan ever usually got.

"Dorobou being too much help?"

He offered Jounouchi-kun a wan smile. "Way too much." Niisan cleared his throat. "And he says you'll get rabies if you bite the teacher." He shook his head before continuing, "So what do we know at this point?"

"Besides that Zork is fucking bored?" Jounouchi-kun groused.

He smiled sympathetically. "Yeah, besides that."

"This is at least our fifth repeat, that I remember, anyway." He glanced over at Yuugi, but no, that was Yami-kun staring back at him.

That was one interesting thing about this world, that they -- he and niisan, and Yuugi and Yami-kun -- could do that mental revolving door thing that the Ishtars had perfected.

//Who?// And niisan was back out again. *//Stop calling me that, yadonushi. I'm not your damn--*
// Niisan trailed off. He found himself sitting up straighter and biting his thumbnail, a habit he'd used to do when he was nervous; he'd thought he'd broken it years ago but apparently not. *//Fuck. Whenever Treeboy deigns to put in an appearance in here, tell him it's getting harder to hold on.//*

/Why Kaiba-kun?/

//What?// He could feel niisan mentally shake himself then gather his thoughts once more. *//Like you said, he's our resident genius.//* He definitely wasn't telling him everything, probably not even close to everything in fact. *//If he knows everything, he might be able to figure--//*

/Niisan?/ Silence. "Niisan?" Silence again. "Man, I had him for a second there, but I lost him. What were you saying, Yami-kun?"

A huge frown covered Yami-kun's face. If the situations were reversed, if what was happening to niisan was happening to Yuugi instead, he'd probably be a lot more upset. He'd be railing against anyone and everyone who could have possibly been responsible and begging assistance from anyone and everyone who could have possibly helped. Maybe Yami-kun was doing that where only Yuugi could hear.

"Jounouchi-kun and I both 'woke up,' for lack of a better way of phrasing it, five loops ago. Yuugi and you woke up the next time through."

"I think Honda-kun is waking up," he offered. "Other than that, it's sort of hit and miss. And Kaiba-kun and niisan have... issues."

...And there went the revolving door again. Yami-kun's frown slid away into Yuugi's laughter. It had been bad enough -- in the real world -- when Malik-kun and Marik-kun did it, but somehow, this was so much worse. Maybe that was because it was *his* boyfriend and niisan's boyfriend playing revolving doors. There was just something wrong about that.

"There was probably a worse way you could have phrased that," Jounouchi-kun commented with a smirk, "but I'll be damned if I can think of it."

/Are you okay, niichan?/ Yuugi made himself ask in the silence. The boat was pulling away in the distance, leaving them on the island for Duelist Kingdom, and as glad as he was that he'd get to see all his friends again (because no matter what his brother thought, he counted Kaiba-kun as a friend), he was also worried about his niichan. It wasn't like his big brother to be so quiet. */Is something bothering you?/*

//Just not looking forward to seeing Kaiba again.//

He rolled his eyes, not even bothering to pretend that that was anywhere near the truth. */Niichan.../* He stretched the word out long. */What's wrong? You're not fooling anyone, least of all me./*

His brother sighed heavily, obviously annoyed. Well, that was just too bad. *//I'm just... worried, I guess. I don't like how this is going.//*

/Something in particular or the whole thing in general?/

Yami was looking at something out of the corner of their eye. He barely had to look to know it was Ryou... which meant Bakura. Of course. *//The whole thing, but mostly...//*

/Mostly Bakura-kun?/ he asked softly.

//It... bothers me that all of us remember all the time now that we've woken up, but Kura's -- Bakura's memory goes in and out. Hell, we wake up remembering, but he...// He trailed off with another deep sigh.

/Like how we always remember, but we always have to tell Kaiba-kun to wake him up?/ He sensed a resigned nod from his brother. */Ryou was saying something on the boat, niichan, about Kaiba-kun and Bakura-kun being the only ones not in the mansion when It happened. Do you think that might have something to do with it?/*

If he could bottle and sell the feeling of his confident (some might say overconfident) older brother being nervous, now was probably the time for him to make a fortune. He was apparently shuffling side to side; he'd only give it a moment or so before he started pacing in their mind. *//...Maybe...//*

/Niichan? Why was Bakura-kun outside the mansion? I thought you guys had had plans to stay in?/ From what little he remembered about those last few hours, the only ones with plans to leave the grounds that night had been Jounouchi-kun, the Ishtars, and the leopards.

He was even more curious why Bakura-kun and Kaiba-kun were both off the grounds, but yet none of the bodyguards were gone also -- or even knew about them leaving. The only way he'd known Kaiba-kun was gone was that the door to his study was open to reveal an empty room. Ryou had told him that Bakura-kun was gone, thanks to that almost infallible "twin sense" they sometimes shared, though honestly, Ryou was much better at picking up things from it than Bakura-kun was, as far as he'd noted.

No, he had a lot of questions and a very stubborn older brother who didn't want to tell him what was going on. That was fine, though. Apparently, they had plenty of time. He'd try to get some answers off Kaiba-kun once he woke up and got here or Bakura-kun if they managed to keep hold of him for more than a minute or two at the time -- and if either of those failed, he'd corner his brother and demand answers. It wasn't like he could get away, and he wanted -- no, *needed!* -- to know.

They all did.

Apparently, he had somehow managed to wait niichan out, wonder of wonders. *//I didn't know if Kura was leaving the house, but I do know he was going to go cool off some.//*

"Niichan!" He wasn't going to comment about Jounouchi-kun and Mazaki jumping like a pair of scalded cats. Nope, his attention was firmly on his older brother as he stood stock-still with his arms crossed over his chest, a scowl on his face. */Did you two have another fight?/*

Yami shrugged. *//Maybe.//*

He dropped his face into his hand, shaking his head in resignation. */And why is this the first I'm hearing of this?/*

//Aibou,// ooh, niichan didn't sound happy -- well, too bad; he wasn't happy either, *//you may be my little brother and I adore you dearly, but Kura's and my relationship is none of your business. It's between the two of us.//*

Inwardly, he seethed. In fact, he was pretty sure his eyes narrowed sharply, and he was actually having a really hard time holding in a growl that would have done Jounouchi-kun proud in either form. He loved his brother dearly, really he did, but sometimes he wondered how Bakura-kun hadn't beaten him to death yet for being an ass. He was tempted to try doing that himself now, if it didn't mean beating himself black and blue as well.

And from some of the looks he was getting, it seemed he wasn't being as successful with holding back that growl as he had been hoping he was.

/Niichan? You're an ass./ He sighed, shaking his head again in disgust. */Don't think we're done here yet./* Niichan didn't answer that so, after another deep sigh, he turned his attention back to the group assembled before him. "So where were we?"

"Well, *you* were either cussing at your brother or having a psychotic episode," Jounouchi-kun commented dryly. "*We* were wondering what the hell was going on."

"No psychotic episodes, I'm sorry to say. Niichan's still an ass, though," he returned with a too sweet smile. Ryou burst into giggles; if it were cackles or even just slightly crazier laughter, he might have assumed it was Bakura-kun. "It's tempting sometimes to put one more bet down against him. What are the odds up to now?"

"Don't ask me, Yuugi," his boyfriend returned between laughter. "You're the only one here who bet."

"And now that we've lost half the group," Jounouchi-kun remarked dryly with a brief nod towards Mazaki and Honda, "we have a Kaiba to track down."

He wasn't too sure which part of all this was more annoying: that somehow Mutou was at the center of this little universe; that each and every time through, someone had to remind him that this *wasn't* the real world; or that he felt more and more exhausted and rundown each loop. Somehow, he suspected it was the first one.

He also wasn't too fond of not waking up until he was on an entire *island* run by the Master of Tokyo -- or that Pegasus seemed a bit crazier than normal and didn't seem to remember the real world in the least. If it weren't for the fact that Mokuba always seemed to remember everything just fine, he'd wonder if it had something to do with them being vampires. If Mokuba remembered so easily, though, he'd have to discard that theory.

If Pegasus didn't stop talking about that damn Funny Bunny, however, he wasn't going to hold himself responsible for his actions, up to and including snapping the man's neck and just letting Tokyo get itself a new Master. No way was he going to take on another city.

On the balcony above them, there was a noise that sounded like a brief scuffle. He glanced up to see one of Pegasus's tigers -- Kajiki, he thought was the man's name -- lowering Ryou out of his line of sight amid some rather impressive growls from Kitten, not to mention Honda and Mazaki holding one of the Mutous back. From how angry the smaller man seemed, he was betting on the younger one.

"Good!" Pegasus declared a bit too loudly. Mazaki and Honda almost lost their grip on Yuugi; he was pretty sure those eyes were purple instead of red, but with normal human eyes, it was hard to tell at this distance. "Kaiba-boy," he turned one of the more annoyed looks in his considerable arsenal on the other Master, "guess who I've been talking to?"

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he redirected his full attention back onto Pegasus. "The damn rabbit?"

"No. Cynthia. Why would I be talking to the bunny?"

"Because you've been talking *about* the rabbit the past ten minutes," he returned.

"Don't you know a distraction when you see one?"

Okay, if the man's idea of distraction was waving a card around and yelling "Look at the Bunny, cute Bunny, fuzzy Bunny, Funny Bunny, look at the Bunny" until someone beat him or fell asleep, he would be forced to revise his opinions about Pegasus as the Master of Tokyo. If that was indeed the case, clearly no one had relieved him of the title because they all thought he was insane.

Apparently, Kitten's thought on the matter were similar, since the growling now seemed to be directed towards Pegasus. "The next time you decide to 'distract' someone, *warn* a leopard first unless you want Four-on-One here ripped apart."

Kajiki-or-whatever-his-name-was heaved a sigh. "That was *how* long ago now?"

"Not nearly long enough for me to be over it yet."

He smirked to himself; it was quite possible that he had remained friends with Kitten for the sole reason that the cat could hold a grudge forever like nobody's business.

The conversation was still going on above them when Pegasus continued to speak much more softly, "Cynthia has been keep both our cities running in our absence."

Great. He didn't want to have to think about owing her a favor. It would practically be like owing Pegasus one, and that was something he definitely did not want. "Offer her my thanks, if you will," he finally stated mildly.

Pegasus nodded. "She has said that Noa and Seth also managed to remain on the outside and that she is helping Noa with Domino. Older though Seth might be, she has found Noa to be more powerful. She also said that almost everyone that was pulled into this is being affected, almost as if they're wasting away," he paused, evidently considering what he was going to say prior to saying it for once, "some more than others."

He took a split second to glance up at the balcony before returning his focus once again to the other Master. "How do you mean?"

