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- Based on the facts from anime eps 1-25. Divergent storyline from that point.

Lessons of Another World

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completed: February 1, 2000

(“Cloak of Darkness” - revised...)

“Damn all bureaucrats!!” Koenma scowled at a document and threw it down on his desk, “I don’t have time to deal with these petty requests!” He turned a glare on George, who shrank back.

“I’m sorry, Koenma-sama! But nobody else would take it.”

Koenma snorted. He reached for the document again, put it on top of a stack of other documents, and handed the entire group to George. “Take them to --- . I’m giving him temporary access, but be sure and let him know that I’m going to review each and every one of those when this emergency is over.”

“But Koenma-sama, it will take weeks to review each case!”

Koenma shrugged, “I told you to tell him that, I didn’t say that’s what I was going to do.”

George stared, wide-eyed and respectful.

The door opened, showing five demons standing there.

“Ah, here at last,” Koenma said, waving a hand to send George on his way. “Come in, Hiei – close the door behind you.”

“Sire!” Three of the guards instantly objected. Hiei bared his fangs in what would have been a smile on anybody else.

“I said OUT!” Koenma stood up and yelled. The three who had objected scurried away, the one that hadn’t spoken remained. Koenma eyed the last one.

“Your safety is my responsibility,” the nondescript demon in business clothes reminded Koenma.

Koenma shook his head, “My safety is my own responsibility. Dad isn’t here, and I’m telling you to leave.” He glanced at the short demon who had sauntered into the room, “And take his wards with you.”

The guard stiffened. Koenma glared. The guard obeyed.

As the demon reluctantly left, Hiei watched impassively. When the door was closed, he glanced at Koenma, “A job for Yusuke?”

“It will be,” Koenma sighed and sat down again. “Look, Hiei, I need to know everything you have on dimension traveling, particularly one where the, uhh...” he picked up a piece of paper and studied it for a moment, “the Quala live.”

Hiei snorted, “Find it out yourself.”

Koenma rolled his eyes, “When I send Yusuke to deal with this, he’s going to need to know what he’s getting into. It’s to your advantage as part of the group to give me all the information you have.”

Hiei glared at Koenma. The room started to smoke. “Don’t even think that you can manipulate me using Yusuke!”

“Why not?” Koenma grinned, “It’s worked so far.”

The rug started to smolder. Several pieces of paper on Koenma’s desk flared up and turned to ashes. Three guards ran back into the room.

“Out!” Koenma yelled.

“But!”

“I said out!” Koenma stood up and a wind started to whip around the room. The three guards backed rapidly out. Koenma glared after them, “George!” The blue oni scurried into the room with only a glance at Hiei. “George – find out who sent me such worthless problems that they were burnt with only a show of rei, and make sure they DON’T do it again!” Koenma sat back down as George swept the ashes off his desk and scurried out again, closing the door behind him. “Now, where were we?” Koenma eyed Hiei.

“I will not help you.”

“Isn’t that what you kept telling Kurama when he was trying to get you to join him?”

The room smoldered again and red eyes sparked as Hiei’s skin shaded green.

Calmly, Koenma took a sheaf of papers from a drawer and placed them on top of his desk, “This situation is this: There’s a power draw active upon the world’s rei.” Koenma watched Hiei’s eyes and knew that the demon was at least listening, “So far, untold numbers of lines have been disrupted, leaving

some areas totally helpless and devastating others with earthquakes and storms as the snapped lines have sparked natural currents. We’ve traced it down to an opening between dimensions that these Quala have created.” He ignored Hiei’s skeptical raised eyebrow. “It obviously needs to be shut down. I’m sending Yusuke just as soon as I figure out how to.” He put down the papers and looked expectantly at Hiei.

Hiei shrugged, “I’ll tell Yusuke he can have a long vacation because you won’t be calling him for awhile. Say, fifty years from now.”

Koenma folded his hands into a triangle and looked at Hiei through them, “Hiei... You dimension hop, I know you do. So, tell me about it.”

Hiei shook his head, “It doesn’t work that way, Koenma. Tell me what I’ll get from it.”

“Reduced jail time.”

“From 300 years to 250? Oo, what a bargain.”

“I’ll let you have a month’s vacation with Kurama.”

Hiei growled and this time the rug did catch on fire, along with everything else in the room except for Koenma’s desk, around which a blue translucent bubble appeared. Koenma looked around the office, “I always did think that rug was ugly.”

The door burst open and seven guards shouldered their way in, protected with wards and armed with glowing weapons.

“**OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!**” A wind whipped through the room, putting the fire out and blowing the guards outside. As the last one tumbled head over tail, the door slammed shut, shaking plaster off the ceiling and ashes from the walls.

“They don’t mind very well,” Hiei remarked.

Koenma glared daggers, reaching up to his pacifier and almost taking it out of his mouth before he sat down again, calmly. He didn’t, however, say anything about Hiei’s comment.

“Look, Koenma-kun,” Hiei snarled, “You don’t use **either** Yusuke or Kurama to manipulate me. I refuse to work for you! Assign Yusuke the task, and then I will assist the group when needed, but I will not do this on a favor-basis!”

“Working under Kurama, you’re starting to sound like a kitsune.”

“If that was supposed to be an insult, it didn’t make it.” Hiei glanced at the papers, “You don’t want to send Yusuke on a task that will require thought.”

In spite of his resolve to keep things sparring, Koenma couldn’t help chuckling at the dig.

“I’m serious on that – I’ve only heard of the Quala a few times in other places, but from all reports, you want to send either a full assault team, a half-dozen -----, a highly trained spy/thief, or a very expert ninja-assassin demon. Not Yusuke and Kuwabara.”

“You’re a spy, Kurama’s a thief. It works.”

Hiei glared, “Under Yusuke’s command. It won’t work.”

Koenma opened his mouth to issue another barb but a loud clanking sound drew their attention to an old-fashioned tube built into the wall that rattled before a message container dropped with a thump in the bin below. With a sigh, Koenma got up to retrieve it. Sitting down again at his desk, he took out the paper inside and read it. After a moment of frowning at the first few lines, he looked up at Hiei, “I’ve got to take care of this. So, cutting this short, I’m sending Yusuke becau—”

“A moment,” Hiei held up a hand to stop Koenma and then his jagan started to glow a very bright purple. Black flames dripped off his upheld hand, “With your permission?”

Koenma threw the now empty capsule against the wall, “**MY OFFICE IS BUGGED?!!!** How **dare**—” He broke off and nodded to Hiei. Within moments, the office was completely sealed in black fire surrounding walls, floor, ceiling, leaving only Koenma’s desk free. Hiei hovered in the air above the fire. Koenma sighed and leaned back in his chair. Moodily, he stared at the dark demon in front of his desk. “Can I put you on a security contract? I’ll give you a retainer.”

Hiei growled.

“Worth a try,” Koenma shrugged, “That, Hiei, is precisely why I have to use Yusuke – he is the only one of my agents that I can trust completely. Other than George, and I’m certainly not sending him.”

Hiei frowned, “Use Tikashi or Uratha.”

“They’re Dad’s agents, not mine. And they’re demons.”

“If things are that bad, you can’t afford to be picky. Pick up the pieces later.”

Koenma sighed and glanced around the office, “We’re completely sealed?”

“I don’t things by halves.”

“Except when you fight Yusuke.” As the demon started to growl out a response, Koenma impatiently

waved a hand, “Never mind that, no time. Forget I said it. This concerns the Mirror of Utter Bright.”

Hiei’s naturally pale skin whitened and the star on his black hair glowed as if in a black light. Slowly, he sank to a sitting position atop the flames, “That was destroyed a thousand years ago.”

