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The Air & Darkness Series

Balance of Thought

Parts One & Two

by Larissa ^.^

vega8@att.net

current as of: August 7, 2002

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

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

Genkai watched as the small group walked up the steps to her shrine. She'd felt them coming. Her heir, his friend, Koenma's main assistant, and one other rei that felt... familiar. As they walked up, she identified most of them. Yusuke, Kazuma, Botan, and a stranger. Pale hair surrounding a dark face. Short. And old. Her looks said twenty. Her bearing said something else entirely. *What sort of a rei is that?* The woman walked through the ward-laden path with the others... and paused a moment to go inspect one of the wards, giving a satisfied nod before returning to the group. *Who is she? Why do I feel like I should know her?* Genkai was not used to the feeling of uncertainty. She had trained her memory well when she was young and adventurous. Remembering every scrap of knowledge about things and people had gotten her and her companions out of many a tough spot. And, even as old as she was, there still wasn't much she forgot. But the group was at the top now, and heading towards her, Yusuke grinning as insolent as ever and addressing her informally. Genkai smiled briefly, she liked having him as a student. The outward form, and formality, did not matter when she had such a one as he to teach.. He grumbled, sometimes, against the training but still he stayed to learn from her. Even now, he was back here at Genkai's shrine, of his own accord. She stepped forward to greet them.

"Yo, Old Lady, how's it going?" Yusuke gave his customary greeting.

Shinka's eyebrows about climbed off her head, "Is he always this rude?" she asked Botan, who had rejoined them on the walk back.

"Oh, he's getting much better!" Botan chirped happily, "You should have seen what he was thinking when he first met Koenma-sama!"

"Never mind, I don't want to know..." *But this is somebody he should honor... Why do I think I know her?* "Say, Botan..."

Botan leaned over to catch the slight whisper.

"She is human, isn't she?"

Botan broke up laughing.

Shinka scowled, "I was serious!"

Genkai smiled, "Yes, little one, I am human. Have been for the last sixty years, in fact."

I didn't mean for her to hear that! Shinka blinked her light hazel eyes. *Little one?* Suddenly, instinct seemed to take over and she trilled. Six notes that went up the scale in leaps then came down.

Genkai blinked in startlement and she pursed her lips and whistled, a single sharp note.

Awkwardly, Shinka walked to Genkai and reached for the arm that was being held out... As her hands clasped around Genkai's forearm, she trilled again, a different pattern.

"How very interesting... Darkwing." Genkai breathed out in astonishment, "My little Darkwing... But how?"

As ungracefully as was physically possible, Shinka let Genkai go and sat down, hard, on the pavement next to her.

“Shin-chan?” Kuwabara approached worriedly.

Shinka held up a hand, “No, it’s okay. Flashbacks are always a bit weird. My human body seems so... clumsy compared to some of my animal forms.” She craned her head to look up at Genkai, “I was your pet bird, not that many lives ago.”

“Lives?” Genkai shook her head, “Everybody, come into the Shrine. Yukina-san will make tea and then we can talk.” Briefly, she touched her hand to Shinka’s head. When she lifted it, her hand was noticeably shaking.

Yusuke and Kuwabara exchanged glances, wondering what the heck was going to happen now. Just when things were... settled... things were all different from expectations. “Circumstances change,” Yusuke murmured. Kuwabara rolled his eyes.

“Yukina-san!” Kuwabara started gibbering.

The small turquoise-haired girl smiled gently at him, “Hello, Kazuma-san – it's good to see you again.”

The two smiled happily at each other, not caring about the rest of the world.

Yusuke rolled his eyes and poured himself some tea. Shinka quietly laughed, “What, you like watching Hiei and Kurama but not Kuwabara and Yukina?”

Yusuke blushed furiously, “It's just that they're so...” he gestured at Kuwabara and Yukina who hadn't even noticed them talking.

“Cute?”

Yusuke glared at Shinka.

Shinka grinned again, and this time threw out a serious suggestion, “Absorbed?”

“Yeah...” Yusuke glanced at the pair and then away, “To watch them seems almost like...”

“Voyeurism?”

“Huh?”

Shinka grinned, “Never mind – I know what you mean. Hiei and Kurama are... more open to everybody else in their regard, even if they don’t show it as obviously or often.” The grin changed to a smile, “If these two were ever caught kissing in public, they’d die of shame – well, Kaz-chan would. Hiei and Kurama don’t show their affection often, but aren’t always embarrassed of it when they do.”

Yusuke stared at her in surprise, “That’s it...”

With a sad smile, Shinka informed him, “I was raised in a temple, Yusuke. I watch and I learn for there’s not much else I can do. Even before I was assigned to help you, I’ve had a lot more time this life just to contemplate all the ones before. My other lives, I lived. This one... I think about all the others. And sometimes,” she waved a hand at the couple who were still quietly talking, “it overlaps others.”

As Yusuke was about to ask another question, Botan and Genkai walked in and sat down, which alerted Kuwabara and Yukina to the rest of the world. Yukina blushed prettily and poured the tea for everybody, pausing and blushing again when she noted Yusuke’s cup already had some. Yusuke shrugged in his own embarrassment – he tended to forget that politely you weren’t supposed to pour for yourself but had to let the tea bearer do it. He’d just put a slur on Yukina’s duties by implying she hadn’t done it fast enough. Actually, he wouldn’t even have known that until three months previous when Genkai had stopped rei training for few days and instead drilled both him and Yukina on polite etiquette. The stated purpose for the training was so that Yukina, who had grown up in her Ice Kingdom, would learn about the human world if she was to stay here... but Yusuke knew it was also a pointed comment about his manners. *So I never learned either? It certainly wasn’t my fault! Nobody taught me!* Yet even as Yusuke thought it, he shifted uncomfortably, knowing he had never bothered to even try to learn. As polite company rejected him, so he rejected it.

“So,” Genkai slurped her tea, showing her appreciation for the quality of the tea by the amount of noise, “you, Darkwing, are a reincarnated soul. Well,” she sipped again, “I can’t say I’m totally surprised – you always were an odd bird.”

Shinka giggled. Then sobered, “I remember more of that life now. It wasn’t too long after I’d hatched that I found you. You had such a bright light around you, and such a strength of soul. It was automatic that I stayed near you.”

“And you had such an unusual rei. And were such an unusual bird,” Genkai held her cup with both hands and studied the brown liquid, “My powers were increased when you were with me. And my sense of life. I always wondered why you stayed. For a long time, I thought you’d been sent to me by one of the Powers,” she shot a quick glance at Botan, “and I had a hard time trying to keep my humility.” With a sigh, she raised her cup again, “That changed when I found out that Darkwing was merely mortal like me.”

Shinka shrugged slightly, “Well, mostly.”

Genkai sputtered into her tea and choked. When she regained her breath, she was laughing. “Oh yes! Little one... I’d gotten so wrapped up in the memories, I almost forgot that you were sitting here in front of me.”

Yusuke broke in, having figured out what ‘mortal’ meant in this case, “So how’d you die?”

Shinka shot him a grin, “Flew too close to the sun.”

It was Botan’s turn to giggle. The two boys and Yukina merely looked confused. Genkai rolled her eyes to the ceiling, “She diverted a rei blast that was meant for me, saving my life and losing hers... well, that one at least.” She eyed Shinka, “I hope you advanced from it – you were an immense help to me.” Very softly, she added, “And a good friend.”

“Oh, yes!” Shinka went on eagerly to describe her next life as a cow in a Buddhist Temple.

“So how’d you die?”

“A raid from some starving peasants. They started cooking me before I was even dead.”

Yukina raised her hand to her mouth in dismay.

Kuwabara frowned, “Shin-chan, you seem to die by fire an awful lot.”

“Gee,” Shinka remarked sarcastically, “I wonder why that would be!”

“Oh.” “Yeah...” Kuwabara and Yusuke exchanged looks as they remembered that Hiei was a fire demon. And then they both looked at Genkai, and at each other... “Oh shit...” “Like we needed any more complications...”

Genkai raised an eyebrow. “If I might inquire,” she prodded in droll tones.

Shinka shrugged, “I’m here because Hiei will kill me. The guys are worried you might try and stop it.”

Yukina gave a choked cry, “Hiei-san! No!!”

“Oops...” Shinka was dismayed at her slip. “Uhh... it’s okay, Yukina-chan, really...”

“He can’t! Not Hiei-san...” Yukina started to cry, “He’s really a nice person. I know he is. He’s gentle and sweet and caring, and he can be so thoughtful... He won’t kill you if you’re my friend!” Gems fell to the floor, plinking on the wood and bouncing around.

“Ahhh...” Shinka’s face was a study in consternation.

Kuwabara and Yusuke looked at each other again. “Gentle?” “Sweet?” “Thoughtful?!” They turned to Yukina, and Kuwabara said firmly, “You’re talking about yourself, Yukina-san – and you’d never hurt anybody. It’s okay, stop crying, please.” He reached out a finger as if to touch her cheek then drew back, glancing at Shinka.

Shinka shrugged and tried again, “Yukina-chan, it’s okay. I deserve it. I did something bad to your—”

Yusuke jerked, throwing up his hands as he rapidly tried to figure out how to stop... He relaxed as he saw Shinka sputtering through the tea dripping down her face and blouse. He put his empty tea cup down carefully, pressing his lips firmly together so not to laugh. *I didn’t mean to... well, luck is a function of rei power.*

“Hot!” Shinka jumped up and started wafting her shirt from her skin.

“Even for you, Yusuke,” Genkai remarked serenely, lifting her cup again, “That was remarkably clumsy.”

“Yukina-san,” Botan smoothly got up, “Let’s go outside while they talk.”

With a sniffle, Yukina stood and followed Botan out.

Shinka sat back down and curiously picked up one of the tear gems, turning it over in her hand.

“It’s clear,” she said, obviously surprised.

Genkai also picked one up, “I guess I can afford the repairs to the dojo now.” She glanced at Yusuke, “After this training session, boy, it’s going to need it.”

Yusuke smothered a groan.

Shinka picked up a couple more, “They’re all clear.”

“I thought all Ice Maiden’s tears were clear gems...” Kuwabara asked, puzzled.

“Well, Hiei’s were usually blue. Sometimes green. A lot of black... Every now and then there was one the most beautiful shade of violet-blue, deep and dark until you looked at it in the light and then it sparkled so... Those were prized most, but I rarely gave those out.” Through amber-gold eyes, she smiled, “I liked those the best, you see.” She brought one of the gems to her lips, “Hiei...”

Kuwabara hadn’t noticed the color change, he was too busy sputtering, “Hiei???? But he’s... He’s...” He blinked, “Why the hell was Hiei thrown out of the Ice Kingdom anyway?”

Ah, shit! Yusuke dropped his head in his hands. *Given the right clues, even a dummy can figure it out!!*

Hazel-amber eyed, Shinka dropped the gems in her hand, “You’re right. He’s not an Ice Maiden. I don’t know why that surprised me. Of course a pure koorime would shed clear gems.” She shook her head and sighed, turning to Genkai, “You see – that’s one of the problems. The reason I’m in this mess is because I broke Hiei long ago. Now, the only way for me to atone is for him to kill me. When he kills me, the cycle ends.”

Genkai nodded slowly, “I understand. I will not interfere with you and Hiei.” Thoughtfully, she added, “Though I don’t think he will kill you with Yukina here.”

Shinka wrinkled her nose, “I shouldn’t have mentioned that in front of her. I’m sorry.” She grinned ruefully, “If Hiei finds out I upset her, he will kill me!” Picking up her own tea cup, Shinka blew across the surface and watched the ripples, “She should never have experienced pain. She is made for happiness and joy everlasting. A gentle and pure heart. But something has created a support of steel inside of her. She will not use it unless she has to, but it is there now. Somebody hurt her so badly... that she responded as an Ice Maiden will. She closed her soul and her heart and learned to hate.” Shinka took a sip of her tea, then said calmly, “I will kill that person. For touching what he had no right to, he should die a miserable death.”

Yusuke cleared his throat, “Already taken care of.”

With a blink, Shinka put down her cup, her pale eyebrows raising.

Yusuke nodded towards Kuwabara, “He and I rescued her a year ago. She was being held by a fat merchant making her cry for her tear gems.”

Shinka’s eyes didn’t change color, but they were very hard and cold, “And you killed him.”

“Uhh... well, not exactly. He was financially ruined and then took his own life.”¹

With a shrug, Shinka accepted this, “Would have been better if he’d lived in utter despair longer, but I guess it was good enough.”

Kuwabara and Yusuke both looked at each other in startlement. Kuwabara lowered his voice, “Weren’t those about Kurama’s exact words?” “Uhh,” Yusuke glanced at Shinka and back, “Damn close!” “Shit...” “What if...” “Did...”

¹ Rewrite! I don't want to get into the Tournament at all. In the manga, after the boys had left, the T-brother got up, still alive, then kicked the merchant's head in. After which, he went around issuing Tournament invitations to all the Gang. Like I said... this is where my manga history stops!!

Shinka laughed, "Calm down, guys – Kurama and I just think alike on some issues." Her eyes narrowed and changed to a pale hazel, "We both like vengeance to be appropriate and it's best served cold."

Yusuke and Kuwabara thought about it a moment. That did... describe Kurama rather well. They tended to think of him as the friendliest and easiest of them – but even Hiei said that he didn't like to get Kurama angry. And Kurama's fights... were very cold.

And for some reason, that reminded Yusuke of something he'd been wondering about, "Say, Shin-chan: You say you're not human, but not spirit or demon either... What are you?"

"The People." After she said it, Shinka blinked, then laughed, "Sorry – that automatically translated. Most races tend to call themselves something of the sort, and it's only other races that take it as a name. Actually, in their tongue, 'The Quala' simply means 'Of the One.'" She propped her head on her chin thoughtfully, "Let's see... Twilight was their name – accurate for my particular group, but not a species. 'Elder Race?' No... We do have many dealings with the human world – much fewer with the demon, none with spirit. Humans have named us many things over the years, some based on ours, some not. And sometimes it depends—" As she talked, Shinka's eyes changed lighter colors and settled on the rich gold metal that said 'inhuman'.

"SHIT, URAMESHI!!!! DAMNIT! WILL YOU THINK BEFORE OPENING YOUR STUPID MOUTH?!!" Kuwabara yelled, fright in his voice. "DON'T ASK LEADING QUESTIONS WHILE KURAMA ISN'T HERE! BAKA!!! IDIOT!"

Red-faced and just as scared, Yusuke yelled back, "YOU STARTED IT! WHO ASKED THE FIRST STUPID QUESTION, HUH? MORON!"

Genkai glanced between them and then raised an eyebrow at Shinka, who was sitting with her mouth open, eyes completely hazel as she watched them. She snapped her mouth shut at Genkai's glance then shook her head. "I'm going for a walk," she said faintly, and left the room.

As she walked out, the boys broke off their squabble and squeaked at each other, "Did you see what color her eyes were?" "No, damnit – how are we going to stop her?" "I don't know!" "You're the one who—"

Genkai broke in, "Her eyes were hazel when she left. Now will one of you please explain why?"

After giving huge sighs of relief, the boys broke into rapid bumbles of confused overlapping sentences. Patiently, Genkai let them run down, then started them again and eventually got the whole of what they knew out of them. Then she sent them off to train.

She felt Genkai's approach long before she heard her. It was hard, feeling the familiar rei, not to spread her wings and spiral out into the air, circling and lending her rei to help... With a shake of her head, Shinka stopped her thoughts, addressing the silent figure standing just behind her, "I'm sorry."

Genkai grunted, "Nothing to apologize for." There was more silence, then Genkai abruptly asked, "Why did you stay with me?"

A smile flitted across Shinka's face, "I liked your rei."

"But if you are a reincarnated spirit, you must have had more of a reason than that."

"Not really," Shinka sat down and plucked a piece of grass from the hill. She could feel the emanations of hundreds of years of powers used here. Her rei spun out of her and followed the patterns, feeding the maelstrom. "When I was placed into my first worm, I remembered nothing. By the time I had advanced to a beetle, I could remember the worm, vaguely. As Darkwing, I knew I wasn't quite natural, but couldn't think or reason the way a human does. I found you... and you used my rei as if it were your own and that seemed right and proper to me. So I stayed."

Genkai looked down at the young woman with the pale-blonde hair and the dark skin, and the changeable eyes. The oddness she'd always felt from the bird was understandable in the very unusual bird. The same oddness felt in a human was harder to accept. The aura around the woman was not that of a human being, and her speech, though friendly, had also an air of indifference that seemed to carry to the rest of her actions. "How long have you been human?"

Shinka glanced up to check out the meaning behind the question, then looked back over the conglomeration of trees. "This is my third life. The first one didn't last long. The second... I didn't learn the right things from. I've lived for twenty-two years in this body and haven't done too badly yet, but I've been under very tight control."

"You grew up in a shrine," Genkai stated the obvious – Shinka was very familiar with the layout and conventions around Genkai's temple.

"Derosha Higanshi is my mother. Of the—"

"Tatsuyo Shrine," Genkai finished, nodding. She knew of it. And it explained a lot. "You are the Scented Power."

Shinka blinked, "Huh???"

A smile crossed Genkai's face, "They probably don't call you that to your face." She studied the young woman, "Shinka – Shin for new or fresh, ka for a scent, smell or fragrance." She nodded, "A new life, for an old spirit, and your rei smells fresh and different here. Well named."

Shinka wasn't going to let it go that easily, "Scented Power?!"

The smile stayed, "That's your nickname among those who have used your rei."

After a brief pause, Shinka wrinkled her nose, "Dauni. It had to have been Dauni. Baka. He just had to go and..." she trailed off, grumbling under her breath.

Genkai chuckled, "He was most appreciative of the assistance Derosha-san gave him."

"I'm sure!"

After another chuckle, Genkai turned to leave, "Are you coming?"

Shinka stretched out her legs and looked out over the small valley, "No... I think I'll stay here for a bit. The atmosphere here is... refreshing."

Genkai snorted at the description and left. When she got back to the shrine, she called both the boys in, breaking off the training that they were doing. "I want you two to go into the woods and make your way to the hill. No time conditions. Try to limit yourself to three fights apiece. Yusuke, I want you to specifically find the bat-tamer."

Yusuke shrugged, "Hell, I beat him back before I had any training at all – he'll be no challenge at all now!"

Genkai smiled slightly and didn't answer.

After the boys were out of earshot and on the way to the woods, they discussed it briefly. "What the hell was that?" "Don't know – she's up to something." "You're the idiot who wanted to 'train' here!" "So? We've done this before. No problem." Then they fell silent as they got to the woods and felt it. "Oh Shit." They looked at each other in dismay. "Shinka's out there." "And her rei is augmenting the woods..." They both groaned, knowing this trip wouldn't be as easy as they had thought.

Shinka looked out in surprise, "Well, hi guys – what are you doing here?" She glanced up at the sky, "Did I miss dinner?"

Both panting heavily, their shirts in shreds, exhaustion plain on their faces, the two boys glared at her.

Shinka blinked, noticing their condition for the first time, "What happened to you?"

They looked at each other, nonplused. Then Kuwabara laughed, "I said things always happened around her – Shin-chan, how'd you get out here?"

Thoroughly confused now, Shinka replied, "I walked..."

Yusuke blurted, "By yourself? You didn't have any trouble?"

Shinka glanced out to the woods, finally understanding, "Oh, this is Genkai's training ground, is it? I liked the feel of the place. No – no trouble." She put down the animal she'd been petting and stood up, "I guess it's about time to get back now."

