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- Based on the anime eps 1-25. Alternate timeline from there.

Wings of Air

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Cloak of Darkness
Wings of Air
Balance of Thought
Castle of Darkness
Dagger of Air
Balance of Soul
Mountain of Darkness
Time of Air
Balance of Power

The desk in Yusuke's room rarely had Yusuke sitting at it, and never for homework. At the moment, it had a map spread out with stray objects holding down the corners. Yusuke studied the map with an intentness that he never even thought about giving his homework. Carefully, he noted the high hills and the empty terrain. After a moment, he glanced up, "Did you get the other things I asked for?"

Botan nodded and handed him another roll of papers, admitting "I still don't know what you want them for, but here they are."

Yusuke unrolled the summary descriptions and looked them over, "'Cause I nearly got us killed before with no preparation. I might be stupid, but I do learn. This situation... I'm not ever going on another one of Koenma's assignments without all the information I can get."

With a brilliant grin, Botan dismissed his worries, "You always manage." Switching moods lightning quick, she frowned, "I was annoyed when Koenma tasked you against Hiei and Gouki back when you were just beginning, but your spiritual powers have increased considerably since then." Sounding pleased, she added, "You're always surprising us, Yusuke. Ever since the beginning with your death." Fondly, she pointed her finger at him as she proclaimed, "Bingo!" bringing to mind their first meeting when he realized he was dead.

And am I surprising you with my continued life? Staring at the rather vague drawing of the air demon, Yusuke tried to keep everything he needed to do in his mind. "Botan – you're the guide for dead souls, right?"

Blinking at the change of subject, Botan answered affirmatively.

"Are you the only one?"

"Huh?" Botan blinked again, "Well, normally, yes. But after you were resurrected, you needed a guide still and you had been so interesting... I asked Koenma if I could be your assistant. He agreed and someone else is taking my duties." She wrinkled her

nose in annoyance, "Several somebodies, actually. Those young spirits just can't get the hang of it..."

"So you've seen millions of dead souls. And are older than Koenma." Yusuke looked up at her, thinking about the myths that were told about this blue-haired girl that had become his friend.

Botan tilted her head, trying to figure out what he was after. Finally she gave up and simply answered, "Yes – I changed Koenma's diapers when he was a baby. That's why he lets me get away with so much." She grinned, "He always used to make his way down to the River and watch the water... He was fascinated with the humans. Always stopping me to talk to them before I took them across." She looked at Yusuke, "Is there some point to this?"

"No, not really," Yusuke folded up the papers again, "It's just that I was wondering. You're my assistant... But you're an immortal."

"Hardly that!" Botan exclaimed. Dryly, she added, "I assure you, I can be killed. One wrong slice of a demon's sword and I'll be the one crossing the River – on the other side."

"But..." Human brown eyes studied her in puzzlement, "Why?"

"Why should I be on the other side? Because I'm a Spirit—"

"No – why should you, the Goddess of the River Death, put your soul in danger just to help me, a mere human, out?"

Botan laughed in genuine amusement and reached over to ruffle his hair, "Because I want to." She grinned at him, "Don't worry about it. This is my vacation. There is so much of the human world that passes me by when I don't notice the years. Helping you and Koenma with the cases... I live a bit more."

Yusuke stared at her, thinking about it. And he shivered. He was responsible for so much... His friends' lives were in his hands when he took them out on a case. 'You are no longer just a teenager – you are a Spirit World agent and have a responsibility. Do you want them to die?'

Remembering Shinka's words, Yusuke shivered. *No. No, I don't want my friends die. I want to protect them...* Kuwabara had nearly gotten himself killed so many times before. Rushing in, pride taking the forefront. And Yusuke had worried yet had let him continue on. 'It's only because you've said too much to back down now.' Pride. The pride of a man. No – the pride of a teenager. Of how they were in their lives, in school and out of it. Cutting classes, talking rough, proving themselves in fights. Beating bullies up. But what did that prove? Yusuke grimaced. It proved only that he, Yusuke, hadn't grown up yet. Winning by sheer luck might be a manifestation of rei power... but what did that prove either? Only that he had a natural rei strength. Not that he was better.

"Are you okay, Yusuke?" Botan held up a hand to his forehead, "No fever... but if you're not feeling well, maybe you shouldn't go."

Dark eyebrows raised. "Botan – that demon is a high level – equal to Hiei's power at least! And it's loose in our world! If I don't go, who will?"

"You can go after you get better," Botan soothed.

"It might be just having fun now... but how much longer before it gets bored and starts rampaging just to see what might happen? Or if it gets hungry and decides that a human would be a good snack?"

Yusuke shook his head. He knew that the spirits, even his friends, though they did care they didn't worry quite so much about human lives – if humans died, they'd go across the River and on. But... "I'm fine, Botan. I was just thinking. Really." He stood up, "Have you contacted the others?"

Botan nodded, studying him with curiosity, "They'll meet you at the usual spot."

The park. In the woods. Yusuke remembered an important detail, "When?"

"Uhh..." Botan glanced at her watch, "a half-hour ago, actually. I forgot about that when you asked me to go back to the main library. Have you ever seen that place? It needs an electronic filing system or something!"

Yusuke rolled his eyes as he grabbed the papers and his jacket and sauntered out. As he passed through the living room, he gave his mom a smile, "Off on a mission, Mom – don't know when I'll be back."

His mom didn't put down the manga she was reading, "Fine. Don't die or anything."

With a grin, Yusuke closed the door behind him.

When Yusuke and Botan got to the woods, Hiei and Kurama were waiting. Kurama was sitting at the base of a tree, playing with acorns. Hiei was sitting casually on a low branch of the tree, watching the

clouds. Neither of them looked up as Yusuke came over but they continued their conversation with each other.

"Nice day today," Kurama remarked, tossing an acorn up and catching it.

"Pretty enough," Hiei agreed, "It looks like it might rain."

"Such a nice day to just be sitting here with nothing to do..."

Yusuke rolled his eyes, "I'm sorry I'm late – okay already?"

With a laugh, Kurama stood smoothly up. Hiei jumped down. They both regarded the pile of papers in Yusuke's arms with interest.

Yusuke looked around, "Where's Kuwabara?"

Kurama shrugged, "Hasn't shown up yet." He glanced with hooded eyes to Hiei, "We thought he was with you, actually..."

"Knock that off!" Yusuke knew damn well what Kurama meant and he resented the implication.

With half-smiles, the two spirits stopped their teasing. "So what's up?" Kurama asked, more seriously.

"Eh..." Yusuke glanced around again.

"I can go get him if you want," Botan offered.

He thought briefly about it before shrugging – he'd fill Kuwabara in when he got there, "No, never mind. He'll be here when he gets here." Right now, Yusuke really wanted Hiei and Kurama's opinions before he got much further with his plans. "This is the situation..."

"Solid enough," Kurama finally stated.

Hiei nodded briefly, still frowning.

"What?" After waiting for a moment, Yusuke finally prodded the small demon, "Hiei?"

"Hn..."

Glancing over at Kurama, Yusuke silently asked a question. Kurama spread out his hands in a 'I don't know' gesture. Turning back to the demon, Yusuke growled, "Hiei..."

The demon shook his head, "Just keep in mind that outside influences will change the best of plans."

"Outside influences?"

Hiei shrugged, "Your plan is sound... if all conditions remain the same."

"I should think of alternatives?"

Again, Hiei shrugged. And didn't say anything more. Yusuke studied him for a long moment before sighing and turning back to his notes.

Eventually, Yusuke rolled up the maps and looked around. Still no sign of Kuwa...

"Oyiii!" There was a greeting shout from across the clearing and the group of four looked up to tease Kuwabara over his lateness.

Three mouths fell briefly. And Kurama took several rapid steps forward, his arms open and his green eyes sparkling, "Shin-chan!"

The diminutive girl flung herself into his arms, laughing happily, "Kurama!"

Kurama held her close, picking her up and swinging her around before returning her to the ground. He closed his eyes and let himself sense her, all of her. Her smell, so fresh and wild. Her body, so soft and yielding. Her soul, so free and beautiful. The bond... binding her to him. His. His vixen, his own. The bond that made her his. He felt for the edges of the bond, and found the trust that let it be more than directed. He found the link that joined them under his command. She was of his pack. And he rejoiced for it. Kurama opened his mouth and breathed in her scent, smelling her, tasting her. Finding out who she'd been with recently and through what areas she'd been... Mostly, he smelled Kuwabara – she'd been staying at his house from other smells. Though there was also the hint of tantalizing combinations of wood smoke and incense and power that told of the Shrine. An overlay of city scent – she'd been taking in some of the sights. And a scent that told where her last meal had been – a rice bowl. He found nothing of possession. No other males that meant anything to her. Kurama grinned as he smelled for markers and found none. She was his. His alone... Suddenly, Kurama's nose twitched – beyond Shinka's smells was a familiar one that reeked of bitter jealousy and hatred...

In the same motion, Shinka and Kurama let each other go and backed away, both gazes flicking to a small figure covered in a black cloak... and an even deeper darkness rising over him, dark rei crackling with energy. Shinka swiftly walked over and knelt down, lifting her head but saying nothing. Kurama stayed very still where he was, his emerald eyes watching remotely.

Hiei looked down at the slight figure at his feet. His barely restrained power shaded the whites of his eyes a deep green color that was very different than the bright green irises of his partner. His skin was tinged with hints of the same color. His mouth twisted in a snarl, fangs showing on the outside. His voice was deep and dangerous as he spoke, "What are you doing here?"

Shinka shrugged, "When I returned to the Shrine, the binding couldn't be transferred back."

"Couldn't?" Hiei questioned the basic assumption

"I guess to be accurate, Mama refused it." Shinka shrugged, "Mama said that my power had grown so

that she would not be able to contain it. And I didn't particularly want to burn my mother out, so the situation kindof lingered in limbo until Koenma approached his father and said – I'm getting this part second-hand – that if Enma wasn't using me any more, his team could. Enma agreed, so here I am."