“No,” Koenma sighed, “My dad took it into safe-keeping and has been using it for that project he’s working on. It was stolen from his possession ten days ago. Last week, this drain started.”

Hiei whistled silently. Then he glanced up with a half-grin, “No wonder he was so upset when the Mirror of Utter Dark was destroyed.”

Koenma wrinkled his nose, “You, Hiei, are a royal pain. If you ever decide in the future that you’re bored again, please go take it out on some other god! I have had more than enough of your plots and games!”

“But there was such wonderful potential for chaos if my plan had worked,” Hiei grinned – not a nice sight.

“Oh shut up...”

Hiei glanced over to where the monitor normally was, “Somehow, I don’t think I’m going to be bored again for a very long time.”

Koenma grinned, “Yusuke does that to us all.” Then he sighed and got back to the main subject, “You understand why I can’t use demons.”

Hiei, serious for once, nodded, “There is not a demon alive that would not take the Mirror of Utter Bright for itself. The Mirror of Utter Dark opened a communication line to the Dimensional Antipode for a price. The Mirror of Utter Bright allows physical access to those worlds. The contrasting powers between our realms present more power than even gods have access to.” He frowned, “But to steal it from Enma-Daiou...”

Koenma waved a hand, “It’s that damn project. The flux makes things... nevermind.”

Hiei looked steadily at Koenma, “This creates another problem.”

“Yusuke can handle it.”

“Are you sure?”

Koenma shrugged, “Do I really have another choice? I’d go for it myself, but with Dad gone, I can’t leave.”

Hiei snorted lightly and stared at the flames. After a long moment he stirred, “Maybe you shouldn’t include me in the group.”

With a grimace, Koenma triangled his hands again, “That’s not really an option either.”

Gracefully rising to his feet, Hiei walked lightly over the black fire and stood at Koenma’s desk. Drawing a blank piece of paper to him, he picked up a pen and started scribbling notes. “Contact this demon for security. He’ll charge an arm and a leg, but he’s the best. Give him this password and he’ll not double-cross you.” Koenma raised an eyebrow which Hiei ignored. “To check on the dimensions, use Mathial, Iknothal, and Riagant. They are expert scouts and have enough power and concealment to get through the void.” Hiei paused as something in Koenma’s expression caught his attention, “So which one did you already send?”

“Mathial and Harlon.”

Hiei nodded thoughtfully, “Harlon has other abilities, but it’ll do.” He glanced at the small ruler, “You’re starting to figure out my network.”

“It’s mine now,” Koenma smirked, “That’s what happens when you get caught stealing.”

Hiei’s lips drew up in a snarl before he turned back to the paper, “I can’t assist in the crossing – the jagan uses a different power than can be safely used with others.”

“If I get the location, I can send a Force Demon with the group.”

Wrinkling his nose, Hiei shook his head, “Not a good idea. Send a human.”

“Yusuke can deal with a Force Demon.”

“That’s not...” Hiei scratched his head, “Yusuke has already had too much spirit and demon influence. He is changing too rapidly for his human growth to keep up with and is getting dangerously unbalanced. You need to put another human with the group so that his humanness is not overwhelmed.”

Koenma sat up with a squawk, “What!? Yusuke is changing?” He started fumbling with one of the drawers on his desk, opening it to look at a pale-white egg softly glowing. With a sigh of relief, he closed it again and then looked at Hiei in question.

On the opposite side of Koenma, Hiei had gotten only the barest glimpse of the egg. He filed away the information for later use, “I meant his power is changing. His power was already different than most human rei, and his use of it primarily in the demon realm is causing it to take on demon properties. As an adolescent human, his body is currently in flux, settling into a mature form – his power should be following suit, yet the difference is getting noticeable.”

Koenma leaned back thoughtfully.

Hiei glanced at the door, “Your subordinates are getting restless.”

“Let them stew,” the small ruler waved a negligent hand, “Do them some good to find out I can take care of you myself.”

Tilting his head to one side, Hiei glowered, “Don’t presume!”

Koenma smirked, “The crossing?”

Gritting his teeth, Hiei wrote a few more symbols on the paper, “These are the names of some human sects that existed at least 800 years ago. They could cross dimensions, though in sometimes limited fashion. Check with my network,” Hiei emphasized the pronoun, “and see if there are any still practicing today. Also check out any human family with unusual rei manifestation – the talent is usually inherited and often strong rei will also have hidden training.”

Koenma looked sharply up, “Kuwabara?”

Hiei snorted in disdain, “That idiot had **no** training! He barely had the most basic of telepathic control and most of that seems to be self-taught.”

“He showed up at Genkai’s not for the tournament, but because he wanted training.”

It was Hiei’s turn to look up. He and Koenma stared at each other for a moment before they looked away; enemies could be allies for only short periods of time before opposites opposed. Hiei shoved the paper aside, letting his black firewall die down as he strolled out the doors. Several guards rushed in, almost passing the demon before they regained control. With a look from Koenma, they slunk out of his office, closing the door behind them. Koenma put the paper in one of his locked drawers and leaned back in his chair, thinking.

“Oh, like hell!” Shizuru glared at her brother.

“Come on, Shiz-chan, please????” pleaded Kuwabara, getting down on his knees and adopting a supplicating attitude.

His sister was moved not at all. “I said **NO!** Now get out of my room!”

Kuwabara got up and sighed, “I guess I’ll have to do it, then.”

Shizuru looked at him suspiciously, then turned back to her desk and the book open there. “Whatever.”

“Ah, come on...,” Kuwabara should have known that wouldn’t work, “Don’t you care about the fate of the human world?”

“Not really,” Shizuru stated frankly, “At the moment, I care about finishing my homework.”

Rolling his eyes, Kuwabara tried a different approach, “I suppose I could get Akayo to do it... Yeah, I’ll go talk to her.” He backed into the hall and started to shut the door.

“Hold it, nii-san.” Shizuru leaned back in her chair and studied him carefully, “You’d really do it, wouldn’t you?”

Kuwabara met her eyes, “We need someone who can open the Gate. Akayo is the only person I know besides you who has enough power and the training to do it.”

Pulling out a pack of cigarettes from her drawer and lighting one, Shizuru counted dots on the ceiling and blew smoke rings. “Why the hell doesn’t your friend the Goddess know any one? Surely we aren’t the **only** people in the world who are able to do something about the power drain.”

“Drain?” Kuwabara innocently asked, “What drain?”

Shizuru rolled her eyes. Tapping her cigarette ashes into a cup, she ignored his comment and remarked that he hadn’t answered her question.

Coming back into the room, Kuwabara shut the door and then sat down on her bed. At his sister’s glare, he transferred to the floor. “I’m not actually sure,” he admitted, “Koenma tells Botan, Botan tells Urameshi, Urameshi tells me... something usually gets lost along the way. But hey,” he grinned, “it’s a great excuse to skip school!”

“Oh, Nii-san...” *That might work with everybody else, but I know you too well, little-big brother.* After some more apparently indifferent coaxing, she eventually got the story out of him. Then she shooed him out of her room so she could think. Lighting another cigarette, she inhaled the smoke and blew it at the window. Through the window she could see the apartment next door. And she could feel it too. The city was too crowded and there were too many people. Even on the outskirts, citizens were packed in like a tin of caviar. *The world would never miss a few people here and there.* But she didn’t want it to be her little cousin, or, reluctantly though she might admit it, her brother. *He’s always been a bit of a goody-two-shoes. Only I never thought it would be Urameshi that encouraged him.* Tilting at windmills and slaying dragons was a time-honored pastime of the males of their family. Nobody ever thought to ask what the females did. Shizuru crushed out her cigarette and went to tell her brother that she’d join them. This once.