"Yourself and Bakura-boy seem to be fading fastest of us all." He was almost startled when the older vampire turned sharp eyes on him. "Why might that be, do you suppose? And what might that have to do with where Cynthia retrieved the two of you?"

That bit was still a bit foggy, unfortunately, and as much as it galled him to admit to that, he finally stated, "I don't know. I'm not sure I remember."

"Well, if anything about a cemetery or zombies come back, let me know."

Now *that* promised to be... interesting when it came back, to say the least. He had another, slightly more pressing question, though. "How long have we been in here?"

"Today makes Day Seven."

"*Only* a week?!" There was no mistaking the speaker, and when he turned to look, he was able to confirm that Kitten was indeed listening in. He was hanging halfway over the balcony railing to hear them better -- there was no doubt in his mind that his friend's sense were likewise dulled -- and there was no way of knowing how long he'd been paying attention to the vampires. "You mean, every damned thing that happens in here is only *one day* out there?!"

"So it would seem," Pegasus returned just a tad louder. "Cynthia has a theory, that Zork is gathering energy through these endless repetitions to try to raise itself in the real world."

"You two certainly *have* been comparing notes," he commented under his breath. Once upon a time, in the real world, several people in this room would have been able to hear him; it was more than a little depressing that no one seemed able to right now.

Of course, he could have been knocked over with a feather when Yuugi, of all people, decided to pipe up next. "Umm... Pegasus-san?" Slowly, both he and the other man turned to look up at the younger boy on the balcony above. In fact, all eyes were locked on Yuugi, which was no doubt why he was squirming uncomfortably. "Ryou was saying something on the boat over here. Actually, he said quite a bit. Like Bakura-kun and Kaiba-kun being the only ones away from the house when this happened." Good. Then, if Yuugi missed that part of the conversation, maybe the rest of them did as well. He could hope anyway. "He also has this theory that Zork is inside Bakura-san's mind."

"*He makes the voices stop.*" He faintly remembered Bakura saying that to him in the car going... somewhere; he truly hated not remembering any of this. Well, if the younger Bakura's theory held true, then that certainly would explain a lot, he thought sourly.

Pegasus, on the other hand, was nodding. "It makes sense and is why I needed a distraction. Your Mahaado mentioned to me a few years ago that there aren't that many people in the world who can talk to ghosts and spirits and such like Bakura-boy does. It would follow, then, that a spirit creature like Zork would gravitate to someone like him, and..."

"Tell me we're not living in that thief's head."

For a moment, confusion reigned as everyone tried to place who had spoken. It took even him a moment to realize that it had been Honda who spoke.

Predictably, perhaps, the balcony exploded into noise once again, mainly consisting of "What?" and "What do you remember?" firing from every direction. So the humans were starting to wake up now too? Why, then, couldn't he ever manage to remember on his own?

Shaking his head in annoyance, he turned to where the other vampire was -- and had to keep turning. Silent enough to do anything of the cats proud, Pegasus was rounding the table towards him, stopping to stand next to him. In a sotto voice, he spoke very quietly and carefully. "Ryou-boy's theory matches Cynthia's. Zork, we believe, is trying to enter our world by draining energy off us."

"Through Bakura," he surmised.

Pegasus nodded his agreement gravely. "Exactly. It's using his abilities like... a two-way radio, I suppose works best. Anything said to or around Bakura-boy is also said to Zork. Ryou-boy should be safe enough, but I wouldn't risk it. I would do my planning away from either of them. This has to end this time. How, we're none too certain, but this has to be the last cycle."

Of course, it always came down to him to figure out the hard stuff. Wait a second... Why was Pegasus so desperate on this? This had better not be some attempt to try something on Domino -- or just trying to get home to his wife and human servant, Cynthia. He didn't even try to keep the suspicion out of his voice when he demanded, "Why?"

"Another cycle through is going to start killing people -- us, in the real world. And it will probably begin with Bakura-boy, since he's fading fastest, being *human* and all... Then how will the rest of us leave?"

If Bakura were awake and himself, he would probably have a hundred expletives for a situation like this, likely canvassing an entire range of whatever degrees swearing covered. He, on the far other end of the spectrum, could only manage a rather pitiful "Shit".

"Indeed." It was said so mildly he wasn't sure if it was meant to be insulting or not. Pegasus's single eye (And what exactly was up with *that* anyway?) lifted back up to the balcony, frowning slightly. He turned quickly to see Kajiki waving some sort of signal down. "Ryou-boy is waking up. Remember all that I've said here."

He turned to look at the other once more, and instead being next to him as he'd expected, Pegasus was almost to the other end of the table again. He suddenly felt a sense of empathy for Bakura all those times he had loudly declared his intentions to superglue bells to the neck of ever single immortal in the Kaiba household. God, he was really starting to hate being human again. "Let's get this over with," he declared loudly.

It looked like there would be a lot to discuss on the way back home.

"Do you know," the Egyptian began, "how much *crap* I've gone through just to get here?"

The blond rolled his eyes and once again cursed the fact that his were abilities were non-existent here. "Please say you're not going to tell me every single detail again," he pleaded, hoping beyond hope that Marik would decide to take over, just to keep his twin from whining forever. Especially since Anzu was apparently only half-aware (and how that was even possible he didn't care to guess, learning that Honda was a damn animator had been enough of a shock for one, er, day) and Malik tended to babble once he got going.

"I figured, 'what the hell, I'll just go to Japan early'," Malik said, ignoring him entirely. "So I got on a plane. It landed in Egypt."

"Could have been engine trouble," Anzu offered, glancing his way and shrugging slightly.

"It was in the air long enough to have gotten to Japan!" the Egyptian snapped. "*Anyway*, I tried another plane. It took off and flew around for a while," and it really looked like he was going to knock himself out with all the gesturing he was doing to demonstrate the plane flying, "and landed back in Egypt. So then--"

"This is going to be a long story, isn't it?" he interrupted, only to be ignored.

"-I decided to be sneaky, and I took a plane to China. The plane actually made it to China, so I figured 'hey, this'll work' and boarded a plane to Japan. And where did it land?!"

Might as well play along. "Egypt?"

"Egypt!" Malik huffed in annoyance. "So *then* I took a plane to South Korea. Which is where it landed. I could *see* Japan. I could have *swam* to Japan. So I got on a boat heading for Japan." He frowned slightly and continued, "I'm not sure how the hell it happened, but the fucking boat wound up on the Nile!"

Anzu leaned over and whispered, "Does he have a history of mental illness?"

"No, but I'm sure Marik would say that he does," Katsuya replied just as quietly.

Malik, fortunately, didn't hear them. "So I took *another frigging plane* to South Korea and decided to go ahead and attempt to swim to Japan. If only! Do you know how scary it is to come face to face with a water horse?! Because those things might look silly and cute in tutus, but they'll eat your damn face off!"

"Hippos don't eat people, dear."

"Well, it *wanted* to. I could see that in its eyes." Malik opened his mouth to add something else, but there was an abrupt shift in his eye color and a sudden spikiness to his hair.

"Shut up, moron," Marik snapped, rolling his eyes and giving a vaguely apologetic smile to Anzu and Katsuya. "Sorry about that. He's actually been bitching about the whole ordeal for... oh, a *while* now."

"No problem," Anzu offered almost cheerfully, "but aren't one of you two supposed to be possessing *him*," she nodded heavily in his direction, "right about now?"

Katsuya resisted the urge to reach over and smack the woman as Marik smirked and gave him a glance-over. "Mind out of the gutter, dear," he said sternly, already knowing that he wasn't going to succeed in keeping any of this in the realm of All Audiences Permitted.

"But you love it when my mind is in the gutter, sun cat," the Egyptian purred -- and it was just *no fair* that someone without one trace of cat in him could make such a yummy sound! "And

we *do* have some time before we're supposed to do the whole 'friendship duel'," he added, even including the air quotes.

"Maybe, but I don't feel like putting on a free amateur porn show for my source inside the newspaper office," the blond replied. Anzu, damn her, was laughing way too hard by this point to add any further input to the conversation, thank whomever might be listening.

Marik pouted. "Fine," he huffed in annoyed disappointment, "but when we get on Kaiba's penis compensation blimp we're hopping into a bed and staying there for two hours."

It meant something that both Honda and Anzu remembered the real world now. He remembered that, only a few cycles ago, almost no one else had. That he could almost make sense of, but... Kura still didn't remember much or even a lot of the time. That meant something as well, something he wasn't sure he was ready to deal with. Not yet anyway.

It did seem, though, that there was more going on than anyone was talking about. Back at Duelist Kingdom, they had spoken some of what was going on. Kaiba and Pegasus, for instance, had clearly been taking the time to discuss some sort of information in depth during their "duel". Since then, though, there had been no chance to speak further of any of it. Whatever information they had discovered, the two secretive bastards were keeping to themselves, and Yuugi had taken charge of the body they were stuck sharing in his worry for Ryou, so he himself had been unable to try to hear what was going on.

He knew that, on the boat to Duelist Kingdom, Ryou had spoken about a fear that the creature that was controlling this made-up world was living inside Kura's mind, and he had to wonder if this was the same as the voice that had invaded in Bakura's mind from time to time in the real world, the one he could stop for his lover.

No, if Kaiba had ideas on this that he was not sharing, then it was past time he changed that. If that were the case, then it was also past time he made Kaiba start talking. It would seem at first glance that they were in a perfect place and time for exactly that. It wasn't, however. Trapped on an airship hovering thousands of feet above the surface they might be, but Kaiba was still entirely too damn good at avoiding any contact. Kura would probably say that that was for the best: the two of them had never gotten along from Day One. But now he needed to find him. Now he needed answers, and immediately would be better, before the duels started.

There were things he did know for certain, though. For instance, there was no way -- no way *at all* -- he was using Osiris in this upcoming duel against Kura. The last time had been entirely too terrifying, as they all had waited to see if Kura was going to get up again from the dragon's final attack. He couldn't do that to his lover again.

A flash of white going past his door pulled his attention back outside of his shared bod and into the world they were all currently stuck in, and he scrambled to his feet and to the door to follow it. There were only three people it could realistically be, after all: Kura, Kaiba, or Isis -- and the Egyptian woman seemed bound and determined to avoid him as much as possible. That left Kaiba or Kura, either one of which he wouldn't object to seeing right now, as odd as that felt to think.

He held in a purely mental sigh, trying to even keep it from Yuugi as much as was possible, and called out just loudly enough to be heard, "Kaiba."

The vampire paused in midstep, took a very obvious moment to compose himself, and then turned to face him. "Mutou."

He found the urge to narrow his eyes at the chill in the vampire's voice -- even if he wasn't a vampire here. "I want to know what's going on here."

