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Cloak of Darkness

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"So what's the problem with this one?" asked Yusuke.

"Humm?" Botan looked up, "Problem? What problem?"

Kuwabara folded his arms over his chest, "Botan-chan, you have that look in your eye... You haven't told us everything."

"Well, it's going to be a really tough job. We don't normally go to other dimensions – those of us of the Spirit World don't have full access to our powers, so Hiei and Kurama are going to be handicapped. That's why Koenma wanted you – as humans, your rei isn't restricted."

"We got that part, Botan," Yusuke commented wryly, "Now what's the part you didn't mention already?"

Botan sighed, "It's not... Well, it's just that Koenma had this really worried look on his face as he told me about the assignment. And I saw a letter on his desk that had King Enma's seal. I tried to get a closer look, but... Well, I just don't know."

The two boys looked at each other in surprise. In the year they'd been working as Spirit World Detectives, they'd learned that though Koenma tended to quail at the thought of his father, rarely did the King actually get involved. But if Botan didn't have any more information... Yusuke redirected the conversation, "So, where is this person who's suppose to get us into the other world?"

"Dimension," Botan corrected, "It's not strictly another world, but... oh, never mind. Kurama's picking her up. He's going to meet us at the park. Hiei's suppose to meet us there too..."

"Her?" Yusuke picked up on the most relevant, to him, part of that conversation.

Botan glared at him, "Don't try any of your tricks, Yusuke – Shinka is a respected priestess of a Shinto Shrine. She's young, but she's the one who first felt the emanations coming through to our world and she—"

The rest of Botan's sentence was cut off as Kuwabara hooted with laughter, "Oh that's rich! 'Respected Priestess'! Oh, that is soooo good! I'm

going to get her on that one!!! She won't live it down for ages – especially if I tell her mother!!!"

This time it was Botan and Yusuke who traded glances of puzzlement and curiosity. Botan glanced at her notes, "Do you know Shinka, Kuwa-chan? It doesn't mention anything like that here..."

"Know her?" Kuwabara exclaimed, "Shin-chan is my cousin!"

Botan and Yusuke fell down.

Yusuke picked himself up, "Your cousin is a priestess!!!"

"Naa..." Kuwabara waved a hand, "Aunt Derosha is the priestess. Shin-chan is... well, she's sortof the mascot of the temple. Her rei is so powerful that she can't come to the city often, 'cause things have a tendency to get out of control when she's around. The shrine is the only really safe place for her. But she's not in training to be a priestess..." his enthusiasm running down, Kuwabara frowned, "actually, I don't know what the heck Shin-chan does."

"Kuwabara's cousin..." Yusuke muttered, "I might have known." He sighed, "Kuwabara – do you have any ordinary relatives?"

"What do you expect of Kuwa-chan?" Botan asked, "Normality?"

"Hey!" Kuwabara glared. And then he did a double-take, not quite sure if that was an insult or a compliment from the Guide of the River Death.

Impatiently, Yusuke glanced at the clock, "Let's head out to the park. It's almost time to meet them."

The others agreed and they left. On the wall, the clock ticked off the seconds to the empty room.

When they got to the park, the group of three looked around at the silent woods.

"I guess they're not here yet," Yusuke remarked.

A giggle from the trees disproved his remark, and a slim lithe form dropped from the branches and ran to Kuwabara and hugged him, "Kaz-chan! Kurama said you'd be here!"

"Shin-chan!" Kuwabara laughed as he hugged his cousin back, "You're in fine spirit today!" He regarded her fondly, "You're happy."

The diminutive girl smiled up at her tall cousin, "We were playing while we were waiting for you." There was a slight flush on her dark skin and the amber highlights in her hazel eyes sparkled, accenting the yellow-white hair.

Kuwabara pushed a stray lock back over her ear, "Playing? We?" He looked down at her rather curiously.

Another laugh came from the woods, and they looked over to see Kurama leaning against a tree, breathing heavily, "Minx... I'll never agree to play tag with you again – I can't even keep up with you! Let alone catch you!"

Yusuke was catching flies. He put his jaw back in place finally and used it for speech, "This is a Shinto priestess? She's the one who will open the gate? She's a child!"

Botan was making shushing gestures, too late.

"Ooo..." Kuwabara rapidly stepped back, "You've done it now, Urameshi!"

A deeper red showed under the hazel eyes as the short girl stepped up to Yusuke and looked him carefully up and down, taking her time and not skipping over any part of him. Yusuke's blushed under the attention but stood his ground. The girl finally looked up into his eyes, "How old are you?"

"Huh?" Yusuke blinked and answered, "Fifteen..."

The child grinned humorously, "I'm twenty-two. In this body. Don't be deceived by looks alone – you should know better, for one trained by Genkai."

"Did I forget to mention that she's my older cousin?" drawled Kuwabara in amusement.

Yusuke glared at him. Then transferred his gaze back to the... young woman and studied her more carefully. His rei sense wasn't nearly as good as Kuwabara's, but this close, looking at her... Yusuke could feel the waves of rei coming off her. She was powerful in a way he hadn't felt before. Even Botan didn't have this... presence. Some of the demons they'd fought had rei like this... but this wasn't dark. Nor was it light. It just was there, part of her. He blinked rapidly, "No wonder Kuwabara says things happen around you."

The girl nodded in approval, "Now you're looking! Call me Shin-chan – and I'm not a priestess. My mother, Derosha, is. I live at the shrine and assist when I'm needed. I can't do much on my own, but my rei can augment others. That's the main reason I'm going with you – with the incantation anybody with enough rei can open the gate."

Yusuke nodded, "But with you along, Kurama and Hiei will have full access to their normal powers – that's good." And he and Kuwabara would be even more powerful... He glanced at Botan, wondering why she hadn't told them that part. Botan didn't see his look, as she was absorbed in frowning at Kurama, still leaning against the tree, watching Shinka intently. Yusuke blinked at the tableau and looked down again at Shinka.

She took a step back, the red eyes turning a more normal hazel color as she spoke, "Are we all here yet? The sooner we go, the sooner we can get this over with."

"Uhh..." Yusuke glanced quickly around, "Hiei still has to get here..."

"I'm here," a rough voice established his presence as Hiei jumped down from a tree. "Let's get on—" Hiei's eyes widened as he saw Shinka. Then they narrowed to slits as he growled in his deepest hate-filled tones, "You!"

Shinka blinked in surprise, but she reacted quick enough when Hiei pulled his sword from his cloak and attacked her. She jumped back. He followed. There was only a set of blurs darting around the trees and the others could barely track their movements.

"And I thought she was fast when we were playing tag," Kurama remarked lightly, "Obviously she was holding back." He grinned, but his green eyes were cold as he watched.

"Kurama!" Yusuke was turning around in place, trying to keep track of the two, "Do something!! Hiei! Hiei! Stop that! She's on our side!!! Hiei!!!!"

"What do you want me to do?" Kurama questioned, and then sighed. "Oh, all right, I guess I better or there'll be distractions..."

Vines rustled... and wrapped up to hold their targets tight.

"Kurama!?"

"What the hell???"

"Eiii!"

Yusuke, Kuwabara, and Botan were held fast by the vines, three pairs of eyes turning to Kurama in shock and surprise. He looked amusedly back at them, "Just hold tight until it's over." He glanced again at the blurs speculatively and then more vines wrapped up to muffle the shouts from the other three.

After several minutes, the blurs slowed and then solidified into shapes. Shinka was panting heavily,

watching Hiei warily as he stood and held his sword at the ready.

"Meitta... You will pay for what you did to me..." Hiei growled and took a step forward, "You can't run forever. I will get you. And then you will die."

Shinka stood her ground as she blinked, "Meitta??" She studied him, "You look familiar... Did I know you in a different life?"

"Did you know me?" Hiei repeated in astonishment, his red eyes burning with anger, framed in dark-green skin. His hair bristled, spiking wildly in every direction, "I will kill you!!" He jumped forward and she flickered and blurred away, dashing to another tree. Hiei stopped again and growled low in his throat, "Stop playing games, Meitta. Fight me. Fight me for real, and I will kill you."

Shinka slowed and stopped on the other side of the clearing, "I can only fight those I'm allowed to. I have no permission to fight you. Rather the opposite, if you're part of the team." She studied him again, and then walked forward to the center of the clearing, "On the other hand... if you're the reason for my present condition, then it certainly is your right. Did I do something to you?"

"Did you...?" Hiei lowered the sword briefly in surprise before gripping it tightly and raising it again. "I don't believe you. You won't get out of the justice by pretending not to remember. I know you too well, Meitta – and I will have my vengeance for what you did to me!"

"Humm..." Shinka's head tilted to one side as she studied him. Her hazel eyes shaded to a dark amber color as she looked. Then she nodded, "It feels right. You must be the one." She stepped closer to him and then suddenly knelt down, her back straight, her head tilted back so her face was to the sky, though her eyes watched Hiei, "It is your right. Do what you want."

"What...?" Hiei lowered his blade and studied the slight figure in front of him, rage and puzzlement chasing each other across his face.

Kurama laughed, drawing all eyes to him. He grinned, "Shin-chan, you've spent time as a fox, right?"

Without moving from her position, the girl answered, "Well, yes. Three or four lifetimes, actually. Why?"

Kurama walked a bit closer to them, "Because baring your throat to show submission is a very fox-like thing to do. Not a human trait."

Shinka blinked and moved very slightly to switch her gaze to him, her body still facing Hiei, "So what do humans normally do?"

"They bow down and lower their heads to the ground."

In surprise, Shinka turned to stare at him, "But that's protecting the neck and vitals!"

Kurama shrugged, "I never understood it myself..." His eyes flicked to watch Hiei, the humor draining out of him.

Hiei was standing still in shock, looking between them. "Kurama..." he whispered in disbelief, "You betray me too?"

"No!" Kurama stepped back to his tree, "I am only an observer in this. It is between you and she – I just thought that I might point out that she wasn't lying."

Hiei studied the woman in front of him carefully. He raised the cloth on his forehead and his third eye opened as he studied her in all ways. And puzzlement became the foremost expression on his face as he put the cloth back down, "That... is a human body. But... But you are Meitta." The fire behind his eyes flared again as he gripped his sword tightly, "I know you are. I would never mistake that soul! You are the one – and you will pay."

"It is your right," Shinka said softly, her amber gaze soft on his face, "My original soul would never have been set on this course if I had not done something. I can feel that you speak the truth. And it is your right to do what you will."

Hiei took a step backwards, "Original..." He glanced to Kurama in confusion, "This is Meitta."

Kurama shrugged, "Shin-chan is a reincarnated soul. This body is a human body – much like mine. Her soul is much older. But she's been through so many hundreds of lives that she doesn't remember much of the older ones, and nothing about the first."

Hiei's eyes narrowed, "It wasn't that long ago."

Shinka grimaced, "Frogs and bats don't have as long a life-span as humans."

"Frogs and bats?"

Shinka grinned sourly, "This is only my third human body – and this only by special dispensation. I messed up rather badly in my last body and was going to get sent back to animals, but Mother Derosha needed somebody to help out and my soul was available, so a dispensation was granted, in a way." She shrugged as she studied the small fighter. "You're a demon, aren't you? What did my original self do?"

Hiei stepped forward again, and sniffed, "What didn't you do? You made me as cold as you, is what you did. I suffered..." Hiei bit his lip and glanced to Yusuke tied up in the vines as he trailed off. Then he took a breath and glared down at the girl, "It matters not. What matters is my vengeance now."

"It is your right," the girl repeated for the third time. She tilted her throat back again, watching the black-haired demon calmly as her eyes shaded back to hazel.

The sword licked out, too fast to see.

The three onlookers struggled uselessly to free themselves from the vines. Kurama's eyes narrowed but he didn't move.

Shinka kept her eyes calmly upon Hiei as her shirt fell off her, cut to shreds. She raised one eyebrow at him.

Hiei studied her bare torso, "What all is included in 'my right'?"

The eyebrow lowered, "Anything. You are the one. And it is your right to do what you will to me, for my soul's punishment." The light eyes regarded him confidently, "If you want me to suffer as you did, it is your right."

Hiei snorted, "That's not possible. It never was. I can't hurt you as badly as you hurt me. You..." He glowered at the girl, "It doesn't do much good for me to kill you now, if your damn soul is just going to jump to another body."

Shinka shrugged, "It won't. Not if you are the one to kill me. Because you are the reason for my reincarnations, if you kill me, my soul will cease to be."

"That's not suffering," Hiei remarked. And sheathed his sword as he turned away. "You don't know me. It might be your soul, Meitta, but I won't kill you until you know why you die." He glanced at the three people wrapped in vines. "So, what about this mission we're suppose to be on?" The color of his skin back to normal, Hiei spoke as if nothing unusual had happened.

If they hadn't been wrapped in vines, the three would have fallen. They fell anyway as the vines retreated back into the forest from where they'd come. Kurama walked to Hiei's side and looked down at him, the green eyes unreadable. Hiei cocked his head to regard Kurama, but his eyes weren't giving away anything either.

"Shin-chan!" Kuwabara ran to where the diminutive girl was getting to her feet. Then he backed off and turned his back, flushing a furious red. His embarrassment found a target in the short

demon, "Hiei! How dare you do that to my cousin!" He raised his fist and ran at Hiei.

Hiei turned around, his eyebrows disappearing under the cloth on his forehead, "Cousin?"

A tentacle of energy whipped across the ground and tripped Kuwabara before he reached Hiei, "Kaz-chan," Shinka scolded, "Don't interfere. It was his right."

"Shin-chan?" Kuwabara looked at her, disbelieving. And then he whipped his face back around again, eyes screwed shut, cheeks red.

"Uhh..." Yusuke coughed, "You can use my jacket, miss..."

"Thanks," Accepting the jacket and slipping it on, Shinka grinned as Yusuke didn't avert his gaze. The jacket didn't really adequately cover her, but she didn't seem to care. "I told you to call me Shin-chan."

Hiei's gaze wandered over the two embarrassed boys to Botan – who was watching him rather grimly and nodding to herself – to Kurama. Kurama's gaze was on Shinka, a feral grin pulling at his lips. Fire smoldered through Hiei and he pulled off his cloak, drawing everybody's gaze as they anticipated his attack. Hiei tossed the cloak to the girl, "This will serve you better until we complete the mission." His eyes were dark as he gazed at her, "What is it they call you?"

Holding the cloak in one hand, the girl walked up to Hiei and studied him intently. They were nearly of a height and their eyes leveled as they looked at each other, neither one showing any emotion. Finally, she answered him, "My name is Shinka, the new one. Most people call me Shin-chan." She slipped off Yusuke's jacket and put on the cloak, letting it settle around her, becoming a figure of darkness. She forbore to speak to Hiei again, but turned away to give Yusuke's jacket back, "Thank you."

"Uhh..." Yusuke took the jacket, his gaze flickering uncertainly between the girl and the demon.

Botan cleared her throat, "If we're ready, we can get on with the mission."

"We can," Shinka emphasized the first word, "but you can't go, Botan-chan."

"What???" The blue-haired goddess was nonplused. "Why can't I?"