Shizuru glared at the blue-haired Goddess, “For the last time, Botan, you can’t go!”

Shutting her mouth on another protest, Botan studied Shizuru for a moment then asked, “Why?”

“Ooo,” Shizuru remarked, “A thought!” *from the queen of bubble-headedness...* Red skin was an interesting contrast with the blue hair. “Because,” Shizuru explained carefully, “you are in charge of the River of the Dead, and the route we will use to get to the Quala’s home dimension will take us far outside the bounds of your authority.”

Botan paled, “I can’t do that.”

“No,” hazel eyes regarded an appalled Botan calmly, “that’s why you have to stay.” Shizuru used the type of voice that mothers used when explaining something to very young children.

Botan switched from apprehension over leaving her territory to indignation at the implication but she swallowed her words before she said anything that would just make it worse. *In all my years of ferrying humans over the River, only Yusuke has ever been as rude to me!* She’d not minded it from Yusuke, since he was dead at the time, but she didn’t like it from the living. She turned her glare on Yusuke, who flinched back, puzzled as to how he’d managed to offend her.

Shizuru’s mouth twitched in a grin, but she hid it by raising her cigarette to her lips.

“It’s okay, Botan-chan, we’ll do fine by ourselves,” Kuwabara hastily tried to divert some of the tension running around.

“All right,” Botan glared once more at Shizuru for good measure, then turned back to the group, “Yusuke, you have all the information, right?”

Yusuke shrugged, “I left it in my room.”

Botan gave him an appalled look. From where they’d been silently watching, Hiei and Kurama traded looks.

“Hey,” Yusuke spread his hands, “I read it!”

“Ooo, you can read?” Shizuru questioned.

Kuwabara rolled his eyes, “Enough already, onee-san! Gee, you’re in a bad mood today.”

His sister glanced sourly at him, “I didn’t want to come in the first place! You could at least let me have my fun.”

Kuwabara glared at her.

“Fun,” Kurama remarked, “Uh, huh...” When Shizuru turned her gaze to him, he grinned at her, conveying a sense of humor and mischief that said he perfectly understood. At her wide-eyed look as she

absorbed the message, he also closed one eye in a wink.

Oh... Taken by surprise, Shizuru felt the impressions slip between all her careful barriers. Turning quickly away from the red-haired... being, she fumbled through her pockets until she found her notepad. “Let’s get going, already,” she said gruffly, not looking at the others, “Botan – move out to those trees.” As soon as the goddess had done so, Shizuru closed her eyes and felt for all the spirits that she’d have to move. Her brother she knew well. Urameshi was harder; all angles and undefined planes – contradictions and opposing parts. Somehow, she fit him in. With a feeling of surprise, Shizuru felt the spirit of the red-haired one and realized that he was a fox. *I thought...* She reached for the last one... and drew back with a gasp of pain, her eyes opening, “I can’t take you!”

Hiei tilted his head to one side as he regarded her, “Hn.”

Shizuru shivered, drawing tightly into herself at the feeling of evil darkness and power. Too much power. The others all had their own power, but they kept it to themselves. This one was wild, unconfined fire that burned...

“Go,” Hiei said shortly, “I’ll follow.”

Yusuke looked at the demon in exasperation, “Hiei, if you could get us through the Gate, then why the hell didn’t you say so in the first place? We wouldn’t have had to get Kuwabara’s sister!”

Hiei regarded the youth impassively but they could all feel his scorn. Kurama hastily intervened, “I think what he means is that once Shizuru-san opens the path, he can get through on his own power.”

“Hn.” The snort was an agreement with Kurama’s interpretation.

Shizuru sighed in relief, eyeing the demon with apprehension. She didn’t even want to have to touch that spirit again! Then she abruptly remembered where she was and tried to cover up the fear she’d felt with casual indifference as she drew in some smoke and reviewed her notebook. “That’ll work better,” she said gruffly. Again, the red-haired... fox gave her that smile that said he understood. Shizuru tightened her mouth around the cigarette and refused to let him in again. “Gather around me,” she ordered the group, motioning the demon to stand back where the goddess was. After he did so, she raised her arms and felt for the Gate, holding the spirits within her mind. A small wind started swirling about them as *things* responded to her search.

Finally she found it. Before it could escape her, Shizuru called to it in the ancient words, pulling it near even as she pushed them in.

Yusuke and Kuwabara drew close to each other as the wind whipped around them. They ended up in automatic fighting stance, back-to-back as they called up their rei.

“Relax,” Kurama advised, seeing their tenseness, “You’re just making it harder.”

The two youths looked at him wide-eyed and then Kuwabara nodded. With a quick glance to his sister, who stood with her eyes shut, chanting sharp words that made no sense, he let the rei sword dissolve. Yusuke followed his lead, and then they stood together and watched Shizuru. They could almost see the words she spoke as they dropped from her mouth and whirled into the wind. A last word seemed to shatter the world they were looking at and rainbow colors swept around them in a funnel until they couldn’t see. When they regained their sight, they were in a different place, standing on rock and dirt, with a red sun looking down upon them and brown cliffs in the distance.

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

Shizuru looked out to the cliffs, “We came out further away than I expected. We’ve got a bit of a walk ahead of us.”

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

“Shouldn’t we be attacked by now?”

“You complaining?” Yusuke glanced sideways at his friend.

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

“You draw the fight, the fight draws you,” Shizuru laughed shortly, “You really like this, don’t you?”

Kuwabara gave his sister a puzzled glance.

She squinted up at the sun and then pulled out a cigarette. “They’ve been pacing us. If you want a fight, look left.”

The four fighters spun to the left, various attack weapons out. As they evaluated the monsters rising

out of the ground, Hiei and Kurama put their weapons away, glancing at each other in amusement.

Yusuke looked at the two ghosts, “What?”

Kurama shrugged, “You two can take them – those aren’t Quala.”

“But they’re attacking us...”

Hiei snorted, “We’re in their territory.”

The monsters drew nearer and Yusuke abandoned the quest for information for the more immediate fight. He leaped forward to meet the monsters, his punches and kicks falling like lightning. Kuwabara was just behind him, his battle-cry thundering across the ground as he enthusiastically fought beside Yusuke.

Shizuru blew a smoke ring and watched it float away, “Boys,” she commented to herself.

Kurama raised a hand up to his mouth, hiding a laugh. Shizuru turned to him, raising an eyebrow, and redirecting attention off of herself, “I thought kitsune were suppose to masquerade as female when taking a human form. Though that **is** pretty close.”

The shorter, dour-looking demon quietly broke up laughing.

Kurama glared at the demon and then forced a smile as he turned back to Shizuru, “I’m not masquerading – this is my form.”

“Oh?” Shizuru looked the red-haired human over very carefully, noting the preciseness of his bearing and stance and the hint of flexible muscles hidden under the high school uniform. However, she was also careful to give the impression that she was instead looking at the more noticeable features, such as the long red hair and the vibrant green eyes... Actually, those were very easy features to look at. With enjoyment, Shizuru let her evaluation go further.

Kurama’s face slowly turned red under the direct gaze. He was use to the girls at his high school giving him a quick glance... this wasn’t quick, and she was doing more than glancing. He glanced to Hiei, wondering what to do. He found Hiei’s attention mostly focused on the young woman – and seeming to approve. Kurama blinked and then grinned, realizing that he’d trapped himself into human conventions again. Then he looked back to Shizuru and gave her as good as he had gotten.

Shizuru flushed beet red and backed up a few steps before getting a hold of herself. Then she stood straight and blew another smoke ring as the... fox continued to look her over. She had never felt so unclothed in her life, and there were some people in Tokyo that she’d thought were experts. Not

compared to this one! But she figured she'd brought it on herself, so she had to take the consequences.