The group stared at her in a fascinated way – the indifferent description, lack of honorifics for the rulers of the Spirit World, and the simple acceptance of her situation spoke more of her inhumanity than anything else they'd seen. Or at least that was the foremost thought with four members of the group. The fifth looked down at her and wrinkled his nose in puzzlement, "Mama?" His anger wasn't gone, the rei still crackled the air around him, yet the energy was poised, balanced, contained while he spoke, waiting...

Shinka's mouth twitched up, "My human mother. Enma didn't just spring me out full-formed. When the Shrine needed some extra power for... ah, never mind that... Enma found my soul wandering around looking for the next incarnation and he snagged me but needed a body to put me in. Mama volunteered, and so I was born."

Hiei was regarding her with the same fascination a mongoose would give a snake, "The Shrine doesn't need you anymore?"

"Well, they like having my rei around... but the initial emergency was over twenty years ago."

"So we get saddled with you."

Shinka smiled up at him, her hazel eyes gleaming, "Please?" At Hiei's sour look, she dimmed the humor down, "The, uhh... flower you used to break me free apparently increased my ties with my soul and my original land. My memory..." she shook her head and changed track, "The rei is... well, there's more of it than there used to be, and it's... wilder. Kurama is the only one who can handle the bond now, with his combination of spirit and human and since we were bound before the break." She shrugged, "It's either let him command me, or kill this body before something happens beyond Enma's control. Enma will not let me wander free in the human world in a human body of his making."

Everybody in the group, including Hiei, blinked at that. Kurama and Botan exchanged swift glances in speculation. Yusuke and Kuwabara exchanged horrified looks at the thought of killing Shinka for so casual a reason. Or was it casual? What really did they know of her?

Hiei didn't turn his gaze off Shinka, and his stillness was more expressive than any movement of his would have been. "Yathia," Hiei murmured.

"Huh?" It was Shinka's turn to blink, thrown completely from any track she thought he might have been following.

"The flower. It was a yathia."

Hazel eyes regarded him steadily, though a corner of her mouth twitched up, "If you say so."

The green faded from the depths of his eyes, but Hiei still glowered at her. There was silence in the glade for several long minutes.

Yusuke took the opportunity to flick his gaze over to Kuwabara, asking a silent question. Kuwabara spread his hands and shrugged, replying that 'yes' it was pretty much as she'd said and 'no' he hadn't had a chance to warn Yusuke in advance. *Great. Just great.* Yusuke admitted to himself that he'd been happy to see Shinka. Until he'd seen Hiei's reaction. Talk about conflict! Though, at that, Hiei was reacting much... calmer... than Yusuke would have expected. But then again – when had the demon ever been anything but composed in their presence? He snarled, growled, and snipped. But he didn't ever lose his self-control in either speech or fight. His fighting spirit was unequaled; so was his restraint. Hiei's fights were finished in a tenth of the time it took the others. Not simply because he was the most powerful, but rather because he didn't play around in a fight. He went in with his goal and got out again. Usually. That first fight... he had played with Yusuke, taunting him and showing off... And Yusuke had beaten him by taking him by surprise. Hiei had gotten caught up in the game and hadn't paid attention to the goal. *Or... What had been the goal of that first fight anyhow?* Yusuke watched the little demon and tried to remember. 'I challenge you – take this sword from me.' *Hiei wasn't trying to kill me – he was seeing if I could match his challenge.* When Hiei had decided to kill Yusuke, he took action instantly. It was only Kurama's intervention that had saved Yusuke. *Challenge.* Yusuke remembered the scene in these same woods last month, when Hiei challenged Meitta and both of them had smiled... *Game. It was a Game.* He watched the scene, waiting with the others, *but what is it now?*

Hiei finally broke the silence with a snort, "If you're going to be with us I expect you've figured out a way of controlling the use of your rei other than sealing yourself off."

"Ahh..." Shinka reached a hand to the back of her head and scratched her hair.

Hiei's eyebrows disappeared under his headband, "You haven't?"

"I've been working on blocking others' access," she tentatively offered.

Hiei regarded her for a moment, "Try."

She gulped and then steadied herself.

After a moment, Hiei shook his head, "Not good enough."

"I'm not sure if I could ever block you, anyhow..." Shinka's eyes were wide as she stared up at him with an expression that revealed an emotion that was almost like longing before her face shuttered over again and showed only the calm regard she normally gave Hiei.

"I wasn't evaluating you by my standards." Hiei shook his head, "No. I will not allow you to endanger Yusuke by joining his group."

Shinka's eyes fell and her kneeling position became more of support, one hand dropping down to rest upon the ground. Softly, she spoke once more, "What would your Meitta have done?"

The black-haired demon blinked in surprise, and he looked down at her with what was almost a tender expression, "You are not my Meitta. And never were." His hand reached out to finger one lock of the near-white hair before returning to his side, "You are always, and only, your own. You own others, but no one owns you. The wildest of the wild. Never tamed, always free. The Balance of Air, the Twilight of Darkness."

At the comment about ownership, Kurama stirred guiltily, but didn't say anything.

The look in Hiei's eyes vanished as he cleared his throat, "But if you are asking what you would have done in the old days..." A grin flashed across Hiei's face, almost too quick to be seen. "You wouldn't have gotten yourself in that position in the first place. Or you would have Bargained them to Hell and they would have thanked you as they went." He took a step back from Shinka as she raised her head to look at him. His laugh was tinged with a bit of wildness, as he answered honestly and with the merest hint of longing in deep rich tones as he painted a picture of the past, "If Meitta had needed to accomplish the same task... The city would have been dust and ashes before I would have had time to draw my sword. If she'd wanted to play... the inhabitants would have been taken as pawns and curiosities for her people. If she wanted to challenge herself with subtlety... the mirror and leech would have simply vanished one night and the inhabitants would have had no memory or recollection of either. If she'd wanted to punish..." Hiei shuddered and he bit his lip with his fangs. "Never mind," he finished weakly.

Shinka stared at him and slowly rose to her feet, her eyes wide. Her mouth worked, but no sound came out. The hazel eyes were shifting colors to mixtures of ambers and browns and reds; dismay, wonder, fear, excitement, and longing all contained within the shifts.

As he watched her stand, Hiei regarded the slight human, only as tall as he, human in body not in rei, white-blond hair, the scent of roses around her... he

studied Shinka for a long moment and then sighed wearily, "Too many years..." He turned away to regard the dark clouds that were blowing a storm in. His deep voice turned remote and cold – his normal speaking voice, "If Meitta had somehow managed to end up in the situation... you would have pulled all your rei to you in a concentrated gather and shaped it into a weapon to use. Like Kuwabara's rei sword. Though swords were never your favorite. While you use your rei, others cannot."

"Oh..." Shinka breathed out, her mind grasping at the image and drawing eagerly upon it, "Like I did in the net room. The bar of energy..." Her hazel eyes filled with dismay, "I could have! I could have shaped the energy and done something instead of being an idiot and nearly getting everybody killed. I could have..."

Hiei nodded solemnly.

Kurama coughed, "I hate to interrupt, but no. Actually, you couldn't have."

"Huh?" Every eye in the group turned to him. Shinka was frankly disbelieving. Hiei was curious. The others were very curious.

Kurama shrugged, "It's the binding. While in this body, Shinka cannot fight or harm anybody unless I give her permission. And other than that one quala, it never even crossed my mind to do so. So she couldn't have gathered the energy if she was using it for fighting." His green eyes shaded slightly as he thought, *it was my fault that she nearly died. I hadn't given her any other options...*

"Stop that," Shinka said derisively, "It was not your fault. I didn't even think of trying anything else. The energy didn't need to be a weapon... I could have used a net or a barrier or..." Her eyes were alight as she figured out other uses for a batch of raw energy. Then she blinked, "But I did use it to fight!"

Kurama grinned and abandoned his brief foray into self-recrimination. "You mean when you were knocking the quala away from killing Hiei?" His eyes flicked to his friend, "Off-hand, I'd have to say that any laws of binding have no power whatsoever when compared with your ties with Hiei. The soul will always take command when it comes to him."

With a flicker, Hiei disappeared.

In startlement, everybody looked to where he had been. Kurama's mouth twitched up and he glanced over to Yusuke. After a moment, Yusuke met his gaze and they shared a silent laugh – Hiei had been scared off by the mere thought of a connection.

"Ah well," Yusuke smothered his laughter and took back command of the group, "Hiei knows the basic plan – we'll assume he can catch up with us. Kuwabara, Shinka, this is the basic scenario – I'll fill you in on specifics as we go along."

And the group got down to their real job.

"Before I forget this time..." Kurama paused and held a hand out to Shinka. She stopped walking and came back to him while the other four waited curiously. As Shinka put her hand in Kurama's he put his other hand over hers, holding her close in his grasp. "You can fight anybody who threatens the group or the mission except for ourselves. I would prefer, however, that you stick to augmenting our rei unless the options grow thin. And if you have the chance, check with me first regarding force and power." He withdrew his hands, leaving a rose behind in hers.

Shinka stared up at the emerald eyes and let the bond flow through her, feeling the changes made in it with his permission and trust. She breathed in the smell of the rose and that of the red fox and that which was uniquely Kurama and she nodded in acceptance and submission. He was her pack leader. And she would follow him wherever he led.

As he watched, Hiei's eyes were shadowed and remote. Slowly, he shook his head.

Yusuke was interested in Kurama and Shinka, but he looked to Hiei at the slight movement. *Speaking of which...* "Hiei," he motioned the demon closer as he kept his voice down, "If she's really as powerful as you say – are we going to be okay? For that matter, are you okay with this? We don't have to have her along..."

Hiei shrugged, his attention still on his partner and the other, "It's an interesting puzzle and there are questions unanswered. I will kill her. But I will have my answers first." He finally turned his gaze on Yusuke, "Alone, she's not that powerful. When I was talking before... that was the power of who she used to be, and she had much more to draw upon then. Now... she's alone." Hiei grinned, an ugly self-mocking look, "Hell, if she was what she used to be, I would have never thought about attacking her. But when she first appeared and I sensed her rei... I lost control. If she had been Meitta, with all that Meitta commands – I would have been dead. But this is the New One. Alone. Without her world, without her people. She has only her own rei to draw on. With the bond, you can trust Kurama to hold Shinka. But when her eyes turn golden... then beware of Meitta. Her powers are less than what they were, but still more than ours. And Meitta will automatically be able to draw on what she needs. Be very, very careful with what you say and do at that time. Do not draw her notice or anger her."