Yusuke looked at the small furry rabbit with the extremely long fangs and backpedaled a step. "No trouble," he said faintly, "Wild things..." He shook his head and sank to the ground, "I'm resting here before we go back."

Kuwabara joined him, collapsing on the hill, "Shin-chan... how about if you go back first. Please."

Raising an eyebrow, Shinka grinned at them and then left.
The boys looked at each other and didn't say a word.

Yusuke yelped as a rei ball winged him. Stifling the yell, he ducked low to avoid another, twisting to his right to avoid a third... Across the hall from him, Kuwabara's language was going from bad to worse as his rei-sword was a constant wall of light cutting the rei balls apart.

"Kuwabara!" Yusuke yelled, "Get over here!"

"I'm trying, damn it! Ouch!!!!!!!" Kuwabara blew on his hand before leaping over one rei ball, rolling on the ground under another, and then up to stand back to back with Yusuke to meet the next one. Only to be hit from behind as Yusuke ducked one aimed at him. "URAMESHI – STOP DODGING!"

Tightening his mouth, Yusuke concentrated and his fists started to glow with rei power. Then he lashed out at the balls in his vicinity, the rei powers canceling.

After several minutes, they started feeling better about the exercise. Until they heard a soft snort of disdain in the distance.

"Pathetic. I'll show them a challenge."

Rough green orbs of makai fire joined the bombardment of smooth yellow rei balls.

"OW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Both Kuwabara and Yusuke yelled loudly as they were pressed beyond capacity, each getting hit by several orbs.

"Damn it Hiei! That's not funny!"

"That stings!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Ow! Ow!" Kuwabara stopped his war-dance and glanced up, "Whassa – Hiei's here?"

A soft chuckle was their only answer at first, then a voice, "Rose Whip!" and Kurama jumped in to stand next to them, his long whip snapping out to destroy twenty of the orbs and balls in a single crack. With new confidence, the boys stood with their friend and were shortly decimating the room.

"Hn..." Hiei juggled a few orbs before tossing them out.

Genkai smiled, "I think you and I can take the three of them..." She spread her hands and the rei balls changed into threads of energy that swooped and dodged through the room, more flexible and agile than the balls.

Hiei's orbs sparked, emitting heat as well as light.

"Ow!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Damn it!"

Kurama just grinned and kept his whip active.

Eventually, Genkai called a halt and went in for her tea, leaving the four of them together. There were only a few seconds of silence before Kuwabara and Hiei started snipping at each other and Yusuke and Kurama looked on. Everything was perfectly normal.

"Wow. You actually wear something besides that black dress?"

Hiei chuckled, the low menacing sound that was so familiar to the group, "Black doesn't show blood."

Kurama intervened on that one, "You and I are not wearing the school uniforms either."

The boys looked at their jeans and shirts and then at Kurama and Hiei's rather formal looking outfits, long flowing Chinese tunics and slacks, Kurama's outfit in shades of green, Hiei's in yellow. Seeing their looks, Kurama shrugged, "We came straight from the Spirit World."

Kuwabara left that one alone and went back to an earlier barb to Hiei, "Your dress is a uniform? Oooo... I'd love to know where that comes from!"

Hiei snorted, "At least I can move freely in it – your 'uniform' is too tight around the neck and shoulders for good action. A monkey in a suit."

"Monkey?"

Kurama and Yusuke moved away as the snipping started up again.

Yusuke looked at Kurama and said softly, "I'm glad you two are back with us." His tone implied a slight question about Kurama's remark about the Spirit World.

Kurama winked, "It wasn't that hard once you know what strings to pull."

With that sort of an evasive answer... Yusuke shook his head and then basked in the warmth of his friends all around him.

When the group had rejoined as a whole, they stayed up until long past midnight as they talked and laughed together. Shinka stayed mostly on the outskirts of the group or quietly talked temple business with Genkai. Botan settled down between Yusuke and Kuwabara and was a constant cheerful presence. Yukina and Kuwabara sat next to each other, but for once weren't absorbed in each other. After Yukina had given Hiei a glad welcome, she'd set herself to, in her own gentle way, draw Yusuke out to talk about himself. Yusuke could see what she was doing, but she was so sweet and honest about his feelings while she asked that he found himself answering instead of clamming up like he usually did when things got personal. And his reaction also was partly due to Kurama who sat across from Yusuke and smiled with delight at every happy memory Yusuke dragged up, and his green eyes pooled with sadness at the difficult memories... With such support and affection, Yusuke couldn't feel embarrassed or upset, and for Yukina's and Kurama's sake, instead of only reflecting on the bad things in his life, he found himself remembering more happy memories than he'd thought he had. Hiei was sitting in the windowsill, looking out at the night sky, but his periodic caustic remarks or insertion of good sense into a degenerating conversation proved that he was listening and part of the group. As the evening went on, Kurama's gaze rested more and more frequently upon the black-cloaked figure and his contributions to the conversations were proportionally lessened. Botan and Kuwabara took over the bulk of the interaction, getting into an odd theological debate – odd in that one of the myths herself was there arguing on the opposite side! Genkai watched in amusement and Shinka and Yukina were fascinated to learn about human and spirit ways.

Eventually, all the conversations slowed down and the late hour started to show. Finally, when even Botan started to yawn, they decided it was time for bed. Genkai eyed the group before showing them where all her spare rooms were and left them with an obviously sarcastic remark that she was sure they could divide up the rooms appropriately. Yukina blushed delicately and stated firmly that the girls' rooms were over on this side and she led Botan and Shinka down a corridor away from the guys. Kuwabara stared after them wistfully while Yusuke scratched his head and wondered what Genkai had meant.

After the girls had gotten out of earshot, Kurama chuckled and remarked, "Was I really being that obvious?"

Hiei snorted, "Randy fox. You've been quivering since we left the Makai, and even your youki looks red! I don't think you took your gaze off me at any point in the last half-hour – and you were licking your chops. Genkai would have to be blind to have missed it."

"Oh? The temperature in the room went up by at least five degrees in the last half-hour – I wonder what could have caused that?" Kurama speculated and licked his chops deliberately. At Hiei's glare, he inquired, "What color is your youki right now, anyhow?" as he quirked an eyebrow at his short friend and leaned over...

Comprehension hit the two onlookers at the same moment. Kuwabara yelped and pelted into a nearby room, slamming the door shut behind him. Yusuke's eyes went round and he stared...

Kurama straightened up and grinned, "Which room were you going to take, Yusuke?"

Yusuke's mouth opened and closed a couple of times, "You're not going to... I mean... You're really...? Ah..."

“Yes, we’re going to share the same room,” Hiei said as he stomped on Kurama’s foot preventing him from saying anything, “So if you’ll pick yours, we can choose ours.”

“Uhh...” Yusuke was absolutely burning with curiosity.

Kurama took a careful step away from Hiei and answered, “Because the noise when Hiei— oooffff...” All the air in his lungs was driven out by an elbow in his diaphragm.

Hiei removed his elbow and pointed to a room next to Kuwabara’s, “That’s yours, Yusuke. We’ll be down this way.” Grabbing Kurama by the hand, he dragged him away in the opposite direction that the girls had taken.

“Down? But I thought we were up...”

Yusuke listened to Kurama giggling as the pair went into a room on the furthest outskirts. He glanced at the room that Hiei had pointed to, but took a couple of steps past the room towards Kurama and Hiei before he stopped. Ears burning red, Yusuke gulped before he went into a room just a bit closer... He pulled the futon out from the closet and set up the mats, wondering how Hiei and Kurama were going to set theirs up... If they just laid the mats next to each other, Yusuke thought that rolling around would just slide them apart... As Yusuke thought of just what sort of rolling around the two would be doing, his ears burned deeper until the embarrassing fire seemed to also burn within him. It felt almost like when he got ready for a rei gun shot, pulling the energy into one single spot and then waiting... But the spot wasn’t at his finger.

Shivering violently, Yusuke sat down on his bed and tried to stop himself from thinking about his friends. He’d always known they were a couple... but he’d never before thought so explicitly about what that meant. At school, the ones who divided into couples sat together at lunch, exchanged diaries, held hands once in a while if they thought nobody was watching. But Hiei and Kurama were closer than that... Yusuke remembered the kiss that Kurama and Hiei had shared. He raised his hand to his mouth and traced his lips, wondering...

The way Hiei looked at Kurama after he’d changed from fox form, and that kiss... The kiss they’d shared was more than just lips on lips. Yusuke ran his fingers over his lips and parted his mouth slightly at the movement, remembering. They had leaned into each other, their bodies pressing together as their mouths were. Kurama’s bare skin glistened in the air and there had been small glints almost like sparks where Hiei touched him. Beautiful smooth skin, on such a marvelous supple body. They had shared their moment together regardless of the company. But then Kuwabara had yelled at them, and the girls had giggled – Public Display of Affection. They had stopped, then. But later... The love between them had been so evident and clear as they held each other, and Hiei had reassured Kurama with such tender care, and Kurama had needed Hiei so very much. They had held each other close, in hearts as well as bodies.

Yusuke shivered and wrapped his arms around himself, drawing his knees up to his chest. *To hold Hiei like that...* He remembered his impulse earlier, when Hiei had looked at him with determination overlaying the pain at rejecting a friend. Yusuke had wanted to go to Hiei then, but had held back for the situation. Yet knowing more now... if Hiei had been raised by air demons, then Agathil must have been a cousin of sorts. In the end, though, Hiei had stayed with Yusuke, and had looked at him with affection and respect... An invisible touch, ruffling his hair.

With a moan, Yusuke put his head on his knees and fought against all the memories of his friends. Kurama’s body. Hiei’s touch. Kurama’s voice. Hiei’s eyes. The affection they had for each other and him. Drawing him in... Yusuke tried not to imagine what they were doing at this very moment. And failed.

Over in another room, dark hands clutched white cloth tightly as Shinka buried her head in the pillow to muffle her moans. *Damnit Kurama! Now would be a good time for you to block the bond!!!!* She tried to block it on her own, but the bond didn’t go in that direction and tears fell down her cheeks as she tried to deal with second-hand impressions of fiery skin and exploding stars.

Hiei chuckled and licked the sweat off Kurama's forehead, murmuring softly, "So what happened to your Dance tonight? Fox..."

Kurama didn't answer outloud, wrapping his arms around Hiei and pulling Hiei's mouth back to his. After a very long time, he murmured against the soft lips, "I'll give you a dance, my love. A dance that's for you alone. One that will last the whole night long."

"Oh, prolong my torture that long, huh?" Hiei retorted, "You get your release and deny me mine..." His words dissolved into a long moan as Kurama expertly danced his hands through Hiei's hair, ruffling it in the way Hiei loved best.

As they lay there, completely exhausted and immensely satisfied, Hiei listened to the birds outside their room and groaned. Carefully, he got to his knees and shook Kurama awake.

"Huh, whassit...?" Kurama tried to pull Hiei back to him even as he closed his eyes again, "Hiei – go to sleep."

Hiei shook his head and kissed his partner lightly before standing up, "Kurama, you crazy delightful fox – it's morning! We have to get up and join the others now."

"Huh?" Kurama blinked, "Already? But we just got to sleep!"

Hiei glanced down in amused frustration, "Exactly. You and your dance..."

"Ah," Kurama stretched with satisfaction, "Oh, that was good." He curled up again, "They won't mind if we're late."

Through the jagan, Hiei found a bucket and some towels in the washroom and carefully filled the bucket with water before bringing them to the room. He ignored Kurama's remark as he took a quick sponge bath and got dressed. Just as he finished, there was a scratch on the door.

When Hiei opened the door, Yukina was glad that the pair were already up... and then she saw Kurama on the mat, sleeping, the sheets only partially over him – and not where they needed to be. Her eyes flew back to Hiei and she tried to stop the blush she was sure was on her cheeks. "Ah, Hiei-san..."

Hiei glanced behind him and shook his head, "I'll get him up. Genkai wants us?"

Yukina nodded with relief, reflecting that she could always count on Hiei. "She says that if anybody misses breakfast, there won't be any more. And..." she hated to say the rest of the message.

With one of his half-grins, Hiei guessed at the rest of it, "She can't teach Yusuke to be responsible if the trainers aren't?"

"Oh! You phrased that much better!" Yukina nodded, delighted at Hiei's understanding. Then she felt Hiei's youki gather to telekinetically ruffle her hair. She hadn't felt the like since she was a child. As she smiled at Hiei, she wondered if he realized that, or even knew what he'd done. She reflected sadly that he probably didn't know, otherwise he wouldn't have done it. *He's so relaxed right now. I think it's been a long time since Hiei has been happy.*

"Hiei, come back to bed..." Kurama's sleepy voice showed a complete lack of awareness of what was going on.

Rolling his eyes, Hiei motioned Yukina away and he shut the door. Then he advanced on the slumbering fox purposefully...

As she was walking away, Yukina heard the splash and a yelp. Giggling, she reported to Genkai that the two ghosts would be there directly.

The rest of the group stumbled in one by one, except for Shinka. They ate breakfast together and she still hadn't joined them. Genkai glanced at Yukina, who shrugged – she'd knocked at Shinka's door like all the others. Hiei raised an eyebrow at Kurama.

"She's sleeping," Kurama answered the indirect question.

All the others looked to him, then Yusuke and Kuwabara remembered the bond and how in the quala's realm, Kurama could sense her and find her. The women all looked moderately puzzled but none of them commented. Instead, Genkai looked in the direction of the rooms and narrowed her eyes.

Suddenly Kurama yelped, his eyes going wide. Then he shook his head, “Well, that woke her up!”

“Good,” Genkai said, “Yukina – go fetch her.”

“Is she in training too?” Yusuke asked curiously.

“Anybody who stays under my roof, follows my schedules,” Genkai replied definitively.

In the meanwhile, Hiei had been frowning at Kurama, who answered, “It was only because I was concentrating – otherwise I would have only known that it happened, rather than feeling it directly.”

“Don’t concentrate often,” Hiei said briefly.

Kurama studied his friend for a moment, then shrugged. What was between Hiei and Shinka was between them and didn’t involve him.

When Yukina and Shinka came back, most of the group reacted with sympathetic startlement.

“Geeze, Shin-chan – you look horrible!”

Standing up from his spot, Kurama went over to her and put a hand on her shoulder, “Shin-chan – are you okay?”

Her dark skin almost pale, her eyes bloodshot and swollen, her hair messy and unbrushed, swaying where she stood, Shinka glared at Kurama angrily, “It’s your fault, you idiot.”

Kurama blinked, “Ahh... Bad dreams?”

“No dreams at all, ‘cause I didn’t get any sleep!” Shinka took ahold of herself with an effort, “Kurama-sama, you might be my lord and master... but when we’re not on a mission, please block the damn bond!!!”

Everybody in the room blinked and several frowned. Kurama took his hand off her shoulder and glanced to Hiei before replying, “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Shin-chan – you said your connection was stronger now, and I don’t want you to slip.”

“Slip.” Shinka rubbed a hand over her face. “You don’t want me to slip. Fine. No problem.” Her teeth ground together, as she gritted them, “Okay, then let’s put it this way: Kurama-sama – don’t project through the bond when you have sex with Hiei for the whole damn night!!!!!!!!!!”

Everybody recoiled in shock, then several grins started popping up while gazes flitted between Hiei and Kurama and Shinka. Kuwabara blushed and started studying the wall, pretending he didn’t hear that. Yusuke was one of the grinners, but he glanced quickly over to see how Hiei was reacting. To his surprise, Hiei was silently laughing, amusement plain in his features.

Kurama’s mouth dropped open, “You felt that?” Then he grinned, eyes sparkling mischievously, “But why should that bother you?”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Shinka closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she drew herself up to her full short height and poked a finger in Kurama’s sternum, “Because, my idiot lord, I’m a virgin! And a girl! You were projecting every damn thing you were feeling and doing and seeing...” Shinka trembled and drew a breath, “You try dealing with a complete arousal when you have no partner and the feelings just keep going on and on...”

Actually, Yusuke felt rather sympathetic on that one...

“And I’m certainly not built anything like you are. Ah, fire and flames and the softest fur... but I’m not the one running long fingers over the smooth skin, it’s not me that receives the nectar kisses... And I can’t respond that way!” Shinka closed her eyes, her voice weak and pleading, “If you won’t block the bond... Did you have to do it for the whole damn night???”

“Oh, Shin-chan,” Kurama put his hands on her shoulders and drew her close to him, “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.” He studied her for a moment, then used one hand to tip her face up and he leaned down, bending over until his lips met hers.

Shinka pushed him back, “What the hell do y— umph...” Her words broke off as Kurama kissed her again, this time with more determination. After a moment, her body shuddered as she leaned into Kurama. Her clenched fists on his chest opened and her hands spread out, feeling through the shirt. Her body swayed closer to his.

The hand that Kurama had on her chin slipped around the back of her head, winding his fingers through her hair. His other hand he placed on her waist, pulling her into him. He slid one leg closer to her. Shinka responded, her slight form pushing into his larger one. The kiss went on...

Yusuke gulped and glanced around again to Hiei. To his surprise and embarrassment, Hiei was watching him thoughtfully. When their eyes met, Hiei shrugged slightly and then slid off his perch on the window and walked to Yusuke. He moved so silently that most of the group didn't notice. Yusuke's gaze shifted between Hiei and Kurama as he wondered what to make of this latest tangle...

When Hiei stood next to Yusuke, he said quietly, "It's okay, he's a kitsune. This is as natural to him as breathing. And it means a lot less than what we have together." Hiei's mouth quirked upwards, "I just wonder if he knows what he's doing."

Yusuke felt rather faint, his senses dividing between the... show Kurama was putting on and Hiei standing next to him. Yusuke watched Kurama avidly, trying to place in his memory just where Kurama had his hands and how he was doing this... *I wonder if Keiko would respond that avidly. I think she'd be more likely to hit me if I tried that. But if she responded...* Next to him, Hiei stood calmly, his attention less on his partner than on Yusuke. And Yusuke could feel that attention and wanted to respond to it in ways that weren't appropriate, his mind whirling with the fantasies he'd had last night. *They were doing it for the whole night???* How could you make it last that long? Yusuke didn't look again at Hiei.

Shinka drew back from Kurama slightly, her mouth open and her breath panting. Carefully, she cleared her throat, her hands straightening out Kurama's shirt, "Kurama-sama... that didn't help things." Her hazel eyes hungrily looked up into his green ones, "In fact, it made it rather worse..."

Kurama traced her chin and then the outlines of her cheekbones. His eyes glinted merrily, "Ah, but now you're feeling yourself rather than anybody else."

"True," Shinka closed her eyes, "Very true." There was a pause as she struggled with herself and then gave up. The feelings after a whole night of denial, were just too much. Shinka moaned and pressed herself forward on him, "Kurama..." her hands found the bottom of his shirt and tugged it upwards.

"Whoa..." Kurama put his hands on her shoulders but didn't stop her, "Ah, Shin-chan, I didn't mean..."

She paid no attention to him except to speak his name pleadingly, her hands and lips roving over his chest. As she continued, her hands drifted more downward and her lips upward. Kurama shifted uncomfortably but obviously didn't quite know how or really want to stop her.

Hiei chuckled and Kurama's head lifted to focus on him.

"And now that you have her, what do you plan on doing with her?" Hiei asked in amused mockery. "Kurama, you silly fox. You have this habit of not thinking your conquests through. People are not possessions, to be thrown or given away when you tire of them."