"Because you are in charge of the River of the Dead," Shinka explained carefully, "The route we will use to get to the Quala's home dimension will take us far outside the bounds of your authority."

Botan paled, "I can't do that."

"No," hazel eyes regarded an appalled Botan as calmly as they had an angry Hiei, "That's why you have to stay."

"It's okay, Botan-chan, we'll do fine by ourselves," Kuwabara assured her, but not without his own dubious looks between his cousin and the fire demon.

"All right," Botan gulped, not wanting to send them off by themselves – and certainly not with all this tension running through the group – but not having a choice. *I'm definitely going to have to speak with Koenma! Damn him, he knew what was going to happen when Hiei saw her... and he didn't tell me! He keeps too much to himself.* Although... Botan watched Kurama speculatively. Kurama had certainly expected it. *So, what exactly did Koenma tell him?* She was really going to have a talk with Koenma when she got back.

"You said something about an incantation," Yusuke remarked lightly, trying to keep the tension to a manageable level.

He didn't succeed as Shinka gave him a wry look and then scooped to sift through the remains of her shirt on the ground. She picked out a few shreds of paper from the cloth and eyed the fragments then let them fall out of her hand. "Oh well," she remarked lightly, "I'll just have to do it the hard way."

Three furious gazes turned on Hiei. Kurama was holding back a grin, while Shinka remained impassive. Hiei glared back at the humans and Botan and then glowered at Shinka.

"Kaz-chan, do you have your notebook on you?" Shinka asked.

"Uh, yeah," Kuwabara fished it out and handed to her.

Scribbling quickly, Shinka went through a few pages and then handed the notebook and pen back to him. "Don't lose that," she warned.

"Is this the incantation?" he asked, looking at the pages, "If you can do that, why are you giving it to me?"

"It's not an incantation." She thought about it and amended her statement, "Not exactly. It's your way back home if something happens to me."

Everybody carefully avoided looking at Hiei, who sniffed loudly.

"It looks like an incantation..."

Shinka rolled her eyes, "It's not protected. An incantation is insulated to protect the user. Without

the physical incantation, the words are too sharp. But they should get you here without too many problems."

Kuwabara looked at her dubiously and then pocketed the notebook carefully. "Okay."

"Right then," she raised her arms and a small wind started swirling about the glade, making the black cloak she was wearing flutter with its own life. "Botan, go back to the trees. Everybody else, gather in."

They obeyed and she started to chant, sharp words that made no sense. They could almost see them as they dropped from her mouth and whirled into the wind. A last word seemed to shatter the world they were looking at and rainbow colors swept around them in a funnel until they couldn't see. When they regained their sight, they were in a different place, standing on rock and dirt, with a red sun looking down upon them and brown cliffs in the distance.

"Wow..." Yusuke was impressed in spite of all that he'd seen in the last year. Not so much from the landscape as from the 'feel' of the land. It was... different. They truly weren't in their home anymore.

"Shin-chan!" Kuwabara exclaimed, "Are you okay?!"

The slight figure knelt on the ground, her head bowed down. Slowly, she stood, wiping a hand across her face and dashing away blood from the cuts on her head and cheeks. "I'm fine," she said wearily. And she glanced at Hiei with respect fluttering in the back of her eyes, "Nice cloak – it actually protected me from most of the words."

Hiei frowned and spun away so he wasn't looking at her. Shinka shrugged. Kurama watched them both speculatively.

"You mean you were hurt from saying the incantation?" Kuwabara took out a handkerchief and gave it to her.

"It wasn't..." Shinka pressed the handkerchief to her cheek and gave up, "Never mind. Yes, it was from taking us through. But it's fine. I'll be better shortly." And indeed, even as they watched, the gashes started closing up. She looked out to the cliffs, "We came out further away than I expected, the Quala must have some transport protectors. We've got a bit of a walk ahead of us."

"Well, then, we better get started," Yusuke briskly started forward and the others quickly followed.

After a dozen feet or so, Shinka flipped up the hood on the cloak, enshrouding her completely in darkness.

Hiei grinned mirthlessly, "Still don't like the sun, do you?"

The head in the cloak turned and hazel eyes peered out at him, "You mean there's a reason I don't? I just thought it was too bright and hot." She flashed a grin at him and turned back to the cliffs, still walking.

Hiei stopped dead in his tracks and stared. Kurama put a hand gently on his shoulder and pushed him forward again. Hiei looked bewilderedly up at his friend, "She really doesn't remember?"

Kurama shrugged, his green eyes showing nothing. "Come on, Hiei – we can deal with it later."

"But..." Hiei studied the tall red-head, "What do you know of this?" His voice was cold again, showing none of the emotions he'd just revealed.

Kurama sighed as he walked next to his friend. He kept his hand on Hiei's shoulder, feeling the bare skin and the contact. In spite of the heat, Kurama shivered. "Of her history? I only know what Koenma and... George... told me. And that was that she was a reincarnated soul that had a past that would conflict with yours. It was iffy as to whether they were going to put her in the group or not. But this mission... They left the decision up to me what to do about it." He looked down at Hiei's wide eyes, "I decided to leave it up to you."

Hiei hadn't missed the slight pause and change in names, but he put it to one side as he thought about the rest. If Hiei read it as a human would, Kurama's words and actions would imply a trust. But as a demon, knowing the demon ways, it more indicated the fox-spirit's fondness for mischief and curiosity. But Kurama was both spirit and human. Hiei grimaced, "Did they tell you it was Meitta?"

An elegant eyebrow rose, "Hiei, I don't know who Meitta is. Was. You've never mentioned that name before."

"Oh." Hiei fell silent after that one word. *No. I never have.* Shrugging off Kurama's hand on his shoulder, he stared thoughtfully at Shinka's back, enveloped in his cloak. *This human body of hers... It could almost be another person there. But it is Meitta's soul. I can feel it all around me.* Hiei shuddered and wrapped himself in cold layers of non-emotion, pulling his heat deep within him where it would be safe.

After several moments went by, the three pairs of ears ahead of the two ghosts stopped straining to listen and attention refocused on the cliff.

"Shouldn't we be attacked by now?"

"You complaining?" Yusuke glanced sideways at his friend.

"Naw," Kuwabara cracked his knuckles, "I just thought it was weird. Whenever we're on one of these missions, we're always attacked before we get there."

Shinka grinned, "You want a fight?"

Hiei whipped around to face her, crouching with his hand on his sword.

Shinka blinked at him. Then she tilted her head upwards, exposing her throat, "I only meant that they've been pacing us. If you want a fight, look left."

The other three spun to the left, various attack weapons out. Hiei regarded the girl for a long moment, suspicion bright in his eyes. He glanced to evaluate the monsters raising out of the ground, "They can take them." He glared at the small girl, "I will keep watch."

Yusuke rolled his eyes, "Suit yourself, Hiei," and then leaped forward to meet the monsters, his punches and kicks lightning and thunder. Kuwabara and Kurama were just behind him.

"Wow..." Shinka sank down to the ground, cross-legged, propping her elbow on her knee and her chin on her hand, "They're good!" Her eyes tracked Kurama's rose whip in admiration.

Hiei backed away a few steps, frowning, "You're impressed..."

A slim hand brushed the hood off her face and hazel eyes in the dark face regarded him steadily, "Is there some reason I shouldn't be?"

Hiei continued to scowl at her.

Shinka shrugged, "Look – I don't remember. Out of my past lives, only bits and pieces. That's the way it goes. The soul is the same... but I've also been through hundreds of other lives. Okay, so maybe they weren't worth much, but I was still in them, and remember things from them. From my original life..." The black cloak moved up and down as she shrugged again, then studied him intently. The eyes started to turn amber. "Hiei..." she spoke his name slowly, thoughtfully.

The demon's mouth drew back in a growl, his fangs showing and his skin starting to turn green.

"Hiei! Stop that!" Yusuke blew cooling air over his fist as he came back, "We have a mission and we can't accomplish it if you keep snipping at her." The other two flanked him. Kuwabara was frowning. Kurama had a faint smile on his face. Hiei turned his growl on his friends, but the green faded from his skin.

Ignoring the demon, Shinka stood smoothly up and approached Kurama, "Are those seeds you keep in your hair?"

Kurama's smile deepened and he reached up to his hair and then held a closed fist out, "Spread out your hand."

"Oooo..." Shinka's eyes were wide as several seeds dropped on to her open palm. She touched one carefully, "Rose, of course." Her finger moved to the next, questioning its inclusion, "Ine?" [*rice*] Kurama just smiled in answer. "Ahh," her hazel eyes sparkled in amusement at the third, "Asago. That's what you tied them up with earlier." [*Morning Glory*] She grinned familiarly at the fourth, "Sakaki." [*eurya - said to be the first tree that grew out of the chaos of creation.*] But she paused on the fourth, her face troubled, "I don't..." Her eyes blinked rapidly, "I don't know..." She shook her head, and looked upwards to meet the green eyes gazing down at her, "What is this one?"

"Sakura," Kurama said softly, his green eyes equally as soft as his voice, "the seed of the cherry."

"Sakura..." Shinka shook her head and backed off, her hazel eyes confused, her fist clenching around the seeds. She backed up until she bumped into something and then spun around. Her wide eyes met Hiei's dark red ones.

He glowered at her and remarked sarcastically, "Of course, you would know nothing of the soul of bushido..."

Shinka stared at him for a long moment before she tilted her head up, her eyes locked on his, "It is your right..." she said softly, her voice firm.

Hiei growled again and spun away, stomping off towards the cliffs.

Shinka stared after him until Kurama took her by the elbow and guided her onwards. The diminutive girl looked up at the tall human-fox and her troubled face cleared in obvious trust of him.

Kuwabara and Yusuke stared after them and then looked at each other. Yusuke rolled his eyes. Kuwabara shook his head, "This isn't going to be an easy trip! And I thought I didn't get along with the shrimp!! Geez..."

Yusuke grinned sourly, "I guess he likes you, after all."

"Don't even joke about that!"

"I wonder," Yusuke dropped the teasing, his voice serious, "what she did to him?"

Kuwabara shuddered as he started to walk forward, "I don't even want to think about that! She's my cousin! Even if she is a reincarnation... Geez..."

Yusuke followed him, laughing.

"But you know," Kuwabara's voice was quiet as he spoke, "It makes sense now. Now, knowing that, a lot of things make more sense."

Yusuke glanced at him.

Kuwabara bit his lip, his gaze on the three in front of them, "My cousin has always been... a bit odd."

Yusuke let the subject drop, his own gaze watching the small figure in black walking next to the tall red-head. It wasn't the person they were used to seeing in that spot.

"Hiei..." The voice was quietly deferential, without giving much away.

The short demon stopped roaming ahead of the group and turned back, his eyes dark, his hand on his sword. He growled at the white-blonde hair that poked out from his cloak and the amber eyes within, "What?"

"Thank you for the use of your cloak." A slim hand unfastened the edge and then handed it back to him.

All the guys stared, including Hiei.

"Shin-chan?" Kuwabara asked, wonderingly.

The hazel eyes sparkled with laughter, "I borrowed the weave pattern – do you like it?" She spun around, the flowing tunic and pants gracefully following her move. Indistinct patterns of red roses grew on the black background, outlined in white.

Hiei involuntarily looked down at the cloak he held in his hand – black on the outside, lined with red on the inside, and the white scarf/cowl on the shoulders. The others also looked at it before returning their attention to the girl.

"How'd you do that?" Yusuke walked around her, his gaze admiring. Hiei's eyes burned.

Shinka grinned, "One of my other lives was a spider. I just had to remember how I made the web and then borrowed the weave pattern from the cloak

and the fabric from my pants to make these. Not bad for a first try."

"Not bad at all," Kurama's voice rumbled with laughter as he stepped up to her and ruffled her near-white hair. "Are those my roses in there?"

The small girl smiled up at him, secure in the green eyes. More than Hiei's eyes burned, but no one was watching him.

"A spider???" Yusuke and Kuwabara spoke in identical tones of revulsion in the same instant. "Ewww..." The disgust quickly turned to interest, "What was it like, being a spider?"

Shinka shrugged, stepping away from Kurama and starting towards the cliffs again, the others following – they'd come over half-way now. She pulled out another length of white cloth and twisted it into a turban around her head, flipping the folds of cloth over her face but leaving her eyes showing. Despite the cloth over her mouth, her voice was clear and precise as she answered, "Most animal's lives are unremarkable for them. I only remember the unusual – which usually means their deaths. I remember the spider more clearly, for it was fun and interesting to weave. The patterns of life, the patterns of death. Life for me, death for my prey. Not that the spider thought of it like that, but I was still there... I enjoyed life as the spider, however short it was."

"So how'd you die?" asked Yusuke with morbid fascination.

"I had my web on a woodpile. In the winter-time, while I was sleeping, a human came and tossed my log into the fire."

Hiei burst into laughter. It wasn't very nice laughter.

The others turned to look at him, annoyance and curiosity in all faces but Kurama's, who was smiling knowingly at his friend. Seeing the look in the bright green eyes, Hiei's laughs abruptly stopped and he turned away from the group, taking the lead and showing only his back, covered once again by his black cloak.

They were attacked with more frequency as they approached the entrance in the cliff. Shinka guided them with ease, ignoring the suspicious looks Hiei tossed her way. The monsters were defeated with ease, the boys using the fights as tension relief and not bothering to use any rei power.

"Is this all they've got?" Yusuke grumbled, "So why'd they bother sending us? This is nothing!"

Shinka glanced curiously at him, "It is not in fight that the Quala will be defeated. And it's not fighting that will close the leech and break the mirror."

They all stared at her.

She sighed, "Didn't you get the instructions on the tape? Koenma said he was sending it to you..."

"Yeah..." Yusuke pouted – it was true, Koenma had emphasized the need for closing the leech, and had told them how to do it... But Yusuke liked fighting!

Shinka giggled. "Deal with it," she suggested heartlessly, "It's not my problem."

At the words, Hiei involuntarily growled, his hand reaching for his sword.

Shinka turned to face him, her face clouding in confusion. Her hazel eyes shaded into the amber color as she stared at him.

"Meitta..." Hiei swirled his cloak back, preparing to draw his sword, his eyes locked on hers.

"Hold it," Kurama suddenly broke in, walking between them with a hand up, his attention focused wholly on the entrance in the cliff, "I feel..."

"Evil," Kuwabara rumbled, his attention also engaged. His hand clenched but didn't make his rei sword. "It's in there – and it's now watching us."

"It wasn't before?" Yusuke was somewhat insulted – he was used to being thought of as a threat.

Tilting her head to one side, Shinka nodded, "It is the Quala. Now our troubles begin." She frowned and stepped closer to Kurama without seeming to notice what she did.

Kurama placed a hand on her shoulder, "I think it is time to start drawing on your rei – I don't want to be unaware in this place."

She nodded, "Go ahead, I will augment what you need."

There was silence for a moment and then there was a feeling of excitement and vitality in the group as new, strange wild energy flowed through them.