Kaiba rolled his eyes at him in obvious annoyance. "We're stuck in a dream world. I thought that much was obvious, even to someone like you. And some of us have parts to play, so--"

"I want to know what you and Pegasus were talking about, back at Duelist Kingdom," he cut in. Why bother pretending to be civil to someone like Kaiba, after all? It wasn't like the vampire cared. What was more important was to unclench his fist before he did something stupid and punched the shit out of the other man.

It didn't look like his efforts to remain calm went unnoticed either. No, Kaiba was looking at him like something the blue-eyed man would like to squash. Kaiba had turned some truly dark looks on him over the years, but never had they even come close to resembling this one.

Kaiba wasn't going to tell him anything. Hell, he would probably have better luck getting information out of--

"Bakura will die if this thing repeats itself again." Kaiba said it baldly, as if it didn't mean a thing in the world to him, but the way he was watching him seemed to belie that. "Pegasus and Cynthia believe that this Zork creature is draining him dry to break into the real world and leave us trapped here forever."

Dear gods... He felt sick just thinking about this. "We have to stop it," he managed to say, and he was surprised at how steady his voice sounded. He certainly didn't feel steady, after all.

"No, *you* need to stop it." He glanced up, uncertain when he had turned his attention to his clenched hands, to find Kaiba no more than a step in front of him.

Automatically, completely without thought, he fell a step backwards. So was he that distracted -- or was Kaiba regaining some of his vampiric speed? He had known Kaiba was a vampire for years now, and frankly, this was the first time he had ever been even a bit afraid of him. Belligerently, he covered his nervousness with an annoyed "What the hell are you babbling on about now, Kaiba?"

"*You* need to finish this game. For some ungodly reason, this creature has decided to make *you* the center of this game. Every time we get to the end, it comes down to *you* to end it, and every time, we go right back to the same spot." With every word, Kaiba stalked a step forward, forcing him to fall back one in turn, slowly backing him up into the door. "And besides all that," he finished as a hiss, "it's *your* fault we're in here to begin with anyway."

He managed to rally himself at that. "And what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You're an idiot."

Fuck it. He let a fist fly; at this close range, he should get some good damage in before any of Kaiba's guards got here to pull him off.

Somehow, though, Kaiba's hand caught his fist before it could connect. God damn, maybe he was getting some of his vampire skills back in here, after all. If that was the case, then they were all screwed. The vampires would be insufferable. Maybe if some of the others' traits started showing, though...

"This is what I was talking about," Kaiba continued calmly, never releasing his fist. In fact, his attention was turned towards it, like it was more interesting than he was. "I saw the bruises you gave him. Do you really think this creature would have gotten through, if you hadn't pathed the way for it?" He released his hand abruptly, pushing it aside hard like it was an abomination. "Therefore, it's your responsibility to see to it that this ends this time around."

His fault...? Trying to push past the nausea rising in his throat, he tried to demand, "What do you care anyway? You only took Kura and Ryou in to keep your reputation as Master of the City safe. If their father had managed to kill him, you would never have been able to keep the city. It would have made you look weak."

Kaiba's eyes narrowed sharply. He might have been wrong, but he thought he also saw a hint of fang peering out from slightly snarled lips. "Let me make this clear enough that even an idiot like you can understand," the other man bit out tightly. "*Bakura* is one of my people. *You*, on the other hand, are not. For some obscure reason I cannot understand, however, Bakura cares for you. If you feel anything for him at all, you will end this game this time, or he will die. You decide which you would rather live with, Mutou. However, if anything happens to one of my people because of you," he finished as he turned to go, "believe me: my vengeance will be unlike anything you have ever seen."

He was shocked enough that he felt frozen stiff. It wasn't like this was the first time Kaiba had threatened him. Hell, it wasn't even like this was the hundredth time Kaiba had threatened him. It might have been one of Kaiba's better threats, but it wasn't too far off anything he had heard before. This might have been the first time Kaiba had threatened him over Bakura, though, and that was something new and different.

He wondered inanely if he should be jealous -- and dismissed the thought out of hand. Firstly, it was his jealousy that had started all this, as Kaiba had rightly pointed out, not that he would ever admit to that aloud, and secondly... Well, there was a reason Kura sometimes called the other man the Ice Prince. He usually acted like he had the same interest in a relationship as an ice cube did.

Kaiba was a door away, about to turn down the next hall, which would take him to the blimp's control room, when he finally managed to speak up again. "Kaiba."

"What?!" Now this time he was sure he wasn't imagining the snarl he heard as Kaiba whirled to face him once more.

A good deal more hesitantly than he would ever let himself show, he strode boldly up just close enough to hold out a card from his deck to the other man. "I want you to hold onto Osiris during

the duel. I don't even want it in my deck when I duel Kura." He took a deep but shaky breath and swallowed nervously. "I can't risk using it and hurting him again."

He might have been wrong, but he thought he might have seen something like a wary respect for him in Kaiba's eyes. If it was the case, then it would be a first. That sentiment certainly was not in the blue-eyed man's voice when he spoke, though. "Can you win without Osiris?" Unspoken was that they couldn't afford to give the demon within Kura a single win, even at this point in the game.

He laughed, and the sound was short and bitter. "I've played this exact same duel at least five times that I remember. I've had time to analyze it step-by-step. I can win without Osiris."

Kaiba nodded slightly, palmed the card wordlessly, and was gone.

I felt him before he opened his damn mouth.

"Kaiba," he said just loud enough to get my attention. I paused, took a fortifying breath, and then turned to face him.

I wanted to claw his eyes out. The possessive fury that was raging inside of me did not show on my face -- I have better control than that -- but I knew if I couldn't get it under control, Mutou would be dead at my feet. I settled for the next best thing and acknowledged him, my voice as cold as ice.

"Mutou." A familiar face flashed before me and bruised face, and I clenched my teeth subtly as if I were afraid the incisors of a vampire would elongated, something I knew could never happen here. His eyes narrowed at my coolness, but I could care less about what he desired.

"I want to know what's going on here."

He wants to know what's... Who the *fuck* did Mutou think he is? And where had the little nitwit been the last seven cycles?! I rolled my eyes. "We're stuck in a dream world. I thought that much was obvious, even to someone like you. And some of us have parts to play, so --"

"I want to know what you and Pegasus were talking about, back at Duelist Kingdom," Mutou cut in.

The sheer *impertinence*! He thought that he didn't need to be cordial. He held nothing back with me. I could see the fire in his gaze he wanted to hit me so badly and yet... I knew that he would not.

He wouldn't *dare*. He'd hurt what was *mine* and for that he would pay. Look at the little worm in all the times we'd done this stupid dance. In every cycle, he'd made the same mistake. What I wouldn't have given to have my true vampire strength in me now. I don't know what I would have done first: broken each limb and then drain that sack of shit dry, or maybe... maybe flay him alive instead. No, that would have been too quick, much too easy. He deserved to suffer, he deserved...

"Bakura will die if this thing repeats itself again." I spoke coolly as if my -- as if Bakura didn't matter. But he mattered -- oh did he ever. Just thinking about his death... did not sit well with me. Bakura was mine, and the only way he would die was if I handed him his heart on a silver platter. *He would not die because of this fool's incompetence!* I took a deep breath and continued, "Pegasus and Cynthia believe that this Zork creature is draining him dry to break into the real world and leave us trapped here forever."

I could tell some of what I said finally got through. He looked struck dumb. Oh wait, that was his normal state of mind. Needless to say, I was glad to prove a point.

"We have to stop it," he said as calmly -- or at least, he tried to -- and I couldn't hold back any longer. The edge of my subconscious became blurry, and then suddenly I was in front of Mutou. It would seem there is a delicate balance between the real world and this mockery of one. For that brief second, I felt all powerful -- like a vampire Master should feel.

"No, *you* need to stop it," I snapped back. He stumbled backwards, his eyes widening slightly.

"What the hell are you babbling on about now, Kaiba?" Why am I not surprised? It was not time for my 'you are an idiot' lecture, but perhaps I could get my opinion across.

"*You* need to finish this game. For some ungodly reason, this creature has decided to make *you* the center of this game. Every time we get to the end, it comes down to *you* to end it, and every time, we go right back to the same spot." I stalked him, and as I suspected, he backed up right into the door like a pup cowering from a Doberman. "And besides all that, it's *your* fault we're in here to begin with anyway."

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

I just stared at him. "You're an idiot."

And the bastard tried to hit me. Time seemed to slow around me, and again the edges of reality and fantasy seemed to *bend* -- and I caught his fist. He was surprised and fearful. He should have been. Again my Bakura's bruised face flashed in my memory, and I contained the growl in fury that I wanted to unleash. Mutou had no right -- *no right* -- to treat Bakura thus, and it was high time he knew it.

"This is what I was talking about," I told him, my attention turning to the fist in my hand. Did he realize how easy I could break all those pretty little bones just now? I doubted it. "I saw the bruises you gave him. Do you really think this creature would have gotten through; if you hadn't paved the way for it?" He disgusted me. I pushed his hand away roughly. "Therefore, it's your responsibility to see to it that this ends this time around."

"What do you care anyway? You only took Kura and Ryou in to keep your reputation as Master of the City safe. If their father had managed to kill him, you would never have been able to keep the city. It would have made you look weak."

I could feel my eyes narrowing, I could also feel my incisors elongating. I could already see his broken bloody body in mind. I could see me tearing into his throat. I could hear his screams, taste his blood, and I could feel his death. I'd make sure there was nothing for anyone to come clean up - especially Bakura.

If only... If only --

"Let me make this clear enough that even an idiot like you can understand," My speech was tight and sharp; Mutou was extremely lucky I knew how to control my urges. "*Bakura* is one of my people. You, on the other hand, are not. For some obscure reason I cannot understand, however,

Bakura cares for you. If you feel anything for him at all, you will end this game this time, or he will die. You decide which you would rather live with, Mutou. However, if anything happens to one of my people because of you," I turned to go, because if I didn't, I might have killed him just to spare everyone the migraine he was more than likely going to cause, "believe me: my vengeance will be unlike anything you have ever seen."

I knew, though, as I walked away from him, that I couldn't kill him, at least not yet. I -- no, *my Bakura* -- needed him to finish this because otherwise we'd be doing this an eighth time, and Bakura would no longer be with me at all.

Wait -- that -- *fuck* those stupid marks...!

"Kaiba." Mutou again?!

"What?!" I snapped at him. Mutou looked like he'd rather run the other direction than to approach me by the door, but approach me he did, holding out a card: Osiris.

"I want you to hold onto Osiris during the duel. I don't even want it in my deck when I duel Kura." He was nervous -- he had a right to be -- but he swallowed and continued. "I can't risk using it and hurting him again."