As the fox continued his examination, Shizuru turned her attention to the other demon. *He seems familiar... Oh.* She remembered the video tape that her brother had brought to the house a few months back, “You’re Yukina’s brother!”

There was a roar and a dark aura flared around her, burning her barriers and making her flinch back from the manifestation of sheer anger. With an effort, she raised her hand... and then realized that Hiei had never moved. He was standing there, watching her, his eyes narrowed, a snarl on his lips... but he hadn’t moved. It was all his power that was surrounding her.

“Enough, Hiei,” Kurama’s voice was decidedly annoyed.

Instantly, there was a cessation of the dark waves, and Shizuru shakily brought her cigarette up to breathe in the calming smoke. *I didn’t even want to come in the first place!*

“Did Kuwabara tell you that?” the calm voice of the fox soothed and made things reasonable again.

Shizuru glanced at him in some puzzlement, “No. My idiot brother left before the end of the tape.”

Hiei and Kurama traded quick glances of differing puzzlement and then Hiei looked back, his eyes remote again as he determined one meaning, “You were there when Yusuke reviewed Koenma’s instructions for rescuing Yukina.”

Shizuru tapped her cigarette with a finger as she studied the powerful demon, “Of course I was – it was my house.” She glanced at where the two fighters were finishing up the last of the monsters, “Since my brother is obviously lacking in social skills, let me introduce myself, I’m Kuwabara Shizuru.”

“Ah,” Kurama’s eyes lit up, “Of course – I can feel the resemblance.” He bowed to her, “Very nice to meet you. I am Kurama, known in the human world as Minamino Shuiichi.”

Shizuru nodded back, “Someday, you’ll have to tell me about that.”

“Someday,” Kurama agreed, twinkles lighting the green eyes as he turned to meet Yusuke and Kuwabara as they came back, joking and laughing at the ease of the fight.

Hiei looked between Kuwabara and Shizuru and his eyebrows disappeared underneath the white band he wore on his forehead. “That is your brother?”

“Look, you little shrimp,” Kuwabara stomped up to Hiei and towered over him, “You bother my sister, even once, and I swear I’ll beat you up!”

Hiei snorted as he looked up while not tilting his head, which made his posture just as steady and confident as Kuwabara’s and made the height difference unimportant.

Yusuke rolled his eyes, “Knock it off you two. Let’s get going.”

The two combatants gave each other one final glare and then with simultaneous sniffs, turned away from each other and followed Yusuke.

The small group was attacked with increasing frequency as they approached the entrance in the cliff. The monsters were defeated with ease, the boys using the fights as tension relief and not bothering to use any rei power.

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

Shizuru snorted in disdain, “How do you expect to close the leech by fighting?”

Yusuke turned red.

“I knew I shouldn’t have agreed to this,” Shizuru sighed as she blew smoke out, “Stuck here with a teenage muscle-bound twerp. Just because my brother—”

“WHAT did you call me?” Yusuke glared.

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

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

“It wasn’t before?” Yusuke was somewhat insulted – he was used to being thought of as a threat. Then something caught his attention and he looked to one side and stared. Everybody else followed his gaze. Yusuke moved forward, concentrating his rei in preparation.

“What the hell is that?” Kuwabara’s eyes were popping as he took in the weird appearance of the thing that was approaching them. His sword came out of his hands as he instinctively moved to the outside of the group. Hiei took the other outside position, his hand raising to finger the edge of his cloak before he left it on and simply took out his sword. Kuwabara nodded to himself as he noted Hiei’s actions, *danger, but not peril.*

Standing behind them, Kurama sniffed and coughed, “That’s a quala – smells horrible, doesn’t it?”

Kuwabara nodded in agreement, wrinkling his own nose.

Yusuke almost turned around, “That’s a quala??? Whoa! What happened to the Quala we’d be fighting? And what the hell have we been fighting anyway?”

“Oh for…” From where she was carefully standing at the back of the group, maneuvering away from the battle scene, Shizuru rolled her eyes, “I thought you said you could read!”

“I read it! Koenma’s instructions said we were to find a mirror and break it and to close the leeching action between our worlds! He said we’d probably have to fight the Quala to do it.”

Shizuru dropped her cigarette in the dirt, “That’s all he said???”

From his stance, Hiei chuckled, “Koenma’s instructions usually leave much to be desired.”

Kurama shrugged, “He likes to leave Yusuke’s options open.”

“That’s open all right!”

“Will somebody answer my question before this thing gets here?” Yusuke was getting weird vibes off the creature approaching them and he didn’t like it.

Hiei answered him, “You’ve been fighting wild animals, mostly. ‘Quala’ is the name of the race of intelligent beings here.”

Yusuke turned his head to stare at Hiei, “We’ve been fighting animals?”

Hiei raised a shoulder and dropped it.

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

And without using any of their special powers, the team was having a hard time defeating it, though it wasn’t really affecting them much either. It was surprisingly quick and seemed to avoid most of their moves as if anticipating. Yet it couldn’t land a blow on them. They tried to encircle it, but it kept stepping out before they could finish moving around it. It was even evading Hiei’s speed – and that made the whole group nervous, even as it made the demon mad, red eyes sparking. If it wasn’t for the ineffectual attacks, Yusuke was almost ready to use his rei gun, but he was trying to save his power and without being hurt, it wasn’t worth the energy expended.

“Humm…” Shizuru stayed outside the fighting range and watched.

From where he stood next to her, Kurama asked curiously, “What do you see?”

“It’s not so much as what I see… as what the quala is not seeing.”

Kurama raised an eyebrow and turned his attention on the group instead of watching their backs. “Ah…” he breathed out. Then he grinned, “Hiei’s not going to be happy that he missed that.” He pulled his rose out of his hair and sniffed its rich scent, a smile curving his lips as he felt into the rose and shaped it as he needed. Then he took three quick bounds and leaped up the cliff wall, using the momentum to propel himself up to the quala that had been watching, hanging on to the edge of the cliff. His rose whip split the quala in two, and on that instant, the quala on the ground faltered and knew not where its enemies were, and Kuwabara’s sword sliced it from one angle while Hiei’s took it from the other. Yusuke held himself ready for another attack but none came.

Yusuke glanced to where Kurama was folding up his rose whip, “There were two? And the one Kurama killed was watching for the other?”

Hiei grunted sourly as he sheathed his sword, “Yes.” He nodded at Kurama in acknowledgment.

Grinning lightly, Kurama nodded at Shizuru, “She saw it.”

“Hn,” Hiei’s eyes sparked with a faint red glow as he studied anew the woman who had joined them.

Shizuru drew in the smoke from her cigarette and ignored both Kurama and Hiei’s unspoken approval, and her brother’s enthusiastic remarks. *Being in this group is going to be a danger to my neutrality.*

They were attacked once more before they got to the opening in the cliff. This time, the team kept their eyes open and found and killed all four of the quala opposing them. When they got to the opening, they started to go in, but Shizuru coughed, getting their attention. As all eyes turned to her, she spoke, managing to sound indifferent yet still demanding an answer, “Before I walk into the spider’s web, I’d like to know what the plan is.”

As her brother and her brother’s friend looked blankly at her, Shizuru qualified, “Kazuma didn’t fill me in on much. Even if I am just your transport, now would be a good time to let me know how I can help or hinder.”

Kuwabara protested, “I told you all I knew!”

Shizuru looked at him disbelievingly, “So what’s the plan?”

Yusuke and Kuwabara looked at each other and shrugged. Yusuke answered, “We’re going to go in, find the mirror and break it, kill the leech, and then go home.”