Kuwabara laughed as he held out his rei sword and they could all see the increased power in it, golden sparks dropping off the energy bar. Yusuke placed his hands together and a bright glow surrounded them before he let it fade away. Kurama smiled as he drew out a rose and smelled its fragrance.

Hiei went totally still and then snarled and jumped backwards, "DON'T TOUCH ME!!!!"

They all stared at him. Kurama's mouth tightened briefly in annoyance, but he hid it with the rose.

Shinka sighed, "Don't be a fool, idiot. You're at a tenth of your normal level. With my rei, you will be at full power, and more."

Hiei's red eyes blazed and he was in front of her in less than a moment, his skin green and eyes forming on his arms and chest, his cloak in a puddle at their feet as he pulled out his sword. "Die, you bitch!" he roared. The sword stopped as it touched her dark skin and his arms trembled.

The group stood frozen, the instant over before they knew it had begun.

Hazel eyes blinked as they met red ones. Shinka didn't move as a trickle of blood flowed down her throat. "I didn't mean that as an insult," she said calmly, "but it is, as ever, your right."

Millimeter by millimeter, the sword pulled away from her neck, the metal catching the light of the sun and reflecting it outwards. Hiei's whole body trembled with the effort he was making to control himself and then something seemed to snap and the shivering stopped, the green and the eyes faded from his body, and he replaced the sword in its scabbard with a smooth motion. He picked up his cloak almost calmly, "I will never be in your control again," he stated as he twirled the cloak around him. "Let's finish the damn mission."

There was a general exhaling of taunt breaths.

Shinka stared in bewilderment at the figure turning away from her. And she couldn't leave it alone, "Why won't you kill me? You want to... It's your right to... Why do you wait?" She touched the cut on her neck and drew her fingers through the blood.

The figure in black stood motionless.

Breaths inhaled again in desperation. "Shin-chan..." Kuwabara moaned. "Shit..." whispered Yusuke, "That wasn't a good thing to ask..."

As Hiei remained still, Shinka turned her bewildered expression onto the other three, obviously also not comprehending their worry.

Kurama broke the tension, speaking softly and compassionately, "Because you still don't remember. At the moment, you are only a human. A human with a different soul, true, but a human all the same. He won't kill you until you know why he said what he did, until you know why he hates you."

Shinka nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "When I look at him... I can almost feel something... something tugging to be remembered..."

"Please don't remember it until after we're done," begged Kuwabara, "Coz, I'd really rather not see you hacked to pieces in front of me."

Lowering her hand from her neck, Shinka laughed lightly at her cousin, reaching up to ruffle his dark-blond hair. "Silly," she teased him. He looked sourly down at her and shook his head before offering her a handkerchief to press to the wound.

She doesn't care. Kuwabara shook his head again. *She really doesn't care that Hiei might kill her. It's... his right? She's lived so many lives, why should she care if she dies. She might even welcome it. Reincarnation... and punishment. What did she do to Hiei? What is she?* Kuwabara stared at the short blond girl who he used to think of as his cousin. And he shook his head.

"Let's go," Yusuke started forward, trying to get his group back together as the team it usually was. He feared, though, as he glanced around at the separate members, that it couldn't be done. They were all there... but not together. *The mission might have been accomplished better if we'd left Shin-chan back home. We wouldn't have had full rei... but we certainly don't now!* And Hiei, their usual ace-in-the-hole, was completely apart from him more than he'd ever been before, and his rei was fluctuating so badly that even Yusuke could sense it. Yusuke felt a hand on his shoulder and he looked up to see Kurama's beautiful face smiling down at him.

"Don't worry," Kurama murmured softly, his red hair flowing around his face, "It will be all right. Things will work out."

Yusuke looked at him in disbelief, but had to trust the brilliant green eyes, so compelling, gazing at him with that particular combination of affection and loyalty. He had to believe that Kurama spoke the truth. Still, though, he had to wonder, *just what exactly, does a fox-spirit consider to be 'all right'?!?*

"What the hell is that?" Kuwabara stopped dead and stared. His sword came out of his hands as he instinctively moved to the outside of the group. Hiei took the other outside position and Kuwabara knew a moment of relief that the short demon was still reacting as part of the team.

In the middle and slightly behind them, Shinka sniffed and coughed, "That's a quala – smells horrible, doesn't it?"

Kurama nodded in agreement, wrinkling his own nose.

Yusuke almost turned around, "That's a quala??? Whoa! What happened to the Quala we'd

be fighting? And what the hell have we been fighting anyway?"

A grin reached Shinka's lips, "Monsters."

"Shin-chan..." Kurama rebuked the answer with a laugh in his voice.

The slight girl shrugged, unrepentive, "Wild animals, mostly. When I was saying 'the' Quala, I was talking about the race of beings. That in front of us is a single quala." She frowned, "And that's rather odd in itself..."

The big-hairy-tentacled thing with a barely recognizable head roared and attacked them.

And the team was hard pressed to defeat it. It was surprisingly quick and seemed to avoid most of their moves as if anticipating. They tried to encircle it, but it kept stepping out before they could finish moving around it.

"Humm..." Shinka stayed outside the fighting range and watched. Finally, she spoke, "Hiei."

There was a snarl on his lips as the demon appeared close to her, "What?"

Shinka merely pointed up... And Hiei blinked and then disappeared in one of his moves too quick for eyesight. The displaced air whipped Shinka's clothes and she frowned, whispering under her breath, "Quicksilver..."

And then Hiei's sword slashed through the quala that had been watching, hanging on to the edge of the cliff. And on the instant that the quala on the wall spit in two, the quala on the ground faltered and knew not where its enemies were, and Kurabara's sword sliced it from one angle while Kurama's whip took it from the other. Yusuke held his rei at the ready for another attack but none came.

Hiei returned from the cliff. Yusuke looked over at him, "Nice work, Hiei – clever of you to figure it out that the one was seeing for the other."

"I didn't," Hiei growled shortly, jerking a thumb in Shinka's direction.

Kurama's smile widened. Yusuke and Kurabara nodded in respect. Shinka frowned, "It's still odd that there were only two. The quala work as a team. And a pair is not a team. I wonder if they're sending us their rejects."

"A pair can be a team," Kurama objected, his green eyes dancing merrily.

Shinka's hazel eyes looked up to meet his and her breath noticeably stopped for a moment. Finally, she spoke, trying to keep inflection out of her voice, "Okay, I'll rephrase that. The Quala don't fight in pairs alone."

"Whatever," Yusuke impatiently broke in, "Let's get a move on."

The group started forward again, five pairs of eyes scanning the area around them.

They were attacked once more before they got to the opening in the cliff. This time, the team kept their eyes open and found and killed all four of the quala opposing them. When they got to the opening, Shinka stepped back and glanced around before looking questioningly to Yusuke.

Yusuke blinked, "The mirror is in there, right?"

"Somewhere," she answered, "The Quala live in the mountain. This, I'm pretty sure, is one of the few openings to their lairs, but that also means they've got to know we're coming this way – I was wondering what your plan was, and what you want me to do to support your team."

"Plan?" Yusuke blinked, "We're going to go in, you lead us to the mirror – you can sense where it is, right? And then we kill the leech, break the mirror, and go home."

Shinka's mouth worked silently for a moment as she pulled the cloth over her face down to stare more completely at him. Finally, she got out, "Plan? That's what you call a plan??? Didn't you do any research before you left? You're just going to try a straight-frontal assault and hope for the best? That's a plan????"

Kurama and Hiei traded amused glances, in complete accord for the first time since this trip started. Kurama coughed, raising a hand to cover his mouth. The edges of Hiei's mouth curved very slightly up. They kept their gazes locked for a bit longer than the moment required.

Yusuke shrugged, blushing slightly, "Hey, it's always worked before."

Hazel eyes burned with undertones of red as she walked up to stand directly in front of him, tilting her head to look up at him, most definitely not in a submissive pose. "Listen, you snot-nosed teenager," and Shinka, despite her small size, suddenly seemed as old as the twenty-two years she'd lived in this life – and more beyond, "You are the leader of this team. I know in current times, teenagers are still considered youths to be growing and allowed some irresponsibilities... but you are no longer just a teenager! You are a Spirit World agent and have a very definite responsibility! Do you want the members of your team to end up dead?" She waved a hand at the group, who were mostly standing still in surprise at the tirade. Since she didn't actually

look at the others, Shinka didn't notice Hiei's eyes starting to glow. Instead, she continued her thoughts, "You have got to take some responsibility for your actions! And that doesn't just mean consequences, but rather foresight! Looking ahead to optimize the results! This isn't a game, it's—"

Shinka's voice was broken off by a growl and a hand that yanked her away from Yusuke and threw her in the dust. Hiei stood over her, his eyes blazing furiously, "You will not lecture Yusuke!" Those who were paying attention to the details were relieved to note that Hiei hadn't pulled off his cloak, nor was his skin changing colors. Yusuke looked at the back of the powerful demon standing protectively between him and Shinka and spoke his name softly, not in rebuke but more in wonder.

Shinka stared up at Hiei in surprise, "Do you want to die from a bad plan?"

Kurama groaned and put his head in his hands, muttering under his breath, "Nice one, Shin-chan..."

One hand went to the edge of his cloak and hovered there as Hiei's breaths came shortly. He growled out between clenched teeth, "It is not your place to instruct him! He is not yours, and you cannot touch him!"

"Touch? Who said anything about touching?" Shinka blinked rapidly and shook her head, "Of course he's not mine... what does that have to do with giving some survival advice?"

The hand fell away from the cloak as Hiei stared in surprise at her. Slowly he spoke again, "You do not own him, he is not of your people. You cannot instruct him."

Shinka stared, "And that means? By that logic, if he was 'mine' I could talk to him. But..." She shook her head again, blonde hair waving around her face as she demanded, "Is that some weird set of demon rules?"

"No..." Hiei stepped back, his eyes on her, "Those are your people's rules."

Her mouth hung open as she absorbed the importance of that statement. Slowly, Shinka got to her feet, watching, studying the slight powerful body under the black cloak, the wide eyes set in the stern face, the wild black hair outlined in blue, the white star over his head. "You know," she mused, "I'm almost anxious to regain some of those old memories."

"Don't be," Hiei advised her, turning away, "The day you remember, is the day you die."

"Yes, but," Shinka whispered, her eyes watching the figure in his black cloak, his shoulders

and bearing telling of his pride and strength, "then I'd remember you."

Hiei didn't respond to this comment, but his eyes sought out Kurama's. Kurama had been watching Shinka, but the instant Hiei's gaze reached him, Kurama snapped his attention to Hiei. He noticed the confusion deep within the eyes and Kurama's heart went out to his friend. *Hiei, you have changed so much since we first met. Yusuke has changed you. And now you are confronted with your past, but a past that does not know you... Is it any wonder? And, I think, you no longer know your past as you think you do. Be strong, Hiei. Be strong for a while longer and I will do what I can.* Kurama didn't walk to his friend or put his hand on his shoulder, though he wanted to do both. Instead, he let his eyes speak for him and was rewarded by a slight nod as grim calm replaced the uncertainty in the red eyes. Kurama wasn't sure about the 'grim' part, but was relieved by the 'calm' – and the trust that was implied with the connection.

Kuwabara drew a bit closer to Yusuke and they looked at each other as they watched the others and their eyes showed only one thought, 'oh boy...'

They made their way in through the opening of the cavern, peering curiously around them. And then they were attacked, twenty of the quala striking in unison and maneuvering them around and around, trying to split them up. The group was hard-pressed to counter this attack, being more used to single-fighting than as a whole. Their advantage was how very well they knew each other, and the length of time that they'd been together as a team. It took few words for them gather together and unite their defenses, sending attacks out as openings appeared. Their problem was that when those openings came, all four of the fighters tended to leap out and then their defense was lowered. Each time they split, it took time for the four to come back as a whole team again.

At first, Hiei and Kurama had instinctively moved together to work as a team, and Yusuke and Kuwabara fought together. But it quickly became obvious that the strengths and experience differences between the two teams were causing Yusuke and Kuwabara to be rather out of their league against the united quala. Hiei and Kurama shared one of their unspeaking glances and split, moving so they were each backing up the other two, rather than being at the forefront of the group. The four working together instead of two and two, or by ones alone.

The rei was wild in this fight. Yusuke recklessly drew upon his shotgun blasts time and time again, as his punches seemed to have no effect at all. The shotguns worked... and the power seemed limitless. Kuwabara's sword glowed bright, and the sparks off the bright yellow sword seemed to have a life of their own. Kurama's rose whip was joined by other plants that hindered and fought the quala under his direction and manipulation. His green eyes glowed with his power and his mouth quirked in an undying smile.

Hiei darted around, his lighting speed and his sword techniques undiminished by his lack of rei. At first. As the battle prolonged, his speed slowed and his sword stopped slicing through everything the way it normally did. He gritted his teeth and continued on, but finally dropped back to a supporting position as he took off his headband. Kurama noticed and his green eyes flashed concern as he moved to bolster and protect his friend. Yusuke and Kuwabara also shifted positions and Yusuke again took the point of strength in the group. No one said anything as they migrated around.

Hiei's third eye opened and scanned the area, noting the patterns of rei and energy and will. All but the qualas' was familiar to him. The qualas' signatures merged and blended without seeming regard to individuals. And the energy divided equally between them, sharing and supporting each other without thought or effort. *That is how they work as one...* For perhaps the first time in many years, the small demon felt a sense of alarm as he understood what they were up against. It wasn't just power. Power, they could fight – in their group, Yusuke instinctively responded to aggressive power by increasing his to match and was therefore the more powerful in any true fight. And it wasn't will – the quala seemed almost puzzled as they fought, fighting only by direction and not purpose. No, what their group was truly up against and threatened by was cohesiveness. A whole fighting as a whole, acting as a whole, supporting as a whole... Their group could not match it. Their group was a team... but not a whole. Four individuals that got together for a common purpose. And, in many ways, could not be a whole. They were too different and needed to keep those differences for their strengths. But...

As he glanced around again, Hiei finally found Shinka in a corner, her signature masked and hidden so precisely that her physical presence was completely unnoticed by the fighters. But her rei flowed out and around the fight, pouring into three of her companions in a never-ending flow of wild power – a mountain glacier melting and the river

flowing down the mountain walls to the valleys below. Pouring into Yusuke, Kuwabara, and Kurama. Not into Hiei. It flowed around Hiei, but would split before touching him, a rock diverting the flow. Hiei gritted his teeth in pain. And took his barriers down. The wild rei surged into him in an instant, pouring through his veins like ice water and shocking his system. The impact sent him reeling, falling to his knees as he strove to order and tame the rei that overwhelmed him. Vaguely, he felt his body being knocked and thrown as the quala surged towards this sense of weakness. Remotely, he heard the calls of his teammates and sensed them struggling to protect him. Sharp was the feeling of Shinka's pain as her rei was consumed by his fire as he changed the rei to the only one he would use – his own. Hiei rolled away from the quala that were beating his body and he jumped back, his eyes open and seeing and working – all of them.