I looked down at the card in his hand, and then I stared at Mutou. I don't know what he saw in my face, but I'm sure he'd go for what was most optimistic. Time to dash his hopes. "Can you win without Osiris?" I asked him. Hopefully, he was smart enough to get my other meaning: we couldn't afford to give the damn demon bastard within Bakura a single win.

His laugh was short and bitter. "I've played this exact same duel at least five times that I remember. I've had time to analyze it step-by-step. I can win without Osiris."

I took the card. Perhaps I nodded also, and then I left him.

I kept seeing Bakura's bruised face.

If Mutou didn't win -- if we weren't back in the real world -- if my Bakura died --

Hell hath no fury...

...hell hath no fury...

If he was right, then things were starting to change already. Not that he was in the loop on a lot of things -- okay, in truth, not that he was in the loop on *anything* -- but he wasn't dumb. He had a brain in his head, and he knew how to use it -- and more than that, he remembered a loop or two. He could see a few things that were different, changing as they went.

//Such as?//

Well, there was the whole lack of Osiris on Battle Ship, and America definitely hadn't gone the way it should have, from what Yuugi had told him, and the less said about the whole thing with Dartz-san the better, and... and...

And that voice hadn't been his own thoughts, even if it was in his mind.

/Niisan? Are you okay? I mean... Are you, well, you right now?/

Yeah, maybe he was babbling. He had done that when he was nervous or scared for as long as he could remember.

His brother sounded terrible, though. If he had thought niisan sounded bad when this loop began, he sounded a thousand times worse now, like he was a mere step from death's door. If truth be told, if niisan had his own body and was talking aloud to him while sounding like he did now, he would have thought he was talking to a zombie.

//Yeah, I'm me,// niisan chuckled wearily, *//though I can't guess for how long. Are we alone?//*

For a moment, he felt puzzled. After all, they were never really alone, not with that thing inside his brother's head. It actually took him a moment to realize niisan meant physically, outside their shared body. */Yeah, we are. I'm at the apartment, and everyone else is off somewhere plotting and planning, no doubt. I wasn't invited, not that I'd be a lot of help in that arena. That's more your thing than-/*

A quick flash of light and a sudden feeling of weightlessness were his only warnings before he found a transparent version of his brother standing in front of him. And if niisan had *sounded* like the living dead earlier, he looked even worse in person, so to say.

Yuugi had said, when his older brother appeared like this to him, Yami looked exactly the same as usual, except for wearing a whole lot more leather. His niisan, however, didn't look anything like his normal overconfident, self-assured, almost arrogant self. Jounouchi-kun might even say he looked like he'd been rode hard and put up wet. He looked like he was exhausted, a fine sheen of sweat covering his nonexistent skin. His whole body seemed to sag; even his normally wild hair was drooping.

The thing was, all of that he could almost understand, with the weight of carrying a demon like Zork around in his mind. It was the plainly healing black eye that obscured half of his face which was incongruous with everything else. It alone he couldn't make sense of, and that both annoyed and worried him to no end.

/You look like hell, niisan,/ he commented frankly.

//Very funny.// He glanced around slowly, as though the effort cost him most of his energy. *//So everyone's off plotting and planning without us, huh?//* He nodded absently. *//Their loss.//*

/Niisan...? What happened to your face?/

His brother winced hard. *//It's not important right now.//*

Yeah, right, like he was going to let that one go through. That might have been the dumbest thought his brother had had in a long time, since he figured out a couple of years ago that his brother was more concerned with keeping him -- Ryou -- safe than he was with keeping himself alive. Takeshi had been a startlingly vivid example of that, after all. */Niisan--/*

Niisan cut into his words before he could even really start to scold him, and no, that was conspicuous in the least. *//I think Zork's planning something, some kind of endgame, and I think it'll spring it soon.//*

As a distraction, it was terribly obvious -- but utterly effective. */What kind of 'endgame'? What does that mean?/*

His brother sighed heavily, almost seeming to slump against something only he could see. *//I wish like hell I knew. I can't always get a lot out of it. I just get this sense of... anticipation and, I don't know, joy -- or excitement. It's definitely up to something. It's going to do something and soon.//*

/In Egypt maybe?/ he hazarded to guess. His brother shrugged, so obviously that was more than he knew. */So what should I do?/*

Niisan shook his head side to side slowly, and the movement was obviously an effort. *//I don't know. Stick to the others like glue, for one. Kitty'll keep you safe. Or maybe Treeboy. Keep close to one of them, and you should be fine.//*

It was now his turn to shake his head. */I'm more worried about you right now, niisan. You look exhausted as hell, and your face.../* He trailed off, giving his brother a chance to speak, to say something about what was going on, a chance he didn't take. */You didn't have that black eye the last time I saw you, but it looks a couple of weeks old. So start talking. Tell me. What happened?/* He end up biting each of his last few words out, and he was pretty sure his face was closing in on what niisan usually called 'rabid bunny'.

//I got in a fight.// For anyone else, that explanation might have -- would have -- been too short. For his brother, though, it said a lot. For all his faults, and there were plenty, niisan didn't much care for lying. *//After the last time you saw me but before we got pulled in here.//*

He almost asked 'with who' but stopped himself. It would have been a dumb question anyway. Really there was only one person it could have been. The accounts of what had happened before they got pulled into this weird world, all the versions he'd had to compare, all stated that his brother had been alone with exactly two people before all of this started: Yami and Kaiba. And while his big brother was admittedly capable of pissing off the Buddha, he didn't really think that niisan would still be alive -- so to speak, given his current state of transparency -- if it had been Kaiba who had hit him like this. That left one option... and it was one that had him seeing red.

No, whatever Yuugi's thoughts on that damned betting pool were aside, *he* was going to punch the hell out of *Yami* for this. Niisan might have had the reputation for being overprotective of his family, but it was actually more a part of being one of the Bakura trio; he and Amene had the same trait, but their older brother rarely gave them a chance to express it. Usually, he was too damn good at taking care of himself and the rest of them for either of them to get a chance to show it. To be fair, their short lives thus far had called for niisan to be like that, but damn it, sometimes he wanted the chance to take care of his brother as niisan had always taken care of him. This might be it.

Still, to be safe... */Yami?/*

The silence that followed was answer enough for him. He bit down hard on his lip to keep from letting any of the things he was thinking get to his brother.

/Why do you stay with him?/ He hadn't actually meant for that to come through where niisan could 'hear' it, but now that it was, well, he wanted an answer, damn it.

What he hadn't expected, though, was his brother bursting out into laughter. His grey eyes lit up like he couldn't remember seeing in years as he nearly doubled over in amusement. Had their lives really been so hard since they moved to Domino? There had been a lot of good, but there had been a lot of bad too -- and probably more of that than he knew about, since it would be just like his brother not to say anything.

/What's so funny, niisan?/ he finally had to ask.

Niisan sat up again, still chuckling to himself. *//Thanks. I needed that, brat.//* He wiped at his face and just grinned a moment. *//I guess it's not really all that funny, but Treeboy said the exact same thing to me right before we got pulled in here.//*

Niisan... remembered? */Really?/* was all he was able to manage though -- and that was little more than a squeak.

All too cheerfully, his brother nodded. *//Oh, absolutely. Of course, he was trying to kill me with his driving at the time, so I guess it balances out.//*

Oh boy, there was that weird niisan logic. Hard to believe he had almost missed it. */Going where?/* he prompted. This was kind of great, though. Niisan was usually never this forthright. He might not have much stock in lying, but he was great with obfuscation. This was the most honesty he'd gotten out of his brother in years, if he ever had.

//Hmm?// Grey eyes looked up at him in confusion, like he'd lost track of the conversation somehow. Odd...

/Where were you and Kaiba-kun going?/

Niisan paused, obviously backtracking through mental notes. Okay, now that was really weird. Usually his brother had a pretty good memory unless a ghost was nearby. Usually that was the only time he went all spacey like this. *//A church, I think,//* he finally answered, even if it did end up sounding like more of a question than a reply. *//He was getting these letters, saying to meet someone there. We all decided he shouldn't go alone.//* He paused a long moment, obviously trying to recall something. *//The city was empty near the church. Everyone was dead. Mass zombie raising.//*

/How big is 'mass'?/ he questioned, his heart in his throat. Vampires, weres, those he could deal with. Zombies weren't something he was comfortable with, though.

Niisan shrugged. */I don't know. Dozens? Hundreds? They killed Mahaado to raise them all.//*

So that ruled out that avenue of help from the real world. Still there was a small sticking point in the faltering tale that stood out to him. */Who is 'we all'?/*

//Me and Treeboy and... and... Seth, I think.//

/What were the letters about?/

//Last Halloween. Those new vampires he and I ran into back then, I think.// He snorted as if he were highly amused at something. *//Maybe the ass-kicking they gave us too, for all I know. I didn't read the damn things.//*

He straightened up sharply, plucking at his shirt tail nervously. */I thought you said it went smoothly. New vampires gone, no dead hostess./*

Niisan nodded. *//Yeah, we did. Kaiba kicked their asses, I got the hostess out. I just nearly got my brain bashed in in the process.//*

He felt his blood run cold and his stomach flipflop nervously -- no, in terror. He had come so close to losing his brother and hadn't even known about it? */Why didn't you tell me?/*

//It got sorted out.//

For all their talk about the Ishtars being the insane ones, niisan was certainly a bit touched in the head too. */It 'got sorted out'?/* he repeated, still feeling a bit shocked and sickened.

Niisan nodded again, still a bit too cheerfully for his tastes. *//Yeah, Kaiba took care of it, so... it's sorted.//*

//He-- How? He-- How could Tree-- Kaiba-kun 'sort it'?/ he floundered. He felt completely like a fish out of water here. Not only was his brother being extremely forthcoming with all this information, but he was also being entirely too relaxed and almost gleeful about the whole thing. */He did-- He didn't...?/*

//Turn me?// his brother finished with a short laugh. *//No way. Besides you've seen me in sunlight since then, brat! No, he just gave me the first mark, that's all.//*

""That's all," he says," he muttered aloud. Like it was something so simple and small. Really, he just needed a moment to process all of this. So Kaiba-kun had given his brother the first mark towards being his human servant? So what did that mean? From what he could recall, a full human servant was nearly as hard to kill as a vampire, healed almost as well as one, and lived as long as their vampire they were bound to did. That... didn't sound like a bad thing for his danger-prone brother. */So he made you harder to kill?/*

But niisan was shaking his head. *//That's for later marks. The first one just makes me harder to hurt.//*

There wasn't any reason to doubt what he was saying. His brother knew a hell of a lot more about vampires and their myriad powers than he did. But that meant... */But then... your eye?/*

Almost self-consciously, his brother reached up to touch the yellow-brown bruise. If they had really only been in here a week, it should have been more of a greenish color. If there was one benefit to life with their father, it was that he now knew how to date bruises by their colors; he

had seen enough of them on his brother and sometimes even in the mirror. If it was already this far along, then maybe niisan was starting to heal faster already. That... could be good.