A green spark of annoyance and shame showed in Kurama's eyes but he made no reply.

Walking forward, Hiei stopped in front of his partner, looking up. Softly, he added, "And you're not Yoko anymore. Yoko would not have cared."

Kurama's gaze softened as he looked at Hiei. Shinka squirmed in his arms and he glanced down, "Shin-chan..."

Hiei shook his head, and spoke sharply to Shinka, "You're in public. Get ahold of yourself."

Irrked by the brusque manner and heartless words, Kurama snapped his attention back to Hiei, ready to form a protest. But on the instant, Shinka was pulling away from him, her hands reaching up to straighten her hair as she turned to face Hiei. Kurama blinked at the sudden control, "Shin-chan?"

Shinka looked back and smiled, "Thanks Kurama, that did help." Her eyes twinkled merrily, "Even if it did create other problems..."

"Hiei," Yusuke had to ask, "You didn't mind earlier – and you and Kurama were doing even more than that... What's the big deal about public display of affection?"

Amused red eyes rested fondly on Yusuke, "Affection is fine. Loss of control is not. Besides," Hiei glanced up again, "Kurama needed a way out of the situation he'd created."

Kurama thought about being indignant and decided to be fondly amused instead.

Shinka also grinned at Yusuke, "Never show weakness in public. It's a fundamental cornerstone of survival. When you're weak, others will drag you down. Maybe not on the instant, but eventually. The only way to live is to never be weak." Her face looked bleak for a moment, "I'd forgotten that for a bit there. Animals tend to live in the moment, yet it is a Truth for them as well."

Yusuke blinked, "Love is weakness? I always thought it was strength. If you love, you can be strong."

Everybody in the room regarded him with speculation and curiosity at his statement, each with their separate reasons.

Shinka blinked, "Well, yes, love is obviously a weakness – you can be hurt through love and others can hurt you... But what does that have to do with sex?"

Kurama drew his breath in sharply and took a quick step towards Hiei, "Is that where you got that from? From her? I thought it was of the demon world..."

Hiei blinked, "Kurama, what the hell are you talking about?"

Gently, Kurama reached out and touched Hiei's face delicately, "The same words, the same inflection, the same reasoning, the same puzzlement..." His grin was more rebuke to himself than humor, "As you just reminded me, I didn't know what I stole, and I hadn't expected love. You said it, the same thing – 'what does that have to do with sex.' I thought it was your demon upbringing. But just now..."

"Oh," the puzzlement was gone from Hiei's voice and a rather sour note replaced it, "that." He sighed and flitted out of Kurama's touch, "Kurama – in the demon world, sex is for domination. In the spirit world, it's for pleasure. In the human world it can be either or both. Reproduction is also a factor in all three worlds. Love is elements of all parts, yet is most closely associated with sex in the human world." He stopped speaking, seemingly finished.

"And what does that have to do with answering my question?" Kurama asked, folding his arms across his chest.

"Why do you want it answered?" Hiei parried.

Kurama blinked. And then looked over at Shinka, who was watching the two of them in fascination, her attention mostly on Hiei. He also gave a quick glance at the rest of their audience, silently watching. Yusuke was obviously intent on figuring out Hiei's words and waiting for Kurama's reply. With a shrug, Kurama gave it, "To know you. If things were not as I reasoned, then I need to rearrange some ideas."

Hiei shook his head, "Curious fox..."

"Curiosity killed the cat, not the fox," Kurama pointed out with a grin.

Hiei glared, "Oh, tell me another one, Yoko..."

Kurama spread his hands in defeat.

"Wow," Kuwabara remarked in awe, "I always thought it was just me he snipped at."

Hiei snorted as Kurama grinned. The red-head responded to the oblique question, "I usually wait to pester Hiei until we're alone. A mission is not a good place for a debate. But we're not on a mission at the moment, so I'm not holding back as much."

With another shake of his head, Hiei got back to the subject, in his own way, "Botan could answer the question about the worlds easier than I."

Everybody looked at the blue-haired spirit, who raised her hands to fend off their gazes, "I don't know anything about Shinka's world, Hiei!"

"No, but you know how the demon and spirit worlds are formed, which is an indirect answer to Kurama's question."

Genkai thoughtfully lowered her teacup, "How they are populated, you mean."

Hiei turned to her, tilting his head to one side to regard her, "Yes."

“Huh?” Yusuke, Kuwabara, and Kurama asked as one. The Ice Maiden and the non-human also looked curious but they stayed silent.

Botan nodded, realizing what Hiei was getting at, “That’s true. I don’t think I’d ever thought of it in quite that way.”

Hiei’s expression lightened a bit as he looked at her, “You wouldn’t, Ancient One of the Spirits, Goddess of the River Death.”

Botan smiled, “No, I wouldn’t – until you make me look outside my millennia-long regime of duty.”

“I?” Hiei asked pointedly.

Botan flashed a quick look to Yusuke, the brilliant smile on her face widening as she shared an acknowledgment with Hiei as to what truly changed them all. Then she cleared her throat and addressed the room, “When a human dies, they are judged by their actions in the Book, and then cross over Death to enter into either Heaven or Hell, neither of which are as rigidly defined as some religions would make them. Sometimes it is the weight of a single action which separates the border.”

“What about those who are border-line?” Yusuke asked curiously.

“Despite your recent experience, it is highly unusual for a human to be solidly in the middle with equal weight of good and bad acts,” Botan said wryly as the rest of the room except for Kuwabara looked at them curiously. Genkai nodded to herself as if a mystery had been cleared. Hiei and Kurama frowned as if they had just had one put in front of them.

Botan went on, “This much is known to all. What many tend not to see is what happens to the ghosts after their sojourn in the realms of the dead. When a ghost has spent its time under King Enma’s rule, then there are four choices before the ghost, usually dependent on what they believed before they died.” She ticked them off on her fingers, “A ghost can stay where it is for a longer duration by its choice. A ghost can be reborn in the human world in a form of King Enma’s choice. A ghost can die. Or a—”

She was interrupted by several voices at once, protesting and questioning the third option. There was a trace of annoyance on the beautiful long face and purple eyes as she responded, “To cease to exist. Every ghost has that option when its time comes.”

Silence was in the room before Shinka questioned, “Do they really? Cease, I mean?”

Botan shrugged slightly, “As far as we know. We never see them again. But I admit it might be possible that they just pass out of our domain. It is the same for dead Spirits and Demons – we don’t know what happens to them. Our realm is that of dead humans.”

Hiei cleared his throat meaningfully.

Botan nodded, “And that brings us to the fourth choice, which is Hiei’s point. The fourth choice, for those ghosts in Heaven, is to be reborn as Spirit. For those in Hell, as Demon.”

The group stared at her for a moment. Yusuke was the first to break the silence, “So... Spirits are good, Demons are evil?”

Botan shook her head, “That’s oversimplifying it! Remember, the weight of actions is the balance. But... the ghosts usually have spent centuries separated in the realms before moving on. There are certain characteristics they pick up that are associative with Spirit and Demon. Hiei cited the relevant two. In the Demon world, there is rarely such a thing as ‘love’. Possession, dominance, obsession – all the usual parodies of love, but the actual feeling has to be learned from elsewhere.”

She stopped speaking and immediately three voices chimed in with questions. Botan sorted them out and answered Kurama’s first, “As a general rule, Spirits tend to hold ‘love’ as more of a, uh, refined idea that has less to do with sex and more to do with feelings. This holds less true for those Spirits with a strong family association.”

Glancing towards Yukina, Botan answered Kuwabara’s question, “I said rarely. That doesn’t mean demons can’t love. And if a demon was born from a ghost where the border was skewed then they are less likely to show demon traits and will retain more human ones.” At the general look of incomprehension, Botan expanded, “Sometimes a human will live their life doing good but a single act

of tremendous evil overweighs the balance and puts them in hell. Or they'll have been evil or neutral enough to put them in hell but a few good acts stand out in their soul to remember."

And then she glared at Yusuke, "And I never talk about past lives! That's forbidden."

Hiei quirked a grin and Yusuke saw it and promptly redirected his question, "So what were you?"

Hiei shrugged, "Memories don't get passed on."

Narrowing his eyes, Yusuke rearranged his assumptions about the grin, "Forbidden?"

In spite of himself, Hiei winced slightly at the word. Quickly he answered Yusuke's question and got his thoughts away from himself, "Enma keeps the record."

"Hiei!" Botan was scandalized, "Don't say anything about that!"

"Of past lives..." Yusuke whistled, "That's why he's ruler. He knows what makes everybody in the two realms tick. If there's a problem, he can just look up their weaknesses and zap them."

Hiei nodded, it was a rough summary but basically an accurate one.

The typically easy-going Goddess of the River Death was furious, a golden glow of rei surrounding her body and her oar changing in appearance into a deadly looking scythe.

"Whoa..." Yusuke took a quick step around to Hiei's side, "Calm down, Botan – it's not like we're going to challenge Enma or anything. It's okay. I'm sorry I brought it up. Don't get mad, Botan-chan." He smiled winningly at her, confident of his reception.

Slowly, Botan let the scythe change back. She looked beyond Yusuke to Hiei, her eyes dark, "That you even know of that, Hiei... I will have to talk to Enma-sama."

"Ch'," Hiei made a negligent gesture, implying 'like I care.'

"Hey..." Yusuke was starting to get a little worried, "I was the one who asked!"

Hiei allowed his half-smile to flit across his face, "Yusuke, I was the one who answered."

Kurama was also worried but he only allowed himself one brief frown before locking it down. Or so he thought. A noise at his side drew his attention to Shinka and then he also quickly sealed off the bond.

Genkai cleared her throat, "As long as we're on the subject, there's something I've always wondered about."

Every eye turned on her, most of them in relief.

The elderly Martial Artist waited until she was sure that all thoughts had been diverted and then she asked Botan, "If the souls of humans are reincarnated from other souls, then what is happening with the rapid expansion of the human race? Where are those souls coming from? I realize that at the same time, there are many animal species that are dying... Are they filling the excess numbers?"

Yusuke and Kuwabara grimaced at the thought.

Botan tilted her head to one side, "Partially... Mostly, though, humans aren't reincarnated."

"They aren't???" Multiple people asked.

Botan shrugged, "There are always some, and a lot will depend on how they were raised to think – if they think they should be reborn in another body, then usually they will chose that route. And there are several animals that have elevated themselves to having souls and so go on. But most human souls have always been fresh ones."

"Enma-sama doesn't provide them?"

"No. He keeps track of them, and there are always the odd ones," Botan shot a glance at Shinka and Kurama, "but he doesn't provide the souls himself."

"Back up there a moment, Botan-san," Kuwabara frowned, "Do animals have souls or not?"

"Show me an animal and I'll tell you if it does or not."

Kuwabara scratched his head, "But I always feel rei from them."

Shinka cleared her throat, "Life-energy isn't necessarily soul-energy. But you would feel the rei anyway since you provide it."

"Huh???"

Botan smiled at Kuwabara, "All things are given their souls by those that have them. If you give them attention, you give them part of your soul. When an animal has been given enough parts of a soul, then it becomes their own."

"Velveteen rabbit," Shinka remarked.

Hiei laughed softly and quoted, "When the stuffed animal has been loved so long and so well that its ears are torn and its fur rubbed off, then it becomes real."

Shinka looked over and grinned at him. Without seeming to think about it, Hiei returned a grin of good-humored understanding.

Botan also smiled, but it was tempered, "It's not just love that can make a soul." She glanced pointedly at Yusuke.

"Say, what ever happened to my egg?" Yusuke asked, reminded.

Everybody turned to look at him, eyebrows raising.

"Your egg?" Kurama asked, his mouth twitching.

"Not like that!" Yusuke glowered, "It was—"

Botan interrupted, "Koenma still has it and it's still an egg at the moment. When it hatches, he'll return it to you."

"Uhh..." Yusuke wasn't sure if that's what he wanted, "What if it's a monster that'll devour me?"

"You've come a long way since then, Yusuke," Botan reached over and ruffled his hair, "I don't think you have to worry about that."

Kurama and Hiei traded frowning looks as they tried to figure out the by-play behind the words. Kuwabara snorted in disdain, "Soft."

Yusuke glared at him, "Oh shut up, Mr. 'buy the mangas' for a cat."

Kuwabara flushed and took a step towards Yusuke, his hands balling up in fists. Yet there was a grin playing at the corners of his mouth as he remembered who had saved Eichichi.

Ignoring the boys, Yukina continued a thought she'd had earlier as she remarked, "I used to have a stuffed rabbit for a companion. It was soft and fuzzy and so warm... I kept it in the hollow of the pine where I kept all my favorite things. It disappeared after a hundred years or so. I always wondered what happened... but if it became real..." she smiled, a brilliant happy expression that lit up the entire room and felt like the sun on a snowy day with beauty in the reflected glimmers of white and ice, patterns in the snow, "I would like that, if it became real."

Kuwabara goggled, his face softening in joy at hers, unaware of anything in the room but her.

Hiei sighed very softly and looked out the door at the sunlight glimmering there.

Yusuke saw Shinka open her mouth to say something to Yukina and he hurriedly intervened, "Say, Shin-chan – were you ever a rabbit?"

Blinking at the suddenness, Shinka turned to him, "A rabbit?" She paused for a very long time, frowning, "I don't think so."

Also distracted, Kuwabara glanced over, "There are animals you haven't been?"

Shinka shrugged, "Animal lives might be shorter than human, but still I haven't been hopping lives for long enough to go through everything on the planet. And there are certain forms that tend to be repeated more than others."

"How long has it been?" Yusuke asked, now curious.

With another shrug, Shinka turned to Hiei in question. Hiei looked her over in amusement, "Now how would I know that?"

"You... uhh..." Shinka tilted her head to one side, confused.

Hiei allowed a smile to flit over his face, "I assure you, you were very much still alive when I was tossed out of your kingdom."

"Oh..." Shinka blushed as she realized how true that would have been. And then she frowned as she thought about it, *but if I'm reincarnated because of him...*

Yukina drew in her breath sharply, "Tossed out?" The room suddenly turned cold and everybody looked over at Yukina in surprise. There were sparks within the wide red eyes of the ice maiden. Even Hiei looked alarmed at the unexpected anger from the normally placid demon.

"My plants can't survive at this temperature," Genkai remarked mildly.

Instantly the room was back to normal and Yukina was blushing furiously, "I'm very sorry, Sensei. I didn't mean..."

Genkai regarded her fondly, "Why are you upset?" Nearly everybody else in the room shifted uncomfortably at the question but no one made a move to block it.

Yukina looked down at her feet, "My brother was thrown out of the Ice Kingdom by my aunt. I never got to know him though I love him still. He was the one who gave me the rabbit and I was thinking... the similarity. It..." She turned to Shinka, her red eyes still gleaming, "What did you do to Hiei?"

Shinka tilted her head to one side, her own eyes starting to shade slightly amber as she regarded the ice maiden. There was a general inhalation of breath as the onlookers held themselves poised to interfere. After a long moment, Shinka shrugged, nonchalant, "I told you he will kill me."

The light of vengeance faded, leaving Yukina's eyes the soft pale red they normally were. Slowly, she nodded. "You are not my friend," she said definitively.

With a tinkle of soft laughter, Shinka agreed as she glanced to Hiei, "I am not your friend and will not be. Hiei can kill me without compunction."

One black eyebrow disappeared under the cloth on Hiei's forehead as he watched this interaction between the females. "Hn," he snorted at the maneuvers they made to allow him to do what he would anyhow. Then he shook his head, "400 years."

"Huh?" A universal incomprehension was expressed.

Hiei shrugged, "I'm still checking into it but as far as I can tell, Meitta has been gone from the Worlds for at least 400 years. There are a lot of rumors as to how you died, but I'm not sure yet which is the truth. Considering my reception the last time I looked in, I'm being cautious as to how closely I can probe."

"The flower," Shinka said, her attention focused completely on Hiei. The demon didn't answer, but he didn't need to. As Shinka stared at him, her eyes started to flicker between colors. "I think," she said slowly, "I..." There was a long pause before she finished, "lost a bet." Her eyes settled firmly into hazel again.

Hiei blinked, obviously startled, "That was stupid!" He shook his head, "That was the most common report, but I dismissed it 'cause you'd never be that stupid!!!"

Yusuke was fascinated and couldn't resist, "To lose a bet?"

Red eyes glittered, "To make one in the first place with a weasel and then allow him to cheat. Especially with those stakes."

Kurama reached out and grabbed Shinka as she swayed. Hiei frowned, "The memories should come naturally. Stop pushing it."

Despite her evident tiredness, Shinka managed a sarcastic grin. Carefully she disengaged from Kurama's support and looked at Genkai, "I'm going to go get some sleep." She waited for Genkai's nod before she left them.

"I think training has been postponed long enough," Genkai stated. "Yusuke, I want you to start with the needle. Hold for 2 hours and then report to me. Kazuma, come with me."

Both boys groaned but obeyed. The three ghosts followed them in amusement, Botan and Kurama splitting to heckle Yusuke while he tried to concentrate and Hiei to watch Kuwabara's training. Yukina watched after them for a bit and then went to another room to resume her studies.

"I can't fight Kurama!!!!!"

Kurama blinked, startled. Hiei coughed, amused. Yusuke frowned, puzzled.

Kuwabara glared at them all and blushed, "I mean... It... well..."

With an exasperated look heavenward, Genkai snarled at the tall fighter, “You idiot! Kurama is not a woman! Of course you can fight him.”

Green eyes were wide as Kurama remarked, “I really don’t know whether to take that as an insult or not.” His long red hair flowed in waves around his face as he lightly shook his head, revealing the slender neck and flawless skin. Delicate ears poked out between the strands of rich russet hair. Though his words spoke of amused indignation, the speech was music in liquid syllables. His bearing and pose was as grace defined.

Yusuke caught his breath as he suddenly noticed again how easily the fox spirit could pass on a casual glance for female. *It is a compliment, my friend... so beautiful...*

Kuwabara sputtered, but he didn’t back down, “I can’t fight Kurama. I can’t. He’s... I mean... well, it’s just that...”

Standing to one side, his arms folded as he watched, Hiei saw a chance to tease. “I assure you,” Hiei remarked dryly, his tones fraught with several meanings, “Kurama is most definitely not a woman.”

Kuwabara turned red in addition to sputtering.

Kurama rolled his eyes, “Never mind. I’ll fight Yusuke. Hiei can work with Kuwabara.”

“Uhh...” Yusuke shifted from foot to foot.

“You too!?”

“Uh, no...” Yusuke gulped, looking Kurama over and suddenly realizing what Kuwabara’s problem had been – Kurama was just so... his skin so fine and soft looking, the red hair so vibrant... Okay, maybe that hadn’t been Kuwabara’s problem. Yusuke gulped again, nerving himself, “I’ll fight...”

Well amused, Hiei intervened, “Haven’t you two seen Kurama fight? He’s well able to take care of himself.”

Kurama grinned at Hiei.

With a shrug, Yusuke conceded. He remembered the first time he’d ever seen Kurama fight – and Hiei’s praise of the ghost at that point, ‘so beautiful and graceful’. “Hiei,” Yusuke asked abruptly, “do you ever fight Kurama?”

Kurama’s grin shifted to a growl and his human ears twitched as if they were trying to flatten down.

Utterly fascinated, Yusuke watched for a moment before turning his attention back to Hiei, “You don’t?”

“I do,” Hiei was still amused, “The fox just doesn’t like having his plants burned when we spar.”