Three mouths dropped open in astonishment as they saw their friend, broken and bleeding on the ground as they fought to reach him, suddenly jump away from where he was, blazing with power, his skin green, his hair divided in two points like horns, and every eye on his body open and seeking. Instinctively, each of the three averted their gaze and each knew a stab of fear for here was the power of the jagan unleashed in its whole. But the power was not directed towards them. As one, the quala stopped moving, and then a keening wail came from each of the creatures still alive as their tentacles and appendages flailed and beat against the ground.

"NOW!" Hiei roared as he leapt towards a quala, his sword flashing out and splitting the creature in two.

With a shake of their minds, his three teammates shook off their momentary paralysis and started attacking as well. Within moments, the cavern was full of dead quala and they were the only things living as they stood together, panting, chests heaving as they recognized the end of the fight.

With a sigh, Hiei cleaned and sheathed his sword with his patented lighting move. His skin turned normal again and he put a band over his forehead before searching for his cloak somewhere in the litter of body parts.

The other three stood for a long moment as they looked at each other, elated at the successful fight that had tested them so well. And then Yusuke's eyes narrowed, "Where's Shinka?"

"Shin-chan?" Kuwabara remembered his cousin for the first time since the battle begun and his heart twisted in fear. He could feel her nowhere... And

then realized that he was still drawing on her rei. "Shin-chan?" *If I'm drawing on her rei, she has to be here...* but he still couldn't see her, couldn't find her. He tried to feel her presence, and his thoughts kept skittering away...

"Shin-chan..." Kurama turned in a circle and then his green eyes picked out his roses in a corner of the room... He hurried towards the small lump and then was kneeling beside Shinka, holding her in his arms as he searched for wounds. Hazel eyes opened and looked into his green ones for a long moment before she blinked and then pulled herself upright.

"Oww..." Shinka put a hand up to her head and tapped gently on her skull, "my head hurts." She grinned reassuringly at Kurama, allowing her other hand to stay within his grip, "I'm fine. Just a little..." hazel eyes sought out a figure in black walking across the room towards them. White teeth flashed in a grin as she found the word she was looking for, "...singed. What did you do, Hiei?"

Hiei's gaze dropped to Kurama's hands holding hers before flicking up again, "I told you – I will never be in your control again."

"But my rei doesn't control – it's only an augment." Shinka gently tugged her hand out of Kurama's and she moved a step away from him. Even as new to the group as she was, she was starting to figure out this particular point of tension!

Hiei snorted, "A fire burns differently depending on what type of fuel is used as its base. Your rei..." He stopped speaking and studied her, "You truly don't know..." Shaking his head, he turned away from her and looked up to Yusuke, "We should, perhaps, not stand around here too long."

Yusuke nodded in agreement, pulling his fascinated attention off the two antagonists... or rather the one antagonist and the other... fascination. He herded his small group out of the area, checking the corridors and side walls for clues and information about their opponents. So far, this job was not at all what he'd been expecting. And nowhere near as straight-forward as their others had been. The goal was clear enough, the approach was hazy. And the side-issues seemed to take up more attention than the main one.

"Were you once a chameleon too?" Kuwabara asked Shinka curiously as they went, "I couldn't even see you there! Until Kurama picked you up, you only looked like a part of the wall, and even my rei sense couldn't find you."

Shinka shook her head, "I don't know how I did that – but I knew I had to stay out of the fight since I haven't worked with you as part of the team, and I had to not only let you draw on my rei but also focus it... I moved away and then just..." she shook her head and shrugged again, "I don't know."

Yusuke interjected, "But you can do it again if you need to, right?"

"Oh yes," Shinka nodded, "It's completely instinctual. I know I can do it – I just can't explain how I do it."

"Glamour..." muttered Hiei, "your personal rei signature is masked under the wild power of your world. The river never sees the snow it melts from. And water is everywhere."

Shinka stopped dead in her tracks and stared at him. So did everybody else.

Hiei shrugged and kept walking. After a moment, so did the others.

Kuwabara changed the subject in his usual manner, "Damn, Hiei – that's an ugly body of yours when you're green! What's with all the extra eyes, anyway?"

"Ugly?" Hiei studied Kuwabara's craggy face, "I wouldn't be one to talk..."

Yusuke intervened, "That's Hiei's jagan, Kuwabara – it's his demon power to control weaker wills..."

"Like yours," Hiei put in, grinning shortly, "but Koenma told me not to use it on you – I might burn out the ineffectual little cells you call a brain."

"Why you arrogant little runt..." Kuwabara growled.

Kurama cleared his throat, "By the way, Hiei – that wasn't a lock you used on the quala, so what did you do to get them to stop moving?"

"It wasn't the evil eye?" Yusuke blinked in surprise – it had looked like it...

Hiei shrugged, "The quala are too different, I only like to control what I understand. No. I used the eyes to see the rei connections between them and then I severed them."

"I see..." Kurama breathed, "They're so used to working as a cohesive whole that when they were forced to try and do something on their own, they couldn't do it. They couldn't work alone and fell apart." His eyes met Hiei's, "Nice..."

Hiei looked away from the intensity in the vibrant green emeralds. And his gaze accidentally met Yusuke's. Yusuke grinned at him, "I'm glad you're my friend, Hiei" He laughed, his brown eyes

dancing merrily, "Actually – I can't even remember when you were an enemy! If we ever have that rematch, we'll have to redo the stakes."

Hiei's eyes widened as he held Yusuke's gaze a moment longer, seeing the binding there... He wrenched his gaze away and didn't look at anything as he scouted the route ahead.

"What's with him?" Kuwabara blinked at the blur that kept barely in their sights.

Kurama shrugged, "He's starting to figure out why he's changed since he met Yusuke." The tall red-head looked fondly down at Yusuke, whose contented gaze was following the black blur. Yusuke finally glanced up to Kurama and spoke affectionately, "He wouldn't have been my friend if you weren't first."

Kurama smiled at him, not denying it, "Having you for a friend is worth much indeed."

As the two looked at each other and a black shape slowed ahead of them, Kuwabara and Shinka simply watched the interaction, not understanding it.

They walked through the corridors, fascinated with the strangeness of a culture that was alien to their experience. The walls were shaped differently, the colors were different, the people... As they continued on, they saw the occasional quala, or qualas. The first time they saw one, Hiei nearly split it in two before Yusuke stopped him. As Hiei and Kuwabara stared at Yusuke in surprise at the order, the quala squealed in obvious fright and scuttled off almost quicker than Hiei could move.

"It wasn't a warrior," Yusuke stated. "We only fight those sent to fight us – we leave the citizens alone."

"Citizens?" Kuwabara muttered, staring hard as they walked by a trio of quala that were... taking a light panel apart and working on the insides, tentacles weaving bands of metal in it. The quala stared at the group and then they continued with what they were doing. Kuwabara craned his head back to watch them, "Did we just pass a work crew?"

"Looked like it..."

It was different. Their usual jobs were either searching out criminal spirits in the human world, or going to hell to fight a particular group of demons. This... wasn't the human world. And they had a job to do. But the quala... were different. And they had to think about what they were doing.

They walked from the corridor into one of the larger intersection rooms where many corridors met... And white sticky strands shot out of the walls to envelop and trap them tight. Flies caught in a web. Even Hiei's speed was not enough for him to avoid the multiple strands shooting out. They struggled. Rei powers ran rampant though the room, glowing swords, rei blasts... Eventually they stopped struggling.

"Damn, what the hell is this stuff?" Kuwabara tugged again at the strands holding him.

"Eisithai..." a squeak filled the room and died then started again differently, "Visitors... It's been long indeed. The leech is working well." A quala stepped into the room and studied the entrapped prisoners. "The strands are eisithai, a patented formula that our scientists worked out. Immune to others' rei, controlled by my ti-group..." it waved a tentacle at a couple of quala that stood behind it. "It takes some time to set up, but we had the time, watching you. It works well, no?"

None of the group answered. Yusuke tried to figure out whether or not shooting the quala would do them any good. It seemed like a leader... But they would still be very trapped.

"But wait," the quala squeaked in its broken-record voice. "There should be five. I only see four here..."

With a blink, the group started looking at each other. There was Yusuke, Kuwabara, Kurama, Hiei... Yusuke grinned, obviously Shinka had done her fade-out again. Though he knew she'd been in the room...

"The fifth is here..." One of the quala behind the first made its way into the room. It touched a tentacle to the web and the white started to pulse. A glow moved through the web... and it centered on an area that looked like the rest of the area...

Shinka yelped briefly and her body shimmered into view. The glow on the webs touching her disappeared.

The quala chattered at each other too quickly for the group to follow their speech. Abruptly, they all left the room.

"Good try, Shin-chan," Yusuke commented, "Obviously they have senses in this stuff..." He jerked at the strands that held him. Again, they surged slightly with him movement, and then held him tight.

"They—" Shinka started to say something and stopped as some quala moved in.

Yusuke wasn't sure, but it looked like a slightly different group. The leader-type was still there... And one of the ni-group. There were a couple of others...

"Is it? It feels like one," the leader squeaked at the new ones.

One quala approached where Shinka was and placed a tentacle on her shoulder, moving its way up her face as she jerked her head away. It paused on her forehead, "It does feel... The rei. It is the rei... It is blocking the rei from us, but that is not the nature of that kind..." Two more quala moved into the room, making it very crowded. All three quala put tentacles on Shinka while Yusuke yelled uselessly at them.

Then Shinka screamed suddenly and fell limply into the web, the strands holding her up.

"Ahhh..." All the quala looked up and their fur rippled over their bodies. The white web sparkled and started to glow. "The rei... The rei of a Wild One. So good. So long since it has come to us..."

"Shit..." Yusuke's eyes were wide, "They can access her rei as well!" All the advantage the group had was taken away in that instant. He glanced to Shinka, who was starting to straighten herself. She met his gaze shamefaced.

"Sorry... I tried to block them..."

"Easy, Shin-chan," Kurama's voice soothed.

"Wild One..." The other quala backed out to leave room for the leader-type. It approached Shinka, hissing and squeaking. "It has been long since we had one. What type are you?"

Shinka blinked and blinked again. She glanced to Kurama, but he could only shake his head. The corner where Hiei was held was deafeningly quiet.

One of the three came back in. It held a sheet of thin metal with etchings out to the leader and the two ran their tentacles over it. "This power curve..." "But that line..." "What about..." Finally, the other backed out and one of the first group came in again. It touched some of the strands around Shinka and they retreated into the web, leaving her free. She rubbed her wrists and then stood still.

The leader looked down at her, "My shas-group has determined you are a Twilight. In previous eras, we have bargained well with Twilights. A Light must be broken, a Dark controlled. But a Twilight can freely share and increase the Power. We would bargain with you."

Hiei growled, a desperate hating sound.

Shinka ignored the sound and tilted her head to one side. "Bargain?" she asked, not looking at her group.

"Twilights do what advantages them most. We offer long life. In your current situation, you might consider that a bargain."

Shinka shrugged, "I don't care much. Life is overrated."

The quala blinked, "We could offer you a definite death after the use of your rei."

"One has already promised to kill me. I don't care much about that either. It is the same." Hazel eyes narrowed, "But it is not your right, so I do not think I care for that one."

"Our world has much metal and stone that other dimensions consider scarce and precious. All of it is at your disposal."

"To do what with?" Shinka shrugged, "My needs are not for pretty things." She cocked her head and grinned, "Though I do like opals – they're nice to look at."

"Opal?" The quala turned to the one next to it in a questioning attitude.

"Sedimentary or volcanic silica formation. Not in our world, but can be accessed through others with the use of the mirror."

The quala nodded and turned back to Shinka, who shook her head, "That's a want, not a need. Try another Bargain, though they might add sweetness to the deal."

"Shin-chan!" Yusuke screamed, "What the hell are you doing? You're with us!"

She turned to face him, her eyes unreadable. She studied him for a long moment, remotely, no emotion showing in her face. Finally she spoke, "I am not yours. I do not obey your commands."

Yusuke's mouth dropped open and he stared, bewilderment and betrayal filtering across his features.

The quala's tentacles fluttered with excitement, "You will discuss a Bargain?"

Shinka shrugged again, "I will discuss."

"Good..." the squeak was almost close to a purr. "Come and we will Bargain." It backed out to the doorway.

Shinka hesitated and then started to follow. She was stopped by a soft voice that spoke her name. She turned and walked to where Kurama was. They stared at each other for a long moment. The quala turned to watch but said nothing. Shinka reached up a hand and stroked it through Kurama's long hair,

her fingers digging in the red mane. Kurama's eyelids half-closed in pleasure and he spoke her name again, softly, caressingly. After a moment, Shinka grinned and stood on her tiptoes while Kurama's head tilted as far down as he could. Their lips met and then the kiss went obviously deeper...

A howl filled the room and fire sprung out, burning strands of web as power blazed in fury and despair. Kuwabara yelped as some of the fire touched him. Hiei jumped down, his sword in his hand, his eyes green, his speed but a blur as he attacked.

One of the quala in the room moved even faster and the blade stuck in its body before Hiei got to Shinka. Other quala moved in and grappled him, throwing him down. Strands waved and moved, seeking his form. Fire blazed but was extinguished. A spike came down to kill.

"NO!!!!!!!" Pure energy whipped through the room and knocked the spike away. Shinka stood in front of Hiei and spread her arms wide, her fists clenched tight. "No kill!"

Hiei growled and tried to reach her, so close to him, but the strands held him still and the power he'd used to burn them before was not there anymore.

The quala backed away. The leader stood in the doorway and hummed. "We could offer his death."

"This is the one that promised to kill me. I do not want his death."

"We could offer his life."

"Not enough of a bargain," Shinka's voice was sarcastic and rueful on the words, where most of her other speech had been more emotionless.

The quala pointed a tentacle at Kurama, "What about that one?"

Shinka looked at Kurama and touched her hand to her lips. Then she shrugged, "I don't care enough about that one to make a Bargain." She walked away from Hiei and towards the door, "We will Discuss?"

"We will Discuss," agreed the quala. They left the room.

More quala moved in and the strands moved and wrapped and altered... Eventually, the group was carried from the corridor room to a cell that looked more designed for the purpose. The quala dumped them in and the entrance blended with the walls. Then the strands faded away, leaving them free.

"What the hell...?" Yusuke stood shakily, trying to make sense, any sense at all, out of what had just happened. "But she is a part of the team..."

Hiei snorted. "Meitta is not human or demon/spirit. They described her kind well: Twilight. Never trust one of them. They only think of themselves." He growled, "I should have killed her. I should have killed her the instant I saw her. That is not a human. It was obvious she would betray. I should have..." He slammed a fist into the wall, which gave with the impact and then bounced back to its original shape.

Yusuke shook his head, "No – you did right to wait. But I don't understand. I trusted her..." He shook his head again, "She was a part of us. I know she was. I don't understand." His eyes suddenly lit up as he remembered and turned to Kuwabara, "She's your cousin – she won't betray us."

Hiei snorted again.

Kuwabara reached a hand to the back of his head in embarrassment, "Ahh..."

"Kuwabara!!!!"