Shizuru’s mouth worked silently for a moment as she stared at him. Finally, she got out, “Plan? That’s what you call a plan??? Didn’t you do any research before you left? You’re just going to try a straight-frontal assault and hope for the best? That’s a plan????” She tossed the cigarette down on the ground and stomped it, shaking her head in disgust.

Kurama and Hiei traded amused glances, in complete sympathy with Shizuru and trying hard not to show it too obviously. Kurama coughed, raising a hand to cover his mouth. The edges of Hiei’s mouth curved very slightly up.

Yusuke shrugged, blushing slightly, “Hey, it’s always worked before.” Kuwabara nodded agreement, siding with his teammate.

“We’re all going to die...” Shizuru muttered as she lit another cigarette, “No plan, no responsibility, just a snot-nosed teenager with delusions of immortality... I knew I should have made my will before we left.”

Yusuke flushed even redder and looked to Hiei for support. To his surprise, the short demon was carefully studying the walls of the cave. Yusuke turned to Kurama, and found him watching the area they’d come from, obstinately watching their backs. He glanced between the two ghosts uncertainly, “You agree?” A quiet minute went by as Yusuke and Kuwabara drew together under the combined weight of silence. “Hiei? Kurama?”

Hiei finally turned away from the wall and looked steadily at Yusuke, “It would be better to have a plan.”

They never rebuke me, Yusuke suddenly realized, Kurama and Hiei are more experienced than I, but neither one of them have ever said anything like that before. They make comments about evaluations and situations we’re in... but they never even imply that I’m doing something wrong. Involuntarily, Yusuke stepped towards Hiei, drawn by the reserved red gaze, somehow thinking that if he got physically closer that the feelings and thoughts behind the barrier would make themselves known. As Hiei’s only response was to roll his eyes up higher to keep him in view, Yusuke realized how silly that was and stepped back, “What sort of a plan?”

Shizuru smacked her forehead with her hand, “Standing on the enemy’s doorstep is not the time to be thinking of that!” Then she sighed, “Although better late than never I suppose...”

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

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

The quala were dying, yet more came to replace them. The warriors were being worn down, and they were alone in their Team.

And we haven’t even gotten through the door yet. Hiei finally made a decision that he would have to act separately and not wait for Yusuke. Dropping back to a supporting position, Hiei pulled off his headband. Kurama, Yusuke, and Kuwabara shifted positions to protect and support Hiei’s actions, and Yusuke again took the point of strength in the group. No one said anything as they migrated around.

Hiei’s third eye opened and scanned the area, noting the patterns of rei and energy and will. All but the qualas’ was familiar to him. The qualas’ signatures merged and blended without seeming regard to individuals. And the energy divided equally between them, sharing and supporting each other without thought or effort. *That is how they work as one...* For perhaps the first time in many years, the demon felt a sense of alarm as he understood what they were up against. It wasn’t just power. Power, they could fight – in their group, Yusuke instinctively responded to aggressive power by increasing his to match and was therefore the

more powerful in any true fight. And it wasn't will – the quala seemed almost puzzled as they fought, fighting only by direction and not purpose. No, what their group was truly up against and threatened by was cohesiveness. A whole fighting as a whole, acting as a whole, supporting as a whole... Their group could not match it. Their group was a team... but not a whole. Four individuals that were together for a common purpose. And, in many ways, could not be a whole. They were too different and needed to keep those differences for their strengths. But...

Time to act. Hiei took a breath and prepared to step out into the maelstrom of rei, pulling on his jagan power to change forms and allow his action. *Yes...* Hiei closed his three eyes as his power settled into himself and then he opened all of his eyes to see that much better.

The power of the change swept over the group and every gaze instinctively turned to Hiei. For those who were his companions, astonishment was foremost in their thoughts as they saw their friend, blazing with power, his skin green, his hair divided in two points like horns, and every eye on his body open and seeking. Even Kurama drew in his breath, having seen the jagan form only a few times before. Instinctively, all three averted their gaze and each knew a stab of fear for here was the power of the jagan unleashed in its entirety. But the power was not directed towards them. As one, the quala stopped moving, and then a keening wail came from each of the creatures still alive as their tentacles and appendages flailed and beat against the ground.

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

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

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

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

“Once-san?” Kuwabara remembered his sister for the first time since the battle begun and his heart twisted in fear.

“Calm down, Nii-san, I'm right here,” Shizuru walked forward, picking her way among the litter with barely a look down at what she was stepping over. As one, the group turned to her in question. Shizuru shrugged, “I don't like to be involved in battles.”

“But where were you?” Kuwabara demanded, “You disappeared after the first rush!”

“But you knew I was fine, didn't you?”

“Well, yeah...”

Shizuru grinned, “Don't worry about it, nii-san. I take care of myself.” She glanced at Yusuke, “I don't think we should stand around here too long.”

Yusuke nodded in agreement. He didn't have a plan, exactly, but... He herded his small group out of the area, checking the corridors and side walls for clues and information about their opponents. So far, this job was not at all what he'd been expecting. And nowhere near as straight-forward as their others had been. The goal was clear enough, the approach was hazy. *I guess I should have thought about it a bit more. But it's always worked before...*

As they continued on, Kuwabara kept glancing over at the short demon. Finally, he came out with, “Damn, Hiei – that's an ugly body of yours when you're green! What's with all the extra eyes, anyway?”

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

Yusuke intervened, “That's Hiei's jagan, Kuwabara – it's his demon power to control weaker wills—”

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

“Why you arrogant little runt...” Kuwabara growled.

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

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

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

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

Hiei looked away from the intensity in the vibrant green emeralds. And his gaze accidentally met Yusuke’s. Yusuke grinned at him, “I’m glad you’re my friend, Hiei” He laughed, his brown eyes dancing merrily, “Actually – I can’t even remember when you were an enemy! If we ever have that rematch, we’ll have to redo the stakes.”

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

“What’s with him?” Kuwabara blinked at the blur that kept barely in their sights.

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

Kurama smiled at him, not denying it, nor confirming it, “Having you for a friend is worth much indeed.”

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

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

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

“Looked like it...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It was here...” several quala moved into the room, chattering at each other and waving metal sheets with lines and diagrams at each other. Finally they left, still chattering.

The group looked at what they could see of each other. They left the subject of just where Shizuru was alone. Yusuke tested his bonds again, “Hiei, can you get us out of this?”

There was a brief purple glow around Hiei, centering near his head. He shrugged, moving with the give of the strands, “I could, but I would be useless afterwards.”

“We’ll wait...” Yusuke kept looking around the room.

Shizuru snorted as she watched the group caught in the web. *Young idiots. Though I thought Hiei and Kurama were better than that... Why don’t they do something?* With a sigh, she floated out of the room

and looked around. *Well, I might as well explore, since I think it's going to take them awhile.*

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

Yusuke rubbed his wrists and glanced at the bare cell, “Okay, Kuwabara – where is she?”

Kuwabara shrugged, “I haven't the foggiest idea. Does any brother ever know what their sister does or thinks?”

One of his rare grins lit Hiei's face, “No.”

“You have a sister???” Kuwabara's face was almost comical as he stared in surprise at the demon, obviously re-evaluating some of his ideas.

Hiei shrugged while Yusuke and Kurama held their breaths.

A rumble interrupted them and a hole in the wall opened up, not where the previous door had been. They all looked over to it, wary and prepared for action.

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

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

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

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

Kuwabara and Hiei traded amused glances. Hiei addressed the other two, “They only look at the rei, their focus is such that they don't see anything else.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You didn't.” Kurama studied his friend, *though it's still a mystery as to why you cared in the first place. I meant nothing to you then. But the look on your face...*

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

“I owed Yusuke—”

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

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

“The one that was apart...” Yusuke mused, “Was he the leader? Did he have any bonds?”