Kurama growled again, “I told you not to do that!”

“You weren’t supposed to use them.”

“I thought if I could take you by surprise...”

“Heh,” Hiei’s mouth twitched, “Since when did that ever work?”

“When did what work?” Kurama asked, “You mean taking you by surprise?” Green eyes brightened as they rested fondly on Hiei and Kurama let his lips part to show white teeth gleaming in a smile. He was tempted to lick his lips as well, but decided not to push it in front of Yusuke and Kuwabara, not to mention Genkai.

Hiei’s eyes widened and his face changed expressions too rapidly for anyone to follow before he returned to a very careful impassivity. He didn’t say a word.

Kurama laughed long and loudly, “Oh, you remember, do you?”

“Shut up, you damn kitsune!”

Kurama’s green eyes sparkled merrily but he didn’t say anything more outloud.

Waiting until he was sure their interaction was done, Yusuke carefully asked, “Burned?”

Hiei lifted up a hand and green fires danced atop his palm. “I can call Makai Fire.”

Kuwabara blinked, “So why don’t you?”

Observing and learning up to now, Genkai finally involved herself in the conversation, “It is best, if you have other enemies, to use the bare minimum of power needed to destroy an opponent.

Otherwise, the enemy you have not yet fought learns your range and your ki.” She nodded at Hiei in acknowledgement of his status in both power and extent of enemies.

Yusuke blinked, “But isn’t that dishonorable? If your opponent doesn’t know what you can do, then it’s not a fair fight.”

Hiei and Genkai snorted with identical scorn. Kurama was smiling gently at Yusuke, but it was a smile of tolerance for one who has not yet learned life’s lessons. Annoyed and shamed, Yusuke threw up his hands and turned to go.

“Wait, Yusuke.”

As no other could, Hiei’s soft voice caught and held Yusuke, drawing his attention and his focus back. Deference, command, warning, and affection was a mixture of tone that Hiei rarely used and when he did it was only to Yusuke.

Waiting until Yusuke’s brown eyes met his, Hiei explained, “Use honor with honorable people and the rules will be followed. Use honor with demons and you will end up dead.”

If it had been anybody else, Yusuke would have bristled and resisted, turning away from the instruction to follow his own path. But he had been guided too often by Hiei’s and Kurama’s calm explanations in battle with otherworld demons to not listen now. Reluctantly, he accepted the truths in the statement while still not accepting the mores that made them so.

Hiei flitted and was gone.

There was a brief silence as every eye turned to where he had been, then Yusuke’s gaze went to Kurama in question.

Kurama smiled at Yusuke, “You confused him again.”

“Huh?” *How the heck did I do that?*

Green eyes held a vast quantity of emotions, mostly fondness and respect, as Kurama answered, “It was not that long ago that he would have been one of those you condemn out of hand. And he still doesn’t know why you change him.” *I don’t understand it either.*

If Hiei had still been there, Yusuke would have turned his look upon the demon he’d fought with and by. But there was only empty air for Yusuke to melt with his fondness, and instead he accepted his power and turned back to the others.

“All right,” Genkai sighed, “Both of you fight with Kurama! Kurama – don’t hold back on these idiots.”

Kurama pulled a rose out of his hair and his amused gaze turned distant and cold. Yusuke and Kuwabara instinctively edged closer to each other as their rei powers gathered. And then the spar began.

Much later, Kurama stepped away from the group to find the need he could feel. “Hiei...”

“Just hold me, Kurama; in that hug-thing of yours. Just hold me.”

Kurama held his demon close.

“Owww...” Yusuke hissed as he carefully lowered himself down.

Kuwabara glared, “Get over here and help with the firewood!” He swung the axe down, smothering a yelp of his own as he did so.

“Just let me rest a moment,” Yusuke examined one of his arms where the long welts stood out red on his skin. He blew gently over it and hissed again at the pain. “Hey, Kuwabara...”

His tall friend put down the axe and looked over, caught by the tone of Yusuke’s voice, “What?”

“Why didn’t you want to fight Kurama?” Yusuke knew why he didn’t; that perfect smooth skin, so pale and soft, the luxurious red hair wafting in the breeze... But he doubted very much if that had been Kuwabara’s reason.

Kuwabara sighed and then went to sit down next to Yusuke, smothering groans as he did so. They sat together in silence for awhile before Kuwabara finally answered, “He’s not a fighter.”

“Huh?” Yusuke glanced at Kuwabara in surprise, and then at the welts on his arms in disbelief, “Could have fooled me...” Kurama had taken the thorns off his rose whip and had reduced his rei power. He still tromped them.

The big youth stretched out and picked a piece of grass that he stripped before sticking it in his mouth to chew on. “Do you know why I fight? Or rather, used to fight?”

“Cause you’re a mean SOB delinquent with nothing better to do?”

Kuwabara glared, “Knock it off, Urameshi! Or I’m not going to tell!!”

Yusuke grinned and subsided.

“It’s the challenge. I can feel... fighting rei and am drawn towards it. I can’t actually stop a fight once I feel that type of rei.”

Straightening up in surprise, Yusuke turned to look at his friend.

Kuwabara wasn’t looking at him, his gaze on the clouds. “I never actually knew what it was before, but with all this training to focus my perception rei... I can feel it. And I can’t help responding to it.”

“You see battle auras?”

With a snort, Kuwabara sat up again, “Of course I see battle auras. But that’s not what I was talking about.” He studied Yusuke carefully, “You’re not putting out a battle aura now, but your fighting rei is just about sparking out of you. It’s a part of you – and I want to challenge you because of it.”

“We haven’t fought since I died.” Yusuke thought about that for a second, “Really fought, I mean,” he amended.

Kuwabara turned his head, “No.” He was silent for a long moment. “I can control it a bit better now. Getting the rei sucked out of me by Rando... and then tromped by Byakko... Your fighting rei has a direction now. It’s not aimless when it flares. And so it’s easier for me not to be caught by it.”

“Now you just get caught by Hiei’s,” Yusuke chuckled.

Large shoulders shrugged, “Essentially. The little runt has more fighting rei than you.” He spat the piece of grass out of his mouth and picked a new one, “Feels a lot like yours.”

Yusuke finally remembered the start of this conversation, “And Kurama?”

“Kurama has no fighting rei. He fights. And when he has a battle aura, it’s a powerful thing. But he doesn’t actually send out any fighting signals that I can respond to.”

“Huh.” Yusuke thought about it. His rei sense was pathetically non-existent compared to Kuwabara and the others, but he accepted Kuwabara’s as a matter of fact.

“OWWWWWW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” Both youths jumped up and started brushing at themselves, hopping around to try and get the stinging dust off of them.

Genkai glared at them, “Firewood, boys. Now.”

“Iyi, iya, ow, ow,...” Yusuke hobbled over to the pile of wood and picked up an axe. With a bit more noise, Kuwabara did the same.

“Oh!” Yukina ran to Kuwabara and traced one of his wounds.

Genkai rolled her eyes, “Let them keep the pain a bit longer, Yukina. Maybe it will teach them to be more serious later.”

Soft red eyes flicked over to Botan as Yukina said innocently, “But you said we were to practice our healing skills!”

The onlookers in the room, Hiei, Kurama, and Shinka, all laughed quietly. Genkai let herself smile before she motioned Yukina to carry on and for Botan to go to Yusuke.

“Now,” Genkai glanced around, “Who made lunch and where is it?”

“Oh, was someone suppose to do that?” Shinka looked up at her with wide eyes.

“Don’t give me that, you impudent little bird! You know you were.”

Yukina turned away from Kuwabara and gave a curious look to Shinka, “You told me you put it... oh. Sorry.” She shrugged slightly and turned back.

Shinka and Genkai were both chuckling at the interruption of their verbal spar. With a slight shrug, Shinka answered for real, "I set up a picnic in the glade."

"And invited the ants?" Genkai asked drolly.

"And the yellowjackets too."

"Where's the glade?" Yusuke interrupted – he was hungry.

Kuwabara eyed his cousin warily, "You're not talking about the hill in the woods, are you?"

"Shit..." Yusuke backed off, his eyes wide.

Shinka started laughing, "Calm down; no... The glade is out behind the dojo."

"Ah," Genkai breathed out, her eyes sparkling, "You would find that... wouldn't you, little one?"

Her laughter stopped as Shinka absorbed the comment, "Did I just do something I'm not supposed to again?"

Genkai shook her head, "Let's go."

The group set off for the area behind the dojo and they paused as they looked over the bare grassy ground.

"I don't see any food," Yusuke complained.

Kuwabara rolled his eyes, "Damn it, Shin-chan – if you were hiding it from the animals, did you have to put the glamour over us too?"

Shinka glanced at them, baffled. Genkai pinched her arm before she said anything, "If you're hungry enough, boys, you can find it." Then she lifted a hand and a dark cloud shadowed the sun.

When Yusuke and Kuwabara could see again, the others were gone.

"Oh man!" Yusuke moaned, "Not another damn training exercise."

Kuwabara sighed, "I knew it was a mistake to bring her here."

"You never said a damn thing like that!"

"Shut up, Urameshi!"

"You're the one with the perceptive rei, so where the hell are they? And where's my food?"

Kurama was biting his sleeve to keep from falling over in laughter as they watched and listened to the two youths argue.

Genkai picked up her tea and sipped at it, "Nicely done, Shin-chan."

The blonde girl was still looking rather confused, "How can they not see us? I'm not using a glamour."

Hiei snorted, "We're in a fairy circle."

Picking up a chicken wing and nibbling delicately on it, Botan looked around her at the peaceful setting, "Fairy circle?" Then her eyes widened and she put down the wing, "Here???"

"A long time ago," Hiei said as he put a hand over the ground, not quite touching the grass. Carefully, he traced a series of grasses that were just a bit darker and wider-leafed than the others. Everybody followed his gesture until they too could see where the circle went around their picnic ground.

Genkai smiled, "I found this when I built the dojo. It was originally supposed to be a larger building than it is, but I found that something was distorting my plans... I traced it down and eventually found my way in."

Kurama smiled as he lay down on his stomach so he could absorb the feel of the glade while still watching the boys outside. His senses were also alert for something else and so wasn't surprised when a hand started stroking his hair.

"You look good in here," Hiei muttered as he settled down next to his mate and tangled his fingers in the mane. The air around the kitsune was sparkling with little silver motes and Hiei could almost see the shifting nature of the fox.

Shinka shifted away from Hiei, "You're hot." Then she edged away from Yukina, "And you're cold." With a sigh, she moved to sit next to Genkai.

Genkai raised an eyebrow at her and then looked carefully at the others. Botan, having received no further answer to her question, had resumed eating. Even just sitting there, she seemed to over-tower the others with ethereal size. Yukina was, as Shinka remarked, cold. And she seemed even more young and childlike than she usually did. Little birds flew into the glade and started pecking at the bits of food she laid down for them. Where Kurama lay was now a silver fox that Hiei was feeding from his hand. The fox tolerated it for the fun but this was not a tame fox. Of them all, Hiei was most his normal self, dark and quiet. Genkai wondered what she looked like to the rest of them. She didn't often receive visitors in the glade, using it as a meditation spot when she wanted to find herself. The old martial artist smiled as she realized why.

There was an interruption as the two youths broke through the circle and joined them, "Oh man..." "I told you – just follow the birds!" "But the birds are going everywhere!" Their eyes lit upon the food at the same time, "FOOD!" and they pounced in the same action.

Hiei chuckled lazily and then went to salvage some food for himself before it all disappeared. After a couple of moments of rummaging through the dishes, he looked up and frowned, "Shinka... where are the vegetables?"

The fox started barking quiet little yaps, tongue hanging out as blue eyes gleamed in laughter.

"What?" Shinka turned to Hiei in puzzlement.

"You know, green stuff. Like Kurama grows."

"Uhh..." Shinka glanced around at the various pots, "Didn't bring any."

Hiei sighed. And then he frowned as he studied her, watching as she calmly ate some squid from her plate.

"Now what did I do?" Shinka wondered, putting her sticks down. "I'm sorry already – I forgot you don't eat meat."

Yusuke almost dropped the chicken leg he was gnawing on, "You don't?"

Hiei's sigh this time was more of annoyance, "I do..." He picked out some of the chicken salad and fried pork rice on a dish before starting to eat. Yusuke watched in fascination as Hiei avoided most of the meat parts.

The silver fox shifted into human-form, then reached into his hair and tossed out a couple of seeds. Within moments, there were some broccoli and tomato plants ripening. "Here, silly demon."

Hiei glared at him, "Put your clothes on."

Kurama stuck out his tongue and then changed back into the fox form.

With a gulp, Yusuke bent his head over his plate, shoveling the food into his face as he tried to get rid of the heat on his cheeks. It didn't work well as he kept seeing Kurama's form shifting and blurring... Yusuke moaned and his plate fell off his knees and he bent his body over, his arms clenched to his stomach.

Within an instant, almost the whole team was at his side. "Are you hurting?" "Was it something you ate?" "What's wrong?" "Pull yourself together!" Yusuke couldn't answer any of them, the pain in his chest and head preventing speech as he gasped for air.

A solid voice broke through the others as strong gentle arms picked him up, "It's the Circle." Yusuke clung to a familiar chest as he was carried for several steps before a line was crossed and he could breathe again. He trembled within Hiei's safe arms as he tried to recover.

Hiei knelt and put his precious burden down without letting go of Yusuke. He glanced over to Kuwabara, "How are you feeling?"

Kuwabara blinked, "I'm fine..." He stared at his friends, *Hiei's not asking any of the others...* "Is it because we came in after you did?" He gulped as he watched Hiei hold Yusuke – the demon was normally the last to show any indication of concern. That he was the one to intervene said that this was definitely not normal, and Kuwabara worried. Yet, from what he could read of Hiei's aura, the demon himself wasn't very worried. Kuwabara glanced to Kurama, who was studying Yusuke thoughtfully. *That's it...* Kuwabara nodded to himself, *For once, Kurama doesn't know what's going on either – that's why Hiei did something, he was the only one who knew.*

“Order had nothing to do with it,” Hiei allowed himself to carefully stroke Yusuke’s hair as he felt the trembling start to recede, “It’s because of your youth. You two are still undefined in self. The nature of the Circle is to reveal Truth.”

Kurama’s eyes narrowed at the way that Hiei had accented the word, though he said nothing.

“Uhh...” The feelings in the glade suddenly made sense in a way they hadn’t before.

Kuwabara’s gaze slid to Shinka, who was still within the glade, packing up the picnic dishes. “Should we get her out of there?”

Hiei blinked and glanced over, then back at Kuwabara, “You can see her?” He seemed more interested in his question than Kuwabara’s concern.

“Huh? Oh.” Kuwabara shook his head, “I could until you asked that! Arrgh... now I only see the meadow.”

“I can see her, but not the picnic stuff,” Kurama said thoughtfully.

Hiei snorted, “That figures.”

Genkai and Botan just watched the others, observing the interaction while keeping their thoughts to themselves.

At that point, Shinka came over to them holding a basket with the leftover food, “I take it that wasn’t a good place to eat...” With a quirk of an eyebrow, and a steady gaze that rested on his face and nowhere lower, she handed Kurama his clothes.

“Oops...” Kurama quickly got dressed, despite the tears in his shirt from where he had ripped it in fox form. Botan and Shinka traded amused looks at his forgetfulness.

“If he’s going to be doing this often,” Botan remarked, “I’m going to have to stop hanging out with the group.”

“Don’t you mean hang out with them more?” Shinka grinned. “Good scenery.”

“Knock it off,” Kurama growled without meaning it, his face red.

Warm and relaxed and safe... He was being held by someone. Yusuke flushed in embarrassment at his weakness. Pushing slightly at the arms encircling him, Yusuke said, “I’m okay now.” He’d been listening and not listening as the group talked, feeling almost like he was out of his body and just settling back in, like when he was dead. It was weird and not very nice, but now that he was better, he would stand on his own, like he always did.

Withdrawing just enough to look at Yusuke, Hiei studied him carefully before nodding and letting him go.

Yusuke sat up, rubbing his arms and suddenly feeling cold now that there wasn’t the comforting heat around him. *I didn’t have to be so truthful, I could still be in his arms...* Now that he knew where he’d been, Yusuke suddenly and fervently wished he could be there again, when he could actually feel what it was like... A sudden pain shot through his chest and he doubled over again.

“Hn...” This time, Hiei just watched Yusuke, his red eyes narrowing in thought. He took a couple of steps back and then shook his head. “Yukina.”

The blue-haired ice maiden rushed to Yusuke’s side with Hiei’s command. She ran her hands gently over his sides and face.

Kuwabara felt a brief pang of jealousy, but it was overshadowed by his concern for Yusuke, “Will he be all right?”

Yukina nodded, “He’s just a bit unbalanced at the moment. And there are more hormones in his system than there should be... I’ll fix some of it, but he should balance okay on his own.”

“Unbalanced...” Yusuke muttered, “that’s about what it feels like. But why...” he trailed off as he looked up and saw that Hiei was gone. He sighed instead and glanced to Kuwabara, who shrugged.

Genkai broke the silence, “Let’s go inside and the boys can finish their food.”

Yusuke perked up immediately.

A couple of hours later, Genkai put her hands on her hips and glared at Kurama, who spread his hands, “I don’t have any say in his comings and goings.”

Genkai scowled, "If he's not going to train, I don't want him taking up space!"

Hiei snorted as he walked up behind them. Everybody jumped and whipped their heads around to look at him. "There you are!"

"Just call my name," Hiei suggested, "I'm usually not very far away."

"I couldn't feel your youki," Kurama said, looking curiously at his partner, "I assumed you weren't around."

"I wasn't broadcasting it," Hiei retorted, casting a side-long glance at Yusuke.

Yusuke caught the look and blushed, "I'm feeling better now..."

"Good," Hiei said shortly, his expression impassive. "Kurama, fetch up one of your shadow creatures and set it on Yusuke. Kuwabara, come with me."

Genkai watched them separate and when nobody could see her, her lips twitched up in fond amusement, "Well, this is one way I don't have to work."

Hiei led the way to a practice area outside the dojo and waited. Kuwabara grinned as he formed his rei sword, "Today is the day I slice you to bits!"

"Put that away, idiot human, before you hurt yourself," Hiei snorted contemptuously.

Kuwabara let the sword disappear, his eyes lighting up with glee – it was rare that Hiei condescended to teach any part of rei or psychic control. His occasional, but more frequent, sword training was covered with the excuses 'so you don't accidentally backstab Yusuke while tripping over your own feet' and 'so Yusuke won't be ridiculed for having such a stupid-looking partner'. Eagerly, Kuwabara settled onto the ground cross-legged, preparing to do the mental exercises that Hiei would put him through.

"Hn," Hiei muttered, "I guess it's true."

Kuwabara jumped up, his hands clenching into fists, his anger overflowing, "You stupid little runt! How dare you mock me, the great Kuwabara Kazuma!"

"And a moron and a fool, don't forget that part..."

Kuwabara roared and attacked with his fists, pummeling the smaller figure – or trying to. Hiei let the punches mostly miss, letting a few through while giving with the motion to barely register the touch. He didn't return any. The spar went on for a few minutes before Hiei flitted, disappearing before the fighter's eyes. Kuwabara stumbled to a halt and turned in a circle, searching for his enemy. When he saw Hiei on the edge of the clearing, he clenched his fists again and started forward.

"And takes some time to wear off, too," Hiei said. "Kuwabara – why are you mad?"