Kuwabara sighed, "I don't know – Shin-chan has always been... different. She plays games by a different set of rules than us. It's a hell of a lot of fun to be with her – things happen, animals are friendlier, senses are sharper... Now I know why that happens. But I couldn't tell you what she might do. No one has ever been able to tell her anything except her mother. She obeyed Aunt Derosha without question, and always perfectly. But without Aunt Derosha here..." Kuwabara shrugged.

"But, but..." Yusuke desperately searched for any type of reassurance. "Kurama! She obviously likes you...!"

Kurama laughed, a wildly delighted sound. "And she tastes good too," he agreed, running a tongue over his lips, "I was wondering if... how she would taste. She tastes very good indeed..."

Hiei growled, low and menacing.

"Oh come on, Love," Kurama laughed again, his emerald eyes resting fondly on the short demon, "What did you expect me to do? I'm a fox and she's a vixen." His eyelids half-closed again and he licked his lips again, "Very much a vixen... With such a delicious scent..." There was a deep growl in his throat, but somehow it was different, not... threatening, more like a purr.

"Vixen..." Hiei stood, stunned, "Of course... Fox. You are a wild creature in your spirit form. She is of the Wild... The more you draw on her rei, the more you revert to the spirit of your fox..." Hiei

closed his eyes and his shoulders slumped, "I should have killed her. I should never have allowed her close. Now she has trapped you with her rei. I should not have allowed it..."

"Oh, Hiei..." Kurama grinned and shook his head, "Easy there. I have always been both. And don't tell me you don't enjoy it when the fox lets loose..."

Kuwabara choked and suddenly backpedaled. "You... he... You... it isn't... You don't mean... the two of you..." His face turned an absolute and pure shade of red.

The other three turned to stare at him. Yusuke blinked, "You mean you didn't know, Kuwabara?"

Kuwabara squeaked something unintelligible and shook his head.

Kurama grinned mischievously, "But I do share sometimes... You and Hiei have always shared... a bond... haven't you?"

Kuwabara's gaze went to Hiei in stunned horror. Hiei raised an eyebrow at Kurama and then examined Kuwabara's form dispassionately, his eyes traveling slowly over the tall body, starting at the feet and going upwards, pausing in a few places. Eventually he reached Kuwabara's head.

And at the look on Kuwabara's face, Hiei couldn't hold it in anymore and a snicker broke through the emotionless facade. When Hiei lost it, so did the other two and Kurama and Yusuke fell on the floor as they held their stomachs, rolling as they laughed.

"Sheesh..." Kuwabara glared at them, "Okay, okay already. I fell for it. Enough already."

Yusuke tried to stop, "The look on your face..." He lost it again.

Rolling his eyes, Kuwabara turned to the only one not collapsed, intently curious though still embarrassed, "You two are really..."

Hiei shrugged, "When we're together." His gaze rested on Kurama, "It's not a life bond."

Kurama's laughter stopped abruptly and he got up, dismay obvious in his green eyes, "Hiei..."

A rumble interrupted them and a hole in the wall opened up, not where the previous door had been. They all looked over to it, suddenly reminded of their real purpose. Yusuke bit his lip for the time he'd wasted while he could have been planning... *Shinka, you haven't betrayed us. I know you haven't.* But he didn't know. For once, he really didn't know.

The quala walked in. Five of them. They spread out around the group, items they were carrying chirping and clicking and whirring as they moved. First they surrounded Hiei... The demon snarled, his eyes narrowing as his hand reached for the sword he still wore. Yusuke stopped Hiei with a quick word and the demon stood still, the snarl remaining still on his lips.

"Demon. High level spirit." One of the quala etched something on a surface. They moved on to Kuwabara. "Human. Strong rei." Then Kurama, "Demon. Fox spirit." Then Yusuke. They spent a lot of time on Yusuke. They finally came up with a report of "Human, spirit influence." And then they all left.

The group looked around at each other. Kurama looked faintly insulted, "Demon? But I'm also human!"

"Spirit influence?" Yusuke muttered in irritation, "I'm me!"

Kuwabara and Hiei traded amused glances. Then Kuwabara blushed and looked away. Hiei grinned and then addressed the other two, "They only look at the rei, their focus is such that they don't see anything else."

Yusuke looked at him thoughtfully, "You can still see their rei connections, even though you have the jagan bound?"

"Bound?" Hiei blinked his two normal eyes, "My jagan isn't ever 'bound'." He fingered the band around his forehead, "I just wear this because it's dangerous to let normal beings see my jagan. I uncover it when I want to use it more than superficially, but it's always active." He glowered at Kurama, "Except when there's a fox-spirit's corrosive blood sprayed on it..."

Kurama grinned at him, "I wanted you to fight Yusuke fairly."

"You could have just said so!" Hiei growled, "I had already offered the Game. The Rules were malleable. Your blood is like a damn poison!"

"You stuck the stupid sword through me, I thought I'd share some of the pain."

Hiei paused, "I actually wasn't sure what that was going to do. You are spirit, but you were in a mostly human body... and that particular sword. For a moment there, I thought I'd killed you."

"I knew you wouldn't." Kurama studied his friend, *though it's still a mystery as to why you cared in the first place. I was nothing to you then. Less than nothing. But the look on your face...*

With a growl, Hiei responded to the comment, "After that, I was going to! How dare you interfere in a fight already started?"

"I owed Yusuke—"

"Enough." Yusuke broke in impatiently. The old times weren't important anymore and the verbal sparring was getting on his nerves. "Hiei, you can see them. So what is it with their rei? The group that fought us... you broke their connections and they fell apart. Can you do that with these?"

The two demons stopped their squabble with slightly guilty faces – they'd gotten wrapped up in each other, sharing the words as a part of themselves and had forgotten about the others. Hiei answered Yusuke seriously even as he curiously watched him, wondering what Yusuke was doing, "The group that was fighting us was bound together with their rei's merging as a group so they were a coordinated whole fighting us. When I broke the connections, it was as if I'd severed their sight – they couldn't adjust quickly when they were used to being together. With these others... Each of them seems to have different connections. When the one that was apart introduced the others as groups... they were. Each group member was bound tightly to each other, and only superficially to other quala. Pod groups, more or less. If I severed their bonds... it probably would stun them momentarily, but the scientist types seem to be more independent than the fighters."

"The one that was apart..." Yusuke mused, "Was he the leader? Did he have any bounds?"

Hiei shrugged, "Its rei was in all the others. But it was not tied to theirs. In this culture... that could well be leadership. When Meitta's rei augmented its own, I saw some brighter bonds that were further away, but I can't say for sure." He thought a moment and added, "And they don't seem to have separate sexes. The term 'he' really isn't appropriate with them."

"No sex?" Both Yusuke and Kuwabara stared at him and then their gazes went to each other as they obviously speculated...

Kurama rolled his eyes, "You two really need to spend more time in school instead of cutting classes. Biology. There are a lot of other means of reproduction than sex."

"But who would want to do it any other way?" Kuwabara exclaimed. And then he did a double-take at Kurama and his ears grew red.

Kurama threw back his head and laughed. "Kuwa-chan, you are just so cute sometimes!"

Kuwabara blushed even more and backed away.

Shaking himself out of the fascinating idea, Yusuke directed his attention at Hiei again, "How about these walls and stuff? It looks like they are manipulating the whole of the structure rather than just parts, like we do."

Hiei tilted his head to one side as he studied Yusuke in evident approval. Then he turned to one side as he took his headband off and his third eye opened.

While he studied the walls, Yusuke turned to Kuwabara, "Can you find Shinka?"

"Uhh..." Kuwabara turned around in a circle, focusing his rei. Then he turned back to Yusuke and shrugged, "No. The quala have taken her rei and spread it everywhere. I can't tell if any area is really her or just an extension of her rei."

"Damn..." Yusuke frowned.

Kurama cleared his throat, "I can find her if it's really necessary." At the announcement, every eye in the room focused on him and Kurama winced, "Hiei! That hurts!"

"Sorry," Hiei muttered as he diverted the focus of his jagan off his friend. And then returned to the subject, "What the hell do you mean by that?"

Kurama sighed. And turned a pleading gaze on Yusuke.

"Uhh..." Yusuke blinked but responded promptly, "Hiei – what did you find out?"

With a snarl at the obvious switch, Hiei reluctantly told him, "This room is a combination of things. The walls are mostly organically grown out of mineral elements, and there is a rei weave though it that allows it to manipulate to events – the doors or an attack on the walls. There are also several electronic and rei components in places, surveying devices mostly."

Yusuke blinked, "They're watching us???"

"And listening," Hiei confirmed.

"Shit..." Yusuke fumed. Now the quala knew of several abilities of his team. And particularly the rarely used ones of Hiei. Hiei was the most powerful of them all but usually the quiet demon was their back-up, their ace in the hole, the one enemies underestimated the most. And now the quala knew what he could do. It was Yusuke's own carelessness. He should have assumed they'd be monitoring, but he hadn't and now his group had lost advantages they could have had. But how was he suppose to plan anything with the others without talking to them? Yusuke swore again and threw a

punch in the wall. It yielded briefly and then bounced back. *They set up that trap. They plan ahead. I rush in and get our team captured... Plan. I need a plan.* Yusuke started to pace and the other three quickly moved out of his way.

"Hiei..." Kurama walked over to the smaller demon and placed a hand gently on his shoulder. Hiei glared up at him and then looked away. But didn't shake the hand off. Kurama tightened his grip briefly and then smiled slightly and stood silently next to his friend, leaving his hand where it was.

Kuwabara watched them, fascinated. He shook his head several times but didn't say anything.

Finally, Yusuke stopped pacing. The others instantly looked to him. "Kuwabara – can you tell if they're listening and watching us right now?"

"How the hell am I suppose to tell that???" Kuwabara demanded. And then gave in under a glare from his companion. "Oh all right..." He closed his eyes and sent out his rei-sense, seeking out other rei, rei directed towards them, attention... He sneezed mightily. And then looked up while sniffing, "There's a few quala at the monitoring stations, but they are watching a block of cells, not just ours. The scientists and leader type seem to be diverted by playing with Shin-chan's rei and aren't paying any attention to us."

Yusuke's eyes lit up, "Good. Let me know the instant any of them do switch their attention." He narrowed his focus at the other two, "Is there any way we can block their monitoring, even for a short time?"

Hiei and Kurama glanced at each other and Kurama answered, "Yes... but I don't know how long it would last." Then he blinked, "But... Hiei – you said the walls were organic?"

"Of mineral elements, but they are alive," Hiei confirmed.

"Humm..." Kurama studied the walls in interest. "I think I might be able do something that won't let them know they're being blocked. Give me a few minutes." He sat down in the middle of the room and closed his eyes.

Yusuke watched him for a moment and then went back to pacing.

"That's it..." Kurama stood up and walked in a smooth glide around the edges of the room. At the same time, he reached a hand up and shook out his hair. A few minutes later, vines started sprouting around the edges of the room and merged into the walls. Yusuke exclaimed briefly and then shut his

mouth, eyes dancing in relief. Kurama stood still for a moment, head tilted to one side as if listening for something. Then he nodded, "It's done. They can't see or hear us now, but their machines aren't indicating a fault."

"Good!" Yusuke exclaimed, and then he grinned merrily, "Kurama, you devil!"

Kurama blinked, "No, I'm a fox."

"No – you and Shinka! What sort of seeds did you give her?"

"Oh!" the revelation struck Kuwabara and he grinned also.

Hiei whipped around to stare in shock at his friend. Then a whole wave of tension flowed out of his body as his shoulders slumped over and he bowed his head. "Seeds..." he murmured, his voice deep and soft.

"I'm sorry, Love," Kurama said apologetically, "I couldn't tell you or they would hear. And it was too dangerous already."

Hiei shook his head slowly. He had allowed himself to think that Kurama had betrayed him. He would not forgive himself. And they all felt Hiei's retreat into himself.

Kurama rolled his eyes and then switched his gaze to Yusuke. They shared an understanding glance and then Yusuke cleared his throat.

"What we need," he said, laying out the problems, "is a way of accomplishing the purpose behind this mission." Yusuke's expression was serious as he looked at his team, "We can break out of here, no problem. We can find Shinka. And we can find the mirror and the leech. Now that we know what the quala fight like, we should be able to deal with them without too much more trouble. Or at least no more than we can deal with at the time. But what happens after we break the mirror and kill the leech?" He looked around the group.

"We go home?" Kuwabara asked.

Yusuke glared at him, "We could." He glanced at the other two, "But from what I've been seeing, I think the leech is probably one of their science inventions. Even though we can kill this one, it's likely that they can just make up a new one. We can't just leave. Or we'll have to come back – when they're prepared for us. We need to take care of this now. The mirror isn't a problem, it's a one of a kind they stole from the spirit world and I doubt if they can duplicate it. But the leech? What can we do about it?"

Kuwabara looked stunned. Kurama and Hiei were both regarding Yusuke with almost identical

expressions – approval and delight foremost. When Yusuke finished talking, they looked at each other and smiled.

Kurama cleared his throat, "If it's out of their labs, that's a three-part task. First, all samples to be destroyed. Also all records and notes, physical or otherwise. Finally, all personnel who know the process have to be killed." He spoke simply, laying out the steps calmly. Yusuke listened calmly. Until Kurama got to the killing part.

"Hey, whoa there... No killing unless necessary. These are scientists you're talking about, not fighters."

Kurama paused, his face confused, the green eyes cold. Then he seemed to settled into his human part once again and he looked at Yusuke with a smile curving his lips. But didn't back down, "Yusuke – these people designed something that would tap into other worlds and kill them. Only so their own power would be augmented. Giving no thought to the inhabitants of the other worlds. The human world is already weakened and in turbulence because of their actions." Kurama walked over and placed his hands on Yusuke's shoulders, "Just because they're scientists, does not mean they are not evil. A cold-hearted scientist is worse than the most angry enemy."

Hiei snickered. As Yusuke glanced to him, the short demon nodded, "Of the two of us, Kurama is a worse enemy than I. After all, you defeated me." The words were left unspoken that Yusuke had never fought Kurama. Yusuke remembered Hiei's words when they first worked together, 'Kurama is much colder and ruthless in battle than I. I joined him because I didn't want to make him angry.' And Yusuke shivered.

"I would never hurt my friends," Kurama stated firmly, his hands gripping Yusuke tight.

"I know," Yusuke looked up into the beautiful green eyes and let his trust for this multi-faceted human-demon show. He trusted Kurama more than he'd ever trusted anybody in his whole life. "All right," Yusuke turned away and started pacing again. "All right. The pod group that designed the leeches have to be silenced. I don't suppose there's any way of just wiping their memories?"

Standing where Yusuke had left him, Kurama shook his head, "Not by us."

Yusuke sighed. And continued to pace. Finally he stopped and looked at the two demons helplessly, "I haven't the faintest idea how to do that. How to get to the lab, figure out which records are which,

what pod group was in charge of the project... How do we do that?"

The red fox grinned, "You could just command the best thief in the Spirit World to go do it, and then it would be done and you wouldn't have to worry about the details. This time."

Yusuke sat on the floor, hard. His eyes were wide as he stared at his friend. And remembered. "Oh..."