Hiei shrugged, “Its rei was in all the others. But it was not tied to theirs. In this culture... that could well be leadership.” He thought a moment and added, “And they don’t seem to have separate sexes. The term ‘he’ really isn’t appropriate with them.”

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

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

“But who would want to do it any other way?” Kuwabara exclaimed.

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

“Uhh...” Kuwabara glanced between Kurama and Hiei and then his face turned a bright red and stumbled over his words, “I didn’t mean... Uh... I meant... Uh...”

With a grin, Kurama rescued him, “That’s okay, Kuwabara – I knew what you meant. And sex is a lot more fun than cell division.”

Kuwabara’s blush didn’t fade.

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

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

While he studied the walls, Yusuke turned to Kuwabara, “Can you find Shizuru?”

“I already said—”

“I said ‘find’!”

“Oh.” Kuwabara turned around in a circle, focusing his rei. *That’s odd. This place... has rei patterns through everything.* He couldn’t see them, but he could feel them, just out of his touch, there if he could tap... Kuwabara sat down and closed his eyes.

Hiei turned back, frowning, “Kuwabara...” The demon looked nervous.

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

“Kuwabara!” Hiei finally yelled, “Stop that!”

With a startled blink, Kuwabara looked up, “Huh?”

Hiei sighed and sat down across from Kuwabara, “Damn stubborn human! Get yourself killed...” He sighed, “Not like that, idiot. Like this.” Hiei closed his eyes and so did Kuwabara.

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

Baka. Shizuru longed for a cigarette as she glanced between the two of them, “And you’re letting him do this? Nii-san isn’t even able to focus, let alone wander out by himself!”

“I,” Hiei said with emphasis as Kuwabara fumed, “am not involved in this!”

With a snort, Shizuru dismissed that statement, “Like hell – with the way you support Yusuke, you’re obviously not a neutral.”

Discorporate, Hiei’s wince was obvious to both of the others.

Kuwabara glared at his sister, “Are you coming back with us or not?”

“To a prison cell? Hell no!” Shizuru glanced at a herd of quala as they walked through the three of them. “Watching them is much more interesting.”

Hiei grinned.

“But Onee-san!”

“Let it go,” Hiei interrupted, “She’ll join us when we need to get back home.”

“Huh?” Kuwabara stared at his sister, “But you—”

Shizuru shook her head, “Never mind, Nii-san. Hiei’s right, and I’m not going back with you.” Her brother was looking stubborn and Shizuru sighed, “Look, I can’t do this very often and I don’t want to waste my rei popping in and out of existence while you four go bumbling around without a plan. It’ll be a lot safer for me to just stay like this until you’re done.”

Since his sister’s safety was foremost on his mind, that argument was the most effective. As Shizuru watched him nod, she reflected she should have used it first and not wasted the time.

The other two finally left and Shizuru glanced around, *now where did that thought go?* It was hard trying to figure out what the quala were saying but if she concentrated really hard she could usually find the meanings – though she didn’t always understand those either.

Yusuke and Kurama were playing a game of stones when the other two finally opened their eyes and stood up. The obvious curiosity was ignored as Hiei and Kuwabara only talked to each other. Kurama grinned both at them and at the disbelieving puzzled look on Yusuke’s face as he listened and watched.

“That’s nifty. That’s so nifty. I can see anything by doing that.”

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

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

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

Kuwabara winced as he gave in, “Okay...” He turned to Yusuke, “Onee-san is okay – she’ll join us when we need her.”

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

“No,” Hiei replied shortly.

“But...”

Kuwabara’s mouth twitched, and he clarified, “We didn’t tell you that.”

Yusuke growled. Kurama grinned.

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

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

And then Yusuke turned back, frowning, “Hey, wait a minute... Hiei—”

The other two cut him off in nearly the same instant, starting a meaningless verbal fight that had them squaring off and growling, but not actually saying much.

After a couple of minutes with no let up on their part, Yusuke finally smiled. *Neither of them are going to admit it. Hiei must be teaching Kuwabara, and must have offered to in the first place. But neither of them are ever going to admit it.* Yusuke remembered Hiei’s disbelieving disparagement about Kuwabara’s sword technique when he was fighting Byakko. Obviously, Hiei had decided to do something about it. But the little demon never helped people... that he admitted to. Hiei still insisted that he was just with Yusuke so that some day they could fight again. And Kuwabara would never admit to having had help from Hiei. They were a perfect team. Yusuke shook his head at his friends, “Hiei – what about the room?”

Instantly, the fight stopped and both were serious again. Hiei glanced around and reported on his earlier findings, “This room is a combination of things. The walls are mostly organically grown out of mineral elements, and there is a rei weave though it that allows it to manipulate to events – the doors or an attack on the walls. There are also several electronic and rei components in places, surveillance devices mostly.”

Yusuke blinked, “They’re watching us???”

“And listening,” Hiei confirmed.

“Shit...” Yusuke fumed. Now the quala knew of several abilities of his team. And particularly the rarely used ones of Hiei. Hiei was the most powerful of them all but usually the quiet demon was their back-up, their ace in the hole, the one enemies underestimated the most. And now the quala knew what he could do. It was Yusuke’s own carelessness. He should have assumed they’d be monitoring, but he hadn’t and now his group had lost advantages they could have had. But how was he supposed to plan anything with the others without talking to them? Yusuke swore again and threw a punch in the wall. It yielded briefly and then bounced back. *They set up that trap. They plan ahead. I rush in and get our team captured... Plan. I need a plan.* Yusuke started to pace and the other three quickly moved out of his way.

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

“How the hell am I suppose to tell that???” Kuwabara demanded. And then gave in under a glare from his companion. “Oh all right...” He closed his eyes and sent out his rei-sense, seeking out other rei, rei directed towards them, attention... He sneezed mightily. And then looked up while sniffing, and simply nodded.

Yusuke swore briefly and then continued to pace.

Idiots. Shizuru watched them and sighed. *I still don't understand why the others don't do something, but they're all waiting for Yusuke. At least he's thinking this time.* After a few minutes, Shizuru shrugged to herself, *I guess I better do something. Now how can I act without being involved...*

Abruptly, both Hiei and Kuwabara swung around to focus intently at one wall. After a moment, Hiei chuckled, “Your sister is good.”

“Was that her?”

“You know any other human wandering around here?”

“Uhh...”

Yusuke impatiently broke in, “WHAT?”

“Onee-san just goosed the scientists and they've all left the monitoring stations to chase her, but she faded out again and they're all milling uselessly around trying to find her.”

“Goosed?” Kurama's eyes twinkled.

Hiei snorted, “She phased to solidity in the back of the room and waited until they noticed her and then she phased out again.”

“Phased?” Yusuke blinked.

Hiei sighed and glanced to Kurama, who looked at him steadily for a moment and then explained to Yusuke, “She's doing close to the same thing she did when Gating us here. Essentially, she's creating pocket-gates around her self and stepping into them – but they don't actually lead anywhere so she's still here while not-here.”

Yusuke absorbed that for a moment, then realized the important part of Kuwabara's earlier statement, “They're not watching us?”

“Ah!” Kuwabara hadn't thought of that, “No – none of them are paying any attention to us at all.”

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

Hiei and Kurama glanced at each other and Kurama clarified one point, “Hiei – you said the walls were organic?”

“Of mineral elements, but they are alive,” Hiei confirmed.