The question was sharp and direct, demanding an answer. Kuwabara frowned, "Your tone of voice said it all! You guess it's true, huh? Well the great Kuwabara will SHOW you its truth!!"

Hiei chuckled quietly, "You have done that..." Not changing tone or position, Hiei redirected his attention, "Shinka – augment Kuwabara's rei in steady increments. I'll tell you when to stop."

From the safe spot where she was watching, Shinka nodded and a golden glow sprang up around the tall fighter. Kuwabara blinked and shook his head, then shrugged, "That won't be necessary for me to defeat you, runtling! I can take you myself!!" He attacked Hiei again, his speed and force of blows starting to match Hiei's. Hiei started fighting back as a defensive maneuver, and both fighters started showing signs of battle on their cloths and person.

Abruptly, Kuwabara broke off the attack and backed off, staring at Hiei in surprise, "Find out what truth?"

Hiei quietly broke up laughing. "Okay, Shinka – hold there and maintain," he glanced over to the slight figure and noted the sweat drops on her forehead as she nodded. Then Hiei turned back to Kuwabara, "Why didn't you get mad at my first insult?"

Kuwabara blinked, trying to think back.

"And you got mad at a statement that had little to do with you, but ignored the second insult after it..."

“Why you little...” Kuwabara growled, “You were changing your rei focus! You weren’t projecting fighting rei while you were insulting me, but you did on that other statement... That’s what you wanted to find out what was true!” Kuwabara blinked, “You were listening to me and Yusuke?????”

Hiei shrugged, “I always listen to everything.” He tilted his head to study Kuwabara, “You didn’t notice it then, but when Shinka boosted your power to equal mine, you could tell the difference. Interesting.”

“I’m your equal?” Kuwabara blinked again and then grinned with delight, his fists clenching as he prepared to do battle, his eyes bright with anticipation.

Hiei rolled his eyes, “Take a look at Shinka, you idiot.”

The insult didn’t sting since Kuwabara wasn’t being prodded with fight-rei – but he did follow Hiei’s instructions. Kuwabara gasped as he saw the rivulets of sweat dripping down Shinka’s face, pale beyond her dark skin, her eyes wide as she trembled trying to maintain that much rei power. “You can stop now, Shin-chan!” Kuwabara hastily said, “The point’s been made already! Don’t hurt yourself!”

“Hn,” Hiei snorted before he nodded in response to Shinka’s glance to him for permission to stop.

Kuwabara turned to Hiei in bewilderment, the world seeming a little less bright and clear, “What’s going on?”

Hiei shrugged, “Genkai doesn’t like people taking up space, so Shinka’s job is to augment the trainers,” Hiei grinned, “I altered it a bit...”

Shinka’s snort sounded much like Hiei’s before she contributed, “It’s essentially what I do at Mom’s temple all the time.”

Putting his hands on his hips, Kuwabara glared at both of them, “THAT’s not WHAT I MEANT! And you know it!”

The lightning grin flashed across Hiei’s face and disappeared, “I was curious about that explanation you gave to Yusuke – I’ve never heard or felt anything like a ‘fighting rei’ and wondered if you were making it up.”

“But you were turning it on and off...” Kuwabara tried to remember, but he had been responding on instinct alone and the demon’s rei had swept him in so powerfully...

Hiei shrugged, “I was sealing my entire youki rather than any part of it.” He studied Kuwabara thoughtfully, “Obviously there’s something there. Shizuru said that she had the same problem when she was going through puberty, but she ended up controlling it by not letting herself feel anything.”

“You talked to my sister???!?!?” Kuwabara sputtered, his face turning red.

“She’ll be coming out here for the weekend so I can study this further.”

Kuwabara realized something, “You were talking to her today? Just now?” As Hiei nodded, Kuwabara rapidly calculated distances, “I thought you said you weren’t far away!”

Hiei tilted his head to one side, in a gesture of confusion, “I wasn’t.”

“But Shizuru is at home!”

“Yes...”

They stared at each other for a moment before Hiei finally asked, “What do you consider ‘near’?”

Kuwabara sighed, “Never mind. But Hiei –you shouldn’t talk to my sister without me being there! I’m her brother, so I’m responsible for her.”

The demon blinked several times and then shook his head, relegating the statement to the category of something he was going to ignore for now. Instead he switched to something else, “She also said your name is Kazuma?”

“Uhh,” Kuwabara shook his head, clearing his thoughts – the demon changed topics so fast... “Of course it is!”

Hiei frowned, “I thought that was a nickname Yukina gave you – she tends to do that to animals she likes.”

Kuwabara's fists clenched and he turned red for a different reason, caught between embarrassment and uncertainty and fury.

With a quiet laugh, Shinka broke in, "Easy Kaz-chan – Hiei was just stating a fact, not insulting you. Yukina does like to name things – just like you do too."

Hiei's gaze flicked to Shinka for a moment as Kuwabara tried to regain his cool. He found it by focusing on a different topic, "Yukina-san..." He frowned at Hiei, "Meitta said that you're an Ice Demon too – no, she implied that. What—"

His words were broken off as Hiei's rei fared out around him and his skin turned green, eyes flicking over his body as he directed a stream of fire at Shinka, "Meitta said??? When the hell were you talking with HER? Without Kurama there???"

Kuwabara yelped as he ducked away from Hiei while trying at the same time to turn to look at Shinka...

"She's in a barrier until I get an answer," Hiei briefly stated, "Now, explain!"

Opening his mouth, Kuwabara closed it again as Yusuke and Kurama ran over, alarmed. "Hiei, what's wrong?" "What's going on?"

Hiei flicked his gaze at Yusuke and his glower darkened, "Yusuke, I told you I would kill her if you didn't take care. When and why did Meitta appear?!"

Kurama's eyes widened, "While I wasn't here?" He also turned a stern frown upon the boys.

Yusuke groaned and glared at Kuwabara, "You had to tell him that..."

The tall youth glared back, "Well, it was mostly your fault!"

Hiei's glower darkened even more and the yellow flames surrounding Shinka flared with green light.

Yusuke winced, "Well, actually, she was that way before you two left, but it's okay 'cause Kuwabara got her out of it."

Both ghosts blinked in startlement and the eyes on Hiei's skin started to fade. The ghosts glanced at each other and Kurama shrugged, "I really wasn't paying attention."

Hiei's expression was still dark, but he minutely tipped his head to show that he hadn't been either. When he looked back to Yusuke, the youth could see the pain deep in Hiei's eyes that spoke of a duty failed. "She changed before we left... Tell us what happened."

"Uh," Yusuke glanced to Kuwabara, "Well, Shinka and I were watching you..." He had to shrug – he hadn't really noticed it himself until after it had happened.

"Watching?" Hiei blinked, obviously not remembering.

Yusuke flushed red, "When you two were... ah..."

Kurama grinned, "Kissing."

"Ah, yeah."

Hiei raised an eyebrow at Yusuke's redness and then turned his look on Kuwabara, obviously getting back to the subject.

Kuwabara frowned at Hiei, "She started changing back when Kurama said he trusts you. It sort of hovered on the edges for awhile and then slipped over after you two left. The first thing Meitta said was 'Hiei needed somebody who could love and trust him.'"

It was Hiei's turn to become redder than Kurama's hair, and the other three, alerted by his reaction, stared at him curiously. Kurama studied his partner carefully, but it was Yusuke who asked the question, "I thought you two were enemies!"

Hiei turned away from the others and stared at his wall of flames, "We were friends before she betrayed me." He sighed, "She told me not to trust her..." After a moment, Hiei walked forward and into the flames.

The other three stared after him with mixed expressions, but all thoughtful.

After a moment, Kurama turned to Kuwabara, "How did you get her back?"

Kuwabara shrugged, still looking at the green fire, "The difference between Shinka and Meitta is only in the memory. They're the same, but what they remember are two sets of memories... there's a line

between them. When she switched over, she was thinking of Hiei as he was in the past, back behind that line. So I... drew her thoughts forward until she remembered something that took her over that line again."

Yusuke and Kurama blinked as they looked at him. "A line?"

"Well, a gap. It's thicker than a line." Kuwabara saw their puzzled expressions and threw up his hands, "I can't explain it any better than that! It's just something that I sensed."

The other two let it go. Yusuke looked nervously at the flames, "What are they doing in there?"

Kurama snorted, "Not that." He grinned, "Now if I was in there instead of Hiei..."

Both of the boys looked blankly at him before they realized what he meant and their faces turned red.

"You two are so easy to tease," Kurama tilted his head to one side and studied them, "Obviously I'm going to have to do that more often."

"Shinka," Hiei narrowed his eyes at the human in front of him, "You must take more care or I will kill you now."

Sitting cross-legged on the ground and not looking at all worried about the flames around her, Shinka blinked, "I still don't know why you're waiting. Go right ahead."

Hiei growled, shaking the ground. Without moving, he studied her for a long moment before shaking his head, "You should never have been reincarnated, and I want to find out why before I kill you."

"I did something—" Shinka started to say, but Hiei interrupted.

"No. Not for you. That is a human rule, for human souls." He stared at her thoughtfully, "If you truly lost the bet, then it is possible..." he shook his head, "I will find out, and then I will kill you. But right now, you are endangering Yusuke, and that I will not tolerate, no matter the reason." Reaching out, he held a strand of the pale-blond hair between his forefinger and thumb. There was a brief smell of something burning and then he was holding ashes. Carefully, he rubbed the ashes together and then he moved his hand to draw a line under her left eye.

Throughout his actions, Shinka sat still, her hazel gaze remote as she watched him.

"You are not Meitta," Hiei stated, watching her carefully. "Yet you have Meitta's soul, and some of her self. Why do you allow Meitta to come through?"

Shinka shrugged, "I'm curious. In all these years, I'd never thought to know the reason why, but then I met you, and you were so angry... I realized then that you were the one." She shook her head, "Maybe you're right, and it shouldn't be possible – but that answer lies in the past that I don't remember. As much as you want to know your answer, so do I want to remember you." *Red eyes, sparkling with joy. Flames turning to anger and pain. Why was I happy at the change? Why was it wrong? I...* Shinka looked at the stern figure standing above her, *I want to remember it all. Not bits and pieces that fade but for the words.*

"Hn." Hiei sat down across from her, "If you're going to stay, I will have your promise."

Not saying anything, Shinka waited.

As he watched her, Hiei nodded at her non-action, "I want a pledge that you will not harm Yusuke. Will you do this in the void?"

Shinka shivered, though she didn't know why. Running through her memories of the shrine she grew up in, she remembered some ceremonies that called upon various bits of nothingness to accomplish purposes, but she knew instinctively that none of them were quite what Hiei was talking about.

"Humans don't go there. Only a jagan-barer may enter, and only a master of the jagan can take another. Only an expert can shape as well as question." Hiei shrugged, "I go there a lot."

With a grin, Shinka nodded, "I will give you my word, in the void." She knew there was more to it than that. A lot more. But she also knew that if Hiei wanted it, then she would do it. Carefully, she lowered all the barriers that she knew of. And then she stared into the purple eye on Hiei's forehead and sat still as she felt the other barriers that she hadn't known about being expertly dismantled.

The three stopped their low-voiced discussion and as one looked to the green flames. There didn't seem to be a change, but...

"Where'd the baka go now?" Kuwabara growled. "If he's left again, Genkai's not going to be very happy."

Yusuke and Kurama kept staring at the wall. Yusuke shook his head, "He's still there. But..." he glanced with puzzlement to his friend, "Kurama, what did Hiei just do?"

A still body, the soul elsewhere... Kurama firmly squashed his instinct to call his plants and wrap a protective cover around his mate. This time, Hiei had taken care of the protection first. The fire wall was a barrier for things entering, as well as those leaving. Nothing that was not Hiei would get through. "He's..." Kurama glanced at his friends, "He's fine. But we might as well go back to the temple, this is going to take awhile."

"But Kurama!" Yusuke protested, "What's going on?"

Kurama shook his head. As close as the two humans were, he was not going to reveal a weakness of his mate. While Hiei could do incredible things using the void as a base, his body was left vulnerable during that time. *But he doesn't trust Shinka...* With a blink, Kurama felt through the bond – and found the same emptiness at the end of the bond, that he felt with Hiei gone. *He took her along?* Kurama gulped, his eyes on the green flame. Hiei could use the void in many ways. The one time he'd taken Kurama there, he'd asked a question... but afterwards he had told Kurama some of what had happened to others he'd taken. And none of the others had returned. *I guess it was too much to have her here. Enemy. Dangerous. Hiei likes to play with fire... but not with Yusuke around.* Kurama turned his gaze on the object of his thought and studied the young human for a moment. *Yusuke, you are an interesting enough puzzle to keep two ghosts and a goddess by your side. And you don't even realize it.*

"Uh, Kurama... what is it?" The look his friend was giving him was making Yusuke nervous and he didn't know why.

Kurama just smiled, shook his head, and walked away.

Yusuke and Kuwabara watched him, glanced at each other, looked to the wall of flames... and sighed and sat down. "Wanna play stones?" "Sounds good."

Around them, the nothingness swirled and touched, leaving trails of cold and numbness in their passing, to be filled by what was near.

The lengthy, slick, cat-like figure with silver-blue tentacles of fur twitched her ears and reached out a paw, flexing long sharp claws, {Interesting.}

The dragon with the gleaming black scales outlined with white stars snorted, letting small sparks fly through the dark smoke. {Get on with it.}

{Don't you want to ask your question now?}

{Hell no. This is the void.} The dragon stretched and made a circle in the air of nothing, defining a border that couldn't be seen. {Just the promise.}

{Hiei, you knew this would happen and you're telling me you're not the least bit curious?} The cat-like thing curled upon an unseen cloud and blinked golden eyes, {Why don't you just let me give you the answer to your question, and then I can finally die.}

The dragon kept its head facing outward, away from the cat, {Enough, Meitta. The void can shape as well as reveal. And I do not want a false answer.}

{And my wholeness is only temporary.} The golden eyes gleamed as they stared at the back of the dragon's head. {Hiei, you risk much.}

With another snort, the dragon turned to face the cat, {The promise. You will not harm Yusuke.} The words vibrated around, turning and revealing every side and facet of their selves.

The cat sighed and stretched out, digging her claws into the nothingness, {Harm?}

{No. Harm.}

The words sounded similar on the surface, and at first glance were the same, but as they twisted and turned, they proved to be different animals. The first spoke of no action that would cause pain, physical or mental or otherwise, deliberate or accidental. The second revised the first, telling of no intentional act that would cause dire harm, but allowed actions that would cause mild pain to prevent larger injury later. The third was closer to the first, not allowing any actions at all, yet it agreed to the revision of harm from pain.

{Cutting off your nose to spite your face. What if something attacks him and to save him, he is knocked out of the way, bruising his pride and his body?}

{Then you do not do it. Yusuke will take care of himself. He is learning and growing, and I will have him free. But I will not allow you near, for you are outside the rules of his world. The twilight does not rule here.}

The cat laughed at the twisting of words and meanings within the sentences. The laughter brightened the darkness around them for a long moment; stars gleaming through the mist. {Very well, Quicksilver.} She sat up and arranged her paws carefully, "I will not harm the being identified as Yusuke Urameshi." The words were more than words and wrapped through the fabric of all that was conceived, creating a truth that could not be denied.

The two creatures looked at the words for a moment, and then a red haze formed around the dragon's body as it growled.

{Oops.} said the cat, {Do you want me to do it over?}

{And create a paradox? Baka...}

{I didn't mean to do that,} a paw waved in the air, {it just sortof happened.}

The dragon that was Hiei sighed as he scratched his nose with a claw, {Never mind. Verbal bruises are allowed, physical ones aren't. I suppose it'll work well enough.} The dragon stood up and looked out across nothingness, {Let's go.}

The cat stayed on her cloud, {Don't you want a promise for Yukina and Kurama?}

The dragon whipped his head around and stared at the cat, {You would never harm Yukina, she is a child.}

{Quicksilver, she has grown up while you were not watching. She has inner strength and the will to continue despite pain. As much as you love her, it had to happen eventually. Even our people grow up at some point, and the time is always too short.}

A low sound like a sigh drifted like mist through the emptiness surrounding them. {Very well. Yukina, not Kurama. Kurama can take care of himself and would not thank me for binding you against him.}

The cat nodded and arranged her paws again, her tail curling around them, "I will not harm the Ice Maiden defined as Yukina, sister of Hiei."

The dragon listened to the meanings and the truth, and nodded. {Good enough. Now let's get out of here.}

{Do I make you nervous?} The cat laughed as she stood up.

The dragon glared, {You are too real here, and the void is too malleable. I will stay here no longer than I must.} The dragon reached a claw to touch lightly on the cat's forehead. Then both creatures shed their temporary identity forms and left the void, leaving an emptiness behind to bring new truths into reality.

End part one

Part Two

“Boys, it’s time for dinner.”

Yusuke and Kuwabara looked up.

“But...” Yusuke protested – the green-yellow flames were still surrounding a spot they couldn’t see.

Genkai’s eyes narrowed, “Hiei does not need protecting while on my lands.” Her tone softened, “Come in to dinner and you can check on him in the morning.”

“In the morning?” Yusuke and Kuwabara traded looks. “What is he doing there?” “Why will it take that long?” “Why is he there, but not there?” “How is he there and not there?” “What’s going on?” The last was rather plaintive.

Genkai shook her head, “I don’t know, and it’s none of my business. Nor is it yours.” She looked over at the wall of flames, “Hiei will not appreciate your concern.”

“Actually, he probably won’t even understand it.”

Yusuke and Kuwabara whirled to stare at the red-haired fox-spirit who they hadn’t seen approach. “Kurama.”

Kurama shrugged, the movement fluid. Then he turned and walked off.

Genkai regarded them for a moment more, “If you miss dinner, I’m not making more.” Then she also walked back to the temple.

Yusuke and Kuwabara again looked at each other.

“We can’t leave him,” Yusuke finally offered.

Kuwabara nodded, but seemed uneasy. “They don’t care.”

“They do... they think we’re overdoing it.”

“Hiei’s a demon, he’s strong.” Kuwabara sounded like he was trying to persuade himself.

“We’re always fighting other demons and defeating them. Strength isn’t everything.” *And Hiei says I defeated him. But... I’m not so sure about that anymore.* Yusuke stared at the flames that were obviously not human and were no part of a power that Hiei had ever shown before.

“I wish to hell I knew what was going on.” Kuwabara paced around the flames, “He’s not there. I’d swear he’s not. And yet...”

Yusuke watched unhappily, “I don’t like it.”

Kuwabara stopped pacing, “You go to dinner, I’ll take first watch.”

Yusuke nodded. That was the way they’d have to do it. Logically, he knew that Kurama and Genkai were right, but Hiei... Yusuke was glad that Kuwabara, at least, was with him. But then, it was Kuwabara who had always been the first to stand by his friends and do the good and right. Yusuke still remembered the day that Botan had told them about the demon insects invading their world. Yusuke hadn’t cared. It didn’t affect him. But Kuwabara had jumped though the hole and for his pride, and his friend, Yusuke had to follow.

“Let me know if...” Yusuke floundered.

Kuwabara grunted sourly, “Not that it will, but if something happens, you’ll be the first to know.”

With a grin, Yusuke went in to dinner.

Another day went by with Yusuke and Kuwabara trading off watching the unchanging flames. Genkai and Kurama didn’t let up on their training, but neither did they try to persuade the boys not to watch.