"Someone's coming," Kuwabara broke in, moving to the center of the room and facing one of the walls. Kurama hastily made some downward gestures to his plants and the vines retreated out of sight.

"Have you been scanning this whole time?" Yusuke asked, amazed.

"You asked me to," Kuwabara growled, "Shh!"

The group remained still as another flock of qualas came into the room and pattered around. When they left, they took Kurama with them. That nearly caused Yusuke to go berserk with the rei gun, but Hiei put out a hand and kept him back. The reversal of what had been happening all morning caused Yusuke to look in confusion to his friends. Kurama gave Yusuke a wink and Yusuke realized that this was a perfect opportunity to send the thief out on the mission. Hiei let go of his arm as soon as he felt Yusuke relax.

When the pod left with Kurama, Yusuke stared after them for a long moment then turned to Kuwabara. Before he could say anything, Kuwabara held up his hand and gestured Yusuke silent. He stayed like that for a few minutes and then nodded. "Whatever Kurama did is still working, but that pod was thinking about us. Now, they're focused on Kurama, so we're free to talk."

"Kurama," Yusuke murmured his friend's name, his imagination picturing the fragile-seeming body with the delicate features, red-hair flowing all around... He pictured that body and face being beaten and bruised for information. Or, in the quala culture, tubes and wires stuck into the pale flesh, blood pumping...

"Yusuke," Hiei's deep voice rumbled through the room, "He's okay. Kurama can take care of himself. He's been doing it for 600 years. He can do it for a few more hours."

"Yes, but..." Yusuke couldn't explain it. He'd never had a group before. His family was him and his mom. He had few friends. He was a delinquent at school – but a lone one. Unlike Kuwabara, who was the leader of a group. And now he, Yusuke,

always alone, now he had a group. A group that followed him and trusted him. Even the remote, wild demon Hiei trusted him. They were his friends. Before, Yusuke had very, very few friends. Kieko. And that was about it. Now that he had friends, Yusuke wasn't going to lose any of them. Whatever he had to do. He wasn't going to lose. Not his friends. Not ever. He wasn't going to lose. His fingers curled in a tight fist, keeping his friends close.

"Six hundred years??" Kuwabara's voice squeaked high in surprise. "But he's in High School!!"

Hiei's mouth twitched up. Yusuke shook himself out of his thoughts and grinned, "I'll explain it later, Kuwabara – Right now let's figure out what we're going to do."

And then they sat (or paced or stood) and planned out their attack. They were going to leave the leech to Kurama, but they still had to break out of this cell, find and break the mirror, get their group together again, and then leave in one piece. And they had to do this before they got split again. Shinka had left them – and Yusuke was still unsure about why. Yusuke had let the quala take Kurama, for the advancement of the plan... but Kurama was gone and there was a hole in Yusuke's heart not being able to see and know how his friend was doing. He had let Kurama go, and was nervous still. He could trust Hiei to go, perhaps. But Yusuke would be terrified if the quala were to come back and drag Kuwabara from his side. So... they planned quickly so that wouldn't happen. So what remained of his small group would stay together.

Actually, Yusuke planned, and the other two contributed. Yusuke bounced idea after idea into the arena and watched Kuwabara enthusiastic reactions and his solid contributions of suggestions for improvements. Hiei was a silent figure in black, but it was his frown that would reject a plan or his quiet nod that accepted them.

Finally, they got to the hardest part of the plan. Yusuke paced, "Are you sure you can't locate Shinka?"

Kuwabara shrugged helplessly, "It's like her fade thing, but different – I can't find her now, because everywhere feels like her rei! The quala are using it in everything now, even the lighting systems."

Yusuke blinked, "She's that powerful?" How could a single person have that much rei?

There was a moment of silence as the two human boys thought about the problem. And then

their gazes both went at the same time to rest upon Hiei.

"No," Hiei stated firmly. "Absolutely no way."

"Come on, Hiei," Yusuke pleaded, "We need to find her."

"No we don't," Hiei muttered.

"Hiei! She's a part of the group. Your jagan is the only thing that can find her right now, since we don't have Kurama with us." *Oops...* Yusuke instantly recognized his tactical mistake as Hiei's mouth curved in a real snarl at Kurama's name and the reminder that his partner had a bond of some sorts with his life-enemy. With a sigh, Yusuke retreated from the battle-field.

And Kuwabara took it up, in his own way. "If you can't do it, than I guess I will after all." He sat down in the middle of the floor and crossed his legs, closing his eyes.

Hiei looked decidedly nervous at Kuwabara's actions.

Hiei looks nervous? Yusuke blinked as he looked between them.

"Enough!" Hiei finally yelled. "Alright, alright," he muttered, sitting down across from Kuwabara, "Damn stubborn human! Get yourself killed..." He sighed, "Follow me." And Hiei closed his eyes.

Yusuke's eyes were very much open. And very, very wide. *What the hell just happened?*

Eventually the two opened their eyes and stood up. Kuwabara's were wondering, "That's nifty. That's so nifty. I can see anything by doing that."

"Don't do it often," Hiei warned, "At your present level of power, you can only stay out of body for a very short time."

"You were both there with me and still in your body," Kuwabara stated. "How'd you do that?"

Hiei sighed, "When you prove to me that you have this step mastered, then you can go to the next. Do you remember what happened when you tried to snap your sword in a Ki-Tham-Shu before I'd even taught you a Jan-Wath-Pa?"

Kuwabara winced as he gave in, "Okay..." He turned to Yusuke, "I know where Shin-chan is. And it actually reduces two of our steps because both she and the leader are in his Power room, where the mirror is."

Being the person he was, Yusuke couldn't let it alone, "Are you two telling me that Hiei has been teaching you????"

"No," Hiei replied shortly.

"But..."

Kuwabara's mouth twitched, and he clarified, "We didn't tell you that."

Yusuke growled.

Kuwabara grinned at his friend and then turned serious, "Look, Urameshi, my main weapon is a sword, right? Well, I've never had sword training in my whole life. In Genkai's tournament, I defeated my opponent by a fluke of luck and surprise. Fighting against Byakko..." Kuwabara shivered, "I nearly died. If I was going to be part of your team... I needed to learn more. If I wasn't to let you down." His gaze met Yusuke's with that bond they'd always shared of two fighters in respect and camaraderie.

With a nod, Yusuke accepted it. It was true – and he'd been getting so much training from Genkai... He hadn't thought about how Kuwabara was staying with them. And something else struck him about that. *Kuwabara... wanted to be part of my team. My team. Kuwabara... has his own team, his own followers... and yet, he chose to follow me.* Yusuke cleared his throat and turned away, embarrassed by the emotions flowing around the room. They both had their pride. And their pride was such that would never allow them to show their care more than this, or ask for help from another. And then Yusuke turned back, frowning, "Hey, wait a minute... Hiei—"

The other two cut him off in nearly the same instant, "We should probably get going." "The day waits for no human." "Hiei, you were going to cut a hole in this wall." "Are you clear on your part, human?"

Bowled over by the rapid exchange of words, Yusuke finally smiled. *Neither of them are going to admit it. Hiei must be teaching Kuwabara, and must have offered to in the first place. But neither of them are ever going to admit it.* Yusuke remembered Hiei's disbelieving disparagement about Kuwabara's sword technique when he was fighting Byakko. Obviously, Hiei had decided to do something about it. But the little demon never helped people... that he admitted to. Hiei still insisted that he was just with Yusuke so that some day they could fight again. And Kuwabara would never admit to having had help from Hiei. They were a perfect team. Yusuke shook his head at his friends. And joined them as they broke out of their cell and started the Plan.

Running down the hall, Kuwabara held up his hand. They halted and looked at him. After a

moment, he nodded and looked to the other two, "Kurama's done. He'll meet us in the Power room."

"Good," Yusuke exclaimed. And his eyes danced with relief.

They fought desperately. The Power room was real, but the quala had enough foresight to plan ahead. And they met them there with traps and tricks and fights. Prepared for some of it, the team was not caught again so easily. But neither was it easy. They fought.

And Yusuke kept glancing to the slight figure in red and black, sitting calmly on the window sill, one knee drawn up, hands on her leg, watching them with indifferent hazel eyes. They could feel her rei, they were drawing on her rei. So were the quala. She gave no sign of being with them.

The quala beat them back. And they finally stood, a team of four, waiting for the next move, knowing they were outmatched unless something happened...

The leader quala moved out of the corner from where it had been watching. It walked towards them.

"Kill or capture?" As the quala passed her, Shinka spoke for the first time, her voice remote.

The quala paused, "Capture of course – there is much yet to be learned."

Kurama's voice was soft but carrying, "Kill."

In a single motion, Shinka stood up, drawing a knife from her boot, and she plunged it deep into the quala's neck. It instantly collapsed in a puddle of skin. A howl whipped through the room and tentacles flailed...

"Yes!" Yusuke cheerfully readied his rei gun again, prepared to end the fight and finish the mission.

And then there was a lash of unification as every quala in the room joined rei in such a merge that even Yusuke felt it. They pressed in, pulling power, no longer attempting to capture but to kill...

"Oops..." Kurama backed up, "That didn't go quite as expected..." He gestured with a hand and plants sprang up from everywhere within the room. Mostly vine plants, but several other types including rose bushes and trees. They sprang up in corners. They grew on machinery. One wrapped around the pedestal the mirror lay upon and it cracked the case and then the mirror itself. The plants attacked the quala...

But the quala for the first time were fighting with purpose. There was hate within them and they pressed forward with determination.

Hiei was a whirlwind of power, fighting full out. Yusuke desperately poured power into his rei gun. Kuwabara's sword flashed.

Then there was a hum in the air and the lights flickered... and all the rei of the qualas disappeared for an instant. The quala stopped, stunned and frightened and alone... The moment passed and the rei was back again, but without the unification and less...

Yusuke didn't question, didn't pause. He attacked. And Kuwabara attacked with him. And they swept through the quala and destroyed all within the room and quickly barricaded the doors. The two boys shared a grin of delight – they had won! Now all they had to do was leave...

They turned back to the center of the room, and blinked at the sight that met their eyes.

The slight figure in black and red was kneeling at Kurama's feet, "I am sorry, my lord," she said in her soft voice, "I failed you and them."

Kurama snorted, "Don't be an idiot, Shin-chan – you did exactly as I commanded. It was no fault that they didn't react as expected."

"Yes it was," A slightly sarcastic voice responded to the statement. It wasn't Shinka's. It was Hiei, standing to one side, his arms folded across his chest as he glared at them.

Shinka bowed her head, "It was." She looked up at Kurama, her eyes bright with dismay, "They used my rei to unify. If my rei hadn't been there, if I had been able to block them, they wouldn't have been able to unify."

With a sigh, Kurama tugged Shinka to her feet. He drew a hand through her near-white hair and then placed both hands possessively on her shoulders, "You are my vixen. You are under my command. And I say you did good. It was your withdrawal of your rei that caused them to falter and fail. We have completed the mission. And you are my vixen."

Hiei frowned but more in puzzlement than anger.

"Command?" Yusuke blinked.

"Oh..." Kuwabara also blinked but for a different reason as he put some of the pieces together. "In the shrine, she obeyed Aunt Derosha. Here... she obeys Kurama?"

Shinka turned her head to them, "It is the condition upon this incarnation. I am not a subject of King Enma, so before he placed my soul into a body that was in his realm, he bound it to obey. When he assigned me to this mission, he placed me under Kurama-sama. I will obey him in all." She lifted her gaze up to meet Kurama's. His eyes were half-lidded with possessive pleasure, the green emerald shining bright as he purred deep in his throat. His hands stroked her shoulders.

"A fox?" Hiei's indignant voice broke the tableau, "That idiot put a fox in charge of a vixen? What the hell was King Enma thinking???"

"Uhh..." Yusuke was having trouble with one part of this conversation, "Don't you guys mean Koenma?" Three gazes turned on him and he raised his hands, "I mean... well, don't you?"

Kurama's mouth twitched up as he stepped back from Shinka, "No – it was King Enma. Koenma commands our team, but when it comes to Spirit and Human rules, King Enma is in charge." The green eyes sought out a pair of red ones, "And who else in the team could he have given the charge to?" Kurama grinned as he waved a hand around the room.

Hiei glanced from Kurama to Yusuke and Kuwabara... and then back at Shinka. He shook his head in irritation and turned his back.

"Besides," Shinka put in, addressing the two humans, "my soul is not Human or Spirit – technically, the only reason King Enma can bind me is because the body is human. Koenma does not yet have that authority."

"You're not Spirit???" Yusuke and Kuwabara traded glances – what else was there?

There came a pounding at the doors of massive bodies trying to break in. And a whirl of machinery outside. The group hurriedly got back to the more important matter at hand – escape.

"That was the mirror that broke, right?" Yusuke asked Kurama, his eyes on the pedestal. Kurama glanced to Shinka, who nodded. Yusuke pressed on, "And you... destroyed the leech and the records of the leech?" Kurama nodded, his teeth flashing in a white grin. "Right," Yusuke looked around one more time than shrugged, "that's it then – Shinka, do we have to get back to the original spot for you to get us out?" He'd originally planned for that, but things... were rather different at the moment than his plan.

Shinka wrinkled her nose, "No – the transport block was for things coming in, not going out."

There was a long pause. Yusuke glanced in puzzlement to Shinka, "Shin-chan? Anytime now..."

"Uhh..." Shinka glanced nervously up at Kurama and gulped before turning to Kuwabara, "Kaz-chan, do you still have your notebook?"

Kuwabara blinked as he pulled it out, "With the incantation? Yeah. Do you need it?"

"Uhh..." Shinka fluttered her hands vaguely, "Actually, it's you. Ah, I mean, you're the one who's got to use it."

They all stared at her. Even Hiei turned around to look.

With intense sympathy, Kuwabara patted her head, "Oh, yeah. The fight. Both we and they were all using your rei so much that you must be exhausted. I hadn't thought about it, but since you pulled that trick, I can't even feel your rei anymore."

Hiei's breath drew sharply in and he did a quick blur to appear directly in front of her. Tugging down his headband, he stared into her eyes for a long moment and then he starting cursing expressively and intensely. Finally, he paused for enough breath to address her more directly, "Meitta... You fool! You absolute idiot!"

"It was the only thing I could think of at the time!" Shinka yelled, flushing in embarrassment.

"Baka!" Hiei continued to glare at her.

"Hiei," Kurama's voice was faint and his face was pale as he beseeched his friend, "She didn't..."

Shinka glanced guiltily up at him and then fixed her gaze on her feet.

Hiei looked grimly at his friend, "She did."

Obviously things were bad... Yusuke entreated silently for someone to tell him what was going on. Kuwabara responded, his voice puzzled, "She sealed her rei within her. But I don't know why that's a prob—"

The doors shattered inward.

"Damn!" Yusuke leveled a shotgun blast at the surging quala, driving them temporarily back, "Kuwabara – do the incantation now!!!!!"

Kuwabara hastily flipped the pages and said the words.

When the quala came into the room, there was nobody there.