"Uh, Hiei – we've seen her eyes gold before and it was still Shinka."

“The eyes are the memory. It wasn’t that way before, but the yathia broke the cycle, and it cannot be reformed.” Red eyes studied Yusuke almost as seriously as they had Shinka, “Yusuke, if you do not say you will be wary, I will kill her now and have done with it, for I would not have you in danger needlessly.” By gaze alone, the short demon held Yusuke locked to him until an honest answer was returned.

It took a moment for Yusuke to remember to start breathing again, locked in those red eyes that peered into his soul... and regarded him from the innermost depths with affection. The eyes that had first looked at him with derision and dismissal, and then in surprise and puzzlement, and then respect, and the puzzlement had only grown the more as Yusuke proclaimed his trust for this fierce demon who had come so close to killing him. Now... now those same eyes looked at him with affection, and trust. The trust that Yusuke had shown to Hiei, the demon returned ten-fold.

Yusuke didn’t want to leave the lock that the demon held him in, but reluctantly gave the honest answer that Hiei looked for, “I saw what happened in the glade, before... And it scared me. That... person... was dangerous in a way I’ve never seen before. She wasn’t evil like we fight, but she could easily have watched us all be killed and not batted an eye.” At that time, the chill down Yusuke’s spine had felt very similar to that he’d had when fighting Hiei, when Hiei held Keiko captive. Hiei had truly not cared. Even Yusuke’s death would have barely been noticed – just one more human gone and not worth the attention he’d been given. But instead, Yusuke had beaten Hiei, and had awakened the demon out of his bored complacency. Yusuke took a breath, as he deliberately deepened the lock Hiei held him in, so Hiei would know beyond a doubt Yusuke’s answer, “I will be careful. I promise you, Hiei.”

After a long moment, Hiei blinked his eyes and let Yusuke go as he accepted his word. Yusuke felt a sense of loss and longing – and knew a moment of envy for Kurama having Shinka bound to him. To be able to feel another... Hiei might trust Yusuke and Kurama, and he was Kurama’s lover and friend, but the demon would never be bound like... like they wanted to bind him. And now Yusuke knew a bit better why. ‘A fire burns differently – I will never be controlled again.’ A binding was a type of control and one that Hiei had had on him before. And Hiei’s fire was unique... as the fire demon was... *Hiei... my friend... to have your trust, and affection... so special...* Yusuke found himself stumbling over his thoughts as his ideas about Hiei swirled around in the maelstrom of emotion generated by the intensity of

the contact and loss. It took several more moments for Yusuke to return his attention to the group.

Hiei had turned those vibrant red eyes on Kuwabara, “Your cousin?” He asked the same question he’d given to Yusuke, but in a very different manner to Kuwabara.

Kuwabara shrugged, his eyes drifting to rest on the dark skinned woman talking with the red-haired fox Spirit. It was a long moment before he turned back with a sigh, looking seriously down at the short demon, “Hiei – I trust you.”

The words hovered in the air for a moment before Kuwabara spun away, saying roughly, “Let’s keep going. We’ve got a long walk still ahead of us.”

Yusuke was caught open-mouthed. For that matter, so was Botan. And while Hiei’s mouth wasn’t open, his expression was openly startled. Kuwabara... He had spoken that elusive word to Hiei. And none of them had expected it.

Putting his mind back in gear and his expression in place, Yusuke hurried to catch up with his friend. After a moment, so did Botan. Hiei stayed behind until Kurama and Shinka had joined him and then eventually they all came together again.

After they walked in silence for some time, Kuwabara suddenly spoke up, “Turnip.”

Four heads turned to look at him.

“Radish,” replied Shinka.

“Nope. Turtle,” Kuwabara grinned.

Shinka blinked, “Tulip?”

“Nope. Tournament.”

Yusuke choked. Shinka and Kuwabara turned to look at him and then Kuwabara laughed, “Sorry about that – it fit.”

“Terrible,” Kurama remarked lightly, a grin tugging at his lips.

“Yep,” Kuwabara nodded and then did a double-take at Kurama.

The grin got wider, “It was truly a torturous deed to tragically drive him to tears.”

“Am not!” protested Yusuke.

“Alright!” Kuwabara threw up his hands, “You’ve got it already – your ‘turn’.”

Kurama blinked, “Uhh...” He thought for a moment, then shrugged, “Tuna.”

Shinka burst out laughing.

Everybody looked over at her. She straightened up and wiped her eyes, “Sorry – odd memory.” She tilted her head and examined Kurama, “You wouldn’t possibly be going for another ‘T-R’ series... Marlin.”

Kurama shook his head and looked at Kuwabara. Kuwabara frowned, “Sardine?” The red mane rustled in the air as Kurama indicated not and looked back to Shinka. “Ham.” “No.” The eyes went back to

Kuwabara, "Tail?" "No." Shinka, "Kelp." "No." "Salmon?" "No." "Flagpole?"

Both Kurama and Kuwabara looked at Shinka in disbelief, "Where's the connection in that?"

Shinka shrugged, "It was just a thought."

"Isn't about time you gave them another clue?"

Yusuke asked. He'd finally figured out what they were doing but wasn't of a mind to play himself.

Kurama grinned, "Okay..." The pause went on.

"Oh! He can't even think of another – no fair, come up with a different one!" Kuwabara huffed.

Kurama turned red, "Sorry..."

Shinka giggled, "So what was it?"

"Fish with four letters."

Kuwabara and Shinka glanced at each other, thinking furiously. Then Shinka grinned, "Fish," she stated.

The three of them laughed.

Botan shook her head, "What are you doing, anyhow?"

"It's just a game to pass the time," Kuwabara explained, "Shinka and my sister started playing it when she picked her up from the Shrine and they got our whole house doing it." He grinned, "It's hard to stop when you get started – sort of like punning."

"But puns can usually be understood by everybody!" Yusuke remarked sourly.

Four sets of eyebrows went up at him, with only Hiei remaining aloof from the discussion.

"Umm..." Shinka thought a moment, "What's an engineer's favorite dessert?"

Yusuke looked at her warily, "What?"

"Pi."

Kurama and Botan burst out laughing and Hiei cracked a grin.

Yusuke and Kuwabara shared identical baffled and annoyed looks.

Shaking his head, Kurama grinned at Yusuke, "Never mind – That's in the higher math classes, you'll get to it in a few years."

"If ever," Botan muttered.

Kurama and Hiei looked over at her. Botan blushed, "I'm sorry, Yusuke. I didn't mean that!"

Yusuke shrugged, "It's okay, Botan. Math definitely ranks about the least favorite of my classes!"

"You have favorite classes?" Kuwabara regarded Yusuke suspiciously.

"Yeah, PE."

"But you always cut it."

"That's why it's my favorite!"

The two boys laughed with identical carefree delinquent understanding. Shinka and Botan shook their heads in unison while Hiei and Kurama frowned at each other.

"I'd never thought of it," admitted Kurama to Hiei. "Yusuke – you're cutting school right now, aren't you?"

Yusuke blinked, "Of course." He looked pointedly at Kurama's High School outfit, "And so are you."

Kurama sighed, "Yusuke – I'm over six hundred years old, there aren't many subjects I have problems with in a Japanese high school."

"Just History," Hiei remarked, his mouth twitching.

Kurama glanced sourly at him, "Enough of that one, okay? You got your laugh out of it..."

Hiei just grinned, and then explained to the others, "Last month, Kurama got in an argument with one of the teachers over Francis Xavier. Apparently, the teacher didn't want to believe that the mission the nice Jesuit priest had founded was really a portal Gate to the Spirit World."

"Oh Kurama!" Botan raised her hand to her mouth, "You didn't!"

The fox went nearly as red as his hair, "I had helped him put the Gate in place, so I could find the Lock of Seven... uh, never mind." He cleared his throat, "I wasn't paying attention in class, while I was thinking about it – I've got a couple of new clues as to where the Lock—" he broke off again and finished hurriedly up, "Well, when the teacher said that Xavier was Portuguese, I just automatically corrected him."

"They got in a massive fight over it before Kurama remembered that, as a human, he can't possibly have been there in 1549," Hiei's expression was deadpan, but his voice was laughing, "You should have seen him trying to back down."

Yusuke and Kuwabara looked at each other and then at Kurama. They both grinned. "That would have been something..." Yusuke suddenly glanced at Hiei, "Wait a sec – you were there?"

Before Hiei could answer that question – not that it looked like he would have, his attention wandering out to some distance trees – Botan finally got her own question in, "There's a Gate at the mission?" She frowned, "Unauthorized?" Her gaze became stern, "And you haven't told Koenma-sama about it?"

Kurama groaned and put his head in his hands, "Botan, I can explain..."

The blue-haired guide shook her head, "I'll hear the explanation later – in my office after this mission is over. And then you're going to tell me about the other unauthorized Gates you know about. And then we're going to go close them." Her voice was as stern as her gaze, her blue eyes very serious and angry as she regarded Kurama. "And if I even hear one rumor of the Lock of Seven Souls missing..."

Kurama whimpered, his red hair flattening down around his head. He shot an accusing glance at Hiei, who just shrugged, not terribly apologetically. Kurama desperately searched for a change of subject – and found one. He stopped in his tracks, his face turning pale. The rest of the group stopped to follow his gaze.

“Shinka! Put that down!”

The diminutive blonde looked up from where she was kneeling, several yards away from the group. She stood up and turned towards the group, holding a small cord in her hand, “Why?”

Kurama’s mouth tightened, “Shin-chan... Out of the 45 types of snakes in Japan, you happen to be holding the most venomous of them all. Now, put it down, carefully, and it won’t bite you.”

Shinka raised an eyebrow, “Oh come on. I know perfectly well what it is – I used to be closely related.” She grinned at him.

A low growl emerged from Kurama’s throat and the group all turned to look at him. “Shinka,” he said softly, the growl still audible behind the words, though his voice remained quiet, “**put it down**. Now. If you please.”