Kurama's grin was feral as he nodded to Yusuke and then walked in a smooth glide around the edges of the room. At the same time, he reached a hand up and shook out his hair. A few minutes later, vines started sprouting around the edges of the room and merged into the walls. Kurama stood still for a moment, head tilted to one side as if listening for something. He glanced to Hiei and the shorter demon nodded. Kurama smiled as he turned back to Yusuke, “It's done. They can't see or hear us now, but their machines aren't indicating a fault.”

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

“We go home?” Kuwabara asked.

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

Kuwabara looked stunned. Kurama and Hiei were both regarding Yusuke with almost identical expressions – approval and delight foremost. When Yusuke finished talking, they looked at each other and smiled.

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

“Hey, whoa there... No killing unless necessary. These are scientists you’re talking about, not fighters.”

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

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

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

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

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

Yusuke sighed. And continued to pace. Finally he stopped and looked at the two demons helplessly, “I haven’t the faintest idea how to do that. How to get to the lab, figure out which records are which, what pod group was in charge of the project... How do we do that?”

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

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

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

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

“You asked me to,” Kuwabara growled, “Shh!”

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

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

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

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

“Yes, but...” Yusuke couldn’t explain it. He’d never had a group before. His family was him and his mom. He had few friends. He was a delinquent at school – but a lone one. Unlike Kuwabara, who was the leader of a group. And now he, Yusuke, always alone, now he had a group. A group that followed him and trusted him. Even the remote, wild demon Hiei trusted him. They were his friends. Before, Yusuke had very, very few friends. Kieko. And that was about it. Now that he had friends, Yusuke wasn’t going to lose any of them. Whatever he had to do. He wasn’t going to lose. Not his friends. Not ever. He wasn’t going to lose. His fingers curled in a tight fist, keeping his friends close.

“Six hundred years??” Kuwabara’s voice squeaked high in surprise. “But he’s in High School!!”

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

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

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

When the quala came for Yusuke, the team knew they couldn’t wait any longer. The team could not be split more; and so they fought, and won.

They busted out of the room with their usual aplomb. With lots of rei-blasting and sword-waving and running down halls. They dodged traps, sliced war parties, and nearly got blasted themselves on several occasions. The quala were smart and quick; with a plan and some forethought, the team was better.

For once in his life, Yusuke hung back and let Hiei take the lead. And the young leader learned. He watched the way Hiei would rush forward, pause briefly at corners while the jagan glowed, then rush on to the next point – or would change their route instead.

We need to get to the power room, and we know the way; yet Hiei is checking every point on the route... Yusuke watched thoughtfully.

They broke into the power room, and the three paused as one as they looked at the jungle inside. The vines at the door rustled... and then snaked past them to attack the quala behind.

"Hn," Hiei snorted, "You let the fox loose."

Yusuke looked at Hiei in surprise, "Kurama did this?"

"Where else would man-eating Morning Glories come from?" Kuwabara muttered as he brushed some of the vines aside with his sword and walked in.

They all went in, closing the door behind them. Yusuke followed Hiei’s gaze up and over. For a moment they looked at the grey and drained bodies of the quala. Then they were distracted as Kuwabara passed them to walk through the vegetation. Yusuke immediately followed him. Hiei waited for a moment, staring at the bodies, before he walked the same path.

Kurama and Shizuru were standing by a large shelf filled with odd objects. Kurama was watching them, while Shizuru was smoking a cigarette as she studied what appeared to be a skeleton – but not of any life form they’d ever seen before.

Yusuke approached with a grin, "Yo! All done?"

Kurama grinned back, smug and satisfied, "Oh yes – there’s not a shred of information left." He glanced at the shelf and his grin became more feral, "And plenty of compensation too."

There was a snort from the black-cloaked figure standing on the outskirts of the group. Yusuke glanced between them and shrugged – if Kurama wanted to take some baubles, he certainly wasn’t going to object. "Right then!" He glanced at Kuwabara’s sister, "You ready, Shizuru?"

Hiei stirred restlessly.

All eyes went to him.

"Kurama," Hiei sighed, "What did you do with the Mirror?"

The fox-human winked at his partner.

With another sigh, Hiei looked to Yusuke. Yusuke looked blankly back at him for a moment then realized, "Oh, wasn’t Koenma’s instructions to **break** the mirror?"

Kurama shrugged, "The quala don’t have it anymore, that’s the intent."

"Uh, yeah," Yusuke glanced from the thief to his other friends. Hiei was carefully looking away from them both. Kuwabara was frowning.

Seeing Yusuke’s question, Kuwabara shook his head, "It doesn’t feel right, Uramishi. I don’t know why, but I don’t like it."

Yusuke turned back to Kurama, "I think we should follow Koenma's instructions."

Kurama shrugged, "Fine." He brought a small mirror out of his pocket and smashed it, "Okay, let's go."

With a smile tugging her lips, Shizuru put out her cigarette and pulled out her notebook.

"Kurama..." Hiei pinched the bridge of his nose. Kuwabara shook his head.

"Oh come on," Kurama grinned, "It's just a little mirror."

Yusuke glanced sourly around the room, "Okay, what didn't Koenma tell us **this** time?" He and Kuwabara exchanged looks.

There was a rustling and eeping in the direction of the door and then the plants burped. Kurama frowned, "My plants won't hold them much longer – the scientists have been playing with gene manipulation to kill them."

"So what is it about the mirror?" Yusuke was undeterred.

Kurama shrugged, "It's a very powerful artifact. I don't see why, if Koenma doesn't want it, I can't have it."

Shizuru nodded in agreement, "Finder's Keepers."

Kurama grinned at her.

"So what is it about the mirror?" Yusuke asked again, now curious.

From a different pocket, Kurama brought out an ornate hand-held mirror, round in shape with a spiraling Celtic cross border around it; a chain trailed off the top.

Yusuke blinked, "I thought the rei gun cracked that." The surface was unbroken.

Kurama grinned, "Looks similar, doesn't it? This is the Mirror of Utter Bright – it was suppose to have been destroyed thousands of years ago." He tossed it up in the air and caught it, "Too good to pass up." The fox-thief grinned.

"And Koenma wants us to break it?" Yusuke was puzzled.

"I think we better," Kuwabara rumbled in his deep voice as he backed over to a corner, his rei sword activating.

Yusuke whirled to face. ... "Hiei?" he breathed out in surprise, relaxing his guard.

"Urameshi," Kuwabara warned him, "Watch it."

"Hiei?" Yusuke asked again.

The short demon was standing where he'd been, but there was a dark aura swirling around his green, eyed form. His hair was shifting around his head, not settling in any points, and his ears and fingers had lengthened and were pointy and sharp. "Power..." he whispered, his red eyes glowing as he stared at the Mirror.

Kurama's grin widened – and his ears grew out into fuzzy fox ears, "It's mine. But," he licked his lips, "I do share."

"Share the Mirror of Utter Bright with a rival?" Hiei asked in disbelief, his claws flexing in and out.

"Rival?" Kurama's tails swished around his waist, "You're my mate. We don't have a territory yet," he raised the Mirror up, "but with this, who needs one? We can create our own world with this." A golden glow surrounded the Mirror and there was a humm of rei power being focused... And then the cave above them crumpled into dust as vines and trees and bushes and ferns grew up into the red sun's light.

Around them, they could hear screams and wails as quala were crushed and broken as their home shattered around them.

"That's better," Kurama said, looking critically around. "But the sun is wrong for my plants..." he raised the mirror again.

"Kurama!" Yusuke yelled stepping forward, "That's enough!"

The fox-human shifted appearance still more, growing several more inches in height, his hair changing to a silver color. "I haven't even begun yet."

Hiei growled and a black blur dashed through the room and things were confused for several moments. When the dust settled, Kurama was wiping blood off his lip with the hand that held the Mirror as he stared at Hiei in shock. "Hiei...?"