When they reappeared in the human realm, they were four. And Kurama held an unconscious Shinka in his arms.

"Oh, good – You're finally back. We felt the mirro—" Botan broke off as she saw them. Her breath drew in, "What happened?"

Kurama knelt down, lowering Shinka to the ground and bending over her, "Ah, my vixen. You can't... you can't go away from me. You are mine. You are under my command... well, I tell you to come back! Shin-chan..." His voice was a raw aching wound as Kurama ran his hands through her white hair and along her pale face.

Yusuke walked over and placed a hand on Kurama's shoulder, "Is there anything we can do?" Not that he knew what the problem was anyhow... Kurama shook his head, not looking up.

"What happened to Shinka?" Botan knelt next to them and placed a hand above Shinka's head, "There's nothing physically wrong..." She looked up, "And where's Hiei? He didn't..."

Both Kurama and Yusuke jerked their heads up, looking around with wide eyes... Hiei was nowhere to be seen.

"He's not here," Kuwabara grunted as he painfully lowered himself to sit next to them.

The other three stared at him. Kuwabara was cut and bleeding in many places, his clothes were in shreds, his tiredness was visible...

"What the hell happened to you?" Yusuke demanded.

"He's not here?" Kurama started to stand up, his worry caught anew, "Not... he's not with the quala, is he?"

Kuwabara shook his head to both questions, "He slipped out between the words as we were traveling here. It was deliberate, but I have no idea where he thought he was going. And I'm fine." He stared at Shinka thoughtfully, "It's just that the words... were a bit sharp."

"But what happened to Shinka?" Botan questioned again, "I can't find anything wrong..."

Kurama bent down again, his hands caressing the slim shoulders, tracing the pattern of his rose on her clothes. "She sealed herself."

Botan blinked, "Oh... So?" She shook her head, "But why is she... hurt from that? I put a seal on myself all the time when I'm walking in a dangerous part of the Spirit World – so others won't sense how much rei I have."

I'm glad somebody else doesn't understand!
Yusuke and Kuwabara both looked to Kurama for the answer.

Kurama sighed, "Shin-chan might have the body of a human, but her soul and her rei is neither Spirit nor Human. Enma wouldn't tell me what she is – he said it wasn't important for the mission. But... her rei is very different than ours." One of his hands ran through her near-white hair and he stared sorrowfully down at her dark face.

After waiting a minute more and not getting anything but silence, Yusuke prodded, "And..."

With a start, Kurama seemed to remember that they were there. He glanced up to meet Yusuke's gaze, his own gaze pleading... Yusuke involuntarily and instantly reached out to his friend, trying to give support in any manner he could. Kurama bowed into Yusuke's embrace for a long moment, accepting the care before he pulled back again. "Shin-chan's rei exists without her, not within." Seeing the blank looks on the three faces, Kurama sighed and tried again, "As a very rough comparison, it's like how vertebrates, birds, mammals – humans and foxes – have their bone structure, their skeletons, on the inside of their body and the flesh surrounds it; while invertebrates, insects, crustaceans – crabs and shrimp – have their bone structure, shells, on the outside. In the same way, humans and spirits' rei is inside us, supporting us from within, drawing power from within us. Shinka's rei surrounds her externally, drawing from nature and making her a part of it."

"You saying Shin-chan is a crab?" Kuwabara stared down at his cousin.

"Inver—what?" Yusuke tried to puzzle out the unfamiliar words. "Insects don't have bones?"

Botan blinked and frowned, "That's... odd."

With a groan, Kurama gave up on explanations and dropped his gaze back to Shinka's still face, placing his hands on her cheeks and narrowing his focus until he could feel the thin heartbeat in her body. Still alive, for now...

"I think I get it," Yusuke announced, the muscles in his face showing the strain, "Her rei is generated by her, like we generate ours, but hers surrounds her like a shell. Both we and the quala could draw off her rei 'cause it was outside her, though she was actively manipulating it for us to be compatible and augment our power – the quala had to do that on their own. But they could. And when she tried to stop them, what she did was stop generating rei. She sealed herself... and her rei disappeared because it wasn't being produced anymore. Not because we couldn't access it anymore – but because it wasn't there anymore. And without rei..." Yusuke stared down at Shinka

in dismay and horror, "she'll die." He'd known from the look on Kurama's face that it was bad, and had gotten the idea that it was really bad... but knowing the 'why' made it much more real. Now, know he knew why there wasn't anything they could do. Or was there?

"Botan," Yusuke turned to her, "Quickly, go to Koenma and find out from him if there's anything he can do. Or if King Enma can do anything," he added, remembering under whose jurisdiction Shinka was suppose to be. He waited until Botan had given a nod and flown off before he turned to Kuwabara.

"I'm on it," Kuwabara muttered, his hands resting lightly on the middle of Shinka's chest as he concentrated, his eyes closed, his forehead wrinkled with the effort. "If I can break through the barrier she's set up, and feed her some rei, she might be able to start producing it on her own again... It's like if we use too much of our rei and burn our life energy by pushing it out of us. She lives by taking it in. So..." He grunted and his rei took on visible light around him as he intently focused.

Those two items having been tasked, Yusuke looked around hopelessly. He hated waiting and watching. But those were the only things he could think of... Yusuke ended up watching Kurama, who was dividing his attention between Shinka and Kuwabara. The fox spirit's mobile face had gone still in a way that reminded Yusuke of someone trying desperately not to either hope or despair, but was caught between.

"Enough, Kaz-chan," a low murmur broke the silence, "You put any more of yourself in that and you'll be in trouble." Shinka struggled to sit up, pushing Kuwabara's hands away.

"Shin-chan!" Kurama clasped her tightly, helping her to sit up while supporting her against him. "Shin..." his voice trailed off as the emerald eyes studied her closely.

Shinka's eyes fluttered in weariness, "No, he didn't break through." She grinned wryly, "I did too good a job. And I don't have the energy to do it myself..." Her eyes opened more fully and the hazel orbs sought out her cousin's, "Stop that Kaz-chan. It's not your fault. And it'll be okay..."

Kurama's head bent over hers and his words were muffled in her hair, "I don't call this 'okay'..."

"Kurama-sama..." Shinka tilted her head up to meet his gaze and their faces hovered only an inch apart. "Ah, Kurama," one slim hand reached up with an effort to tangle in the red hair draping over her, "Don't worry so. I'll be fine." She grinned, "I

don't think there'll be any more human bodies for awhile – no more special dispensations after this!" The laughter in her voice took such an obvious effort that she was silent for awhile gaining more strength to speak, "Maybe I'll go back to foxes again." She grinned up at the emerald eyes, "I'd like that. I would. Certainly I'll have a better appreciation for them!" If anything, Kurama's expression was sadder than before. Shinka looked at him and sighed, closing her eyes and giving up a bit of the effort. Her hand fell out of his hair.

"Shin-chan..." Kurama's voice broke as he said her name, "You can't go. You are mine. I was in charge of you. If you die, I'll have failed my charge and my self. My vixen. You are mine and I can't let you go. Shin-chan, if you go... how can I follow?"

Her eyes shot open and she stared at him in dismay, "Kurama, you idiot!" With a burst of strength, she struggled to twist so she could face him. Yusuke reached out and helped her, supporting her against him. She acknowledged his help without taking her attention off Kurama. When she spoke again, her voice was full of exasperation and sounded much like her normal self, "Baka... You were placed in charge of me for your protection and your team's. Not mine! If I am to be let loose without a control..." The hazel eyes were sad, "You see how Hiei reacts to me. My soul did something horrible, and I can feel it at the edges of my memory. When the quala tried to bargain... I felt like I should. I listened to them and only the fact that I was bound to you kept me from sealing a bargain. You have not failed, but succeeded. You kept me from hurting your team. That was the purpose behind making me yours." The speech had taken a tremendous effort and on the last words, her eyes shut again and her body slumped in Yusuke's arms. Only the fact that she was still breathing kept Yusuke from panicking.

Kurama reached out and took her from Yusuke, cradling her body in his arms again. Softly, he murmured, "I don't care what it was for. You are mine now. And I'm not letting you go."

Yusuke watched, caught between understanding and puzzlement. Kurama's pain... was almost, but not quite, that of a human. The possessiveness... Yusuke was starting to realize why Hiei had been so upset when he'd found out what King Enma had done. It was a fox's possessiveness towards a vixen of its pack. A dominant fox. Obviously, a fox Spirit had some of the characteristics of the animal. And Kurama... what was it that made someone become a thief? It was the desire to have something, to

possess it, to claim it. The challenge and the danger to gain what was another's. Putting Kurama in charge of Shinka, making of her a possession that was his... And now this new item that was his was slipping through his fingers without his control. A new possession, broken before it was enjoyed. Seeing Kurama on the different levels, thinking of him beyond the human, Yusuke could only shake his head – it hadn't been a good idea.

"Kurama..." A low voice caught their attention and jerked three heads up to look around. But they couldn't see Hiei anywhere.

They heard him cough and then his voice came again, "Kurama – bring Meitta over here."

Kurama blinked as he looked around. Slowly, he got up, Shinka in his arms, "Where?"

"The forest..." Hiei coughed again. "Bring her into the forest." The low deep voice sounded... weary. Yusuke and Kuwabara traded perplexed glances as they followed Kurama.

When he got underneath the spread of the trees, Kurama stopped.

"Put her down," Hiei's figure in the deepest of the shadows became discernible, a blackness in the blackness. Only his cowl and the star on his hair were truly visible. "No!" he snapped as Kurama started to obey, "Not in the sunlight! Put her down where no sun shines."

Kurama moved Shinka accordingly, remarking casually, "She's in a human body."

"I know," Hiei moved out from the fold of shade and they could all see him now – and what he carried.

There was a general round of inhaled breaths as they saw the pale silver-white flower in his hands, glowing with its own light, almost pulsating with power. It was... inhuman. Eerily beautiful. And it felt deadly. Strong and delicate. Foreign. They were attracted to it, but knew instinctively that it was not for them... Hiei held it out to Kurama.

As Kurama reached out to take it, he hissed in pain and jumped back shaking his hand and blowing air over the burn.

With a lightning move, Hiei caught the flower before it had dropped an inch, "Didn't think so," he remarked with a glimmer of humor. "Here – Kuwabara. You have to do it."

"Uhh..." Kuwabara inched forward, fascinated by the flower but wary of it, "If it burned Kurama..."

Hiei grinned mirthlessly, "It knows a thief when it feels one. Don't worry – humans are generally safe."

Kuwabara reached out and held the flower gently. "Oooo..." he looked down at it in wonder, "It has rei. This flower..." He knelt down next to Shinka and placed the flower on her chest, his hands around it, "It is like hers. So close... It is the basis of her rei. I can feel..." He closed his eyes and a glow sprang up around his body and flowed around Shinka's.

"It's from her world," Hiei remarked, watching carefully. "Her people draw on the rei of the land for their own. Since she cut herself off, this might bring her out."

Kurama's attention was no longer on Shinka, but was focused very intently on his partner, "Hiei..." he whispered his name in surprise and bafflement.

"Shh..." Hiei held out a hand, "I think he's done it..."

Shinka's eyes opened, a golden glow in the dark face. The eyes dispassionately examined Kuwabara for a moment before dismissing him, her hands taking the flower from his and brushing him aside while she sat up and looked around. They flickered over Yusuke, and rested for but a moment upon Kurama before focusing on Hiei. She smiled, "Quicksilver. So, my demon, you react with thought and speed, as always." She stood up, her movements deliberate and graceful, her baring and manner proclaiming years and years of life and dignity, her white hair shining with its own light, the power of her rei visible in the shadows of the forest. As they looked at her, it was obvious that though it was a human body, it was not a human being that stood there.

"Meitta," Hiei acknowledged her, bowing his head very slightly.

Pale eyebrows in the dark face shot up, "So formal? So cold? Hiei, my little demon, it is unlike you to be so distant." Hiei said nothing and the golden eyes traveled over him. The lady smiled, "Ah, but I see you are wounded – and you are always bad-tempered when you have to show weakness."

Three gazes that had mostly been locked on... Meitta... switched in startlement to Hiei. But by his bearing and stance, not even Kurama could tell that there was anything wrong with him.

Meitta lifted the flower in her hands and brought it up to her face, "It could not have been easy for

you, taking a yathia in bloom from the Garden. The guards must have been upset." She smiled fondly, "Oh, enough of that. Let me heal you—"

As she glided towards him, Hiei jumped back, his form flickering and reappearing just out of her reach. Meitta blinked, surprised. And then her eyes narrowed, "Even from you, my favorite, that is not acceptable! I will not tolerate disrespect from my people, and I certainly will not from you either." She stood easily as she spoke, only the eyes telling of her emotion, "Perhaps I have been too lax..." the smile came again, a brilliant flash of humor and joy, "but it is hard to be angry with you, my quicksilver Hiei." She stepped towards him and he retreated again, this time moving into a patch of sunlight. Meitta stopped on the outskirts, her eyes drawn down in a frown, "Hiei... What Game do you play?" She studied him with the amber eyes, "That is anger in your eyes. Anger and hatred. Of me?" The white hair flowed gracefully as she shook her head, "But I have offered many times to return you to your demon realm – you are the one who chooses to stay. Why do you hate me now?"

Hiei shook his own head, "Shinka does not remember you and you do not remember her. I still have no answer to my question."

Dark lids with long lashes closed over the brilliant gold amber as she blinked, "What question? If it is within my power, my demon, I will grant it." A sudden smile flashed, "I know – you are jealous because you heard of that human I brought in the other day. Do not worry, he is nothing to me. If it displeases you, then I shall be rid of him." There was no reply from the short demon and Meitta raised her eyebrows, "No? Than it must be this... Shinka. Who is she? Human by the name. Is she that new servant that Talthin brought over? If you desire her, I will Bargain with Talthin." She grinned, "I have several items in my library that he's been wanting for the last millennium. I keep them only to annoy him." As Hiei stayed silent, she studied him with a frown, "That's not it either. Than what? What shall I do to bring the starlight and laughter back to those brilliant carnelian eyes of yours?"

Hiei shook his head, "I will let you heal me if you come here to do so."

The eyebrows raised and stayed raised as she looked at the patch of sunlight he was standing in. "You have been too long in my court to make such a transparent attempt at treachery, so it cannot be that. Or, you lost a Bargain and are bound to make an attempt but are not trying very hard..." The

eyebrows lowered, "What Game are you playing now?"

"That is a human body you wear."

Her shock was evident as she looked down at herself with wide eyes, "Why so it is... Now how did this happen?" She shrugged, "No matter. A simple Shaping will reform it." A glow started to surround her.

"Meitta, wait," Hiei spoke quickly.

The glow faded and the amber eyes rested upon him again, "You never could pronounce my name correctly – but it is all part of your charm. What is it, Hiei?"

"I make a Challenge – come to me."

The smile on her face seemed genuine, full of humor and fondness and a glimmer of interest. "A Challenge, eh?" She grinned, "And if I meet your Challenge, what is my Prize?"

In spite of the grimness within him, Hiei smiled in response to the sparkle, "Whatever you will."