After another blink of eyelids over a hazel gaze, Shinka did so. She watched the snake slither off and then she came forward, watching Kurama curiously, “You don’t like snakes?”

“I don’t like snakes,” Kurama answered tightly. “You can get rid of the field mouse as well.”

Shinka raised a protective hand to her shirt pocket, “You can’t have him, he’s a friend!”

“I didn’t say I wanted to eat him – just let him go.”

“But I promised him I’d give him a lift to the next hill over. He got scared by a hawk and ran out of his territory. For him, it would be a long walk back.” Her voice changed to pleading, “Please? He’s a nice mouse and a friend.” At the top of her pocket, a whiskered nose poked out.

Hiei laughed shortly, “Careful of acquaintances you think are friends – they might turn on you at any moment with no warning.” His voice was amused and mocking.

Shinka and Kurama both turned to look at him, distracted out of their absorption. Hiei ignored them both and started walking forward again.

Kurama rolled his eyes, and addressed Shinka, “Okay. To the next hill. And then you’ll let him go.” Shaking his head, he added, “And you’re not going to pick up any more hitchhikers!”

With a grin, Shinka held out the mouse for him to pet, agreeing without words to his stipulations. Kurama grimaced and lightly touched the mouse before retreating.

Kuwabara laughed, “It’s only a mouse, Kurama.” He walked next to Shinka and reached over to pet the small field rodent, crooning softly at it. The little grey ball of fur preened under the attention and seemed as fond of Kuwabara as it was of Shinka.

Yusuke eyed them both and moved next to Kurama and Botan, all three agreeing that while their friends might like petting strange mice, they weren’t about to! As they got started walking, Yusuke asked, “So how’d the snake die?”

“Mongoose,” Shinka replied shortly. Then she grinned, “I gave it a good nip before I went down, though, so I’m sure it didn’t survive me by much.” Switching thoughts again, she frowned, “Of course, it couldn’t have been too long after that that one of my mouse lives got eaten by a snake... I don’t think I’ve ever died from a snake bite, though.”

“How about spiders?” Kuwabara asked, “Last time you said you’d been one.”

Shinka laughed, “That was a simple wood spider – not poisonous.”

“What else have you been?”

“You want a list?”

The two bantered back and forth a while longer as the group walked on. They talked of Shinka’s past lives and the animals she’d been. And then they digressed into a conversation that was half-lecture on Shinka’s part – about the biology and habits of tigers. Kuwabara was hanging on every word, absorbing it eagerly.

For the most part, the others ignored them. Botan was staying carefully neutral in regards to all things Shinka-related. Kurama was interested in the girl, but not in the conversation. And Yusuke was watching Hiei watching them. The demon wore an impassive face, but when something broke through, mostly it was puzzlement. Yusuke studied his friend carefully, trying to figure out what it was that drove Hiei so.

They drew close to the next hill.

Suddenly Shinka yelled in pain, flinging her arm out and away. A small brown figure was thrown off. With one hand, Shinka gripped her arm where red blood dripped out, “He bit me...” she whispered, shock and betrayal in her voice. “But...” her voice trailed off and large hazel eyes turned furiously upon a small figure in black, “Hiei!”

Kurama, automatically heading for her the instant she yelled, stopped in his tracks at the accusing tone and he backed off. Kuwabara and Yusuke did the same. Botan stayed where she had been, looking on.

Hiei turned around, raising a calm eyebrow in question.

“You bastard!” Shinka fumed, “You made him do that – didn’t you?”

Hiei's mouth twitched in a half-grin, "Beware of what you choose to call a friend, New One." His voice dripped mockery as he seemed to search for words, "Shall we call this... an 'object lesson'?" Bright fangs glistened in the air.

"Object lesson?" Shinka blinked. And then her face turned pale beneath the dark skin. Without another word, she turned and walked across the ground.

"Shin-chan..." Kurama called to her hesitantly, his eyes flickering between Shinka and his partner.

"Looking for the mouse," Shinka replied shortly, "He can't have gone..." Her voice trailed off and she straightened abruptly. There was no expression on her face as she carefully wound a strip of cloth around the wound on her arm. She didn't look at anybody as she walked past them, continuing forward on their route.

The group stared after her for a moment, then Kuwabara frowned and went to explore the area she'd been in. After a moment, he knelt down and picked something up. His face was thunderous as he walked back over and glared down at the smaller figure in his black cloak.

Hiei looked impassively down at the dead mouse with its head twisted at an impossible angle. Then he looked up at Kuwabara just as impassively.

"You slimy little black-hearted bastard! You... you... you..." Kuwabara ran out of words, his body quivering in the urge to strike out. Only the mouse in his hand kept him from clenching his fists and driving a punch straight into that smug face. With an effort, he turned away from Hiei, his body shaking violently.

"Kuwabara," Hiei's voice was condescending, "It's only a mouse." The grin could be heard in his voice, "A mouse's life is not a bad price to pay for the reaction I got out of it." He chuckled, a low deep sound that sent shivers through all who heard it.

Kuwabara dropped the mouse and spun around, driving his fist through the air where Hiei's face used to be. Three feet beyond where he used to be, Hiei stood, frowning at him. Kuwabara roared and threw himself forward, rei sword appearing in his hands. Hiei flickered and disappeared. Kuwabara stumbled to a stop and glanced rapidly around, "Hiei!!!! You bastard! Get back here!!!"

With a sigh, Yusuke intervened, "Kuwabara – enough."

His friend swung around, "Urameshi!! That bastard can't get away with it!!! He killed that mouse! With less compassion than—"

Yusuke interrupted him, "And you just stepped on the body."

Kuwabara jumped two feet in the air and fell heavily five feet away. His rei sword disappeared and he looked bewilderedly at Yusuke.

Yusuke sighed and jerked his head at Botan, "You two get going. Catch up with Shinka and we'll follow."

With a nod, Botan went over to Kuwabara and helped him up, making soothing sounds in her throat. After a moment, he raised his head and looked forward, "Cuz..." He strode quickly forward, leaving Botan to follow in his trail.

"Is every mission with Shin-chan along going to happen like this?" Yusuke was exasperated and annoyed.

"I can tell her not to come," Kurama spoke hesitantly, his gaze switching between the hill where the trail turned and a demon all wrapped in black. Hiei had appeared again when Kuwabara and Botan had left.

Hiei shook his head in irritation, "That fool. What is he on about? It was only a mouse."

Yusuke regarded him coolly. *Hiei is puzzled only by Kuwabara's reaction.* "Only..." Yusuke mused speculatively, "I bet that's similar to what Meitta said when you protested against her object lesson..."

The wide shocked eyes that Hiei turned on him proved Yusuke's guess to be correct. The demon was only there long enough for him to realize it and then he was gone. Yusuke narrowed his eyes in concentration to watch the small dark blur. Hiei didn't go far. Just far enough to be gone.

"Object lesson?" Kurama looked bewilderedly around, "Hiei? Hiei? Damn it..." he couldn't see his partner but he knew he was still there somewhere. *Hiei, do you need me now? What sort of an object lesson is that? Making a friend betray you...*

Yusuke sighed again. His group... "Kurama," Yusuke waited until he had Kurama's attention and then he jerked a thumb to the path, "Go to Shin-chan. She's crying."

Kurama's head lifted up in shock as he stared at Yusuke.

"As she went by, I noticed. Go on, Kurama – Hiei doesn't need you right now, she does."

"Hiei..." Kurama turned to look longingly around the empty landscape. Then he abruptly walked away, deliberately not looking back.

After Kurama had gone, Yusuke sighed yet again and walked over to a nearby tree. "Hiei," he called quietly, squinting up into the branches. After a minute went by, Yusuke called again, "Come on, Hiei – I know you're there."

It was another minute before Hiei finally jumped down. He didn't look at Yusuke as he stood there silently.

Oh Hiei... After another minute, Yusuke quietly asked, "It wasn't a mouse, was it?"

"No, he wasn't a mouse." Hiei didn't want to say more but he could see what Yusuke was thinking and justice wouldn't let him think it. He bit his lip, "It wasn't done at Meitta's suggestion. Betrayal... is common-place there." He could still hear Meitta's indifferent voice after he told her what happened, 'I told you that would happen. Consider it an object lesson and don't worry about it.' Hiei's anguished protest, 'But I killed him...' Her puzzled reply, 'It was only a human. Don't worry, Ingalish will just get another.' *Only a human... Only a mouse. Kuwabara likes animals...* "I didn't mean for it to die."

Yusuke stood silently and waited for Hiei to finish thinking. He would wait as long as he needed to. But he wouldn't let Hiei be alone right now.

After a long moment, Hiei sighed, "I'm sorry, Yusuke. I'll not do that anymore when on a mission. It's just..." Hiei went silent again.

"Should I have let Kurama stay?" Yusuke could see the anguish in the dark demon. Past memories, past history, present trouble. His heart went out to his friend yet he didn't dare approach any closer than he was. Above all, he couldn't let Hiei run off again. He needed to keep Hiei here, with them. Yusuke stood very still, so not to frighten the wild demon next to him.

Hiei's laugh was quiet and rueful, "No. No... His love is too unconditional. He would accept anything I do with no thought of whether it was wrong or not." The red eyes focused on Yusuke, "You accept me as I am, but make me question myself and my actions." Hiei took a step nearer to Yusuke and then walked past him to the path. When Yusuke didn't follow immediately, the demon paused without turning around, "Coming?"

Yusuke put his heart and throat back where they belonged, getting his breathing under control. "Of course," he tried to reply with some sort of normality as he hurriedly followed his friend. *What just happened there?* As Hiei had looked at him, after speaking what he normally didn't say, Yusuke had felt a gentle touch on his cheek, brushing up to his hair. He would have sworn it. Yet Hiei hadn't been anywhere near him. Yusuke would have sworn that too. Hiei had been standing there, looking at Yusuke... Yusuke put a hand up to his cheek and traced where the invisible touch had been. *Hiei – was that you? But...*

Any thoughts Yusuke had were thrown clear out of his mind as he got to the top of the hill with Hiei. "What the hell???" Yusuke's mouth dropped open as he stared... He put his mouth back and stared again. And shook his head, "What is that???"