The short demon hauled himself up from the floor, shaking his head while growling steadily. He flexed his arm carefully where a rei-burn had turned the green skin red. His slanted eyes glowed and the plants in the room began to smoke.

Kurama let out a return growl and he started to raise the Mirror. Then he lowered it, "You are my Mate," he declared, his eyes narrowing, "what are you doing?"

Hiei's tongue flicked out around his mouth, tracing briefly around his fangs, "I am a demon, not a kitsune. The Mirror is Power, and it will be mine."

"Shit..." Yusuke glanced between his two friends and then to Kuwabara.

Over in his corner, Kuwabara shook his head, "Like hell I'm going to get involved!"

"Kurama," Yusuke tried, "I think it would be better if we followed Koenma's instructions – he probably knows what he was asking."

He was interrupted by simultaneous snorts from the two ghosts in the room. But Hiei straightened up, "Yusuke, stay out of this."

"Oh like hell!" Yusuke stepped forward between them, "I don't know what's going on, but when two of my best friends start fighting, there's something wrong." He took a breath, "Kurama, give me the Mirror."

Kurama chuckled, a dry, humorless sound, "Little human, come take it from me."

A chill went up Yusuke's spine and he gulped as he looked at the being that didn't look very much like his friend anymore. The golden eyes matched the color surrounding the Mirror.

"Kurama, no..." Hiei's gaze flicked between Yusuke and his mate.

Yusuke took a step towards Kurama, determined to stop this now. Kurama raised his hand. And then there was more confusion in the room as black flames spiraled out everywhere even as golden light eclipsed their vision and Yusuke was knocked to the ground as ground shook...

Picking himself up, Yusuke turned the limp figure of his friend over, "Hiei!"

Kurama was on his knees beside them, back in his human form, his green eyes wide, "Hiei!" He pulled Hiei into his arms, "My love."

Hiei's red eyes opened and he pulled away, dashing towards the other end of the room, "The Mirror!"

There was a loud cracking sound as Kuwabara's sword pierced the center of the Mirror, abandoned on the floor where Kurama had dropped it. Fractured lines radiated from the hole and then all that was left was the frame. The noise seemed to reverberate through not just the air, but their heads and the ground and their souls. The silence that followed was absolute.

And then Yusuke was rushing forward again to catch Hiei as he fell, the green and the eyes fading from his body and his hair settling into a single spike. Kurama approached more slowly, his every movement radiating pain as he put a hand on Hiei's head, "He's okay, just out of rei."

"Kurama, what the hell just happened?" Yusuke demanded, his eyes wide as he looked around the

broken landscape, his arms still cradling the demon he held.

The fox-human also looked around and he sighed as he noticed all the destruction and chaos. He still didn't care that much about the quala – they would have destroyed the human world just for their own gain, sucking out the rei of the planet until none was left and then going on to another. But that it had come so close... he stroked the fur on Hiei's head. "Now I see why Koenma sent you." He glanced at Yusuke, "You weren't even tempted by it, were you?"

"By what?" Yusuke demanded, still frightened for his friends, "You said it was the Mirror of Utter Bright, but what...?"

Shizuru cleared her throat, "Power. Raw and simple. Anybody who gained that Mirror would have had the Power to become a deity. But it didn't reach for you." She glanced around, "We'd better leave now. The breaking of the Mirror is causing the dimensions to fluctuate badly and while our route back is clear at the moment..."

"Right," Yusuke glanced at Kuwabara and Kurama, drawing his group in close to him. He looked at the demon in his arms, "Can you take Hiei with us?" He remembered the first time she'd tried to bring them over.

Shizuru studied them for a moment, "As long as he doesn't wake up while we're on route. That would be bad..."

Kuwabara reached out and pulled Hiei out of Yusuke's arms, "I'll take him. I can keep him shielded for the moment."

"He's less likely to hurt me, if he wakes up," Kurama pointed out as he hovered.

"Let's go!" Shizuru growled, lifting her arms to the air and her mind to the elements...

Botan rushed forward, "You're back!" She immediately started checking the group over for injuries and wounds...

Hiei brushed her arms aside and got up with a grunt, "Leave me alone!"

"Are you okay, Hiei?" Yusuke stood next to his friend and looked down.

Without tilting his head, Hiei looked up, "I'm fine." He met Yusuke's eyes for a long moment and then he walked off, disappearing as he moved between the trees in the park.

Kurama sighed as he received Botan's healing, "He recovers quickly, Yusuke, don't worry about him."

"I wasn't worrying," Yusuke breathed out, staring at the trees. Then he turned back to Kurama, "How about you?"

Kurama smiled for the different meanings in the question, "I'm glad he was there. I'm sorry, Yusuke."

Yusuke remembered the wave of energy that had been flowing towards him and the small form standing in front of him... "It's okay Kurama, it wasn't your fault." Power. Yusuke glanced at Kuwabara, "Wanna go get lunch?"

The large fighter rubbed his stomach, "Yeah!"

Kurama laughed lightly and dropped the subject, joining them in food and fun.

Is this what all their missions are like? Shizuru shook her head at the whole group and went home, promising herself a nice long bath and also promising never again to let her brother talk her into this.

Koenma looked up as Hiei walked in. He put down the paper he was holding, "What went wrong?"

Hiei shrugged, "Who said anything went wrong?"

With a nod to dismiss George, Koenma waited until the oni had left the room, "You're in my office, Hiei. You wouldn't be unless... But Botan said everybody was fine."

With a grunt, Hiei lowered himself to the ground, sitting cross-legged and leaning against the wall, "I see you got the security done."

"Nearly bankrupted the royal treasury." The small ruler studied the short demon carefully, "You look like shit." He hadn't when he walked in, but now that he was sitting still...

"Thanks so much," sarcasm dripped from the demon's tones.

"So what happened?" Koenma got back to the subject, seriously concerned now, but not showing it.

Hiei sighed, "Kurama got to the Mirror first."

Koenma's eyes widened and he spoke a word that was disparate with his toddler-appearance. "How did that happen?"

"We had to split the group up, couldn't be helped. And Kurama got there first. I was sticking close to

Yusuke in case... but I forgot to worry about Kurama."

Koenma narrowed his eyes at Hiei, "Is that what happened to you?"

Hiei rubbed his arm, "Sortof..." He sighed, "I got sucked in too."

Repeating the word, Koenma regarded Hiei warily before he finally shrugged, "Well, at least Yusuke destroyed the Mirror. That was the most important part."

Hiei shook his head. Koenma stared at him. Hiei lifted a shoulder and dropped it, "Kuwabara destroyed it."

"Kuwabara?" Koenma leaned back in his chair and triangled his hands, "That's... interesting."

Hiei snorted.

"Oh come, Hiei – I thought you didn't like things boring."

The only response was a slight lifting of the corners of Hiei's mouth, not enough to really be called a smile.

"Okay, Hiei. Take a few weeks off and rest up. You still look horrible."

"No time to regain all my energy – we weren't safe. But that may not be a good idea."

"Humm?" Koenma blinked. And then he rolled his eyes, "Gods, Hiei, what schemes do you have going on now?" He groaned, "My prison is going to Hell..." He waved a hand, "Never mind. Fine. Solitary confinement for two weeks then."

"That will work better," Hiei stood up, hiding his tiredness again as he did so. "Tell the guards not to check on me."

Koenma snorted, "You'll be in the Human World, I presume?"

"Mostly, yeah." The demon walked out the door.

Before it opened again with a flood of oni wanting things from him, Koenma punched the button that locked it shut. Thoughtfully, he gazed at the door for a long moment before softly saying, "Thank you, Hiei." Then the ruler of the Dead sighed and got back to work.

End.