Yusuke was over at the temple, trying to settle his mind for another round of rei perception training when they were interrupted.

“Yusuke!”

Falling from his precarious perch, Yusuke looked up, “Keiko! Thank God; I hate that damn exercise.”

Keiko put her hands on her hips, "If you're just using me to get out of studying..."

Standing next to Keiko, Shizuru laughed scornfully. "That exercise is a child's trick. If Urameshi can't handle it, what's he doing here?"

"Er..." Yusuke blushed red and didn't know what to say to Kuwabara's sister.

"He's training," Genkai said dryly. "And Yusuke, I did **not** say you could stop!"

With a sigh, Yusuke got back up on the needle. This 'vacation' wasn't turning out anything like he'd thought it would be. He looked upside down helplessly at Keiko.

Giggling, Keiko apologized to Genkai for interrupting and left with a wave and a smile for Yusuke, promising another time.

Kuwabara stood up, his rei sword active in his hand. Nothing had changed about the flames. Nothing, and yet... He stood there for several minutes while nothing continued to happen.

Then a figure walked through the flames, the yellow-green darkening to a solid black fire as Hiei moved through. On the instant his form was revealed and present within them, the flames whipped around Hiei and turned him into an unburning flame of darkness. It held steady for a moment before the fire settled into Hiei's body, a part of him.

Hiei turned a contemptuous glance upon Kuwabara, "Put away your feeble rei, child."

There was a tinkling laugh from just behind him. For the first time Kuwabara noticed the second person and his eyes widened in alarm.

"He's hardly a child, Hiei, and it's not all that feeble for a human."

Hiei's sour glance went to his companion, "If he wants to fight demons, it's feeble. And I don't call him 'child' by your standards but by mine."

Meitta's golden eyes twinkled, but she didn't say anything else.

"Uhh..." Kuwabara's gaze flicked between the two.

"It's temporary," Hiei said shortly. He frowned at Meitta, "I should have left you in the circle longer."

She shrugged, "It would have mattered not. In your flames, Quicksilver, I would not revert to the simple human. Don't you understand yet that—"

"Shut up!"

The not-human regarded Hiei with fond exasperation. "We're not in the void anymore, Hiei, even if it is temporary. Stop dancing around and get your answer."

Hiei's pointed teeth flashed, "You taught me the Games too well for that, High One. The Game will stop when I finish it, not before."

Meitta bowed gracefully, an acquiescent smile on her face, "Your move, then, Demonspawn."

Whatever Hiei would have said next was forestalled by Yusuke running up and skidding to a halt as he saw them. "Hiei! You're back!! Are you okay?"

Black eyebrows rose up Hiei's forehead, setting off the middle eye between them. Hiei stared at Yusuke for a moment, then he flitted away and disappeared.

Kuwabara let his rei sword go, though he still watched Meitta warily. "So why are you here?"

Yusuke spun, noticing the change for the first time. His mouth dropped open and he glanced to where Hiei had disappeared. "Hiei left us with you?"

"Kazuma might not be a child, but you, Yusuke, often are close to it. You may not have the openness, but I doubt if you *ever* curb your impulsiveness. Or your tongue." Meitta turned from Yusuke dismissively and faced Kuwabara, "I am here because Hiei likes to play with fire. And that is all I will say, 'cousin.'" The last word was spoken in a mocking tone.

She walked by them, passing so close they could feel her rei passing over them like a light mist in the air, "I will return when there is only the New One left."

The boys watched her disappear among the trees and then they looked at each other. There was a minute of silence as they absorbed the impact of the volatile personalities that were no longer there.

"So what happened?" Yusuke finally asked.

Kuwabara shrugged, "They came out of the fire, Hiei insulted me, they exchanged cryptic remarks, and then you came running."

"That was it?"

"That was it."

Yusuke glanced around hopelessly, "But..."

"I know." Kuwabara glowered at the now empty practice field. "Shit. That was a bunch of time wasted for nothing."

Returning his attention to his friend, Yusuke thought, *not for nothing...* but he didn't say it out loud.

Kurama sat in their room and waited. He'd felt his mate return, and now he waited. He wanted to go to him... but he knew he didn't need to and that Hiei would not appreciate too close a leash on him. It wasn't a leash... it was affection for his mate that translated into anxious feelings while he wasn't there. But Hiei wouldn't appreciate the very human 'concern' either. Hiei could take care of himself. Kurama wondered what he'd make of the boys watching over him. A slight smile curved his lips as the thief thought about the constant vigil the two boys had been holding. The two in ignorance could get away with what Kurama in knowledge could not.

"Hiei..." *My mate. Constantly coming and going. Not what I'd wanted, but I want Hiei, so I will live with it. Will I ever become used to it?* Perhaps he would in a decade or so, after they had become more settled with each other. Or perhaps Hiei would learn to live with him. Kurama wouldn't force the issue either way. And he knew that it would take several decades, if not centuries, for Hiei to settle his Makai affairs enough for him to feel comfortable with Kurama by his side, openly proclaimed as his mate. *What is valued, is endangered.* And even as Hiei would not risk Kurama, so Kurama would not risk his human mother if they came to the attention of the Makai. *A hundred years is not so long to wait.*

"The fox is brooding."

Kurama looked up, "The fox was waiting." Standing up, he held out his arms and Hiei moved into them. They held close to each other, embraced in the hug, not letting go. Gradually, the hug loosened enough for them to move closer in another way as their lips met in a long and sustained kiss.

Putting out his rei, Kurama probed through his mate's body, looking for any damage and seeking to replenish depleted reserves. With a start of surprise, he drew back from the kiss and looked questioningly at Hiei.

Hiei shrugged, "It was different."

Kurama narrowed his eyes at the demon. The times before that Hiei had gone into the void in Kurama's presence, he'd come out drained completely of energy, so tired he'd curled right up and gone immediately to sleep. This time, he was fine – in fact, he was almost sparking at the edges with excess rei.

"Do you need to know?"

Kurama considered that for a moment. Need... Was it a simple desire for knowledge, or was there something more behind the difference? The differences... "The fire barrier you put up before you went in – you absorbed it on the way out, which replenished your rei."

Hiei nodded, "That's part of it. Also, I used Meitta's rei for the travel, which eliminated the need for using my own."

And there was no need to support another when returning. Kurama nodded in acceptance. Deciding that right now Hiei wanted to talk more than cuddle, Kurama moved to a wall and sat down on the floor to make himself comfortable. He'd wanted the cuddling, but Hiei wanting to talk was unusual enough that Kurama was more than content at the exchange.

Hiei raised an eyebrow, "Aren't you going to ask?"

"Ask?"

"About your Shinka."

With a shrug, Kurama dismissed it, "She didn't come back." He would miss the little vixen, but not as much as he cared about his mate.

"Foxes..." Hiei rolled his eyes, "She's back."

"Huh!?" Kurama's eyes went wide as he darted out a searching probe... He pulled it in quickly with the feel of the wild rei. *Oh. That's why I didn't feel her. But...*

"It's temporary," Hiei dismissed any concern about 'Meitta' and returned to his main thoughts, "I have her promise not to harm Yusuke." Hiei glowered, "Or Yukina."

A promise made in the void? That's... Kurama remembered the truth-in-nightmares they'd had while unintentionally linked to the void. That's something that can never be broken. What... an interesting use for that place. If it was a place. This would require some research... Kurama squashed down his thoughts. Another 50 years. Patience. Just be patient a while longer and I can go freely about again... It was harder now to be patient than it had been for 15 years. Being partially out made Kurama want to be fully out. This half-and-half was wearing on his hard-won patience.

Hiei was still frowning, "She said Yukina grew up while I wasn't looking."

Kurama looked up – he'd missed that part of Hiei's reaction. "And that bothers you," he made it a statement, rather than a question.

"Yes," Hiei replied shortly. "Yukina..." He paced around the room. "Yukina should not know pain."

Kurama opened his mouth and then shut it again. Who was he to talk of acceptance? He'd never cared that much for someone, to want to protect them from everything, including life and all its experiences.

"That's not it."

"Hiei..."

"And I'm not reading your thoughts."

Kurama growled.

Hiei grinned briefly, "You're good, my fox-human, but I'm your mate. If I can't read you, who can?"

I can only accept that if I can read you as equally well. Kurama glowered at the short demon, not happy about the difference in positions and knowing that if his mate tried to be impassive, he wouldn't be able to tell a thing.

Hiei snorted, "Well, you're not exactly trying yourself, right now, fox. If you're being kitsune-inscrutable, or worse yet, Minamino-faced, I have to wait too."

"Minamino-faced??"

"You know, that incredible 'I'm so polite' expression and voice you use when trying to be a better human than the humans are." Hiei snorted again, "Not even I can read through **that!**"

Kurama sputtered a bit in indignation and then got back to the real point, "Why are you worried about Yukina?"

"Worried?" Hiei paused in his pacing, "It's not worry... it's..." He paused again and then restarted, "Yukina has experienced pain and hurt in her life before. She grew up with the Ice Maidens and she lives in the Maikai. She is not helpless, and she has been in the battles at Ice Mountain with her sisters. Yet she has never taken pain to her heart before. She experiences, then goes on. Her life is happy, and sweet, and full of delight of the little joys. The pain, for her, has always been transitory, something that would not last, so it was not worth keeping."

Looking out the window at the daylight, Hiei sighed, "If Meitta says that Yukina has grown up, it means that she has taken the pain into herself and continues now despite it." He stared outside for a long silent moment. "And it is my fault, for trusting in subordinates' reports and not knowing when she was gone."

Deeply affected by Hiei's speech, Kurama's heart was wrapping around the bit of his mate's soul that he kept close to him. *I love him so. This demon of the blackest night, who can love another, and care so much, and understand life in all its forms. He is mine, and I love him for it.* It was not an

unused heart that Kurama had claimed, it was an experienced one. And he was Kurama's now, and Kurama wouldn't let Hiei go. "It wasn't your fault."

Hiei turned to face him, his expression watchful but not accepting nor denying the statement.

Kurama tilted his head, "Three years ago, you approached me with the job to steal the Great Treasures. When I finally accepted, we spent almost a year working out the details, many of which you had already scouted out. Your plan to create havoc in Koenma's world had been started well over a decade back." *Or longer.* "For you to have approached Yukina for closer contact than your remote watch would have jeopardized her and the plan." Kurama shrugged, "Your logic was impeccable, as always. It was Yukina's entry into the human world, at a time you could not have foreseen, that caused her danger."

The silence dragged on after Kurama had finished speaking. Finally, Hiei nodded and turned back to the window. "Genkai is angry."

As usual with one of Hiei's abrupt topic switches, it took Kurama a few moments to readjust. *Genkai... oh – Yusuke ran out of the training, and I came here. And none of us have come back yet.* Kurama grinned, his sense of the mischievous acting up again.

"You go collect Kazuma and take him into training with Genkai. I have to talk to Yusuke." Hiei frowned. "He actually asked if I was okay!"

Kurama smothered a giggle and his eyes danced even more at the frown Hiei directed his way. *They're so cute...* He stood up and stretched. "Okay. I'll take care of my end." With another grin at his mate, he went off to act as the fox in human form. Neither human-minamino, nor kitsune-youko, but a bit of both, when with his friends.

The ground looked like ordinary ground. The grass was green, the soil was brown, there were scuff-marks from fighting that had taken place over it... And there was no sign of a fire that had burned there earlier. Yusuke picked up a bit of the dirt and let it crumble from his fingers. "Hiei..."

"What?"

Yusuke spun around, his hand raised and his rei focusing... At the sight of the short figure in black cloak and white-starred hair, he let out his breath and lowered his arm. "Hiei!"

"What?" Hiei raised an eyebrow that disappeared under the new white cloth around his forehead.

Yusuke was sure that the demon was teasing him, but he was so bland about it that there was always the chance that he was serious too. "How come your fire didn't burn the grass?"

Hiei glanced down at the ground and shrugged, "It's not a human fire." He paused for a moment before adding, "It's not that powerful a flame."

Thrown in more ways than one, Yusuke opened and closed his mouth a couple of times before Hiei rescued him.

"I was asked the other day why I don't call the Maikai Fire in battle." Hiei shrugged, "The answer is that while it is good for burning Kurama's plants and making barriers, for a weapon in the Maikai, it's not very effective."

As Yusuke stared at him in surprise, Hiei warned, "Genkai was still correct, though. One does not reveal strengths or weaknesses to the public, or others will know how to use both."

And you just told me... Another glimmer of trust from his friend. No not a glimmer, a flame. Yusuke's grin spread across his face.

"Yusuke, I don't need watching over, nor do I need to be asked if I'm okay." Hiei glowered. "If I am hurt, you will know it. If I'm not, you don't need to be worried."

Kurama and Genkai warned us about that. Yusuke shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'll still ask." *You have been hurt before, and not told us. In that, Hiei, you lie.* Yusuke accepted that not everything Hiei told him would be the truth – truth was even rarer a commodity than trust, yet it was much, much less precious.

Hiei cursed briefly.

Yusuke grinned. "Accept it, Hiei, it's not going to change."

“Whatever.” Hiei frowned, “We should go back to the dojo. Genkai wants to train.”

“Okay,” Yusuke brushed the last of the dirt off his hands and acquiesced without demur.

As they walked together towards the dojo, Yusuke rejoiced in the return of his quiet friend. It wasn't often that he got to spend any time with Hiei except for the missions, and while he **enjoyed** fighting, lately he'd been wanting something else as well.

The late-night walks he'd take with Keiko along the wharf, the study sessions with her and Kuwabara, watching Kuwabara spend time with his followers while they patrolled their zones... Yusuke actually found that he **enjoyed** all that too. It wasn't fighting... but somehow it was satisfying. And weirdly, the closeness to his friends that he'd always known was improved by his being with them at times other than fighting. He didn't understand it, but Yusuke was starting to accept it. And he wanted it for his other friends as well.

Lately, he'd even been spending time with Masaru, as the younger child would come over and call him 'older brother' and would want to play... Yusuke had saved Masaru's life without thinking about it. There had been the brief contact with the kid and a moment of happiness while they played... Yusuke had enjoyed making the kid smile. But if he'd thought about it, would he have traded his life? Yusuke wasn't sure. To deliberately die, for somebody he didn't know... But he hadn't thought about it and Masaru was saved. And now the child called him 'brother' and came to play with him, looking at him with those worshipful brown eyes and joyful innocence.

It made Yusuke feel weird, to know that somebody cared about him like that. Somebody besides Keiko, who had been in his life for so long Yusuke wouldn't know what he'd do without her. He'd never thought about that either. Not until the day the Fourth Beast had shown a vision of Keiko being hunted down by demon-controlled humans, left to fend for herself while Yusuke wasn't there. That scared him. He had no fears for Keiko while he was near. But there was so much that could happen while he wasn't...

“Hiei, what do you do while you're not with us?”

Red eyes turned on him, flickering briefly in surprise and guarded thoughts before becoming unfathomable again. “Hn. Nothing much.”

Okay, that was a lot of answer... Yusuke sighed and gave up. He just wasn't good at 'casual conversation.' But that was okay. He was happy just to be with his friends – and to count Hiei as one of them.

“There they are,” Genkai remarked from the top of the steps, her arms folded across her chest and smoke raising in the air from her cigarette. “Incredible discipline in this group. The trainers disappear, the students decide what they will do on their own, nobody stays put for more than a half hour at a time.” The elderly sensei looked up at the sky, “Will anybody tell me what I did to deserve this?”

From behind her, Kurama and Kuwabara walked out of the dojo, while Keiko and Botan joined them from the other side of the building.

Keiko laughed lightly, “Nothing to deserve, it, but easy to explain, Genkai-sama – you took Yusuke as a student.”

Yusuke stiffened indignantly, “Hey, Keiko! I'm not that bad!” Beside him, Yusuke felt Hiei stilling into total non-movement.

Keiko grinned at Yusuke, “Of course you are.” She switched her attention to the person next to Yusuke and the smile disappeared off her face.

“Hiei,” with no expression, Keiko acknowledged the demon.

Hiei responded, his voice low and remote, reveling nothing, “Yukimura Keiko.”

Botan's hand flew up to her mouth and she turned to Keiko in surprise and dismay. “But...” she stopped speaking, and her face went white as she looked to Hiei.

“Hn,” Hiei snorted, “Foolish Goddess – did you truly believe that your feeble attempt at memory-control would work on a person that I claimed with jagan and Ghost Slayer?”

Kurama's eyes went wide and his gaze flew to Yusuke as the two of them shared an exchange of looks that said, *'Oh shit, we forgot about that.'*

"I'm sorry, Botan," Keiko apologized, not taking her eyes off Hiei, "It just seemed like you didn't want me to know."

Yusuke wanted to reassure Keiko it was okay, but Keiko didn't actually look like **she** was upset... "Uhhh..." Yusuke himself wasn't actually sure it **was** okay, but he didn't know that anything was really wrong. This was confusing. Hiei **had** used Keiko as a hostage, but Keiko wasn't supposed to remember that. But Yusuke hadn't even thought about that, until they brought it up. It was just that Hiei was his friend now, and so was Keiko. But Hiei had once threatened Keiko, and hurt her. But Hiei was his friend. But... Yusuke stood in indecision.

"What's this?" Kuwabara stepped forward and moved to Keiko's side, his hand coming up in a movement to prepare for his rei sword, though he didn't activate it. His gaze was focused on Hiei, ready to defend Keiko against anything, even Hiei. "Hiei, you bastard, what did you do to Keiko?"

Botan was also stepping between Hiei and Keiko, "Hiei, you were supposed to have released Keiko completely!"

"Released Keiko?!" Kuwabara sputtered and his rei sword activated.

There was a swirl of non-air through the scene and everything and everyone became motionless statues as a pop of displaced reality echoed in nothingness.

"HIEI!"

After glancing at the frozen tableau, Hiei looked up. "Koenma," he acknowledged briefly.

"Hiei! You said you'd released Keiko! What have you done?"

Hiei's eyebrows disappeared under the cloth around his forehead. "You put the world in stasis to ask me **that**?" Hiei asked incredulously.

"Damn it, Hiei! This is important!!"

Hiei's eyes narrowed, "Heir of the Underworld, what is your interest in Keiko Yukimura?"

Koenma turned a furious red, "JUST ANSWER! Hiei!"

"Hn." Hiei walked a few steps towards the frozen Keiko and then turned to study Yusuke. "You take an extraordinary interest in this human, Koenma, that you would go to such lengths to protect one close to him."

"You're a fine one to talk!"

Flames burst about him, as Hiei whirled to face the diminutive god. "You dare!"

"Fuck it, Hiei! I let you out here on certain conditions and—"

"Shut up, Godling! I know damn well what conditions you made me sign, with a Contract roll the size of your fist! Keiko is not under my control, damn you!"

Koenma sputtered a bit then looked around the frozen group, "But the memory..."

Hiei rolled his eyes, "There are some things, Chibi-chan, that can't be undone. Because Keiko is not under my jagan now, does not mean she was not in the past." The fire around him faded.

"Go back to your office, lonely little Godling. Go back and watch from your vidscreen. Remote and alone, always watching, but never able to be a true part of the group. Go back, watch, and learn." Hiei's voice was bitterly cold and mocking, the blackness of the truth of his words biting and painful.

Koenma turned a stark white as he stared at Hiei, the stricken expression on his face making him look like a toddler in truth. Then he disappeared and the world came rushing back.