//I guess it's healing.// If he knew his brother, he probably hadn't intended for those four words to sound so hesitant. It had actually sounded more like a question than a statement.

As much as anything else in this conversation, that hurt him. His big brother was supposed to be, as the saying went, ten feet tall and bulletproof. He was supposed to be crude, rude, brash, and utterly self-confident, and he was personally going to kill whoever or whatever had done this to him. No one deserved his, least of all his brother.

/It's healing up nicely,/ he finally offered. */Give it a few more days, and no one'll even be able to tell it was there./*

//What was where?//

He would almost have thought that he had lost niisan again, that he was now talking to the Spirit of the Ring -- or whatever it was called -- but no, it was definitely still niisan. More than that, it was the version of his brother that he usually saw. It was like he had just drifted away and then drifted back just now. Still, he might as well go with the flow. */Ahh... the bruise on your face. I was saying it's healing up nicely. Another day or two, and it should be completely gone./* He offered a bright, if somewhat forced grin, at his brother. */Of course, if everything goes okay, we should be back home by then./*

//If Treeboy gets his way,// niisan conceded with an answering smirk. *//Promise me you'll stick to him or Kitty.//*

He nodded enthusiastically. */Like glue./* And have a chance to talk about some of this with Kaibakun too while he was at it.

//And let them know what it's up to. The endgame and all.//

Another nod, this one more subdued. */I will, I promise./* He took a deep breath, unwilling now to let his obviously tired brother go -- but at the same time knowing that he had to, because who knew what would happen if niisan was too exhausted to keep fighting it. */You should get some rest, niisan. It'll be Egypt soon, and we'll all need to be at our full strengths then./*

His brother chuckled, the exhaustion bleeding through again. *//And what would that, exactly, in your case, brat? Half that of a dandelion?//*

It was a pretty weak joke and an even weaker insult, but he still laughed and took a playful swipe at his brother's arm--

--and found himself staring as he actually touched cloth, part of the oversized shirt his brother had been wearing when they were all pulled into this hellish place.

He didn't give it a single thought. Instead, he launched himself at his brother, wrapping both arms around his waist as tightly as he dared and burying his face in his chest. If he cried ever, now would probably be the time, but the tears refused to come. Instead, he just held onto his brother

and let the other try to comfort him in his own awkward and uncomfortable way, until niisan disappeared.

He picked himself back up, sniffing loudly, and called out, "Niisan?" No, wait, that wasn't the way to do it, he scolded himself. */Niisan? Niisan?!/*

A few heartbreaking seconds passed before he faintly heard an answer in his own mind. *//I couldn't hold it any longer.//* Niisan took a deep breath that he probably didn't need and continued, *//Sorry, brat.//*

/I was just worried,/ he came back with in a rush. */I'm okay now. You just get some rest, okay?/*

Silence greeted him, so maybe for once his brother was taking his advice. If he was, that was good. There were things he needed to do, questions he needed answers for. He wasn't going to wait to get them either. There was no time like the present.

If he remembered clearly what was supposed to come next in this loop, Bakura was supposed to show up, kidnap his little brother, and force him into a duel on top of Kaiba Corp Tower. He was pretty sure he remembered correctly, seeing as how they had all done this a few times now.

In no previous version, though, had it been the younger of the Bakura twins holding Mokuba in place and looking entirely too annoyed to be where he was. In fact, his voice was utterly bored and flat as he 'taunted', "I have your brother, blah blah blah. Come up and meet me, blah blah." Abruptly, his mannerisms completely changed, though, as he pleaded, "It's important, Kaiba-kun. Please?"

The sense of bewilderment was only heightened as Mokuba smiled cheekily and waved at the camera. "Hi there, niisama. This might be my best kidnapping to date!"

Okay, they definitely had to get out of this damn dreamworld soon, if only because his little brother was starting to rate all the times he had been kidnapped. There had been more than enough, after all, and knowing ahead of time they were coming didn't make it any easier to deal with. Each and every time made his suddenly human heart start to race.

He pressed the button to activate the internal intercom he had installed just for this duel, even if it wasn't with the sibling he was expecting, and calmly responded, "I'll be right up." He waited only long enough to see Ryou nod once in understanding.

The elevator to the roof was just outside the door to his office, still within what some might call his inner sanctum. The door to it actually sat opposite his secretary's desk. At this time of night and on this particular date, though, he had long since sent her home. There was something to be said for foreknowledge, after all.

All he had to do was press a button, and the doors immediately opened. There was also something to be said for being wealthy enough to afford the likes of personal elevators. There wasn't even a Kame Games to contend with in this world; only Industrial Illusions stood between Kaiba Corp and total domination of the gaming world. It was a damn shame he couldn't transfer some of the money he had made in his brief time here over to the real world; he could buy out both of the other gaming heads in no time then.

Those thoughts carried him as far as the roof. The door opened with a near silent hiss. Only a few steps away stood his still grinning little brother and Ryou. "See," Mokuba opinionated, glancing up at Ryou, "I told you he would be here in no time at all."

Ryou nodded, but it looked distracted at best. Perhaps he was talking with Bakura? With a mental shrug, he spoke up, "Go on home, Mokuba. I'll be there in a while."

His brother nodded and headed off with a jaunty "Later, niisama" in parting.

Once the elevator doors had closed again, he focused all of his attention on Ryou. The boy looked frazzled and out of sorts. Perhaps it wasn't fair to think of his as a boy when they were, after all, the same age or nearly so, but they had led very opposite lives. He had been forced to grow up early, even before the whole vampire thing, and by his own admission, Bakura had shielded his twin from much of the worst of what life had to offer. "You asked me to meet with you," he finally prompted, using much the same tone of voice as he would have used for the boy who had just left.

"We don't actually have to duel, do we? I mean, we both already know how this is going to end, and you're, like, fifty times the duelist I am, so can we just not do this and say we did?"

He had to stare a moment in something very much like amazement. How was it possible to get all that out in one breath? "I suppose," he stated.

Ryou let out a sigh of obvious relief and ran a nervous hand through his hair. "Thanks. It's just... I guess I'm a bit nervous." And Bakura had once let it slip that his brother had a tendency to babble when he was nervous. It made sense now. "You and I have never really talked that much, even if you've been letting us live with you for two years now, and all that..."

He raised a hand to cut off the stream of words. This was getting embarrassingly close to thanks, and those just made him uncomfortable. "Is this why you wanted to see me?"

But Ryou was shaking his head before he even finished asking the question. "No. It's just that I'm so nervous." He took a deep breath, visibly calming himself. "It's about niisan."

Hopefully Ryou would not notice how he suddenly stood up straighter and started paying a bit more attention. No, the boy's attention was solely focused on his own feet. That was a small relief at least. "What about Bakura?" Good, he even sounded as cool as ever.

"We've been talking." And suddenly, it wasn't like he was having a conversation with the nicer twin anymore. He might have been used to those hard glares in a much lighter eye shade, but that was definitely the same dark look the older Bakura gave him sometimes. "We've been talking about a great many things."

"Such as?"

"Such as Yami and the punch no one told me about. Such as Kaiba and the mark no one told me about."

What kind of a sign was it when someone as polite and nice as Ryou dropped all of the honorifics? Counting down to the apocalypse, no doubt, and either way, not good. "Was I supposed to leave him there with at best a concussion and at worse a fractured skull?"

Ryou scowled in a way that still immediately put him to mind of a rabid bunny: terrifyingly cute but still not something you wanted pointed at you. "If the situations had been reversed and I had helped Mokuba as you helped niisan and no one told you, how would you feel?"

His stomach clenched painfully at the thought, and it was actually a struggle to keep his face neutral. "Point taken."

"What pisses me off is Yami. I've seen my brother covered in bruises enough to last ten lifetimes. I don't want to see it ever again." He was silent for a long moment then stated decisively, "I want Yami gone."

"On that, at least, we agree."

"But," suddenly he seemed hesitant, not at all like he had been only a second ago, "not right away."

"Cold feet?" He could gladly get rid of Mutou himself, with varying degrees of permanency, if it came down to it. The sudden mood shift was odd, though.

"No. Not really, anyway. I want him gone, from niisan's life if nothing else. It's just... Well, niisan isn't well, Kaiba-kun, and I don't want to hurt him while he's sick. It's like... he kind of fades in and out in his own mind. I think I only found out as much as I did because he went a bit delirious for a few moments, then he didn't even remember what he'd said while he was like that. It was... Well, it was terrifying, Kaiba-kun."

"This thing -- this *game* Zork is playing -- is killing him."

Ryou looked stricken at the bald pronouncement, and he was nearly -- very nearly -- tempted to temper his words. What was it about the white-haired boy that so reminded him of Mokuba and thus tried to make some part of him want to treat him the same way? Maybe it all traced back to one statement Kitten had made over two years ago: something about how they were all -- him, Kitten, Bakura, even that asshole Mutou -- older brothers.

Ryou recovered with a speed that again reminded him of the elder Bakura and looked up to meet his eyes. After several years as a vampire, with no one but other monsters looking him in the eye, it was something of a novel experience. "Yes, yes, it is, Kaiba-kun. That's why I wanted to meet with you tonight. I have a favor to ask -- no, to *beg* -- of you."

If the phrasing alone wasn't enough to make him leery, the idea of any of the Bakura siblings willingly going into his debt would definitely do it. Cautiously, he responded, "I suppose it depends on the favor."

"Give him the other marks. When we get back to the real world, if he is still sick, give him the other marks."

He had... questions, maybe even concerns. First off, his boyfriend was here. They were in Egypt -- or a vague approximation of Ancient Egypt -- and Ryou was here. That was not of the norm, even for this weird world.

In fact, not only was Ryou here, but so was Malik-kun. For that matter, everyone was here except for three people: Kaiba-kun, Mokuba-kun, and Bakura-kun. Kaiba-kun should be along soon, and he couldn't see him leaving his younger brother behind this time, so they both should be showing up any moment.

That just left Bakura-kun, and he had no idea what to expect there. He remembered, in previous loops, seeing a version of him, one that terrified him in some way -- one that likely had a lot to do with self-preservation -- but that was before, when Ryou wasn't here. Now, everything was up for grabs. Anything could conceivably happen, for good or bad.

Aside from Ryou and Malik-kun being here, there were other differences and issues which also caused him concern. Primary among them all was, how exactly were they supposed to change it all so they could finally go home? You know, back home, where everything was *normal*. He still hadn't stopped having miniature heart attacks every single time he saw Kaiba-kun or one of the other vampires in the sunlight; he kept expecting them to spontaneously explode each and every time.