Hiei laughed softly, "I told him he could do it. He just hadn't tried again after being wounded for so long. And then didn't have the confidence to. A shifting requires more than just want – it requires need."

"Hiei..."

The demon finally took pity on Yusuke's bafflement, "It's Kurama."

Yusuke looked again at the lanky silver-furred animal with seven tails that was playing tag with Shinka. "It looks like a fox. But foxes don't have seven tails. Kurama's not a fox." Yusuke swallowed, "Kurama... How can that be Kurama?"

Hiei turned to look at Yusuke, his amusement showing in his face, "Now, I know Kurama told you he was a fox spirit. So what, exactly, did you think that meant? Kurama is a fox. In his spirit form." Hiei waved a hand out, "That's Kurama's natural form. It's his human form that's not natural." He grinned again, "Beautiful, exceedingly so, but certainly not his original form."

"Uhh, uhh..." For some reason, Yusuke was having trouble with this one. He looked at the silver fox and could only mutter, "But Kurama's hair is red."

Hiei burst out laughing loud enough to catch everybody else's attention. Normally his humor was as restrained as the rest of him, but this was a full out expression of delight. He grinned at Yusuke and Yusuke felt an invisible wind ruffle his hair. Before Yusuke could react, Hiei looked away, kneeling down just in time as a hundred pounds of fur and flesh bounded into his arms. "Ooofff..." Hiei wrestled the fox down and the two of them rolled over and over on the ground, the silver fox growling the whole time and trying to get a bite or two in.

"Uhh..." Yusuke shook his head again. "Uhh..." he looked dubiously at the pair wrestling, both of them now growling. Hiei's growl sounded much like the fox's.

"It's okay," Shinka told Yusuke, her face flushed and her breath settling down from her own romp with the fox. "They're just playing. Foxes play a lot."

"Kurama?" Yusuke asked faintly.

"He changed..." Kuwabara came up next to him, a dumbfounded look still upon his own face. "He was there holding Shin-chan," Kuwabara glanced at his cousin and edited out what else he was going to say, "And then there was a sort of a glow around him and... then the fox was there. A five-tailed fox."

Five? Yusuke counted again. The tails were whipping around and the fox was rolling, and Hiei was mixed up in there too... He still counted seven.

"The more tails, the more powerful the kitsune," Botan remarked, sitting lightly upon her oar. "I

admit, I hadn't thought he was a five-tail. He's very sly, Kurama is." She eyed the fox with a bit of disgust, "I suppose this means I better tell George to start upping the security on the palace. If Kurama is letting more of his Yoko self out, that means nothing is going to be safe anymore." With another sigh, she added, "I hope he remembers what I told him about the Lock of Seven Souls – that particular ward is under my jurisdiction."

Faintly, Yusuke said the only thing he could think of, "I thought you said you were on vacation."

A startled look crossed Botan's face, "You're right!" She took the oar up and did a flip in the air, "It's somebody else's problem! I don't have to worry about it!" She zoomed back and came to a stop next to them, a grin covering her whole face, "On second thought, I'm not going to tell George!" She laughed much as Hiei had, "I think I'm going to have fun as a spectator for once!"

Yusuke and Kuwabara eyed her nervously. Yusuke with some dread, *what did I start?*

After several minutes had gone by, Hiei and Kurama broke off the wrestling and came back to the group, Hiei's hand tangled in the fox's luxurious silver neck fur. The fox's mouth was open and he seemed to be smiling, his tongue lolling out even as his ice blue eyes glistened in excitement. Hiei's red eyes were also bright, and there was an unusually relaxed smile on his face as he looked down at the fox.

Yusuke stared at the silver animal, "Kurama, is that really you?"

The fox laughed, a sharp barking sound, and then he walked to Yusuke and reared up, placing his forepaws on Yusuke's shoulders. The blue eyes looked into Yusuke's dark brown ones... and Yusuke knew it was Kurama. "Kurama..."

The fox dropped back down and laughed again. Then he ran out ahead of the group, following the path. After a glance to Yusuke, first Kuwabara and then Botan and Shinka followed. Hiei stayed next to Yusuke as the leader came at the end.

Eventually they got near to their goal. Hiei glanced at the tall mountain and then frowned ahead, "Kurama."

It took a minute before the fox came frisking back, winding around the demon and then starting to lope off again.

"KURAMA!" Hiei put some anger into his voice. Just enough to make the fox stop. "You need to change back, now."

The fox growled, lowering his belly down and his fangs gleaming.

Yusuke and the others looked at Hiei in puzzlement, "But why?"

Hiei growled to the fox, "Baka! Do you want the entire Spirit World to know that Yoko is still alive?"

The fox's growl broke off abruptly and he whined instead. Then he sat very still.

"Oh," Botan raised her hand to her mouth, "I hadn't thought of that."

Yusuke looked back and forth between the spirits.

Botan caught his question and explained, "Back when Yoko switched lives and became Kurama, he was one of the best thieves in the Spirit World. If any of his old enemies, or even his customers," Botan paused a moment, then dryly qualified, "especially his customers, knew he was alive, the human world would be flooded with spirits looking for him."

"We don't need that," agreed Yusuke.

"The best," Kurama corrected lightly, but with a serious tone.

"What?" They all looked over... And the two women immediately turned their backs, "Kurama..."

Kurama glanced down at himself and shrugged, "Foxes don't wear clothing, and I tore my others when I changed. And I wasn't one of the best – I was the best. And still am."

Hiei chuckled fondly, and ran his gaze over every inch of his fox's human body.

Yusuke stared, wide-eyed.

Kuwabara was embarrassed only for the girls' sake, but otherwise indifferent. He was, however, getting a great deal of amusement out of Yusuke's reaction, "Urameshi! Haven't you been to a public bath before? Oooo!!! He's blushing. Look everybody, he's blushing!"

"SHUT UP, KUWABARA!!!" Yusuke launched himself at his friend, hands balled into fists.

Hiei raised an eyebrow and redirected his grin.

Kurama looked at the two boys, totally baffled, "What?" He glanced down at himself, but knew he had a perfectly normal human body...

With another chuckle, Hiei addressed Shinka, "Can you do your weaving trick again? I don't think my cloak will fit him."

"Or at least not adequately enough..." Shinka also laughed, though she didn't turn around. "Sure, give me a minute..."

"You could have thought of that before you asked me to change back," Kurama stated.

"I could have," Hiei agreed, a smile playing around his mouth.

"Baka..." Kurama stepped closer to Hiei and then leaned down.

Hiei quickly glanced around. The girls had their backs turned, and the boys were still fighting. He returned his gaze to Kurama and smiled slowly as he

reached up, twining his hands around the back of Kurama's neck and pulling him down even closer.

"Ewww!!!!!! That's gross! Stop that, you two!!"

At Kuwabara's shout, the two ghosts broke apart with flushed faces.

"What? What were they doing?" A chorus from the two girls came. "Were they...?" "Really?" "In public?" "You two!"

Kurama's face was as red as his hair and he tried to hide behind Hiei. Hiei twisted to look over his shoulder and refrained from saying anything.

"Your clothes are done," Shinka was giggling as she held a hand out behind her back with some black and red cloth.

"Thank you," Kurama replied with as much dignity as he could – and a twinkle in his eye as he took the cloth and shook it, examining his new clothes before putting them on. Shinka had made a fairly simple tunic and pants, flowing and loose. The designs were much the same as she'd done before – red roses on a black background. Kurama smiled, "Familiar pattern."

"It's what I could remember off-hand. Experimenting would take more time – can we turn around yet?"

Kurama chuckled, "Yes."

"Can we get on with it yet?" Yusuke pleaded to the world.

Hiei laughed and all eyes turned to him at the rare sound heard twice that day. Hiei grinned at Yusuke, "Eager for a fight?" For no discernible reason, his tone held faint traces of irony.

Yusuke looked at him sourly, "I think I like you bad-tempered better – at least then you're straight-forward enough!"

"Am I?" Hiei asked, still grinning faintly, "Then let's do get on with it."

Even Kurama gave him an odd look at that one. But with a minimum of more grumbling, they all proceed up the mountain to the heights where they would find the air demon.

"Okay, does everybody remember the plan?"

Yusuke studied the landscape. They were now at the edges of what the air demon had claimed as its own. There were nods from around the group. "Then let's do it." Yusuke walked forward and the others followed, each ready for action in their own separate way. The air demon was wild and unpredictable, chaotic and neutral. It hadn't killed anybody in the human world... yet. Yusuke's group was there to make sure it didn't have the chance.

Cautiously, they walked in the territory, scanning for the enemy.

"Hiei! You're here!!" A bright trill of light and laughter and wind. A silver-blue figure that was long and streaming and only vaguely human-shaped swooped over the group. "Hiei! Come up and play!!!! Feel these thermals!! They're great! Why are you down there, Hiei? Come up – come up and dance with me!"

"Airhead," Hiei remarked fondly.

After the scattered jaws had been replaced, every member of the group turned to look at Hiei. The short demon had a slight grin on his face and he shrugged, "I said circumstances might change." He raised his voice, "Agathil! You still chasing leaves?"

There was another trill of laughter and a gust of wind scattered leaves all around them. A dart of silver-blue streamed after them and twined briefly around Hiei before rising back in the air. Hiei's cloak whipped out around him and then was torn off, fluttering down far away.

"Come up and play, Hiei! You were right – the wind here is so delightful, so changeable, so friendly and wild. Leave the earth, Hiei, and play as you will."

"Hiei! What the hell?!" Kuwabara balled his fists as he glared at the demon.

Yusuke glared at Kuwabara, silencing him, and then turned a baffled look on Hiei, "Why didn't you tell us you knew him?"

"You didn't ask," Hiei replied calmly, "sides, I wasn't sure Agathil would remember me – it's been awhile."

"Awhile..."

The silver-blue spirit whipped through the group in another displacement of air, "Stop talking with them, Hiei, and play with me."

Every other member of the group was knocked flat on the ground, air heavy and tearing on them. They struggled against the invisible weights pinning them.