"Hiei, you bastard! What have you—" Kuwabara's bluster hiccupped as the figure he was menacing disappeared from his sight and reappeared halfway between Kuwabara and Yusuke. Knowing Hiei's speed, Kuwabara would not normally have thought anything about it, but there was something odd...

"It's okay, Kuwa-chan," Keiko walked out from between Kuwabara and Botan, laying one hand reassuringly on Kuwabara's arm as she stepped towards Hiei.

“Okay, but!” Kuwabara sputtered, “If that shrimp has hurt you, Keiko-chan, I will make him pay!”

“It’s okay.” Keiko said more firmly, her eyes drifting over to meet Yusuke’s.

Yusuke was caught between relief and puzzlement. He was glad that Keiko didn’t hate Hiei, but at the same time, he knew what Hiei had done... He looked at his friend, “Hiei?”

Hiei turned to him. At the look of trust and confusion on Yusuke’s face, Hiei’s almond eyes widened nearly round. “Yusuke... how...?” Hiei’s face snapped back into his usual glower and he returned his attention to Kuwabara, “I held Keiko hostage for the two Great Treasures that Yusuke had taken from my companions.”

“I **gave** mine to him!” Kurama protested.

Ignoring Kurama, Hiei continued, “I cut Keiko with the sword Ghost Slayer and I gave Yusuke one chance to defeat me or she would have been a demon slave under my control forever.” He looked to Keiko as he finished, “That is what I did to Keiko, and that is why Yusuke defeated me.”

Keiko’s brown eyes were steady and clear as she nodded slightly, acknowledging the truth of Hiei’s statement.

Hiei and Keiko held the contact for a moment more, before Hiei’s attention turned briefly to Kurama and then locked on Yusuke. “Why Yusuke keeps forgetting that, I do not know.”

“I haven’t forgotten it,” Yusuke muttered.

Hiei snorted.

“Really!” Yusuke protested, “It’s just that...” He looked hopelessly over to Keiko, begging for help.

Keiko sighed in exasperation, “Yusuke, you’re impossible.”

She walked over to him, her movements taking her directly past Hiei, despite Kuwabara’s yelp of protest. With a smile at Yusuke, she slipped her hand into his and turned to Hiei, “Yusuke trusts you.”

Impassive to the remark, Hiei stood there.

“I’ve known Yusuke since we were kids. He doesn’t **think** too well—”

“Hey!”

Keiko silenced Yusuke with a glare, “—but his instincts for people he can trust are never wrong.” She wrinkled her nose, “They’re not all nice people, not like Kuwa-chan—”

“Hey!” This time it was Kuwabara who protested the description.

Keiko’s eyes twinkled at him and refused to change the description, “—they’re not all nice, but if Yusuke trusts them, then I can too – as long as they know I’m a friend of Yusuke’s.” Disentangling her hand from Yusuke’s, she moved forward again, stopping in front of Hiei.

“I remember what you did to me,” she said softly, “and I can’t ever forget. But Yusuke trusts you, and so I forgive.” She smiled, “You’re not a tame demon, but I’ll be your friend.”

Hiei disappeared.

“Off again,” Kurama remarked lightly. He gazed fondly at the empty air before turning to those left, “Keiko, you are an extraordinary woman.”

Keiko smiled at him, “I grew up friends with Yusuke – I have to be.”

Yusuke was caught in between confusion and glowering. “What did you mean, Keiko?”

“About the people you know?”

“Yeah.”

Keiko shrugged, “Gunji, Hiroyuki, Jun...” She glared at Yusuke, “You really think I could be worried about Hiei after you’ve introduced me to scum like those guys?”

“Uh...” Yusuke squirmed a bit. Okay, Jun did get too rough with the girls, and Gunji hated just about everything, and Hiroyuki could be a loud-mouth asshole with a wide destructive streak when he was drunk, which was just about all the time, but they were also a hell of a lot of fun to hang out with sometimes. After he’d defeated them, of course. They’d have never given him the time of day if he hadn’t roughed them up first. Okay, they were scum, but Yusuke didn’t mind being with them. No bartender ever bothered him about his age when he went with Gunji. And Jun had some connections...

“Amotowa Jun?” Kuwabara breathed out, his eyes going wide. He turned a furious glare at Yusuke, “And you **introduced** Keiko-chan to him??? Urameshi, are you out of your mind? He’s raped twelve women and brags about it! The only reason he’s not in jail are his mob buddies!”

“Hey!” Yusuke bristled at the reference to the mob. His mom had some good friends in common with Jun. Not that she liked Jun any better than Keiko did.

Keiko placed her hand on Kuwabara’s arm again as the bigger youth started to charge forward angrily. “Kuwa-chan. It’s okay. Jun won’t hurt me. He won’t cross Yusuke.”

“Damn straight, he won’t,” Yusuke agreed.

“That’s not...!” Kuwabara started to bluster and then he deflated suddenly, looking tired. “Damn you, Urameshi. You dance with the devils and the angels together and still I follow.”

“Don’t you mean, dance with demons and goddesses?” Kurama interjected, his green eyes flashing mischievously, as he grinned at Botan.

The Goddess stuck her tongue out at the Spirit Fox, “Yusuke hasn’t danced with me.”

“Well, then, I think we need a party. That has to be remedied,” Kurama laughed.

“Not at my dojo,” Genkai stated in a rather mild tone. She put her pipe back in her mouth and glanced around the group thoughtfully.

Kuwabara shook his head, not deterred by Kurama’s diversion. “Hiei is a dark demon with an aura and bloody past that makes me shiver every time I see him. But even he is not as truly evil as Takatori Gunji.” His troubled gaze rested on the delicate figure of the girl that stood next to him, “Keiko-chan...”

After a longish pause, Keiko prompted him gently to go on.

Kuwabara swallowed, “Keiko-chan, I would defend you to the death if you needed it. But... are you really okay with what Hiei did to you?”

Keiko glanced out to the trees, her eyes resting on one tall pine tree as she opened and closed her left hand absently. “Yes.” Her assent was quiet. She looked back at Kuwabara and her voice gained strength, “Yes, I’m fine. Hiei... I was only a pawn in the game. And...” she trailed off for a moment before resuming with a quirk of a smile, “And Yusuke defeated Hiei.”

There was a gasp from across the way and the group by the dojo looked over to see Yukina, Shizuru, and Shinka all standing together. Yukina’s hand was at her mouth.

“Yukina-san!” Kuwabara started to go to her, then hesitated and stayed next to Keiko, his eyes troubled and split between needs.

Yukina lowered her hand and her soft red eyes locked onto Yusuke, “You defeated Hiei?” There was enough emphasis on the first and last words to make her meaning that of disbelief rather than concern.

Yusuke frowned and complained, “Why does everybody have such a damn hard time believing that?! Yes, I defeated Hiei!”

Botan giggled. Yusuke glared at her.

“Botan and Kurama were both there if you don’t believe me! Hiei and I were fighting, and he’d pretty much cleaned the floor with me when I pulled a sneak attack reflecting the rei gun off the Mirror of Utter Dark. Hiei wasn’t expecting it from behind after he’d dodged, and I got him in just the right position for the reflected hit.” Yusuke explained the fight as much for Kuwabara’s benefit as Yukina’s. He never had told Kuwabara about some of the missions he’d done for Koenma when Kuwabara wasn’t with him.

Yukina blinked and looked over at Kurama, who nodded. She turned back to Yusuke, “I’m sorry, Yusuke-san. I didn’t mean to doubt you. I know you defeated those sent against you by my captors. I just hadn’t realized...” She shrugged delicately, “Hiei is a very powerful demon. You were very brave to have fought him.”

“Heh,” Yusuke puffed up under the praise, “It was nothing.”

“Nothing?” Keiko asked indignantly.

“Er, I mean after fighting Hiei, no monster seems too much,” Yusuke backpedaled.

Kurama laughed lightly and with delight, "Well, that's certainly true." With his delight, he held Yusuke's gaze to him for a long happy moment.

When Kurama's eyes turned in a different direction, Yusuke was lost for a moment, still seeing the memory of a short spiky demon within the bright green eyes of a red-haired fox spirit. Hiei was not there physically... but in Kurama, he was always there. Looking at Kurama, Yusuke could also see Hiei. Yusuke's heart turned inside out for a moment and he reached out to Keiko, holding her hand and wondering if he could ever hold her as Kurama did Hiei. Keiko drew in a breath, looking frightened, but left her hand in his, and the edges of her mouth twitched up in a tremulous happy smile.

"Is it time for dinner, already?" Kurama was asking the girls.

Shizuru snorted, "Hardly. All the yelling sounded more interesting than watching those two go through Genkai's cooking books and oooing over recipes." She jabbed her cigarette towards Yukina and Shinka.

"We're sorry if it was private," Yukina apologized.

"No, we're not," Shinka grinned. "It did sound interesting over here." She glanced over to Genkai, "No dance? Why not – you used to enjoy dances."

Genkai's gaze moved to the building they were standing next to, "I like my dojo intact, thank you."

Shinka's eyebrows raised at the statement, and she in turn looked from the buildings to the gathering of youths and ghosts around them.

Shizuru nodded, "Different energies released." She didn't expand on the statement but inhaled through her cigarette and released the smoke in a floating trail.

Raising her hands, Shinka started to gesture through the air but paused and looked to Genkai, "May I?"

The martial arts master nodded her permission and Shinka continued with a quick incantation. When she was done, there was a globe of light under her hands with multi-colored lightning trails darting within. Shizuru drew near to look into it, a confident nod confirming her original thoughts. Kurama also went to look, though the very human mysticism was foreign to his experiences in the spirit realms.

"Oh, I see," Shinka dismissed the globe with another wave. "What a clever setup, to direct uncontrolled rei release into the protection wards."

"A necessary one," Genkai depreciated the comment even as she looked pleased at the remark.

"But a dance with this group," Shinka continued thoughtfully, "would pretty much be completely uncontrolled rei release and of so many different types that it would take a rework of the wards to contain it."

"And letting it through would draw unwanted attention." Kurama finished the idea. The basic concept was a keystone of the otherworld.

Shinka's glance went to Kurama and she blushed. Kurama noticed the direction of her thoughts and passed the glance onto Genkai, who snorted with amusement. "Uncontrolled rei release, of any type, is more devastating in the Makai than it ever could be in our world. Hiei's rei is never uncontrolled, and spirit foxes have their own protection. I do not spend time worrying about something that's not a problem."

"And something that **is** a problem?" Kuwabara asked softly but without any hint in his voice that he expected an answer. Turning from the group, he walked away.

"Kazuma-kun..." Yukina hesitated for a moment and then ran after the tall human.

"What the hell is the matter with him?" Yusuke fumed, aware that he was at the core of his friend's sad mood but unable to figure out why. He looked over to his primary interpreter, Kurama, but the fox-human only shrugged, not understanding it either, and by the look on his face, not particularly interested. *It's only Hiei that Kurama struggles to understand... and shares with me.* The 600-odd-years-old kitsune had Yusuke's attention again, as he was reminded of the span of difference in their ages and the very inhumanity of the spirit within. And how alike they were. *I lived fourteen years in the*

human world, Yusuke mused, *and never knew what a friend was until I died*. As they had stood on top of the hospital building and Kurama talked about his life and reasons for stealing the Mirror of Utter Darkness, Yusuke had for the first time in his life felt a connection with another person. Something that said, 'I am not alone' and made him actually **want** to reach out. Keiko had always been with him, so much a part of his life that he knew he never needed to reach out to have her there, taken for granted as much as his mother. But these friends he'd made in the last year... *Why is Kuwabara upset?*

Keiko shook her head sadly and tugged her hand out of Yusuke's. "Never mind, Yusuke. Just leave him alone for now."

Keiko knows. Yusuke's mouth turned down in a frown as he struggled to figure it out.

Botan came up to them and gave Keiko a brief hug before leading her away, "Now tell me what you remember about Hiei—" their voices trailed off into the distance.

Genkai shook out her pipe. "Okay, Yusuke, back to training. You've stalled long enough."
"Stalled?!!"

"You were the one who came to me this week and said you wanted training." Genkai dispassionately looked the youth over. "I have many things to do and I put them all off for your training at your request. Yusuke, you are the heir to my power and techniques. And you **will** learn them before I die. However, I'd also like you to learn them before **you** die in one of your otherworld missions." She turned her back to Yusuke and walked into the dojo.

Yusuke stared after her for a long moment before he sighed and followed her.

Shinka and Shizuru glanced at each other and then turned their combined focus on Kurama.

"What?"

"Home-grown vegetables..." Shizuru grabbed one arm and Shinka another and together they hauled the fox-human to the kitchen with them.

"Last night was your turn."

"And we're taking turns now?"

"When I only have a few days with you, my uncommon fox, all the days and all the nights are mine."

Kurama tilted his head back and growled in a deep rumble as a slightly rough tongue licked up his neck and fiery hands stroked his thighs. Then both withdrew and Kurama yipped a little before opening his eyes.

Hiei was standing with his back to him, looking out the window as he drew off his cape, boots, and pants. Then he carefully folded them and placed them in a tidy little stack in the corner.

Kurama's growl was deeper, seeing his mate revealed thus before him. Then a wicked gleam entered his eyes and he spoke in human terms, "And tonight, no one will hear you scream."

Hiei turned around, his red eyes expressing surprise before the corners of his mouth quirked upwards and he advanced on the fox spirit. "You are the one who is going to scream, Kurama. That I promise."

"Yum," Kurama licked his lips, "A promise from Hiei...." He dropped his jaw in a feral grin, teeth gleaming bright. "And what are you waiting for, dear demon?"

Without another word, Hiei pounced.

For a long time, the only sounds were of skin against skin and other associated noises. Kurama was determined to make his demon work at fulfilling the promise. Eventually, the relative silence was broken as Hiei started to speak, in low, purring tones that contained the essence of honey and sugar crystals, rough and sweet while melting upon their recipient.

"Skin of mixed delight, smooth like a human, tasting of fox." Hiei ran his tongue across the expanse of leg from ankle to inner thigh, eliciting a moan but no more.

"Hair of fox, color of riches." Hiei's tongue and mouth moved upwards from the thighs and his fingers played with the tangles of rough fur found there. The glare Kurama had been thinking about

giving him for bringing up the color of his fur was lost in a melting of green eyes at Hiei's actions. He almost cried out, but arched his back and let a tear escape instead.

"The adventurer will travel over many plains and mountains, exploring each, learning his way as he advances to his destination." Hiei purred as his fingers spread out over Kurama's chest, drifting over the ribs and muscles and tracing out patterns in seemly random manner yet Kurama's nerves were on fire and his excitement spiraled ever deeper, proving that Hiei's movements were not so random.

"As the sea possesses hidden depths, so does soul I love." Face down upon the mat, Kurama could not see Hiei, yet he heard the whisper of sound that stroked the bond they shared and his heart reverberated with it. He muffled his involuntary cries within the pillow and pushed his back upward, seeking a more solid touch to the feathery touches that were driving him mad. A chuckle of delight told him how nearly he'd lost it, but there was a certain point where the pleasure was the object of the game, rather than winning a challenge. And that point was nearing soon.

The poet within Hiei continued to stroke with words as well as with body and at a point that was not too soon and not too late but perfectly at the peak of the spiral of delight, the promise was kept and Kurama cried out his pleasure.

The scream reverberated through the building and Yusuke was awake and running into the hall before the echoes died away, his fist glowing and his senses looking for the danger. Kuwabara was beside him on the instant, rei sword bright and his expression grim. The two promised deathly retribution for that which had harmed their friend.

"Kurama!"

The door became splinters and melted away with the combined force of rei sword and gun.

Hiei faced them, a black fire dripping across his bare body and a greenish-black flame of the fire held in his hand. He stared at them for a moment while they stared at him. Then the fire around Hiei disappeared and he turned from them and looked downward. "And no one will hear you scream?" Hiei's voice dripped sarcasm. "Kurama-baka; you said you were taking care of the barrier tonight."

As the boys stared at the naked, shiny, exposed, and obviously-not-in-any-danger body of their friend, Kurama's eyes blinked open, not focusing very well but expressing a contentment and satisfaction they'd never seen before.

"Barrier?" Kurama's voice was slow and almost purring, it was so full of cream, "I blocked the bond. You always do the barrier."

The black fire burst out around Hiei again as he raised his hand to his face, covering his eyes as he leaned into it without saying anything.

"Well, he **did** block the bond."

A cheerful and giggling voice behind him brought Yusuke back to a sort of awareness and he wrenched his eyes off the extraordinary view of a Kurama replete with sex. Behind him and Kuwabara was the rest of the group. All six females. All of whom were crowding in to get a look. Closest and smallest, Shinka had wormed her way to the front and was peering around Yusuke.

"Oh my!" Shinka's voice was full of admiration and delight.

Shizuru crowded her way between the boys. "Now **that** is a sight actually worth exclaiming about," she remarked dryly. "I hope it was good as it sounded."

"Better," Kurama replied with a lazy smile, not moving but for his eyelids which dipped down in satisfaction. His body was still sprawled across the mat, arms to his side, legs spread apart, with one knee bent outwards. The rich red locks were in artful disarray, spread on the mat behind him with some stray strands across his face and neck and chest. His smooth skin glistened with sweat everywhere, and a slight blue fire danced upon the droplets, barely visible but for rei vision. A musky odor wafted through the room, not unpleasant, and hinting of a richness within.

Yusuke gulped at the sound and the sight and the smell and... Yusuke gulped again and he glanced wildly around, trying to hide his own growing reaction. He avoided Keiko's gaze but stopped and stared in surprise at the interested gaze of a Goddess.

Botan blushed faintly but raised her chin defiantly, also raising the oar she sat upon a few inches to get a better view inside the room.

“Botan...” Yusuke’s voice squeaked.

The Goddess shrugged, “There’s only so much avoiding it that one can do, and, well,” Botan twitched the sleeves on her kimono, “I **am** on vacation...”

“Genkai?” Yusuke couldn’t help it. He’d never think of his elderly martial arts teacher in the same way again...

Genkai’s snort was amused, “Boy, just because I’m too old to bear any more children doesn’t mean that I can’t appreciate the acts that make them.” Her gaze wasn’t on the supple figure laying on the floor, but was rather fixed in admiration on the strongly muscled figure standing to one side. Hiei looked like a dark marble statue of the Greeks, caught in a moment of glory. Genkai gaze wasn’t skirting any areas of the body. “Actually, as one ages, one tends to appreciate more...”

Yusuke couldn’t help it, his gaze had followed Genkai’s and now he was staring...

Kuwabara finally recovered his voice. He pointed his sword at Hiei, “Cover yourself, for god’s sake!”

Hiei dropped his hand from his face and he looked up in astonishment, “What?”

“There are women present – don’t you have any sense of modesty!?”

“Modesty?” Hiei glanced at the remains of the door to their room and his flame turned from a black fire to dark green. “You **dare** to challenge me?” He advanced on Kuwabara.

“Uh...” Kuwabara retreated before the glowering Hiei.

“If you were in the shower and Yukina screamed, would you stop for your modesty?”

“Uh...”

A purple glow brightened, attracting all eyes to the Jagan as it opened wide, the purple color spilling out into the flame surrounding Hiei and shrouding him at the same time as illuminating all the shadows. A weight of heaven and earth and the sky and the ocean bent upon the minds of all who stood there. They were exposed, naked before the Jagan as the bearer’s body was before them. “ANSWER ME!!!!”

Kuwabara straightened to his full height, staring Hiei steadily in his eyes, “No, I wouldn’t.”