More to the point, though, they had to figure out how they were going to change things and soon. This was the last section of the loop, after all, and it always seemed to go by so quickly. If it was true that this was their seventh time going through this, then six other loops they had been unaware of what was going on or unable to affect any sort of change.

That meant whatever they had to change had to be something fairly large. If it was a large change, in a fair world, it would be an obvious one. But by no means was this world of Zork's a fair one. He just needed a chance to sit down and think about it -- and maybe run some ideas by Jounouchi-kun and niichan and Kaiba-kun, when he got here -- and he would come up with something.

It would probably be easier than figuring out why his boyfriend was trying to glare holes through his brother or why... there was a loud argument going on among the group on the silliest of topics.

"-isn't even historically accurate!" Isis-san was yelling, flinging some sort of headdress into the sand and looking all too ready to stomp on it. Now granted, he didn't know Malik-kun and Marik-san's sister too well, but she didn't seem the type to lose her temper like this. "If it were historically accurate, I would be a whole lot more topless!"

"I could get behind historical accuracy," Honda commented in a sotto tone, his voice suspiciously deep.

"Me too," he heard himself chime in as well. And maybe it was just as well all of Ryou's attention was on niichan, because a comment like that wouldn't have gone through without remark otherwise.

And if it weren't for how ticked off Ryou looked, he might have had to be jealous of all the attention his brother was getting. Something definitely had Ryou very ticked off at niichan, and only one thing came to mind: someone must have told him about the fight, and he hadn't liked

what he had heard. Maybe Ryou had even managed to get more of the story out of his brother than he had been able to get from niichan. That part didn't surprise him; Ryou was as protective of his brother as Bakura-kun was of him. The number of times he'd been read the riot act alone...

"Cute, boys," Isis-san returned dryly, rolling her eyes.

In all honesty, though, Isis-san was far from the only one he hadn't known before now in this... this... game... this dreamscape. Come to think of it, there was also the guy with the dice, Otogi or whatever his name was, but Malik-kun seemed to know him, if the whispered conversation much earlier in the game two loops ago was any indication. That meant something. What exactly that was, he wasn't positive, not yet, but he had ideas. He wanted to run them by some of the others first, though. Anyway, Otogi wasn't here right now, so it wasn't too much of a pressing concern. What was a pressing concern was...

"How are you here?" he asked quietly, sliding up close to his boyfriend's side. When Ryou didn't answer immediately, he gently touched his arm, dragging his attention away from niichan, and repeated the question.

Ryou sighed softly, leaning into him, and answered at the same volume. "Niisan asked me to stay close to Jounouchi-kun so I'd be safe." Again, he sighed, but this one sounded so much more resigned, tired even. "He made me promise, like he wasn't going to be here."

To himself, he thought that that might not have been Bakura-kun's worst idea ever. This loop wasn't shaping up to be any better than the ones before, and chances were sickeningly high that they would just end up repeating the whole thing over again from the beginning, waking up in Chono-sensei's classroom once more. And seriously, he dreaded the thought of doing this over again.

"So does anyone have any kind of idea for how we can get out of here?" he finally asked aloud, voicing the question that surely everyone must have been thinking but wasn't asking just yet. Of course, from the dirty looks he was getting was any indication, maybe everyone else was just being a lot more tactful than he was, but there was a time for tact and there was a time for getting the hell out of this place... and this was definitely the latter.

Niichan was squirming in the -- of all things -- throne, looking all too uncomfortable, every so often tugging on what amounted to a skirt, trying to stretch it longer. He desperately wanted to tell him that stuff like that never worked, but in the meanwhile, it was just amusing; he was getting a wealth of things to tease his brother about when they got back home. "All I know," niichan finally stated, "is that it eventually comes down to that final fight and the god cards. Every single time, something goes wrong, I have to seal Zork, there's no way to destroy it, and--"

"--and we wind up back in Chono-sensei's class," he helpfully added with a shudder.

Niichan nodded and finished his thought, "So it has to be something to do with the god cards."

Behind him, very slow and very sarcastic clapping began. They all whirled to look, but it really was no surprise who stood there. "Bravo, Mutou," Kaiba-kun drawled. "You have set a new standard of mediocrity for the world to aspire to."

"Be nice, Kaiba-kun..." Not that he thought it would do a lot of good. Kaiba-kun had never really listened to him. There were only two people here who Kaiba-kun even pretended to listen to, but Mokuba-kun seemed to be in agreement with his brother and Jounouchi-kun...

"What have I told you about sarcasm, Seto?" And Jounouchi-kun seemed to not be too concerned, at least not with making certain everyone played nice and worked together until they got out of here.

"Leave the sarcasm to the professionals'?" Malik-kun -- no, Marik-san guessed.

Jounouchi-kun threw up his hands in dismay, obviously frustrated with one of his boyfriends... when the other one put in an appearance -- and how sad was it that he was getting to where he could tell the difference between the Ishtar twins. "Talk to the paw?" Malik-kun hazarded a guess. Jounouchi-kun let out a growl worthy of his other form and stalked away.

Yep, that settled it. They were doomed. They were stuck in here forever. If Jounouchi-kun, of all people, was getting frustrated...

"So we have nothing resembling a plan?" he asked miserably. "I mean, it doesn't even have to be a *good* plan. Anything? I don't want to end up in Chono's class again. Please?" And if he was whining, frankly he didn't care.

"That desperate to ditch class, Mini-Me?"

He -- They all started at that familiar voice. After all, hadn't he just been thinking about how Bakura-kun might or might not put in an appearance? By this world's strange rules, that was practically like paging him, making him appear from the shadows to lean against a pillar like some sort of phantom. A smirk covered his pale and battered-looking face, and it looked so much like the Bakura-kun he knew from the real world that it almost hurt. The question was, was this indeed their version of Bakura-kun or the one that was controlled by Zork?

"Niisan!" Ryou cried. He made an aborted attempt to grab his boyfriend before he all but leapt onto what might be his brother -- but also might not be.

No, scratch that: this was definitely their Bakura-kun. The fact that he willingly caught Ryou and didn't let go was the first clue. The second one had a lot to do with how he was dressed differently than he had been every other time they got to this point. It wasn't a huge difference; it looked like he had found a way to replace the skirt with a pair of pants. If he wasn't mistaken, it looked like niichan might have even been a bit jealous of that. Yep, that settled it: they had definitely entered the Twilight Zone, and he wanted out. *Now*.

Besides, who else but their Bakura-kun would call him that stupid nickname?

He glanced away, giving the brothers a moment of privacy for them to talk in quiet undertones, and studied the rest of their group. Isis-san, Anzu, and Honda-kun seemed to be quietly discussing something, hopefully how to get them all out of here this time. Malik-kun stared at Bakura-kun for a long moment then seemed to space out, so he was probably talking to his brother about whatever it was he had noticed. Behind Malik-kun, Jounouchi-kun looked... concerned. In fact, if he wasn't mistaken, it looked like his friend was trying to scent the air, like he'd picked up a scent he

didn't like. He shouldn't be able to do that here, should he, unless he was starting to get his were senses back here? That could be... interesting, if only for what it could mean for everyone else -- and how quickly they would have to scramble to get the vampires out of the sun.

And speaking of the vampires, he risked a glance their way. Well, at least they weren't on fire, he thought with some degree of relief. He wasn't hoping to pick up anything off either of them; they were way too good at hiding what they were thinking. That was definitely true for Mokuba-kun. All he could tell about Kaiba-kun was that he was sizing Bakura-kun up, like he was trying to decide Bakura-san's usefulness or something. Maybe Kaiba-kun did have a plan after all.

And niichan... Niichan was staring openly at Bakura-kun, his face a mixture of so many stark emotions there for anyone to see who cared to look: relief, worry, love, maybe even terror. Not for the first time, he wondered about the two of them, about how they had managed to stay together this long, how much they cared for each other. Looking at niichan, the answer to the latter question was immediately obvious, and that wasn't exactly something he cared to see on his brother's face. Bakura-san was a bit harder for him to read on a regular basis, so he had no doubt in his mind that the other man was even harder to do so here.

"I don't know how long I've got," he finally heard Bakura-kun speak up, pitching his voice loud enough once again for everyone to hear. "Zork tends to keep me on a pretty tight leash around here."

If anything, that sounded a bit too much like an understatement for his own comfort. Anyone else's too, for that matter, he was willing to guess, just from the expressions he could see immediately around him.

"Why are you here then, Bakura-kun?" he finally summoned up the courage to ask when it seemed no one else was going to.

"Because I don't see any of you coming up with a way out of here. We need out *now*, so I guess you've all just been waiting for yours truly to bang some heads together and come up with the answers." Yeah, and it was stuff like this that was why he was still a bit terrified of Bakura-kun. Thankfully, though, the white-haired man's attention was no longer still on him. Instead, it was sliding to one of the blonds at the back of their little group, so he could breathe a little sigh of relief -- one that he immediately sucked back in. "Malik?"

"Yeah, Boss?" came immediately. Malik-kun looked stiff, and he might have been standing up even straighter than before. That would be in response to Bakura-san's snappish tone, if nothing else.

"What kind of assets do we have here?"

Somehow Malik-kun recovered quickly, like he had seen this side of the former thief before. "Well, first off, we have your harem boy pants there." Bakura-kun only rolled his eyes, flipped the other man the bird casually, and gestured for him to continue. "We all remember now, everyone, I mean, even those two." He tossed a careless gesture at Anzu and Honda-kun. "And it looks like we're all getting our abilities back. One more turn, and we'll be having to keep the vampires out of the sun full-time."

But Bakura-kun was already shaking his head before Malik-kun finished speaking. "We can't wait one more turn. Zork is planning some kind of big finish for this time. Unless we want to see what he has in mind for the grand finale, I suggest we get the fuck out of here -- and sooner would be better than later."

"We were saying," niichan starts hesitantly, shifting nervously, "it always comes down to the final battle and the god cards."

Now that was worth paying attention to. His brother? Looking nervous as hell? That was just weird! Maybe it shouldn't have been so funny, not as much as it was, but he really couldn't help it. His brother was always so brash and overconfident, but now he seemed afraid of his own shadow, much less his frankly terrifying boyfriend. He had been following his older brother around his entire life -- and a few years of his death too, for that matter -- and he'd never seen him like this before. It was just so wrong that he had to laugh -- or else he would start crying.

As disturbing as that was, though, it was nothing compared to seeing Bakura-kun glance over at niichan then quickly look away. He couldn't make heads or tails of it... then it all just clicked. They had fought before they got pulled in here, and they hadn't exactly had a chance to work things out while they'd been in here. Bakura-kun was usually entirely not himself -- and he wasn't offering up his body for them to use to make up in the few times when Bakura-kun *was* himself. He might love his older brother dearly, but there was no way in hell he was volunteering for that!