"Whatever?" The smile became broader, "Oh, Quicksilver... that is a dangerous thing to offer – I thought I had taught you better than that." The amber gaze wandered over his body, "Once I heal you, you will be full of stamina and grace again..." A tinkle of bells was the sound of her laughter, "I accept your Challenge." And Meitta stepped forward into the sunlight.

And stopped suddenly as the silver flower she held burst into flames and faded to ashes. Shinka looked down at the ashes in her hands and bit her lip before looking up to Hiei. "Why?"

He tilted his head and studied her before answering, "It would take me a human lifetime to find you again if you switched bodies now. And an animal, even a fox, would not be able to give me the answers I want. As you are, you cannot answer my question. As you were, you could not. The answer lies between, and I am willing to wait until I have it before I kill you."

"Hiei... I do not understand – what question? Why is it so important? The way I spoke to you... as if you were a possession? But you..." Shinka paused and then spoke slowly, enunciating and feeling each of the syllables of the name, "Quicksilver..." She shook her head, "Hiei – Why don't you kill me now?" The hazel eyes stared earnestly into the red ones as they stood looking at each other.

Hiei shook his head, "You remember the words, you remember nothing of the self."

"I remember..." She spoke softly, her breath a whisper, "I remember starlit eyes that looked at me in trust and... – I remember that look changing to pain and hate. And I remember being glad at the change. Hiei... Why was I glad? How could I be glad?"

He reached out and dusted the ashes off her hand, "The Game is not over yet." With a quick blur, he disappeared from their sight.

Shinka watched after him, remembering the strong powerful body enclosed in his cloak of darkness, the wild power, the beautiful red eyes, the white star in the spiky black hair, "Hiei..." *I want to remember you... I want to remember the starlight and laughter... What did I do to you? Hiei...*

Epilog: WARNING - Yaoi/Lime content

Hiei... Warily, Kurama walked home. Alone. Shinka had gone home with Kuwabara so she could visit with her human relatives before going back to the Shrine. Botan had returned and left again when no one needed her anymore. Yusuke was going back to his home. And Hiei? No one ever quite knew where the demon went between cases. But he was gone. And Kurama was walking home alone. Hiei... why did you never tell me about Meitta? Who is Meitta? Starlight and laughter... Kurama had only seen Hiei laugh full out a few times, mostly during their courtship. The demon did have a sense of humor, and wasn't afraid to share a joke or to tease – especially to Kuwabara. But... happy? She was expecting him to be. And was surprised at the anger. 'I remember the trust changing to anger – and I was happy at the change.'

Meitta... So different than Shinka. The spirit was power and strength, dignity and age. Kurama as a fox spirit was 600 years old. He instinctively knew that she was much, much older. The moment that the flower had healed her rei, the binding that had existed between him and Shinka had vanished. He could still feel it faintly bound to the body... but the soul was free. Free and wild. Contained by nothing. Certainly not by any commands to obey. What is she? It was not a world that Kurama was familiar with. But then, he only knew of the Human World and the Spirit World. The Demon World was but a subsection of the Spirit World. For the most

part, the spirit world stayed aloof from the human world. There were ties, and certain of the spirits, like Enma and Botan, took on deliberate responsibilities for parts of it. But mostly... Kurama shook his head, this wasn't getting him anywhere in thought.

Shin-chan... He missed the binding. Having the awareness of another. Feeling her in him – and knowing that she would do anything he asked of her. Having her trust. And it wasn't entirely an imposed trust. When her binding had been transferred to him, she'd looked at him with those hazel eyes of hers... and smiled. She trusted him to know what to do that was best. And she trusted him not to interfere between her and Hiei... Kurama paused with his hand on the door to his home. *Hiei...* Kurama shook his head. It was better for him not to think of Hiei right now. Instead he deliberately filled his mind with thoughts and memories of hazel eyes in dark skin, near-white hair fluttering in the wind as they danced around the trees in the age-old game of tag... Shinka may not be a fox-spirit, but she'd been a fox in previous lives, and it showed. She slipped easily into the relationship of fox with fox. And the binding had made her his.

There was a smile on his lips as Kurama entered his house. His mother greeted him warmly, asking about his day and telling him of the hot supper she had ready for him. Kurama slipped back into human life and kissed his mother and said the right things and went into his room to change before eating. And stood, frozen, as he stared at the small body curled on his bed, sleeping in a puddle of darkness. "Hiei..." softly, Kurama closed the door and walked to his bed, sparing one glance for the window that he always left cracked open.

One red eye opened and stared at him for a moment before Hiei yawned and stretched. He curled up again on his other side, muttering, "Go have dinner – I'll still be here when you're done." And his eyes closed again and there were only sounds of soft breathing.

Like Kurama really believed that Hiei was asleep that quickly... He grinned and changed clothes quickly, very much aware of the person on his bed. He longed so much to walk over there and take the demon in his arms and kiss those grim lips and feel them soften beneath his touch, and something else harden... Controlling his breathing with an effort, he walked back out to the dining room and forced himself to be polite and responsive to his mother's gentle conversation. And he did full credit to the meal, wanting his strength for the night. But as soon as he decently could, Kurama eagerly

went back to his room, saying an early goodnight to his mother.

Hiei was waiting for him, sitting up crosslegged in the middle of the bed, his red eyes watching the red fox move towards him... Kurama's breathing was heavy, but he managed a light question, "So, what do I owe this... pleasure, to?" His eyes lidded down over the emerald gaze as he spoke the word 'pleasure', the anticipation nearly driving him crazy.

A ray of light in the darkness, a shooting star. Hiei's grin came and went, but left the memory, "I thought I should apologize for my behavior earlier."

"Apologize?" Kurama walked to the edge of the bed and looked down. Hiei hadn't given the word any particular emphasis, but Kurama took the word and twisted it, layering it with levels of innuendo.

But Hiei was serious, "I had no right mistrusting you. I was wrong to even think it."

"Oh, Love..." Kurama sat down on the bed and reached a hand out to his partner, "I should have told you. I'm sorry. Even if not then, I should have told you earlier what Enma had done and that Shinka was under my command. I..." Kurama hesitated, not really wanting to explain.

Hiei grinned lightly, "You were watching the show." He took the hand that Kurama held out and placed it against his face, "It's alright. I understand curiosity." As he held Kurama's hand against him, Hiei's eyes slowly closed, "Kurama..." his low voice caressed Kurama's senses and Kurama moaned deeply in pleasure. Hiei opened his eyes, "I haven't even done anything yet," he accused.

"You are here..." Kurama whispered, his gaze intent, the emerald eyes shining. "Hiei..." Allowing the hand that was on Hiei's face to wander freely over the cheekbones and up to fondle the round ears, Kurama leaned in and kissed Hiei like he'd wanted to earlier. And Hiei eagerly returned the kiss, his lips already soft in his own expectations, his arms going around Kurama's back to hold him close. Kurama's hands quickly returned the favor, going to the edge of Hiei's cloak and expertly pulling it loose, letting his hands rove down the muscular body... Kurama blinked and drew back from the kiss, his eyes accusing, his hand on a rough bandage covering Hiei's chest.

Hiei shrugged, "Forget it. It'll heal soon enough." He reached out for Kurama, "Come here and make me forget it..."

The pleasure was superseded by more important things. Kurama remembered Shin... Meitta's words, 'it cannot have been easy, to take this

flower from the Garden.' *No, it obviously wasn't.* Kurama couldn't even remember the last time the short demon had been more than superficially hurt. Even after the fight with Yusuke, Hiei was up and about an hour after having been blasted flat. Kurama's nimble hands undid the rough bandage so he could look at the damage. And his breath drew in sharply. "Stay there – I'm going to get some better band-aids and some medicine." He got up and rummaged around in his closets.

"Paw, human medicine," Hiei grumbled. "Kurama, come back here..."

"No." Kurama found soft bandage cloths and the salve that he had... borrowed... from a spirit physician several years back. Human medicine was all well and good for humans, but on Kurama, it didn't always work... "Off with the clothes, Hiei."

Hiei raised an eyebrow, "You can see all the damage from here."

Kurama growled, "I mean it – I don't put it past you to hide any wounds from me."

"And saves you time later?" Hiei obliged, stripping off his pants. His boots were already on the floor. "But you have to also."

"I'm not hurt."

"You might be."

Kurama looked at the small demon sitting on his bed, grinning lightly at him, no doubts or fears in the red eyes but simply a happy trust... His heart twisted in two and nearly tore itself apart. Kurama had to put the bandages and medicine down as his arms couldn't hold them and his legs wouldn't support himself. He knelt by the bed and burrowed his head in the covers.

"Kurama?" Hiei placed one gentle hand on his shoulder and ran the other through the mane of red hair. "What's wrong?"

Shinka's hands, running through his hair. Her mouth reaching up to his... "Hiei," Kurama whispered, his body shaking, "Thank you for saving Shin-chan." He was afraid of saying the words, but he had to...

Hiei's whole body froze for a very long moment. And then he sighed, "Fox. He bound a fox to a wild spirit... You are a very possessive fox, did you know? You do not easily give up what you see as yours. Kurama – what will you do when I kill her?"

"It... That..." Kurama sighed, "That's okay. You have the prior claim and she is yours first and foremost. She acknowledges your right and will not protest anything from you. It was just... When she

was dying for no reason..." His body shook and trembled with remembered anguish. "And you..." Kurama lifted his head and reached a hand out to the wound that pierced Hiei's chest through, a duplicate wound on his back, "Hiei... don't ever die on me."

"Kurama..." There was a note of warning in Hiei's voice, "Don't seek to bind me too tightly. You wrap the vines around me and I will run. I am yours – I love you for the trust you put in me. But I have to have my freedom also."

"I know..." Kurama whispered.

"And that having been said," Hiei's hands fiddled with the loose collar on Kurama's shirt until he'd gotten the top button undone. Though his hands spend more time inside the shirt than on the button. "Let me show you how much I care."

"Hiei!" Kurama gasped, the physical sensations combined with the mental anguish driving him wild with need. He stood up and backed away, "Damn it... Let me take care of you first."

"Humm..." The smaller demon lay back against the covers, reclining on the pillows, "Okay – but then it's my turn."

"Damn it, Hiei..." Kurama bit his lip and walked to the kitchen for a bowl of water. He wondered the whole time what he was going to say if he met his mom, but she wasn't around. Thankfully, he went back to his room and carefully slipped the lock into place as he closed the door. He also set some wards so sound and rei wouldn't get through.

"Took you long enough."

"I was only gone a minute."

"A minute is too long to wait."

Kurama put the bowl of water down on his countertop and stared at his friend. It wasn't that he minded Hiei being so... friendly, but... "What is it with you tonight, Hiei?"

"Hummm?" The wide eyes blinked languidly at him.

"Damn it..." Kurama seemed to be saying that a lot tonight, but the little demon was driving him crazy, "Stop playing games, Hiei."

"But that's exactly what I'm not." Despite the words with multiple meanings, the low voice was deadly serious as he spoke them. Hiei sat up on the bed again and indicated by his posture that Kurama could start tending to the multiple sword slashes on and through his body. As Kurama ran a wet soft cloth over the wounds, Hiei spoke softly. "Kurama... You've been my friend since the first.

You... understood me. And you pulled me out of the hell prison to make me team with you. I've never understood why. But you trusted me. In the Demon World, betrayals are as common as alliances. Based only on power and power alone. But you sought me out, and believed in me. For no reason. No reason at all. And then you made me yours... but left me my freedom. Then we teamed with Yusuke – and he followed your lead. No... it was his own. Both of you. Trusting me for no reason. Beyond all reason. I... couldn't refuse such trust. And you knew that I couldn't."

As Kurama listened, he smoothed the salve over the muscled skin. And shivered. He'd never explained it to Hiei. The feelings that had run through him at the look of shock and horror on Hiei's face as he'd run the sword through Kurama's body. Hiei had not wanted to hurt him. Had cared even then. Was worried... A demon does not care. Not about things like that. And the way he'd fought with Yusuke... Hiei was a mystery. One Kurama had to know more about. And so he sought him out to find the mysterious heart beneath the demon exterior. To find it – and to make it his. Kurama was a thief that delighted in finding what was hidden. Hiei hid his heart so well... But it was there. Kurama had seen it in his eyes. And he wanted it for his own. But Kurama had never explained. And Hiei had never asked before. Their relationship had always just been. A word here, a gesture there. Understanding without the words. Letting the plant grow on its own, keeping an eye on the small seeding as it broke through the weight of the ground surrounding it, reaching up to the air and the light, a sprout that with nourishment would grow. Kurama had watched the demon's change of attitude with pleasure, but had never asked... The kernel of a seed had been there to start. And Kurama didn't know how or why. The more he knew about Hiei, the more mystery there was in his actions. The demon... did not react as he should, by his power and history. Being with Yusuke changed Hiei – but it was a change of choice of sorts, that even Hiei was baffled by. Kurama had to know more about Hiei. He had to know him. If he knew him, he would have him. But he was a patient fox. Instead of asking, Kurama listened. And listened carefully for all that was not in the words.

"When I felt Meitta's soul again..." Hiei's fist clenched tight. Kurama winced as the movement pulled his hair where Hiei had been running his

hand through it. "Sorry..." Hiei smoothed out the mane and continued to stroke it. It took him a moment to start speaking again. In that time, Kurama started with the bandages. "Meitta... Meitta is the reason I play the Game so well. The Game that is played in the demon world is nothing compared to the one that is lived in hers. And I had trusted her..." Hiei shook his head, "She'd told me not to. She knew herself better than I, but still I trusted..." Hiei undid the rest of the buttons on Kurama's shirt, "Kurama – I want you as my lover tonight because I want to know that I am loved." His mouth came down on the base of Kurama's neck as he whispered, "And I am playing no Games tonight."

Kurama moaned, his head falling back as the small tongue explored his skin and the sharp fangs lightly nipped to mark... His hands tangled in the bandages he hadn't used yet, "Hiei..." he fought to speak through his passion, "Hiei – I'm not done yet."

"I certainly hope not!" Hiei's hands removed the shirt and tossed it aside. He expertly stroked Kurama's bare skin until the taller red-hair was helpless in his desire. Hiei whispered in his ear, "Don't worry about me – I promise I'll be okay. Just let me love you now..."

Kurama no longer had any say in the matter. It was funny, but for a fox spirit with 600 years of experience, somehow Hiei always managed to get the better of him... As Hiei's mouth met his, Kurama eagerly met his tongue, tasting his friend and sharing the passion together. *Yes, Hiei. Yes, I love you. You are loved. And I will love you well. Forever.*

"Hiei..." Kurama looked down at the sleeping demon beside him.

"Ummm..." Neither eye opened. Not even the jagan.

"What did you mean, 'it's not a life-bond'?"

"Ohh..." Both eyes cracked open, "Catch me when I'm down, why don't you..." Hiei sighed, "I was in a bad mood because of Shinka. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry. I will love you forever, my fox..." And his eyes closed and he slept again.

Kurama looked down at the sleeping Hiei and his mouth curved in a smile. "I love you too, my quicksilver demon."