Hiei snorted and though the purple glow didn’t fade, the weight in the room lessened.

Kuwabara hunched his shoulders, “But if there was no danger, I’d go back to my room and put something on immediately.”

With a roar, Hiei launched forward. Kuwabara’s rei sword barely activated in time to block the green-flamed sword and they traded blows there within the hallway.

“Now **that**, I’d like to see,” Yukina sighed. Then clapped her hands over her mouth as Shinka giggled. “Oh, I didn’t mean to say that out loud...”

Though the fight was between Hiei and Kuwabara, most of the eyes in the group followed Hiei as the well-muscled, bare fighter presented a spectacular sight. His upper body muscles rippled and flowed with every dodge, every lunge, every block. His legs were equally as muscled and a sight they didn’t see as often. The Greek statue come to life, perfectly proportioned and glorious. Yet he was not a statue as the sparks of his anger and fury flowed out of him, creating a dripping dark-green glow around him. He was Hiei.

With another block and a leap, Hiei and Kuwabara moved outside the building. The group followed automatically, as truly caught as if they’d been gathered in a net. Outside, the fight was even more spectacular. Lit by no lights except their own, Hiei was bathed in green and purple and Kuwabara in gold. The trees around them flickered and shaded as the bodies floated by them.

There was a long regretful sigh from one of the group, “I suppose this means I’m not getting him back in bed tonight.”

Several eyes turned to Kurama in various expressions of amusement and disbelief. Kurama adjusted the sheet over his shoulder and shrugged, “We weren’t done.”

Yusuke, whom Kurama was standing next to, gulped and his eyes went round. Kurama's sheet was gathered about him but not tucked in tightly, revealing a mostly bare chest, and leaving folds and tantalizing glimpses of rosy skin in some places, while other areas clung to a previously damp body, and the sheet wasn't that thick... And it did nothing to mask the smell. The wondrous aroma of musk and roses and electricity and fire...

"Nice sheet," Shinka remarked, grinning.

Kurama grinned back, "If I walked out here as I was, no one would be able to watch the fight."

Yukina, her eyes not leaving a tall orange-haired fighter, snorted, sounding remarkably like her brother, "You're not that special, Kitsune."

Kurama's green eyes sparkled at the challenge. "Ice Maiden, though I am not fire, I think it would not take so much to make you melt."

"Foxes have tried to make their way up the mountain before. All have failed." Yukina didn't even glance in Kurama's direction as she spoke in the same gentle tones she always used. "I prefer humans."

"But humans are—" Kurama started to answer, when a blast of heat and fire from the combatants brought all attention to them, cutting him off. Yellow and green flames licked around the locked swords of the fighters and then burst explosively. Kuwabara's pyjamas turned to ash and fell off him. The human fighter didn't even notice as he threw back the shorter fighter's attack and then had to fall back himself under a strong return.

Kurama's eyes widened, "Yukina, my dear, I've wronged you." His gaze drifted over the human youth in the prime of his growth. As perfectly proportioned as Hiei, but taller and broader, with promise of more to come. Kurama's eyes narrowed again as he studied the movements of the fighter, not so sure and smooth as Hiei's darting attacks and evasions, but with an innate grace of a dancer-in-training. A dancer, or a horseman, with the balance to ride the wild bronco and tame it fierce. "I bet Kuwabara would hunt well..." Kurama's feral grin was back on his face, the fox sizing up the prey.

The air around the group dropped ten degrees and icicles formed on Kurama's sheet as he flinched with a yelp. Yukina's soft red eyes were glowing, "Kitsune Youko, this prey is not for you."

The fox spirit turned to face the ice maiden, a grin splitting his face. "It would be a fun dance..."

"Kazuma is **mine**, kitsune. And you would do well to remember that fact."

"Ah," Kurama brushed the icicles off his sheet with a casual gesture, "but you have not claimed him yet, my dear. That leaves him open prey." His green eyes sparkled, "And even if you had, it doesn't forgo the possibility of a dance with others."

"Just because the hunt is not yet over, does not give you territorial rights on another's ground. My mark is upon Kazuma and no other's will be."

Yusuke made a strangled sound, his face burning red as he glanced from the fighters on the grounds to the two that were fighting just as surely with words. "But, but... Kurama..." His disbelief finally pried itself loose, "KUWABARA???"

Kurama glanced away from the delightful spar he was having with the ice maiden and regarded Yusuke's disbelieving face with amusement.

The cold air swirling around the group solidified on Yusuke, who yelped painfully. "Er, no, Yukina... I'm sorry... I didn't mean... Ah, it's just that Kuwabara..." he trailed off helplessly.

"Honestly, Yusuke!" Keiko shot him a disgusted look, "Just because you can't imagine it..." She looked over at the fighters and her mouth tugged upwards, "I think Yukina is very wise in her choice." A brown eye slanted at the fox in his sheet, "I wouldn't dream of poaching, though. I can admire things that don't belong to me."

The other females in the group agreed with varying degrees of amusement and sincerity. Shizuru was the lone exception as she shook her head and announced that Yukina was welcome to her brother if she wanted him but she didn't know why.

Yukina returned the base temperature around the group to normal with a sweet smile. She prodded Yusuke with one last rejoinder, "At least the kitsune knows what to appreciate!" then she stepped forward a pace towards the fighters so that her back was to both Yusuke and Kurama.

The temperature around the group was normal, however, the two that had incurred Yukina's wrath were still shivering in their ice pockets. Kurama moved closer to Yusuke and leaned against him, sharing warmth and brushing icicles off while laughing softly. "That was more fun than I've had in centuries." He regarded the turquoise-haired ice maiden fondly. "I should have guessed that Hiei's sister would have more fire in her than was immediately obvious."

Yusuke was still shivering but he wasn't sure anymore if it was from cold or heat, as his body blazed where Kurama was pressing against him. Fire. Roses and silken skin and a sheet that barely covered, and sparkling green eyes and that scent... He shivered.

Kurama looked closer at Yusuke and frowned as he noticed the slightly blue cast to his skin. He wrapped his arms tighter around Yusuke and considered saying something to Yukina. Before he could do so, however, around them was a gust of warm air that swirled around them and entered in, removing the chill and bringing warm baths to mind. Among other things. Kurama smiled as he looked out to where Hiei was swinging his sword down at Kuwabara.

"Hiei-san!" Yukina protested, "I wasn't finished punishing them yet!!"

Yusuke blinked, "Hiei?"

Genkai regarded the ice maiden, "You are a very strong wielder of your ki."

"They weren't in any danger, yet." Yukina turned to regard Kurama with soft red eyes, "Were you?"

Kurama shrugged, "I wasn't." He snuggled in a little closer to Yusuke, bringing his arm around the youth's chest, "However, this one is more mortal than I."

Yukina's hand flew to her mouth in dismay, "Oh, Yusuke-san! I'm so sorry." She bowed to him, her pale cheeks rosy, "I forgot. Please accept my apologies."

"Er, no problem..." Yusuke was rather uncomfortable with the attention, particular with Kurama so close to him... though he didn't really want to say anything about that... but Keiko was among those staring... Not that Keiko looked like there was anything wrong. There wasn't anything wrong, actually. This was okay, to have Kurama holding him to share the warmth – it didn't mean anything, not like it did when...

"Hiei-san," Yukina made a bow out towards the fighters, "Thank you."

"Hiei?" Yusuke wondered again.

Kurama drew a little away from Yusuke and looked questioningly down at Yusuke.

Through his bafflement, Yusuke watched the fight for a moment before phrasing his question with the situation, "That warm air was Hiei?"

"Yes, it was." Kurama also looked to where Hiei and Kuwabara were locked in not-so-mortal combat, and his mouth dropped open in a grin as he finally realized what had Yusuke so puzzled.

The others realized it too. Botan giggled, "Hiei is a Jaganshi, Yusuke – clairvoyance is part of his nature. He doesn't have to be somewhere to watch what is happening there." Her expression wavered between concern and affection as she continued, "That first time we encountered him – he made your ki-meter go off through the use of his jagan. He is a strong Jaganshi."

"But he's fighting right now."

Keiko looked out at the fighter and rubbed her hands together, "Hiei... can concentrate on other things while fighting." Her voice wavered as she spoke.

"Keiko-san?" "Keiko?" Yukina and Botan both moved closer to the human girl.

With a shake of her head, Keiko indicated she was fine. "When you were fighting Hiei... that time... He was also holding back Ghost Slayer on me."

"Oh!" Kurama burst out, disentangling himself from the youth and moving slightly away from Yusuke as his gaze flicked to the fighters, "That's why..." his voice trailed off.

Botan frowned, "Holding back?"

Keiko shivered again, her right hand rubbing her left as her face reflected her pain. Yusuke shook off his paralysis and walked over to her, hugging her as Kurama had just held him. Keiko gratefully leaned into him. "Ghost Slayer... It wanted me. It would have made me a youko slave... but Hiei was holding it back, keeping it from taking me too soon." Her voice was bare of expression as she explained, "Yusuke had to have something to fight for..."

Yusuke's arms tightened around Keiko as he held her close. *Keiko...* He looked out to where Hiei fought Kuwabara and he felt his anger of the first time raise up within him again. He remembered... Yusuke shook his head. The fight was over. He had won. And Keiko was safe again.

"It's a good thing Kaz-chan can't concentrate on more than one thing," Shinka remarked lightly.

Genkai snorted, "Otherwise, this fight would now be more than just a lesson."

Keiko laughed, "I wouldn't have mentioned that if Kuwa-chan could have heard."

Yusuke opened his mouth and then closed it again without actually saying anything. He wasn't actually sure what he would have said. The girls were right... Kuwabara would have taken Hiei apart, or tried to, if he'd heard that. But... but **Yusuke** was Keiko's... .. Yusuke looked down at the brown-haired girl within his arms. ...*boyfriend*? His mind winced away from the definition even as he thought it. It sounded so... definite. And he was definite. But...

There was a sad smile on her lips as the Goddess of the River Death looked out at the fighters, "Kazuma Kuwabara is one who would right all wrongs." The words were unspoken, but still heard by the group, that he was also one who would die trying. And that the Goddess would not be mistaken.

Yusuke blinked. *Wrongs?* Why should Kuwabara care so much about others that weren't part of his group? His own gang, yes – the guys had given their loyalty to Kuwabara, so he would repay them in kind. And the cat... well, that was just Kuwabara. But... Yusuke remembered the look on Kuwabara's face as he had committed himself to going to fight against demons in their realm, without knowing anything about it. And the adoring look on Botan's face as she'd watched after the human.

Distracted, Yusuke glanced from Botan to Yukina, wondering if there had been any tension there. But Kuwabara was so convinced that Yukina was his future partner, with that 'red string of destiny' nonsense... He'd flirted with Botan before, but after Yukina... there had been no other girls since Yukina.

How would it feel? To be that sure? When Yusuke thought of the future... He shied away from the thought and resolutely turned his attention back to the fight.

The women, and Kurama too, had been continuing a conversation while Yusuke's thoughts were elsewhere. Apparently, they'd turned from Kuwabara to Hiei in the discussion.

"It's rather odd to actually be **watching** Hiei in a fight," Botan remarked.

Kurama laughed, "Hiei is in sparring mode." Kurama's delight was obvious, "I love it when he slows down to just barely above the speed of his sparring partner, so we can see him. Graceful and sure, with power contained and oh, so strong." The fox spirit growled hungrily.

"Randy fox – didn't you just get yours?" Shizuru raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

Kurama's grin just widened.

Genkai snorted, "He's training, not sparring."

Huh? Kurama's eyebrows snapped down in a frown, but he made no other sign of his displeasure. Or he thought he hadn't. His estimation of the human martial artist rose as a slight golden light appeared around Genkai's hands in response to his change of mood. It was so faint as to be barely noticeable, but it was there as she'd sensed a threat.

Genkai regarded Kurama calmly, as if she hadn't readied her defenses, "When Hiei is simply sparring with Kazuma, their fights are littered with insults and verbal jabs. What Hiei is doing right now is training – they are silent and Kazuma is so focused on Hiei that he hasn't even noticed us."

Kurama returned his full attention to the fighters on the ground. Their battle had ranged throughout the courtyard but was staying basically in front of the house where they were gathered. And it was due only to Hiei's direction of the fight. Kuwabara's attention was as totally on Hiei as Genkai

had indicated. And his moves responded to Hiei's... and then imitated. Kurama's gaze went from the fighters to the old human martial artist.

The human regarded him indifferently, though her power still hovered at the edges, ready if she needed to call it. "Hiei and I are trainers to our students. You are a friend to them."

Our students? Kurama's eyes narrowed as he studied the fighters again.

They came together for more blows, then separated again. Kuwabara's sides were heaving as the sweat poured down his body. Hiei's fire flickered but he barely breathed. Suddenly, Hiei's dark-green sword flared and disappeared from his hands. Kuwabara backed off, his golden sword blocking across his body as he waited for Hiei's move.

Hiei's move... was to change forms. The purple energy that had been swirling around him pulled close and there was the heavy feeling in the air as Hiei's skin shaded into green and more purple eyes started appearing all over his body. His hair flickered and waved around his head and then settled into two horn-like tufts.

Kuwabara gulped, his sword wavering. Then he straightened and his golden sword flared bright, spiraling up into the sky until the whole glade lit with its brightness. The pose held for a moment before the spiral of light collapsed down, condensing as it fell into Kuwabara and lighting him with a golden glow.

From the onlookers, there were inhalations of admiration as the rugged and rough human took on the appearance of a golden metal god with the power of his rei worn around him.

Kurama's gaze took in every detail of Hiei as the short demon watched the human. The demon's mouth had curved up slightly and his head nodded downwards in a bare motion of approval. *He is more than merely teaching him for Yusuke's sake. That is an instructor's approval more than a companion's. Hiei has truly taken the human as a student. How did I miss that?*

But even as he wondered, Kurama knew the answer. Compared with Yusuke, Kazuma Kuwabara was but a shadow. The human was nothing to Kurama's interest, and so he paid him little thought. But somehow the clumsy fighter had attracted Hiei's attention. Kurama's gaze flicked to Hiei's sister and then to the human teenager she had claimed. It was reasonable... Except that he didn't think that that was the answer. Hiei had, as he always did, created another mystery. *I knew I would eventually take a mate. I hadn't expected my mate to be so unknown to me.* It was disquieting, how much of Hiei he did not know. Disquieting... and fascinating. Somehow, Kurama didn't think that a known mate would be nearly as interesting as this fireball of his. Despite 600 years of expectations, he was well pleased with what he'd finally gotten for a mate.

From the golden and green bodies, there was an explosion of energy in the field as they matched this time with direct blows and fists of energy rather than distances of air and swords.

Yusuke's mouth dropped open as he watched them, knowing that somehow in that moment, Kuwabara had gone beyond him. In disbelief, he moved away from Keiko, closer to the fight.

"Yusuke."

Kurama's rich voice drew him back and turned him to face the green-eyed fox, who was looking at him with smiling pride, "You don't have to learn that – it's what you already do. You wear your ki within, and it is already in your every action."

His heart swelled at the approval in that beautiful face. Yusuke turned automatically, though, to look to another...

Genkai snorted, "Control, boy. It's control that **you** have to learn."

With a nod, Yusuke accepted his teacher's word and returned his attention to the fight again, content that Kuwabara, though now trained in that maneuver, wasn't as good as he was naturally.

As Yusuke's attention focused on the fight as a fight, and wasn't distracted, well, mostly wasn't distracted, by Kurama or Keiko, he was struck again by Hiei's speed and beauty in a fight. Hiei's speed had always been the most formidable thing while fighting him. That first time... Hiei had taunted him mercilessly, blurring faster than Yusuke could watch; until he concentrated. When Yusuke stopped

trying to **look** and instead simply let himself **know**, he could follow Hiei without a problem. It had taken Hiei by surprise, earning the demon his first blow in the fight.

And even then, he was playing still. Yusuke grimaced as he recalled the knowledge that the demon had looked on him as nothing worth more than a temporary diversion. Why, even at his 'speediest' in the fight, he hadn't been moving half as fast as he was while fighting... training... Kuwabara now. The only time Hiei had moved to full speed was when Kurama had intervened, taking a sword through his chest that had been meant for Yusuke. The pain of it closed Yusuke's eyes for a moment. *I can stand anything that happens to me, but when it's my friends... it's not right when it's my friends.* Kurama, Keiko, Kuwabara... and Hiei. His enemy that had become his friend. Somehow.

'Something to fight for.' Hiei had understood what Yusuke had needed from the beginning. Koenma still didn't. Yusuke worked for Koenma because it was something to do, but he didn't really care much about the assignments themselves. It was the challenge in using his powers and the delight in being with his friends that made him accept that which Koenma sent him. Everybody assumed he worked for Koenma, but really, Yusuke had never said he did. Koenma... Yusuke didn't really know much about the little God. Even after a year of talking with a God, and doing work for him, he didn't know him. And that made Yusuke uneasy when he thought about it. *A toddler in form, but one who Hiei...* He still didn't know what it was between Hiei and Koenma. There was anger there. Heaps and heaps of anger. But...

As Yusuke watched the fight, Hiei dodged backwards around a tree at the last possible second and Kuwabara who had been pressing him close slammed straight into it. Hiei's return attack was from the side as he stepped back around. Kuwabara went down under the onslaught of quick fists, but his golden shield of ki power kept him safe until he could stand again.

Yusuke noted that Hiei carefully kept his fists closed. In that Jaganshi form of his, his talons were wicked and sharp. But he didn't use all of his powers when fighting Kuwabara. As he hadn't when fighting Yusuke. *If I hadn't tricked him, I would have lost.* But that was true of so many opponents that Yusuke fought – it wasn't always sheer power that won Yusuke the fight, but combinations of many things. In the end, all his opponents went down. As Hiei had, for threatening Keiko.

Something about his last several thoughts bothered Yusuke. He couldn't pinpoint it, but it was there. In the back of his mind, hovering at the edges. *As Hiei hovers...* Hiei... Yusuke blinked. Hiei was a Jaganshi. He still didn't know what that was, entirely, but... Yusuke's eyes narrowed as he watched the demon he'd called a friend. A rage was starting to burn deep within him. *He didn't...* Yusuke didn't want to believe it. And yet, the evidence... Evidence. With a face still as death and his emotions colder than the ice sheet Yukina had covered him with, Yusuke brought up his hand and fired off a rei bolt faster than human eyes could follow.

The bolt slashed through the dark and pierced the air where the Jaganshi Master had been standing a moment before. With his back to the bolt. With his attention on Kuwabara whom he had been fighting. With his purple eyes in his back following the movement of the bolt and widening as they looked beyond to Yusuke.

The demon twisted around in the air and came to the ground facing Yusuke with a surprised look on his face. Kuwabara stood beside him, his own face bewildered, "Urameshi, what was that?"

"You fucking bastard..." Yusuke ignored his friend as he concentrated on the demon. "You *knew* my rei bolt was behind you!"

Hiei's eyes, all of them, widened. His two normal red ones closed for a moment in what Yusuke would have thought before was 'pain,' but all the other purple ones across his body were still staring at the human youth. All of them. Eyes that could see. Eyes that were watching. Eyes in his back that could see things behind him. *"Hiei is a Jaganshi."* Yusuke's anger burned hotter than Hiei's flames.

"You BASTARD!!!!!!!" Yusuke launched himself at the demon, intent on only one thing: winning the fight that he knew now he hadn't won a year ago.

End part two