Hiei chuckled and his feet left the ground. He floated up about ten feet and hovered there, "Agathil – come talk." He looked down and frowned very slightly. A gentle breeze wafted over the group, smelling of pine trees, and the heavy air holding them down dissipated.

"Talk?" The form whipped around and hovered near Hiei, slowly condensing into a slightly more human shape, though the edges tended to trail out. "Why haven't you changed, Hiei – you can't play like that."

"I'm not here to play, Agathil," Hiei's voice was full of sadness and the people on the ground all looked up at him in varying degrees of puzzlement, even as they picked themselves up. This time, through mutual awareness of self-preservation, they

all stayed silent and didn't draw any more attention to themselves.

The form condensed more and settled out, seeming to sit cross-legged in front of Hiei. Golden eyes glittered out of a blue face, white hair streaming out behind it. The voice changed from the light trill to a sound more like a breeze blowing through tall grass, "Oh so? Talk... How... corporeal of you, Hiei."

Hiei chuckled, though it sounded forced, "I am corporeal, Agathil!"

"Oh yes, I keep forgetting." The demon flowed closer to Hiei and then hovered, waiting.

"Agathil..." Hiei paused for a long moment, "You have to go back to the demon world – you don't belong here."

In an instant, the form blurred out and lost all pretense at stability. It wailed, the sharp high sound of the wind that precedes a storm, "Hiei!! You can't! You can't tell me to go! I just got here..." A whisper of sound, "You're the one who told me I should come..."

Hiei rolled his eyes, "Forty years ago, Agathil. Things change."

The demon reformed a shape, and golden eyes glittered with water and ice in the mix of cloud and wind, "If this is your territory, you can let me play in it, I won't try to claim..."

Hiei turned his head away and he bounced slightly in the air, as if buffeted by unseen winds, "Agathil – it is not... it..." For the first time, his voice sounded uncertain and shaky.

Yusuke broke in, "It's Koenma's order. You didn't get permission to come here, so you must go back."

The air demon hissed and the form bunched up as a large head with narrow, slanted eyes peered down to look at Yusuke, "Little human... Who are you to tell me what to do?"

"I'm a Spirit World Detective, Yusuke Urameshi. I am here with Koenma's authority to send you back to the Demon World."

The hiss wafted through every part of the demon's form, reshaping it into a being of glittering scales and sharp points. It tilted its hand towards Yusuke, "Nobody tells me what to do! Die, little human!!!" Sharp slivers of air launched from its hand moving as swift as the air itself. Yusuke narrowed his eyes and put up his arms to block, gathering his rei in.

And then Hiei was standing on the ground between them, his form glowing blue as he held the sword out upright and bare, a barrier of rei and wind bouncing the slivers off harmlessly to the sides of the group. "Stop it, Agathil."

The demon twisted in the air, form shifting, "Hiei!" It's voice was sharp with stunned surprise, "What...?"

Hiei put the sword down, though not away, "I'm with Yusuke."

There was a high keening sound through the air, so high-pitched that everybody but Hiei and Yusuke clapped their hands over their ears to try and block it. Yusuke winced, but stayed upright. He glanced curiously at Hiei, wondering about both the comment and the reaction. Then he strode forward to stand next to Hiei. No matter what was going on, Yusuke was with his friend and would support him as he could.

"Hiei!!!! No..." The form twisted and settled more like its original, "You can't be."

Red eyes showed no emotion, "I am."

"But why?" The tone was genuine bafflement. "Do you... betray?"

Hiei turned his head away and didn't answer. Yusuke caught a glimpse of pain and sorrow within his friend and made an involuntary movement closer. On the barest instant of the Yusuke's action, Hiei jerked forward a step towards the demon, away from Yusuke. Hiei said brutally, "I am not with you, Agathil."

Silence. The wind died. The air was heavy and still as the air demon formed to a near solid shape and settled down to almost stand on the ground near Hiei. It regarded him with inhuman gold eyes for a long moment. Hiei met its gaze steadily.

Then the breezes started, softly at first and then gaining in power and strength. The demon turned its gaze over the rest of the group. It paused for a long moment on Shinka, then settled on Yusuke. Its voice was the growl of a storm, "There is a binding upon you, Hiei... You would never work freely for Koenma. Which of them is it? Tell me and I will kill them. The winds will disperse the parts to the seven corners of the worlds and the binding will be gone forever. I will—"

"Don't, Agathil," Hiei sighed, his voice heavy and weary. "Don't."

The demon turned to face him, "Do you mean there is—"

"Agathil!" Hiei's voice turned sharp, "Calm yourself."

After a moment, the demon unshaped partly, staying in human form, but trailing off at the edges. It floated up in the air and hovered, "Goodbye, Hiei. You choose your fate and I will not be a part of it."

Hiei abruptly flew up in the air and got in front of the demon, "You fool! Agathil, you are a complete idiot sometimes!!!"

The demon regarded him coolly to match Hiei's fire.

"I don't work for Koenma, damn it!"

There was a brief silence.

"I work for Yusuke."

"The human boy?" The air demon swooped down and flew around Yusuke a few times. Yusuke stood his ground while watching every move the demon made. "Hn," the demon snorted. "If this is all that binds you, I will kill it. And you will be free again."

Hiei snorted, "Try it – and I'll know one less air demon." He crossed his arms, prepared to watch the show.

The demon twisted its head around to look at Hiei, and then twisted the rest of its body to face him. "He has no power to match ours."

Hiei grinned sourly, "He defeated me."

All wind died on the instant and the demon lost its shape. Quickly it reformed, mostly into large round eyes.

"In single combat."

The demon flew up in the air and turned again to look at Yusuke.

"When I was using the jagan."

Wisps of clouds were the only indication that an air demon was near as it instinctively shifted into protective camouflage.

Yusuke looked in bafflement to where Hiei hovered in the air and opened his mouth to protest the description of their fight. A gentle finger of air was laid upon his lips and Yusuke snapped his mouth shut.

Hiei grinned in amusement, "It is Truth."

The air demon formed into a barely seen shape of shimmering air and flattened itself out in front of Yusuke, a blob of silver-blue, "Forgive this one. Sincerely, I meant no harm. I would not hurt you. Please. I have done nothing to deserve scattering. I abase myself. Do not harm me, I beg of thee. Forgive this humble air demon for its presumption."

Yusuke's mouth dropped open as he looked from the flat demon at his feet to Hiei. His brown eyes were wide in disbelief and astonishment.

Hiei shrugged very slightly, "You might want to reassure it..."

Yusuke frowned at the short demon and looked down again, "Reform, Agathil. I won't hurt you. I just need you to go with Botan back across to the demon world. And you have to promise never to come back over again without permission from Koenma."

The air shifted and condensed into its half-shape. It bowed deeply to Yusuke, "It shall be done as you say, Yusuke-sama." With a swirl of air, it whipped over to hover next to the Guide of the Spirit World.

Botan closed her own mouth and glanced between Hiei and Yusuke. With a slight frown, she formed her

oar and settled upon it. "Come, Agathil." And they flew away and disappeared in the sky.

When they were gone, Yusuke narrowed his eyes and growled at Hiei, "Come down from there, damn it!"

Hiei settled back to the earth and looked around for his cloak.

"Hiei..." Yusuke stomped between the demon and his cloak and leaned over to stare down at him, his brown eyes hard and angry.

Hiei tilted his head to one side, "You didn't ask." "You could have told me!"

"You could have asked." Hiei's tone was serious and his eyes regard Yusuke calmly.

"Damn it, Hiei!" Yusuke balled up his fists and his rei gathered around his body. "You sat there and listened to all of the damn plan... and never said a damn word about knowing the stupid demon! How the hell was I suppose to know to ask? I assumed you'd tell me if there was something I needed to know!"

Hiei chuckled, "Relax, Yusuke – it worked, didn't it?"

Yusuke growled, "Hiei, I t—" He clamped his mouth down shut before he could say something that would hurt the demon. The one thing that could. And he wouldn't do that because he did trust Hiei. Shaking his head, Yusuke tried again, asking this time, "Hiei, why didn't you tell me?"

"You were formulating a battle-plan. This had nothing to do with battle."

True... Yusuke hadn't thought about talking to the air demon. He had known the demon was just playing and hadn't actually done anything yet. But Yusuke had thought they needed to subdue the demon before something did happen to harm humans, and so formed his plan that way – kill the demon before it killed them. Hiei... had talked to the demon. Yusuke felt ashamed and small-minded. Only wanting a fight. When a fight hadn't been necessary.

"And that look on your face is why I didn't say anything," Hiei sighed and the red eyes looked... tired. "Yusuke. You're learning. I didn't know what Agathil would do. It's been forty years since I last saw it and... I'm with you now. It might have treated me as much of an enemy as you. After all, in the demon world, betrayals are commonplace. If Agathil had seen me with you and attacked instantly... If you had hesitated, even for a moment, thinking the demon could be talked to... you would have died. I couldn't let you hesitate just because I used to know Agathil."

There was that look in Hiei's eyes again... Agathil had obviously been close to a friend. But Hiei was prepared to fight him, for Yusuke. Suddenly, Yusuke lost all his anger. And wanted to

draw the demon into his arms to reassure... He stayed still, "You didn't betray him."

Hiei shook his head, "I am with you now, Yusuke. That... changes a lot of things in the demon world." Hiei looked down at the ground and sighed, a sound of dark memories and darker thoughts.

With me... not with Koenma. Hiei... stays with me alone. Yusuke glanced quickly back to where Kurama stood. The red fox was staring at Hiei with almost as much bafflement and sympathy as Yusuke felt. *Kurama is with me. The best thief in the Spirit World. And Hiei? The air demon cowered down at the thought of me beating Hiei. But that's not...* Yusuke reached out and touched Hiei's chin lightly, applying only enough pressure to tilt Hiei's head up so the demon had to meet his eyes. "Hiei – you are with me. You are my friend. And I trust you implicitly." Yusuke grinned lightly and dropped his hand, "Just... if you can, tell me before you pull something like that again. It was like trying to do a play without a script. I wasn't sure if I was picking up on everything you wanted me to do."