After all, it was freaky enough that niichan and he were dating twins. Something like that would only add a whole new level of weird to the entire thing.

"What it really comes down to is a battle of numbers, right?" Bakura-kun suddenly asked. If no one else was willing to admit to jumping at the sudden words, he certainly would. "Not people against him, but those -- what do you call them?"

"Life points," he heard himself, niichan, and Kaiba-kun answer simultaneously. They *were* the only three actual gamers before all this started. Ryou had played for fun on occasion and Jounouchi-kun had had two cards he liked, but that had been the extent of interest anyone else had demonstrated in Duel Monsters prior to being stuck in here. Bakura-kun had frequently had no qualms about telling everyone just how dumb he thought it was, and the Ishtars, they had probably gone duelist tipping on full moon nights when Jounouchi-kun's back was turned or something.

Almost on cue, Bakura-kun rolled his eyes overdramatically, and from somewhere off to the side, he heard Malik-kun snort. Good to know their two resident crazies were amused at least.

"Whatever," the elder white-haired man declared. He looked like he was biting back adding something, probably something insulting or crude, knowing him. How odd. "So, any ideas?"

"The god cards are the only real possibility in game," niichan slowly stated.

"Or they would be if Mutou here could figure out how to fuse them." Yeah, Kaiba-kun still wasn't feeling too charitable towards niichan, if the way he spoke was any indication, like he was spelling things out for a particularly slow student.

Niichan let out a snarl -- and frankly, it reminded him less of the leopards they were around all the time and more of the tigers from Tokyo they only saw on occasion. "I've tried to fuse them," he gritted out through tightly clenched teeth. "Don't you think I've tried? There isn't a way to do it."

Those two were going to come to blows, and at the rate they were going, it was going to be sooner rather than later.

"So what about all this crap with 'the Pharaoh's name'?" Jounouchi-kun asked, complete with air quotes. "Could that be useful for anything?"

Niichan now rolled his eyes, finally huffing out a sigh, climbing to his feet, and starting to pace. Somehow he had seen that one coming. It had really been a mark of how nervous his brother was that he had been sitting still as long as he had. "Like I don't know my own name..." he muttered darkly, just loud enough to be heard. "And what the hell good is 'Yami' going to do in something like this anyway?"

"I believe," Kaiba-kun cut into the monologue, disdain dripping from his every word, "that Kitten meant your *real* name, the one you try so hard to forget." Unspoken, for once, was Kaiba-kun's opinion on niichan's ability to do something as simple as forgetting.

Bakura-kun snorted in obvious amusement. "It would be something like that."

Jounouchi-kun too was nodding like all this made perfect sense to him. "It makes a sense, though. We all know you don't like your real name, so none of us use it -- and that keeps Zork's spells safe. Ingenious bastard."

"And then there are some of us who don't *know* Yami's real name," Malik-kun complained. "And, Boss, couldn't you have stolen a second pair of harem boy pants? Every time we get a stiff breeze, it finds Yami's skirt there, and I want to spork my eyes out -- except that I'd have to invent the spork first and that might suck a bit."

Predictably, niichan turned a shade of red he might have thought to be humanly impossible, and almost everyone else broke into relieved chuckles, excepting of course Kaiba-kun who always seemed to be above such things. The internal tension had broken a bit, and he couldn't help feeling relieved by that. Hell, he almost wanted to thank Malik-kun for that much at least.

"Eyes off, nutball," Bakura-kun fired right off, though he sounded more amused than annoyed, "or I'll--"

Whatever else he was about to say was cut off in a gasp as he bent over at the waist. If he didn't know better, he would have thought someone just punched Bakura-kun in the stomach, knocking all the air out of his lungs, but the only person standing near enough to him to have done that was Ryou; he couldn't see that happening in this lifetime, funky alternate universe or not.

In fact, Ryou was doing everything he could to keep his brother on his feet, but he was obviously struggling. Yeah, he loved his boyfriend, but upper body strength was not his forte. He had barely taken to go help when suddenly both Jounouchi-kun and -- of all people! -- Kaiba-kun were suddenly on either side of Bakura-kun and were hauling him back to his feet. Well, on one hand, it made sense: they were the only two fast enough to catch him before he hit the ground, if they both

had their abilities back. On the other hand, though, Jounouchi-kun helping Bakura-kun made plenty of sense, but Kaiba-kun being helpful was just out there, no matter how he looked at it, he thought in some detached corner of his mind.

Honestly, he had been about to forget just how bad Bakura-kun looked when he first showed up, injured and ashen. He could be the first to admit that sometimes Bakura-kun's personality kept him from remembering things like that. But if he had been pale before, that was nothing compared to now: it was like every drop of blood had drained from his face. Dull grey eyes lifted to look at the sky -- when he followed Bakura-kun's gaze, the sun was rapidly being blotted out by dark clouds -- and a tired voice stated dully, "Time's up."

When he glanced back, it was only in time to see Bakura-kun flicker out of existence.

He was going to have nightmares about this for the rest of his natural life. Everyone, especially Kura, would probably say he was being overdramatic, but as he saw it, it was just a simple statement of fact.

This whole dreamworld was just, as Kura would no doubt put it, fucked up. He himself preferred to say it sucked out loud, and he wanted out of here *now*. He wanted them all out of here *now*. Hell, even Kaiba, and if that wasn't saying something...

There were few things in this or any other world he was willing to admit frightened him. Seeing Kura flicker out of sight, like a ghost in some crap horror movie, rated pretty damn high on the list. Slightly higher up on said list was watching everyone throw everything they had at the huge creature who literally filled the skyline -- Zork, it had to be -- and having this faint but undeniable feeling that Kura was stuck inside of it, that they had to kill Zork to get free and go home but would have to hurt Kura to do it. He almost wanted to completely call off the assault, but...

Bakura will die if this thing repeats itself again...

There was something seriously wrong about him not being able to get Kaiba's voice out of his head, but those damn words kept echoing through his mind over and over again, until they were all he could think of. No, this thing had to end and *now*.

Zork stumbled -- actually fell back one earth-shaking step -- under a combined attack of Black Magician, the Blue Eyes White Dragon, and the Red Eyes Black Dragon... and a scream rent the air. It was perfectly obvious that it hadn't come from Zork, from either of its mouths, which left only one option: Kura.

And that was when it started: wispy shapes, no more substantial than mist, seemed to rise up from the ground beneath their feet. He whipped around wildly to look beyond him. They were all over!

"Bakura's calling the spirits to him!"

He didn't know who yelled that out. It could have been anyone. Hell, it might have even been him. All he knew was, a scant moment later, another strangled cry erupted. What now?!

He turned quickly to see Ishtar on the ground. He couldn't even be certain which one it was, with how they were flickering back and forth between the two of them as they were. Of course, one of

them was little more than a spirit himself. Either Bakura was pulling on them so hard that the line between the two of them was blurring, or they were switching rapidly back and forth to keep that -- or worse, being pulled into Zork like the other spirits -- from happening. If he had half a minute, he could probably tell which it was... but right now there was no time for that.

At least Kura wasn't turning the spirits loose on them, he thought to himself weakly. As many of them as had been called, not a one of their group would have survived the assault. And he couldn't blame Kura for this. Hell, he defied anyone to blame Kura for this. Unless his guess was way off, Kura was inside Zork -- or at least felt what it felt -- and every attack was hurting him. In other words, Zork had taken the perfect hostage. Like Jounouchi had said earlier, ingenious bastard.

Bakura will die if this thing repeats itself again...

God damn Kaiba...

Bakura will die...

No, there wasn't any other way to do this. They were going to have to hurt Kura to keep from killing him.

Trying not to feel too stupid doing this, he summoned the three god cards from his little brother's deck, making an absent wish as they appeared before him: please let this work, please let Kura be okay.

I have to get out of here and calm down. I'll be back in a while.

You will be back though?

When I'm calmer.

"I'm so sorry, Kura," he whispered to himself, before drawing himself up to his full height and stating aloud, "I call forth the gods: Ra, Osiris, and Obelisk! In the name of the pharaoh, Atemu, I unite the gods."

The light that exploded from the three gods merging was nearly blinding, but somewhere in the middle of it was what looked like a gigantic woman, standing calmly and serenely as you please staring down Zork.

The barest flicker of her attention settled like a stone on him, and he had to fight the urge to shiver. *///What is your command?///* she demanded, her powerful voice seeming to come from both nowhere and everywhere all at once.

"Destroy Zork," he managed to force out. Actually, he was a little surprised he had managed that much.

///Horakhty, creator god of light, obeys,/// she stated plainly, her voice echoing through him. She raised both palms towards the creature, which was by now obviously backpedaling, eager to put as much distance between it and Horakhty as possible. *///Djeseru,///* she said softly, a word he didn't understand but clearly held power.

An impossibly more brilliant light filled the air around them, covering and slipping through him, the magic on the other side of too warm. His skin felt scalded, like he had been in the sun too long, but oddly, he didn't mind. He felt... like he was floating, like this was nothing but a dream. But this wasn't one, was it?

With an effort, he focussed his mind, opening eyes he didn't remember closing to see Zork dissolve into the light. As it disappeared, an odd weight seemed to settled around him, as if holding him in arms that felt too familiar, arms that could only belong to one person. They certainly weren't physically there; it was more the sense of Kura's mind or perhaps even his soul, and it was holding not just him, but all of them. Around him, the world itself started flickering as the monster's illusion began to fade away, and in its place, he could almost make out the real world, dark as pitch after the brilliance of Horakhty's light.

It took him a long moment to place where he was, but perhaps he should have known: the bedroom he shared with Kura at Kaiba's place. He wasn't if they had been brought to where their bodies were or if Kura had just chosen some place that felt safe and familiar, but it didn't bear thinking too hard on.

Something -- Kura, and by extension, everyone else -- bled away, and he slept.

Well, fuck.

You know, I've had some major hangovers in my short life for not being a drinking man, but... Has my life really been that short? Right now, I have two sets of memories running through my head. One's telling me I'm three thousand years old and shouldn't be feeling pain because I don't have a body of my own. The other says I'm not too far from my twenty-first birthday -- and am probably pretty damn lucky to have made it this long, with how danger-prone I've become as of late. The first set says I need to be looking for the Sennen Items (What are those?); the second wants to know if my family is all right. Are my people okay?

Maybe if I can force my eyelids to open...