Slowly, Hiei smiled, "Just be yourself, Yusuke. Be yourself, and everything will always be all right." He looked fondly at the human, and for the fourth time that day, Yusuke felt an invisible touch. Then Hiei turned and walked back to the others, stopping in front of Kurama while they exchanged a long look.

Yusuke watched them. And then shook himself and also walked back. "Well, I guess that's done."

Kuwabara sighed, "No fight?"

Yusuke chuckled, "I guess not." He glanced at Kurama and Hiei, who were still looking at each other, and abruptly decided something, "What the hell – this was so bloody short, let's all go to Genkai's and hang out for awhile."

"Hang out?" Kuwabara scratched his head, "She's going to want to do training."

Yusuke shrugged, "Almost as good as a fight, sometimes." He grinned, "And we can send for the girls and they can join us on the weekend."

Kuwabara's eyes lit up, "Yukina-san!" He counted on his fingers, "That's... three days from now!" He blinked, "Hey! She's already at the Shrine! Great idea, Yusuke!" Kuwabara practically bounced up and down in his eagerness.

Shinka giggled, "He's got pictures of her all over his room..."

With a bit of surprise, Yusuke looked at the small girl. He'd almost forgotten she was there, "You'll come too, right Shin-chan?" As Shinka grinned happily and nodded, Yusuke wondered what Genkai would make of her. And he glanced to where Kurama and Hiei were now watching him. Actually, Hiei's gaze was on Shinka, but he wasn't saying anything.

And that, Yusuke decided, was rather odd. Hiei was normally so protective of Yukina, he wouldn't have thought that Hiei would let Shinka even get near his sister, let alone spend a week with her. Yusuke shrugged slightly, "Kurama, Hiei? You're both coming too, right?"

Kurama grinned, "Sure, sounds like fun."

Hiei just shrugged.

"All right then – let's go!" Yusuke glanced around the hillside they'd hiked for five hours to get to, and had spent less than fifteen minutes on. Much less. What an odd mission. From that thought, Yusuke's gaze drifted to Hiei. Without thinking on it, he bluntly asked, "Are you an air demon?"

Completely and obviously startled out of his normal control, Hiei replied, "Air and Darkness, no! By the Queen, that would be a mess!"

"Ooo," Shinka breathed out, her eyes turning towards Hiei. And then she sank upon her knees as she closed her eyes and raised her hands to her face. Slowly, she bent over until her head was touching the ground.

"Shin-chan?" Kurama and Kuwabara both went to her, Kuwabara shooting an accusing backwards glare at Hiei.

But Hiei's look was about as baffled as everybody else's. Then his face cleared. He glanced to Yusuke and said briefly, "What I said – it's a curse from her land."

"Air and darkness?" Yusuke questioned, "I can see you saying no to the air – that was the question, but where'd darkness come from?"

Hiei blinked briefly, "That's not... – 'Air and Darkness' is... well, it's supposed to be a reverent descriptive term that we kindof use sarcastically as a curse. Like you do with your Deity's names 'Good Lord, no!' – that sort of thing. My answer to your question was just simply 'no'. The rest was a curse, not related to the question."

"Oh..." Yusuke could sort of see it... Air and Darkness? "That was rather an emphatic 'no'..."

Hiei's grin flashed across his face.

Yusuke grinned back then returned to the important part, "Why did she fold like that?"

"Umm," Hiei tilted his head and studied Shinka for a moment as she was supported by the other two, "It's the most direct thing she doesn't remember. I would guess it underlies the foundation of her reincarnations." He frowned for a moment, "Thinking of it, I'm surprised that didn't shock her into Meitta."

As long as they were on the subject... Yusuke stepped closer to Hiei and lowered his voice, "When we go to Genkai's, Yukina... I mean you made us promise, but..."

"Hn. No, leave it alone."

"But if Meitta is that dangerous...."

Hiei chuckled, "Not to Yukina. No, you don't have to worry about Yukina. Meitta would never harm her, or let harm come near her."

By this time, Yusuke was totally baffled, "Because she's your sister?"

"Hell no! Because she's a child."

Yusuke pinched the bridge of his nose, "Hiei – as near as I can figure, she's over a hundred years old. I know she's your younger sister, but even by demon standards, surely she grew up a long time ago."

"She's eight hundred thirty-two." As he saw Yusuke's mouth drop open, Hiei shrugged, "Age is dependent on experience." Hiei watched as Shinka stood up and brushed off the support from Kuwabara and Kurama, even as she turned to look at him with puzzled hazel eyes. Then all three started towards Yusuke and Hiei. With a glance at Yusuke, Hiei backed off and then jumped up in a nearby tree.

He doesn't want to talk about it in front of Shinka.

Yusuke sighed; he wanted his answer. "You guys stay there for a few minutes," he motioned the trio still, then he turned and walked away from them. When he'd gotten out of hearing range, Hiei jumped down, from a different tree, and joined him.

"Yukina is a child in all that matters. Her innocence is still fresh even despite all she's been through – She expects happiness in all, she looks for good, that sort of thing. All animals are her friends and no wild thing would harm her, including Meitta. Her people revere children, so rare and so precious. They would never do anything to harm a child and are fiercely protective of them. In fact..." Hiei frowned, then raised his voice, "Kuwabara – come here."

After a moment, Kuwabara swaggered up to stand directly in front of Hiei so the demon had to tilt his head to look up. Not that it ever seemed to disconcert the demon, but Kuwabara still did it. He put his hands on his hips and glared at Hiei, "I will not be summoned like—"

"Stuff it," Hiei advised Kuwabara, "Listen – don't try anything with Yukina while Shinka is around."

"WHAT???" Kuwabara roared, "Hiei, you damn little shrimp, get it through your petty little mind – Yukina-san and I are joined by the red thread of destiny and nothing you can do can change that! I've put up with your little jealousy snips, but this is more than enough! Only her family has the right to object, and she—"

"IDIOT!" Hiei yelled back, "I'm trying to save your life!" Then he blinked, "What do you mean, only her fa—"

"My life?" Kuwabara blinked, "But I love Yukina! She is my delight and my life and my jo—"

"Joy and happiness," Hiei growled, "Yes, we've heard it all before – Idiot, I'm talking about Meitta."

Kuwabara, his mouth open for another volley, slowly closed it. He glanced to Yusuke, who nodded. "Oh," he said slowly. "How's she connected?"

Hiei groaned in annoyance then growled at Yusuke, "You explain," and he flickered and disappeared.

Yusuke looked after him with a certain amount of resignation, "I thought he'd been too social for too long." With a sigh, he looked back to Kuwabara, "Not that Hiei explained anything in great detail, but..." Yusuke summarized things rapidly.

Kuwabara scratched his head, "So what, exactly, am I not supposed to do around her?"

Yusuke shrugged.

"Oh, that's just great!" Kuwabara fumed. "Can I even talk with Yukina-san?"

Yusuke snickered, "I think Hiei had something... a little more physical in mind."

After blinking in incomprehension at Yusuke for a moment, Kuwabara's skin turned redder than Kurama's hair and he stuttered and protested his innocence incoherently until Yusuke stopped laughing and guided them back to where Shinka and Kurama were waiting. Then the small group finally started making their way back home.

They had traveled for perhaps an hour before Hiei joined them again. The short demon fell in step beside Kurama and didn't speak. The rest of the group, used to his comings and goings, didn't remark, but continued their light-hearted discussion about how a fox spirit establishes a territory in the Spirit World and the multiple suggestions about how Kurama could reclaim his, and whether any of the others should try it. Kuwabara was enthusiastic about the prospect. "I'll find one with woody glades that Yukina-san can talk to all the animals in, and I'll build her a log cabin, and I'll plant one of those special pine trees she likes so much. She talks all the time about the one from her childhood, how warm and special it made her feel—"

Kurama choked, missing his step and stumbling before regaining his smooth walk.

Everybody turned to look at him. "Is there something wrong with that, Kurama?" Kuwabara asked anxiously, "I'm not doing something bad by that, am I?"

"Uhh..." Kurama involuntarily flicked a glance to Hiei before trying to recover and pass it off as nothing.

Hiei grinned in sour amusement, "Yes, Kurama, it was a dragon tree that Yukina liked. And if Kuwabara makes the territory for Yukina like he says,

I'll go out and make her a tree. It can be done. Not easily, but it can be done."

Kuwabara looked at Hiei suspiciously, "A dragon tree? It was a pine tree!"

"Oh?" Hiei tilted his head to regard the tall human challengingly.

Kurama hurriedly intervened, "A dragon tree is a pine tree that has the soul," he glanced at Hiei and modified his statement, "or part of the soul, of a dragon. You've heard it said that dragons take the form of pine trees. That's true. I've... fought one similar. They look much like normal pines, but they have the rei and strength of a dragon."

"And Yukina-san wants one?" Kuwabara asked dubiously. "They aren't tame, are they?"

Hiei snorted, "Hardly." A wild grin flashed across his face, "Wanna see one?"

Kurama winced, "Hiei – stop it, please."

Everybody, including Hiei, turned to look at Kurama in surprise. Then a look of understanding flitted across Hiei's face and he walked to his partner, stopping him with a hand on his arm, "I'm sorry, Kurama – I forgot about that."

Kurama looked down at Hiei, sorrow evident in the green eyes, "Hiei... I love you and I trust you – always."

Shinka blinked and took a step backwards, her eyes flickering between amber and hazel hues. Yusuke was too intent on the ghosts to notice, and they upon each other. Kuwabara gave Shinka a considering look but remained silent.

Hiei reached up and stroked his hand through a lock of red hair, "My precious Kurama – I know that. Stop thinking about it. You, who are so good at going on; stop going back. You had every right to question my actions. It was but Truth. If I hadn't stupidly left the void linked, nothing would have ever come of it."

"Truth..." Kurama knelt down on the ground and gathered Hiei into his arms, holding tightly to him. "Hiei, don't leave me tonight. Please don't leave me."

"Oh, Kurama..." Hiei wrapped his arms around Kurama and lowered his head down to bury it in the masses of red hair.