At least it's not a hospital this time, is all I can think at first, though honestly I might prefer a hospital to the mini-clinic Varon set up about a year ago in one of those many rooms upstairs that had been standing empty. I think the impersonal attention of hospital staff would be a vast improvement to the yelling I'm going to get from Varon when he realizes I'm awake. Speaking of that, am I awake? I'm not used to the non-reaction. Maybe it is a hospital then, I think to myself as I sit up. It doesn't smell like a hospital, and I'm not seeing too much besides white anyway; there is a vague impression of furniture and a window, but I can't even tell if it's day or night.

A click echoes loud in the silence of that large, still room, and my head turns towards the noise. I can vaguely make a figure with long dark hair -- and shouldn't he be a lot younger, like twelve or something? No, wait, not here, that's only in the game. It's definitely night, then, if Mokuba is out and about. "Bakura-kun? You're awake?"

"I'm sitting up, aren't I, halfpint?" I snap back, unable to help myself. He's a tiny bit taller than me. Where did the 'halfpint' come from? Oh yeah, never mind.

The next thing I know, he's bodily attached himself to me. "You're awake! I'm so happy! Oh! I need to go tell Yami-kun and Ryou-kun and Jounouchi-kun and niisama! I'll be right back!" And he's back out the door.

"My, people come and go so quickly here," I have to quip, turning to dangle my feet over the edge of the bed.

There's the loud, quick pounding of feet running. Who do I know who isn't all kinds of damn stealthy? "Niisan!" Oh yeah, yado- No, my brother. My twin brother, Ryou, half my reason for pushing so hard to stay alive. Again, I'm having the life choked out of me as Ryou hugs me tightly. Something in me wants to shove him off and tell him to act tougher, but it's a small part and it's shrinking quickly -- and that's just as well by me. This is my little brother, I tell myself as I blink in surprise when I find my arms lifting to wrap around him as well. Whatever clothes I'm wearing are getting soaked to my chest; he's crying, in relief I hope. "Oh, niisan, I'm so glad you're finally awake. I was starting to get so worried. I thought you were gone."

"We were all starting to worry." That's Seto's -- no, *Seth's* -- voice from the doorway.

"Seth." Him, I can faintly make out; for being a vampire, he's always been very dark-skinned. No wonder he ended up being Egyptian in the dreamworld. No fair, though, that he was only in it before a few brief moments every time, while the rest of us had to do it again and again, even if I didn't realize it till nearly the end. "How is everyone?" Better still, where are they? Ryou's tears are still coming, and I ease one hand up from his back to pet his hair.

"You were the last to wake up. Varon's been working on it. He thinks that... thing was eating your... life-force, as you would have it."

I feel a chill that has nothing to do with the temperature of the room. "My soul, you mean?" It makes a kind of twisted sense. Zork couldn't access my powers without my soul; Mahaado said that's what they're tied to, after all. And it was trying to break free of its imprisonment; gathering energy off me and Seto mostly -- but likely also everyone else too - probably greatly furthered that cause. It also explains why I couldn't break free for so long. I'm glad Yami killed the hell out of it. "Is everyone else okay, though?"

"Yes, they're all fine. If Mutou had stayed in here another minute though, Varon might have made sure he wasn't. He was sent to your room to try to sleep." So that explains why Yami's not here. "Jounouchi and the Ishtars are probably on their way up here. Last I saw of that lot, they'd practically claimed the boathouse as their own private sanctuary. As for Seto..."

"I'm right here." I blink slowly, once, twice. I was almost looking for the damn white trenchcoat, I realize and want to smack myself. "You're awake, I see."

"As observant as always, Treeboy," I fire back. God, that feels wonderful, just to be able to say whatever I want to, no matter how smartass it might be. After however long it's been, I had been about to forget how it felt.

"Don't be mean to Kaiba-kun, niisan," Ryou whispers in my hair. I tilt my head slightly to show my confusion, partially at why he's bothering to whisper; they can hear him perfectly well. "I-- He-- He saved your life."

For a second, I pause and run my tongue along the ridges of my teeth. No fangs. I don't feel the unnatural urge to kiss his ass, so he didn't give me enough blood to make me into a Renfield, so what does that leave? "Seto?"

"Bakura," and it's Seth that's speaking; this won't be good, "you were unconscious nearly two weeks after everyone else woke up. We were all starting to fear that thing had somehow managed to destroy your soul and kill you; Mutou was too much of a wreck to look within you for it, and Ishtar kept insisting it was just a spark, like the tip of a lighter. We took a chance on the only thing we had left to try that wasn't turning you into a vampire or a Were."

In my mind's eye, I saw a flash of long blonde hair: Cynthia Crawford. "You made me a human servant." It's not even a question.

I sense, rather than see, Seto shaking his head. "No." His voice is soft, almost hesitant, maybe even worried -- and I'm not saying a word about how much that bothers me. "I gave you two marks." Two? In addition to the one I already had to make three or one more to make two? "If you hadn't woken up by next week, we were going to try for the last." And if I know Treeboy, that was a roundabout guarded way of saying I'm sitting at three marks, hopefully without letting anyone else know that I'm sitting at three now. Well... fuck...

"As it is, we still don't know what kind of side-effects that possession is going to have on you in the long and short terms." That was Varon's voice, coming from somewhere behind Seto. "No one has ever been possessed by a creature of that magnitude for such a long period of time."

"I can barely see anything. Does that count?"

I should have known better. Those simple words put Varon straight into doctor mode, and there's a bright penlight shining in my eyes as he continues to speak. "Chances are, unless you consent to letting Kaiba turn you or make you his human servant, you probably won't make it another ten years."

Dead by thirty, every teenager's nightmare. Ryou's hold on me tightens and his sobs grow louder, and I glare in the direction of the penlight. "Are you quite done scaring my brother, or do I need to introduce you to your own entrails, Varon?"

I'm probably whining, but damn it, where are Yami and Kitty?! I need to know for myself that they're okay, that they got out okay, that I didn't do anything to hurt them because I couldn't break Zork's hold on me. Goddamn evil spirit... Maybe Yami could have killed it a bit more.

Seth stumbles like someone just shoved him and the bed creaks suddenly, and those are my only clues someone's coming till I feel another set of arms around my waist and hear a loud jagged

purring. I let one of my hands drop on Kitty's head, as I glance around for Malik. Ah, of course he's right next to Kitty, seeming a little reluctant to leave his side even for a second. I think when I find Yami, I'm going to do the same.

"I don't see anything wrong with your eyes that I can turn up with what I have here," Varon's saying, finally putting that damn pen light away. "If they haven't improved by the end of the night, I want to take you to look at them with some better equipment."

"Fine," I grumble. "Where's Yami?"

"Here."

I blink in the direction of the door. Is he hiding behind Seth or what? There's a blank spot where his voice is coming from. Not that I'm telling anyone that while Varon's in the room. I have no wish to see his impressive collection of needles and other stabby things, and I especially have no wish to see them coming anywhere near me. So how the hell am I going to work this?

"Hey, brat, Kitty, I need to talk to Yami a moment." I give them a second to get moving before I add, "Alone."

Ryou's climbing his feet, moving oddly slow, like he's dragging, as Kitty sits back. "Can't you wait to jump him, Dorobou? Let us get out of the room first."

I send a half-hearted glare in the direction I think Kitty is. I can hear a faint snickering from where I know Malik is, so I think I'm a little off. "Out, cat. Now, everyone."

The room is eerily quiet excepting shuffling steps for several seconds till I hear the door pull closed. "Bakura -"

"Are we alone?" I cut him off.

If I know him, he's looking side to side then at the door before turning one of his confused stares at me. "Yes..."

"I can barely see anything. Get your ass over here."

"You can't see anything?" I can actually track him across the room by his voice when he's shrieking like this. That's useful. "How the hell are you so calm about it?!"

"Because I know you're going to freak out enough for both of us." I pause then continue. "And after the past few years, I think this isn't that bad. I'll take this over Zork any day."

"Did... Did Varon tell you?" He's sitting down on the far end of the bed; I can feel it shifting beneath him. Well, that's interesting. Why put so much space between us?

"That he's not expecting me to make it to thirty? Yeah, he did." I turn to face where he is now. "Talk

to me, Yami."

He's silent long enough that I think I'm going to have to prompt him again, but finally he speaks. "Aren't you mad at me, Bakura?"

Okay, rewind. Confused here. 'Bakura', not 'Kura'? Once might be a fluke, but twice? "Mad at you?" I take the other part of the matter first. I want to move over closer to him because maybe, just maybe, I can tell what the hell's going on if I touch him, but I'll probably fall off the bed if I try it. I know my damn luck. "Why the hell would I be mad at you?"

"I... In the dreamworld, I..." Oh, this is about that.

I pull myself to the center of the bed and reach out towards where the bed is dipping. It takes some stretching, but finally I touch his shoulder and use that to orient myself as I slide cautiously closer. "Yami."

"Yeah?" Beneath my hand, I can tell he just turned to face me, so I thump the back of his head. "Ow! What was that for?"

"You're a moron." I thump him again, harder this time. "What happened in the dreamworld only exists in the dreamworld."

"But Osiris -- and the end of the game--!" He's rubbing the place I thumped... and my hand as well. "And Duelist Kingdom!" I lift my other hand to touch his face. He's biting his bottom lip. Why am I not surprised? "The Osiris..." That part's really bothering him.

I will not smirk as I let my hand on his face cup his cheek to try to make him look at me; I can't tell if his eyes are focused on me or not, but I'll take what I can get right now. "You didn't use Osiris on me the last time though, and I hurt you too and didn't remember to pull anything back."

He's mumbling something now, and I pull him closer to hear the words. "I could have killed you though. I thought I had. You weren't waking up and weren't waking up, no matter what anyone tried. I thought I'd killed you when I destroyed Zork."

Oh, for God's sake... I slide the hand I'd had on his shoulder down to his waist and drag him up against me. Only I think I miscalculated a bit; I'm not as steady as I should be, and we fall back with him on top of me. This works just as well too.

"Get it through your head, you game-obsessed moron. You're stuck with me for quite a while yet. I've survived worse than that Zork nitwit, and I'm not biting it anytime soon, especially not at your hand. Don't go getting a big head because Zork decided to take your nickname as your actual position in the game." I pull him down for a kiss. Hey, what do you know? I think my eyes are clearing up; I can almost make out his face. "I'm not going anywhere."

"What Varon said though..." His voice is way too soft, even for him, and I kiss him again.

"We'll deal with tomorrow when it gets here. I'm not dead yet, and I'm sure Seto's not letting any of us give up the ghost that easily." I brush my hand through his hair, and it springs back up. I guess my eyes are getting better then. "I'm not leaving you, Pharaoh." I take a deep breath and say those words I have yet to be able to till now. "I love you." Okay, that wasn't as much of a strain as I thought it was going to be. "You're mine after all."

And I never give back what's mine.