"Oooo..." Shinka and Yusuke breathed as they watched, enthralled by the show of affection that the two ghosts rarely showed. Not that they understood one word of the conversation. But the way the two held each other...

Kuwabara had turned his back the instant they'd embraced, "Let me know when they're done."

After several minutes went by, Hiei lifted his head and looked down, brushing Kurama's hair gently, "Kurama, love – I can't stay."

Kurama pulled out of Hiei's arms and stood up, "What? But you were going to Genkai's with us!"

Hiei snorted, "I never said that."

Yusuke thought back to that part of the conversation. It was true – Hiei hadn't actually said anything. They'd assumed. A very bad thing to do with this little demon, obviously – their group kept doing it, but they'd have to learn better. The look on Kurama's face was heart-breaking. And Hiei was not immune to it, by the painful look on his.

"Kurama – I have to go back. The mission is over."

"You can stay for a couple of days," Kurama reached out to the smaller demon.

This time, it was Hiei who evaded him with a scowl upon his face, "I stayed for a whole week after the last one!"

A week? Yusuke's eyebrows rose. He certainly hadn't seen any sight of the demon. Yusuke glanced at Kurama and he grinned in response to the self-satisfied look upon the fox's face. It was obvious where Hiei had spent his week.

"And I did appreciate it," Kurama's voice had become deep and sultry. "And would like a few more days..."

Be still my beating heart! Yusuke took a deep breath – the things Kurama could do with his voice! And from the look on Hiei's face, it was having an even more profound effect on him.

But the demon stepped back with a gasp, "Kurama! I really can't stay, this time. Botan is already back."

Yusuke blinked. Botan? He interjected, "I'm sure she's going to join us again after she reports in. She likes it at Genkai's."

The two ghosts jumped at the sound of Yusuke's voice and they looked over at their audience of three. Well, two and a half. Kuwabara was casually studying a tree nearby. Hiei actually blushed, to Yusuke's startlement, amusing him to no end. *I didn't know Hiei could blush.* Kurama met Yusuke's eyes and grinned, the little grin that he often gave Yusuke when they were thinking about Hiei, and that Yusuke often returned. Yusuke wasn't actually sure what they were communicating with it, but he knew that the two of them understood each other.

Then Kurama grabbed Hiei's arm and tugged him away, "We'll be right back," Kurama said as they went.

"Just when it was getting really good!" Shinka sighed, "Yu-chan, you just had to say something..."

Yusuke was annoyed at himself as well. But he stayed where he was and they watched as the two ghosts talked just out of hearing range. Talked,

argued, embraced, kissed... Yusuke and Shinka watched avidly.

Then they finally came back. Kurama firmly, Hiei amused but resigned. Kurama addressed Yusuke, "We're both going to the Spirit World now. But we'll meet you at Genkai's in two days if not sooner."

Hiei shook his head, "Optimist."

Kurama looked down, "It will be done! I want you with me."

"And mountains move when Kurama wants something," Hiei just kept grinning.

"Of course they do," Kurama's green eyes twinkled, "I'll talk them out of the way. And in the end, they move because they don't want to make me angry."

"I certainly know that!"

And then the two, after another grin directed at Yusuke, left; walking back the way they'd come from but with a different destination in mind.

Yusuke stared after them, longingly. *I could go with you...* his mind whispered. But he knew that right now, they were better off by themselves. But he hated to see them go. His small group, made smaller with every departure. Yusuke liked the missions for more reason than just the fight – he liked them because he could spend time with his friends. Even now that he'd come back to life, he had very few friends at school. He still hated school. He appreciated the friends he did have... but the very quality of them tended to spoil him for making new. *Where will I ever find another Hiei? Bad-tempered little demon, power contained, my friend. Kurama, my friend, elusive fox who still doesn't understand humans – Hiei knows more about humans than Kurama. From the two who occupied his thoughts, Yusuke's mind wandered to his other friends Kuwabara, once my enemy, now my partner and right-hand man. Stays with me for no reason I can understand. Botan, goddess of the dead – my assistant. She stays with me because she wants to, despite the dangers. And Keiko. Keiko... who has stayed with me through all our childhood and supports me now. I didn't realize until I died, how good a friend you were. And how much it would hurt me not to be able to return to you.*

"I'm glad Hiei has finally found somebody who can appreciate him."

"Huh?" Yusuke turned... and froze at the sight of golden eyes gazing down the trail after the ghosts. Gold eyes. Not amber. Golden the color of metal, glittering in the same manner. *Oh boy...*

Meitta smiled, "Hiei needed somebody to love him. Somebody who could trust him and care for him the way he deserved to be loved. He has so much to

give... Kurama is a very lucky fox." She sighed softly, "But then, one makes one's own luck. After all that he's been through, it is only right that Hiei has such a love."

Internally, Yusuke was gibbering. How had this happened? What were they going to do? Hiei and Kurama were obviously gone. Gone... And Meitta was here. *No controls. None at all. Ah shoot...*

A firm hand rested on his shoulder and Yusuke looked up at Kuwabara. Kuwabara was studying Meitta thoughtfully. He squeezed Yusuke's shoulder once in reassurance, then stepped forward, "And what is it that Hiei has been through?"

The golden eyes blinked and shaded a little less brilliant as they looked at Kuwabara. "What hasn't he? But somehow, he always managed to retain his self." She glanced back down the trail, "He was such a happy little child when he joined us. Playful, cheerful, trusting. Even at his age, he had been through so much pain, and yet he kept bouncing back. We don't normally let the demon-kind through to our world, but he was so persistent... And we were all quite taken by him." She smiled fondly in the memory, "Whatever little else the air demons taught him, they showed him how to play."

"To play," Kuwabara murmured, "And what did you teach him?"

Meitta sighed, turning away from them. Her moves were careful and deliberate, dignified and stately, though she appeared to be completely unaware of it. "The ice demons taught him pain. The air demons taught him play. We... we taught him survival. A necessary lesson in our world, but not always a nice one."

"And what did he teach you?"

There was a long silence before Meitta turned back to them. Yusuke was relieved to note that her eyes were starting to fade to a lighter, more natural color. "He tried to teach me many things, but I was set in my ways and refused his teaching. I think... in the end," the eyes flashed gold for a moment, "he taught me death. Death to the never-ending one, the oldest of my kind." Slowly, as she continued to speak, the gold changed to amber and then hazel, "I know death now better than any of my people could imagine." She sighed again and then glanced to Kuwabara, "Thanks, Kaz-chan. That was... odd."

Kuwabara nodded, "What do you remember?"

"Of Meitta?" Shinka shook her head, "What I said. Nothing about my life... except Hiei. I remember him now, a bit better. When he joined us, he was really too old to be a true child, but he was so open and trusting and happy." She sighed, "He didn't stay that way. He could not, and live."

“So what’d you do to him?” Yusuke figured it was safe to enter the conversation now.

Again, Shinka shook her head, “Survival? Object lessons?” She grimaced unhappily, “I hurt him. I don’t know how or why. I remember the trust in his eyes, and being uneasy about it, knowing it was wrong to have it so. But there was something more. Something that was so very wrong...” *His voice, screaming in pain, waiting for me to rescue him, believing that I would... foolish demon.* The memory flitted by and disappeared again. “I don’t know. I think, of all the memories, that will be one of the last I will regain. And at that point, I will happily let Hiei kill me.”

Kuwabara shrugged, “Not yet.” He switched topics, frowning, “What the hell was that about ice demons? Yukina is an ice demon, and she’d never harm anybody.”

Yusuke glanced over, *oops... he doesn't know about Hiei and Yukina...* quickly, he added his own question, hoping to deflect the intent, “And the air demons – Hiei said he wasn’t an air demon, but you said...”

“I know what I said, and what he said,” Shinka stated ruefully, a hand up to her head, “Damn, that hurt when he said that. As if dark glasses had been yanked off my face just as I was looking into the sun.” She sighed again, “Hiei’s not an air demon – and a darn good thing he’s not! The air demons raised him after he was thrown out of the ice demons’ kingdom.” She glanced to Kuwabara, “And ice demons are not nice creatures generally. Especially to men. Yukina... was always different. Even as a small child, she was different. Wandering into the woods to call the creatures of the forest to her... and warning them when a storm was coming. It’s as if she was given all the kindness her people never had.”

“You knew Yukina?” Kuwabara breathed, his eyes bright.

Shinka shook her head, “Watched her occasionally.” She paused, “I don’t remember why. There must have been something...”

Yusuke nervously interjected another question, “Why is it good Hiei wasn’t an air demon? He implied the same thing...”

The short girl with white-blond hair laughed as her eyes shaded amber. It wasn’t a very nice sound. “Because if he’d even had the slightest part air demon in him, there would have been no more ice kingdom. The ice demons were already at war with the fire demons for the death of one of their own – I don’t think they knew about Hiei – and if the air demons had joined the fight, the ice kingdom could not have stood.” She grinned lightly, “I thought about changing some of Hiei’s genes and then telling the air demons and then seeing what they did, but Hiei wouldn’t let me.”

“Oh...” Yusuke cringed.

Kuwabara glared at him and muttered under his breath, “Good one, Einstein. Now shut up while I get her back again!”

“You started it!”

Shinka, her eyes back to hazel, laughed, “Never mind guys, it’s okay.” She glanced at them curiously, “Is it really so bad when I’m myself?”

The two boys relaxed their fighting poses and glanced at each other, “Uhh...” Yusuke waved to Kuwabara, “You can answer that one, since you’re so good!”

Kuwabara growled at him, then turned to Shinka, “Uh... well, Meitta...”

“Doesn’t care,” Shinka put in, “And that makes ‘her’ different from ‘me’ exactly how?”

The boys looked at each other again, wide eyed and speechless. Quickly, they changed the subject, “Uh, we’d better get going.” “Yeah. Should we stop by home first?” “Naw, straight to Genkai’s – if we go home somebody will tell us to go to school.” “Point.” “Yeah.” “So?” “So let’s go.” “You’re the one holding things up!” “That’s you, idiot!” “Moron!” “Weakling!” “Loser!”

Shinka watched them as they fought and shook her head, “Teenagers...”

END
